

Transformative Power of Love 9-1-24

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

One thing you don't hear talked about much in church... is sex. That may be for good reason. But this morning our first reading comes from the Song of Solomon, which is an erotic love poem. As a minister in the church, I have been tasked with the work of studying and proclaiming God's word. And so, this morning, in an effort to honor the text...we shall discuss sex.

The Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs, is unarguably a steamy work of poetry. But one might dare to ask why, for the love of everything holy, is this particular subject included in our canonized book of sacred writings. The Jews and the Christians both labored over its inclusion, so if you feel uncomfortable, you are in good company. Some of those who originally argued for its inclusion believed in the importance and value of the subject. Not all of the ancients were puritanical. However, others have understood the erotic nature of this text to illustrate the metaphorical love between God and the Church, the "bride of Christ".

Either way you choose to understand this inspired story, if you allow yourself to truly read it and feel it, it will change the way you know God. The glimpse we are given into the text today is PG, so anyone who's still clenching over the subject of sex in church can relax a little. Today's story is something we see on every TV and movie screen, it's one we're familiar with...outside of church anyway. Picture it with me. The girl is inside her house, peeking out and watching the boy approach from a distance. She knows he's coming; she's watching, she's anticipating, getting anxious, excited, and enjoying the look of him. As he gets closer, she sees him start peeking into the house, trying to get a look at her.

When they make eye contact, he calls her over and says, let's get out of here. Let's go be alone, get away from these prying eyes. And, as is true of all lovers, full of the joy of being in love, the world looks perfect, everything is blooming and the earth itself is overflowing with ripened fruit. The English loses the intended poetry of the Hebrew and the fact that it's not projected on a cinematic screen with an equally powerful soundtrack makes it lose something in the retelling.

But can you imagine the feeling of being in love? Most of us have experienced it at some point. Romantic love. The kind of feeling that makes you see the world differently. It fills you with happiness and makes you stupid. Can you recall the feeling of looking deeply into the eyes of someone who sees you, who desires you, who is as utterly captivated by you as you are of them. I'm talking about the heat, the fire, the passion of young, unbridled love? Can you call up that feeling? That is what this story is about.

So, how do you know God? How do you, personally, understand and experience God? We have so many metaphors to describe our relationship with the Divine. God is Father. He is The Creator, Ruler, Judge. Jesus is our Savior, Redeemer, and Friend. The Spirit: is our Helper and our comforter. We have so many ways of naming and explaining who God is and how we experience God. But how we view God, how we feel God, is deeply significant because it shapes the way we live out our faith.

Song of Solomon is vital to canonized Scripture because it paints an entirely different picture of how we relate to God. Friends, if you see this text purely as literal or you read it as an allegory, the fact that this type of love, the spicy kind, the kind we rate movies in order to preserve the innocence of our children around, that kind of embodied, all-consuming, passionate love, is included in our Scriptures tells us God thinks we have something to learn from it.

We Episcopalians have a reputation for being a wee bit stoic. Ostentatious displays of emotion of any kind are not really our thing. We prefer to be appropriate. But this kind of love has no interest in being appropriate. It is completely unselfconscious. It's unbound. How often have you observed people in love and thought or said, with your eyes rolled back, something about the foolishness and heedlessness of lovers? Unless we are the one embroiled in the passion ourselves, we tend to think they ought to tone it down. But I'm not sure that's what God thinks. We might not personally be interested in romance novels, but in view of the text, we might have to concede that God actually is a fan.

Attending to this type of riveting, captivating, love is important because it informs the things that we do and the way in which we do them. If we allow ourselves to feel this type of infatuation from God towards us, as all lovers do, that love will bubble up out of us in return.

When Jesus quotes Isaiah, in response to the hypocrisy of his accusers, he claims the people have abandoned the command of God. These are people who have committed their lives to behaving in accordance with the commands of God. So, what is this command they are said to have failed when they were doing all the right things and avoiding all the wrong things? What is the greatest command? It is to love. Well, these people understood that their love for God was illustrated in their adherence to all the other instructions God had given them. But the very fact that they were questioning the behavior of others who were not living out their faith in the way these folks' understood that faith was meant to be lived out, meant they assumed these other people were wrong.

Friends, this is written for us. Let us take one moment and heed James' advice. Let us hold up a mirror and be honest with ourselves in our judgment of our own practice of religion.

It's easy to do right now. Let us consider how we feel, what happens in our bodies, and note where our minds go when I ask us to consider the person or people we disagree with the most politically? We know why we are right; we've thought about it and prayed about it. Our views have been critically constructed based on our moral priorities. So why is it so easy to judge and become angry with those with whom we disagree? What does our response say about how we view others, how we love others? Our anger never produces God's righteousness. But God's love does, every time.

The message of The Song is that our love should be so overwhelmingly encompassing that all we can do is love. The fact that we are in such a profoundly intimate experience of mind-bending love ought to make everything we see turn into blooming flowers and ripened fruit. We ought to be a people so marked by the stupidly happy expression of those in the throes of young love that it pours out of us and onto everyone around us. We should see others with generosity, believing the best about their intelligence and motives and the practice of their religion. Just as we allow our own practice of our religion to be shaped by the love we experience with God. And when we disagree, because we will, the overwhelming pervasiveness of our love ought to make it possible for us to both hear and express our differences without the destructive intrusiveness of fear and anger.

Our outward behavior in the world matters, but its power comes first from our internal experience of love with God. As humans, working so hard to behave in godly ways, we can get so caught up in doing what we think is right that we risk forgetting the most basic question: is my behavior motivated from of a heart of responsive love for God? And if we are simply not feeling love, it's just not there for us right now... let us take some time to look into the face of our beloved and allow ourselves to feel God looking back at us, seeing into us, loving us unconditionally and wholeheartedly. The power of that love changes everything!