

Sermon: August 30, 2009

Old Testament: Song of Solomon 2:8-13

New Testament: Mark 10:6-8

Sermon: "A Joyful Meeting"

Call to Worship: Proverbs 22:1-6

Leader: A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches,

Congregation: and loving favor rather than silver and gold.

Leader: The rich and poor meet together,

Congregation: the Lord is the maker of them all.

Leader: The prudent man foreseeth the evil and hideth himself;

Congregation: but the simple pass on, and are punished.

Leader: By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, and honour, and life

Congregation: Thorns and snares are in the way of the forward: he that does  
keep his soul shall be far from them.

Leader: Train up a child in the way he should go;

Congregation: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Hymns: #267 All Things Bright and Beautiful

#533 Models of Your Love (Insert)

#441 I Love Thy Kingdom Lord (vs. 1-4)

Prayer of Confession: O God who demonstrated to us what perfect love is all about, we confess to You that we have been slow in learning that lesson. We love others when it best suits us and when we can get the optimum rewards for ourselves. In our marriages we have failed to love unconditionally. In our parental duties we have loved our children when they have lived up to our expectations. In our communities we have loved when it has been convenient. Certainly, Lord, we have missed the mark. For you have taught us to love unconditionally and to forgive without ceasing. Give us new and loving hearts so that we might be reflections of Your love and grace. We pray in the name of Christ who loves us unconditionally. Amen.

Words to Hymn #533: Models of Your Love

Vs. 1

O Perfect Love, that calls us to each other

We will rejoice in fellowship divine.

We praise you Lord, for binding us together

So that in love we find our joy divine.

Vs. 3

O Lasting Love, that celebrates our Oneness

Husbands and wives inspired from above;

Teach us to play and joyfully show to others

That we are simply models of Your Love.

Vs. 2

O Joyous Love, that binds us male and female;

We know in truth the bounty of Thy Grace.

As we rejoice within the bond of marriage

We will experience You face to face.

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I don't know about you, but when I read those words from Song of Solomon, my heart began to beat just a little faster, and my spirit was lifted ever so slightly, and my mind was flooded with images of our dating days back in Richmond during the winter of 1964-65.

I may be pushing 70, but my romantic inclinations are still those of a 20 something. And when the Lectionary selected this passage as our Old Testament Lesson for today, I said to myself. "Self, you are going to preach on a book of the Bible that you have never preached from before!" So I began to explore the passage. And you know what I discovered? This passage is jammed packed with messages for God's people.

I don't know any other way to say it. This passage celebrates the love between a man and a woman, or, perhaps, the love between a woman and a man. Who cares whether you mention the man first, or the woman. The joyful meeting of man and woman is the message of this love song. And it comes to us straight from the heart of the woman.

The first thing this passage does is to remind us of the creation stories. That's where it all began. Dr. Charles Raynal notes that "the Song of Solomon celebrates the relation of woman and man in God's gracious creation, reflecting the two accounts of God's , word and action. God's rich and effective purpose in Genesis."

In other words, we just did not happen to end up male and female by some quirk of fate. God intended us to be two different

elements of the same species. First for the purpose of procreation, and secondly for mutual support and joy.

You know, we live in the most modern, up-to-date, enlightened society in the history of the world. At least we like to think we do. But when it comes to human sexuality and the way we use sexuality as a commodity in the global culture, we are Neanderthals. Everywhere you turn, products are being presented by skimpily clad young ladies and handsome young men with bulging muscles are touted as the model for us all to emulate. Dr. Raynal goes on to say that “While we have human sexuality freely accessible, our free access does not automatically include our responsible, much less joyful, honoring and of the goodness of God’s intention.”

We live in a time when sexual practice is exploitive, especially of women and children. Sexuality becomes another way of manipulating and objectifying human beings. Human beings, males and females, have been created by God in God’s own image and for God’s own purposes. Let us make mankind in our image, says God, Male and female God created them. Therefore we conclude that God embodies everything that it means to be male and everything it means to be female. While we often refer to God as “He”, the scriptures are clear in describing a God that encapsulates all the female traits and all the male traits. Our God is not bound by one gender. And one way to think of God is to imagine God sometimes as having no gender and sometimes as having both genders. Then there are times we want to think of God in masculine terms and other times that we want God to be feminine in nature. We are limiting God when we only think of the Deity as one specific gender. Back to the passage.....

