

September 2, 2018
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17, Year B, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Song of Solomon, better known as Song of Songs, is easy to miss. As the Hebrew Scriptures go, it's a short book, tucked in just before bulky Isaiah. It turns up in our reading list just once every three years, and then generally on Labor Day weekend.

It's too bad, really, because there is nothing else like it in the scriptural canon. It is a simmering and glimmering celebration of love. Unusually, it carries a female voice. At least one theologian calls Song of Songs "erotic poetry."¹ Read in "mixed company," it might make you blush. That it's in the Bible seems almost scandalous—except that it's in the Bible, so it must be okay.

It's okay in the Bible, but is it okay in church? It's quite likely that you've never heard the word *sex* during a sermon; I've never said it. The Church seems to have exactly two ways of addressing sexuality: it's either "just say no" or just say *nothing*. In between those two extremes is a cosmic gap, cosmic gap into which other cultural fillers carelessly leap. Music, movies, television, social media—messages about sex and sexuality are right there, all the time, in infinite quantity. Habituated to them, as to so much of the media noise barrage, we consume them without even noticing.

The media noise barrage is new in human history. We need step back only a few decades to reach a time that might variously be described as more innocent or more virtuous or simply as more prudish. Whichever descriptor you choose, stepping back stills some of the noise and reveals the refrain at its center: an interest in, and maybe even a preoccupation with, romantic love.

This is nothing new; it goes back at least as far as the human ability to document it. In the Bible, references to romantic love are sprinkled about, beginning with the first book of the Bible, at least as early as the moment Jacob met Rachel at the well. Genesis 29:11 is the lovely short verse describing what happened that day: "Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud."²

In the Bible, Song of Songs gives romantic love its most beautiful and exuberant expression. Or is that what it's about? Unsurprisingly, over the centuries there has been disagreement about that. In one interpretation, Song of Songs is an allegory of the relationship between Christ and the Church. This is now generally seen as problematic—after all, Song of Songs is a Hebrew text written long before the birth of Jesus. In another interpretation, one explored by Christian *and* Jewish scholars, Song of Songs is about the relationship between the human being and God.

Theologian and Episcopal priest Jay Emerson Johnson has written quite extensively about sexuality and Christianity. I served with Jay on the Same-Sex Blessings Project, which created the materials for blessing same-sex unions that were later approved for use around the Episcopal Church—he was the primary author of the theological resource. Regarding Song of Songs, Jay says this:

“Part of what makes the history of this little biblical text so peculiar is how important the Song of Songs was to Medieval Christians and how it nearly vanished entirely among modern Christians. For centuries, the Song of Songs was the one text most often copied, the one text most often chosen for commentaries, and the one text most often selected by preachers.”

He continues, “What in the world is all that about? Simply put: for our medieval ancestors, only the language of erotic desire can capture our own deep *longing* [emphasis mine] for God. The yearning for encounter, for intimacy, and for communion among dear friends and spouses and loved ones—what the ancient Greeks called Eros—this is the very same desire that draws us closer to God.”³

Let’s talk about the word *longing*. It’s a word *we* seldom hear or use. It’s a throwback to a different era—to a time before media noise barrages, to a mindset before instant gratification. *Longing* suggests things we would hesitate to choose, things that it is easier to ignore: weakness and vulnerability, risk and disappointment.

It’s kind of scary, but that’s not all there is to it. If we pause to acknowledge it, it would seem that longing is an innate part of our human nature. If so, then we might suppose two things. First, maybe God instills longing in us, to lure us into relationship with God. Second, we are created in the divine image, so maybe God also longs, to be in relationship with us. If all that’s true, then longing is the originating and animating force for relationship between human and Divine. And if *that’s* true, longing must also be the originating and animating force for relationship between humans. Longing might even be the lens through which we most intimately understand our own human nature, and the filter through which we may most keenly develop compassion for other human beings.

And so it seems best to bring a both/and approach to Song of Songs, hearing it as about the human relationship with God, *and* about the human relationship with another human. Our experience of human influences our experience of Divine; our experience of Divine influences our experience of human. And, it might even be more complicated than that: maybe human and Divine are all mixed up.

Jesus is human/Divine mixup extraordinaire. He *is* both human and Divine; he bodily carries the Divine into the human. And he has a lot to say about how human and Divine should interact.

In today's reading from Mark, Pharisees and scribes question Jesus about why his disciples eat without performing the required ritual hand washing. Answering their implied criticism, Jesus expands the conversation. In effect, he completely dismisses the religious laws governing what Jews may eat. All this centers on the issue of defilement, about which there are lots of Jewish laws. Taken together, they form a sort of rulebook for daily living, with particulars governing every aspect of a person's life. The point of following all these rules is to *avoid* defilement, which we might understand as uncleanness or impurity. The *problem* with defilement is that it results in *separation from God*. A defiled person is separated from God.

Jesus says that a person is *not* defiled by what they eat. Instead, a person is defiled by the bad intentions that come from within their own heart. I don't think that Jesus is eliminating the concept of defilement. Rather, I think he's eliminating the notion that any *rulebook* can protect us from it. He offers up a list of things that *do* cause defilement, and we can learn something from it: they are all individual acts that involve other people. Jesus seems to be saying that we can avoid separation from God by avoiding fractured relationships with other humans.

Let's take that a step farther. God calls us not only to avoid *separation from* God; God also calls us to seek *intimacy with* God. There are no rules for this either. Jesus teaches that we move from *separation from God* to *intimacy with God* by acting with thoughtful love in all our relationships.

This brings us back to those things that are easier to ignore: weakness and vulnerability, risk and disappointment. It brings us back to longing: the longing of human for God, the longing of human for human. And that brings us back to sex.

I thought hard about using that word in this sermon. After all, there are children in the congregation. But the cultural media barrage *is* out there. It attracts so much noise precisely because it is so powerful. I hope it's not too late for the Church to be a healthy and constructive participant in the conversation. For, into the cosmic gap between "just say no" or just say *nothing*, let me at least whisper this: God gave humans the awesome gift of sexuality. May God help us to accept it with grace and integrity.

One last thing. God is never actually mentioned in Song of Songs. If it's about our relationship with God, that's because God is the one speaking. Imagine for a moment that God is speaking to you, and hear the text again: "Arise, my fair one, and come away"

Notes

¹ Jay Emerson Johnson, "Love. Now More than Ever," July 9, 2017, from his blog Peculiar Faith: Renewing the Church, Changing the World, available online at <https://peculiarfaith.com/2017/07/> (accessed August 30, 2018).

² Genesis 29:11, NRSV.

³ Johnson.