

“Helpful Wisdom from a Neglected Text”

Song of Songs 2:8-13

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Outdoor weddings can be magnificent, but the uncertainty of weather and a number of other variables can add anxiety to an already anxious situation. I was asked to do one wedding in a hot air balloon, which I might have done if the couple had not chosen a Sunday at 10:00 A.M. to exchange their vows. They were not involved enough in church to realize there is something I usually do on Sunday mornings.

But I have done outdoor weddings that were magnificent, one of which was in the gardens at Graylyn in Winston-Salem. It was May and it was a beautiful day, the flowers were in bloom, and as I was reading these words from Song of Songs, “the time of singing has come, the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land,” a bird started singing!

It was difficult to keep my train of thought. I was doing this wedding in English and Spanish. I didn’t need any more challenges! But it was an almost perfect scene, an embodiment of the text. Our faith celebrates love, true love, and all the elements came together that day with the multiple witnesses of scripture, two people and creation.

Yet, we do not talk about this kind of love very often in church and rarely do we read much less teach and preach on any part of Song of Songs as it is called in Jewish tradition or Song of Solomon as it is called in Christian translations. Like the book of Esther, it is much neglected, and it is easy to understand why.

This book is a collection of poems about human love, passionate love, erotic love, and the primary voice is female, which is why I am using the Jewish title Song of Songs. The reference to Solomon is not in the title and we don’t know who wrote the book. Anyway, ever since it became part of the canon, it has been viewed as a metaphor for thinking about divine/human love, but even if we think this is the purpose of the text or the reason for its inclusion in the canon, it uses sensual love as a point of comparison, which is problematic for many Christians.

In Jewish tradition, the text is understood in both human and divine terms. Judaism is far less conflicted about sexuality than Christianity. Some Jewish scholars argue that the primary purpose of this text is to affirm erotic love as a gift from God. The Talmud criticizes the singing of these verses at secular feasts and in drinking halls, but the message is not disputed.

But many Jewish scholars also view this image of human love as a metaphor for divine/human love. It is a theme we find throughout the Hebrew canon, God and Israel are depicted as lovers or spouses. In fact, in the book of Hosea, the prophet is called to marry a prostitute as a way of symbolizing Israel's infidelity to Yahweh in this love relationship.

For these and other reasons, the book is not isolated in Jewish faith. It is read at Passover and at some Shabbat services. And since the Middle Ages, it has figured prominently in Jewish marriage art, music and liturgy (*The Jewish Study Bible*, pp. 1565-1566).

We could learn from Jewish tradition in many ways here. The only question is as to whether we should view it as a description of human love or a metaphor for divine/human love. And the answer is – yes! The verses we have read today and Song of Songs as a whole provide a wonderful affirmation of human love as well as a magnificent way of deepening our understanding of divine/human love.

So, if we read this text as a description of human love, we find a strong affirmation of love and sexuality as gifts from God. I will tread carefully here, knowing that all ages are present. The text itself is not entirely PG-13, but I will attempt to retain that rating or a milder one. And for starters, just in our verses from chapter two, the imagery is not too spicy. It is beautiful poetry and thus sensory in nature, but this is a love song from my parents' generation, not mine or my children's...

Many aspects of creation are used as images and thus affirmed. The female voice speaks of her true love as a gazelle or young stag leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. Then, she says her beloved calls to her, saying, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the

turtledove is heard in the land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

It is beautiful poetry. Its subject matter is obviously romantic love, but there is nothing too steamy here. There is in the larger text, but it is not necessary to get into all of that here in order to assert the basic claim of the book – that human love, in all its complexity, including the sensual part, is a good and noble thing, given to us by God. It is not some dirty, necessary aspect of creation required to keep the species going, as many have been taught in the church. Responsibility is part of the equation, of course, we’ll get to that, but the core message of this text is an affirmation of earthy, human love.

It is, after all, the first thing the Bible tells us about our character as human beings, that we are gender differentiated, created as sexual beings, and in the text of Genesis 1, God says that we, like all of the other creatures created on the sixth day of creation, are not just good, but very good. And God does not hold God’s nose while uttering this word of affirmation which includes our sexuality.

This is in the Bible, just as Song of Songs is, which makes you wonder just how the church has gotten it so wrong so often. Part of the answer is Augustine’s reading of Paul. Both were great saints who blessed the church with brilliant theological reflection, but neither needs to be the sole source for our view of sexuality. Each had his issues and hang-ups. But another part of the answer is just the basic, reasonable concern for responsibility. This aspect of life stirs powerful emotions which can get out of control and become very destructive.

I helped shape a series on sexuality for the youth group I led in the early 1980’s. I will never forget what a mother said at a meeting we had with parents before we met with the youth. We let them know how we were approaching things and who we were bringing in to help us – a pastoral care professor and an ethicist from the seminary in addition to two physicians, one male, one female. Then, we asked the parents what their thoughts and concerns were. One mother stated the matter succinctly. “We want you to tell them that sex is wonderful, but don’t

have it!” She said it with smile, realizing the challenge, then added, “This is a wonderful, sacred thing which should not be cheapened.”