Dr. Raynal goes on to say: “global markets make human sexuality into a commodity for the promotion and sale of goods and services. Treating human sexuality as a commodity is parasitic on the

goodness of God's intended mutuality. Commercialization devalues and subordinates human sexuality for the sake of economic gain, instead of honoring and respecting God's intended gift and joy."

You see, from the very beginning, God's intention was to foster relationships between man and woman that were founded on building covenants of joy and mutuality. That covenant of joy and mutuality is clearly felt in this beautiful love song.

There is nothing in this song that hints of abusiveness or manipulation. Rather, there is flirtation and joy. There is mutual respect and an understanding that this is a very natural meeting between two individuals whom God has created. The man comes bounding over the landscape like a gazelle or a young stag. But when he reaches the woman's home, he reverts to a shy and adoring individual. He hides behind the fence. She knows he is there. She is flattered by his peeking through the slats of the windows. She welcomes his advances. She is overjoyed to hear him say: "Arise my love, my fair one, and come away." She wants to be courted and enticed.

She hears him give all the good reasons why she should leave her home and join with him. The time is right. The long hard winter is over. The soaking rains have passed. The flowers are in bloom across the face of the earth. It is Spring, a time for singing and the voice of the turtledove is heard across the land. The figs are ripening, the blossoms are out in full and the fragrance of the flowers fills the air with an aphrodisiac aroma.

It cannot be said any better. Love is in the air! The time is ripe for the joining of two together in mutual covenant.

This is not, "sneak out with me in the middle of the night so your parents won't know we are gone." This is not come away with me and let's have an affair that is nothing but a romp in the hay with

no feelings and no commitment. This is a daylight romance. Everything is out in the open. The joy of love between a man and woman is celebrated and both the woman and the man are transformed by the power of this love. The lovers of this song are transformed by the magnetic and ecstatic force of mutual oneness. There is playfulness in this song. There is playfulness that not only transforms the two lovers, but reflects the transforming power of God as well.

In Mark 10:6-8, Jesus has something very powerful to say about the transforming power of mutual love.

***But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh, so then they are no longer two, but one flesh.***

Inherent in the Song of Solomon and particularly in our passage for the morning is the essence of what Jesus understood about the relationship between a man and a woman.

You don't get married and then leave your bride and go back and live with your parents. Marriage is a transforming act. It is transforming for the two who are enjoying the playfulness of love and it is transforming for the family from which they come. I think Elaine and I were ready when Catherine, our oldest got married. We still had Rob with us. But when he married and created a home of his own with Christi, our home was transformed. Some call it the empty nest and bemoan the loss. I called it freedom and rejoiced that we had moved on to a new stage. You see, there are social and political ramifications of falling in love. The simple act pairing off and forming a new unit affects the whole of society.

That is why you and I, as followers of Christ and Worshipers of God Almighty, need to make sure that our children understand this

thing of marriage. Our children need to see us as husbands and wives in joyful play. They need to experience during their formative years the kind of love and tenderness that is reflected in this love poem from Song of Solomon. And they need to see their parents struggle with the stresses of being married and see how two loving and committed people work things out and forgive each other. That is what The Marriage Covenant is all about.

I met with a couple last week who is planning on getting married in September. We talked about a lot of things. But one of the most important things we talked about is the fact that both the young man and the young woman come from broken home. I wanted to know what effect coming from a broken home will have on the formation and the commitment which they will make as husband and wife. Both of them responded without hesitation that having experienced the turmoil of a broken home, they were committed to making their relationship work so that their children will never have to go through what they went through. They had made a covenant together on this point. And that is all God asks us to do.

Julia O'Brien, a contemporary Biblical Scholar at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania reminds us that there is another aspect of this love poem. It can be read as an allegory of the love which God has for us. She writes: "To be in love is to live beyond the boundaries of the self and to enter a realm of sheer delight, in which the human and the divine can merge. Human love both allows us to celebrate God through our bodies and educates us in loving and being loved."

Fortunate is the couple whose love and commitment reflects the love and commitment which God has demonstrated to us throughout all of history and especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Joyful is the young woman in love as she writes:

The voice of my beloved!  
Look he comes,  
Leaping upon the mountains,  
Bounding over the hills.  
My beloved is like a gazelle  
Or a young stag.  
Look, there he stands  
Behind our wall,  
Gazing in at the windows  
Looking through the lattice.  
My beloved speaks and says to me:  
“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 our 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.”

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