We agreed and we worked to maintain a balance between affirming the gift and underscoring the nature of Christian responsibility in its use, mostly leaning on the concept of a one-flesh relationship described in Genesis 2 wherein two people connect in every aspect of life and thus know the deepest joy possible. With this understanding, sexuality is not just a physical thing and thus should be expressed by two people who are connected with and committed to each other in every way – physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

But in such a context, it is a wonderful thing, a sacred thing, a gift from God. We need to be careful not to allow our concern for responsibility to cheapen the gift and smother the joy.

If the church could discover a balance between affirmation of the gift and the need for responsibility, we might be able to promote a healthier way of life. This powerful force will not go away. Repression only works for so long. And in the process of pursuing health, we might also help the church’s witness. For one of the biggest turnoffs of the church is the perception that we are prudish in an uninformed way.

There is a film in which George C. Scott plays the role of a father whose daughter has run away from home and become part of the sex industry. He is distraught, as any father would be, but he is also a strict Calvinist and thus, even more unsettled. Along the way to finding his daughter, he forms an odd alliance with a woman in the business who helps him. But at one point in the story, she says something jarring.

“We are very much alike,” she says. He cannot see how. “I think so little of (this part of life) that I don’t care who I have it with,” she says, “You think so little of it that you don’t have it at all.” It is an irritating insight, but a valid one. Perhaps Song of Songs can help us avoid this unnecessary consequence. God affirms our condition as human beings, our way of expressing love to each other, which includes romance and passion expressed with the appropriate responsibility.

But what if we view this text as a metaphor designed to deepen our understanding of divine/human love? How might this benefit us? We

are accustomed to thinking about God as parent, father or mother, and Jesus as elder brother or friend. There is a great deal of tradition that views God as Heavenly Judge. But how might the image of God as Lover help us understand the nature of divine love and our response?

As we have noted already, it is an image found many places in scripture, particularly in prophetic literature, and it is an image explored by many great monastic thinkers. Twelfth-century Benedictine reformer Bernard of Clairvaux actually preached a lengthy series of sermons on Song of Songs exploring this very image in great detail. It is not about becoming absurdly graphic, but about the idea of God loving us passionately, longing for our best, and us returning that love.

This kind of love provides a sharp contrast to understanding our relationship with God simply as some kind of contractual endeavor where we are given a set of rules to follow and if we follow them, we receive a good score from the Heavenly Bookkeeper. It's nice to get a good score and following rules can produce discipline, but this sort of arrangement does not lead to the kind of passionate love that is willing to sacrifice all for the other. That is what God does for us through Christ and what God asks of us in return. This sort of passion and loyalty grows out of a relationship that resembles that of two people in love.

Consider this hymn text. "Jesus, the very thought of thee with sweetness fills my breast; but sweeter far thy face to see, and in thy presence rest... But what to those who find? Ah, this nor tongue nor pen can show; the love of Jesus, what it is none but his loved ones know (112 'Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee')."

Or consider this text. "Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts, thou fount of life, thou light of all, from the best bliss that earth imparts, we turn unfilled to heed thy call... Our restless spirits yearn for thee, where e'er our changeful lot is cast, glad when thy gracious smile we see, blest when our faith can hold thee fast (121 'Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts')."

Or this hymn text... "O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee; I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be... O Light that followest all my way, I yield my flickering torch to thee; my heart restores its borrowed

ray, that in thy sunshine's blaze its day may brighter, fairer be. (531 'O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go')."

Or finally, these words from our hymn of discipleship. "Jesus, thy boundless love to me no thought can reach, no tongue declare; O draw my thankful heart to thee, and reign without a rival there! Thine wholly, thine alone, I am; be thou alone my constant flame. O, grant that nothing in my soul may dwell, but thy pure love alone; O, may thy love possess me whole, my joy, my treasure, and my crown! All coldness from my heart remove; may every aspect, word, thought, be love (556, 'Jesus, Thy Boundless love to Me')."

In all of these instances and so many others, it is the language of love, romantic love, that best describes our relationship with God. Sweetness filling my breast, earth imparting bliss, spirits yearning, sunshine blazing, being a constant flame – this is not the language of a contract or a courtroom, this is the language of love. Does it not describe far better the way God relates to us and the way we long to relate to God?

I must confess that I am a romantic at heart. Most of my favorite books and films, no matter what other subject matter they explore, include a love story somewhere in the mix – *Dr. Zhivago*, *Casablanca*, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Notebook*. So, it's not a great surprise that I am drawn to Song of Songs. But I really do believe we benefit immensely from claiming the affirmation we find in this text of romantic love as well as the insight such love provides for the nature of divine love.

To be sought after with a passion and seek to return that level of affection is a precious thing. The only thing better is to be in love with God in this way. That is the text's invitation. "Arise, my fair one and come away," God says, "The winter is past, the rain is over, the time for singing has come." Who among us does not want to answer that call?