

Song of Songs – Ruth Huston

Song of Solomon 2:8-13, Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9, James 1.17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Today's lectionary readings challenge the notion that life lived in the way of God should be characterized by long faces, dour expressions, long lists of "don't do's" and strict codes of ethical conduct, empty of joy and delight. Killjoys and party-poopers don't get the last word in these passages. They're the Minority Report. Yes, faith is serious business at times, but not today. Today it's all about God's over-the-top generosity, joy, exhilaration, sensuality, and quality of living, freedom in Christ.

Since this is the only time in our three-year lectionary cycle to hear from the Song of Songs, and if we don't want to wait for another three years to deal with this text, today is the day to experience it deeply and well. And I dare not make it dull! If the rabbis had their way, we would allegorize this text by insisting that it's really about God's love for Israel. Rabbi Akiva, the man we love to hate, was even quoted as saying that it was a secular piece fit only for banquet halls or taverns, and that anyone who sang it had no place in the world to come.

If the ancient church had its way, we would allegorize it to Christ's love for his Church. Jerome, 4-5th c CE—young people should confine their reading to historical writings lest they be led astray. Origen, 200's CE—nobody should read it until first they had "ceased to feel the passion of bodily nature" which perhaps means banning book completely? Not until the late 300's did anyone dare to interpret this book as secular love poetry—as did Theodore of Mopsuestia, and for that the Church ostracized him. Even the modern, western church hasn't often known what to do with such an embarrassing book. I remember reading it for the first time as a hormonal teenager – and being thrilled about finding something in the Bible that was sexy! But alas, my youth leader thought it was about Christ and the Church. What a disappointment. Don't get me wrong. I love scripture celebrating Christ's love for the church but we already have lots of those texts. It seems so unfair to take one of the few texts that delight in physicality and sexuality and add those to the Christ-loves-the-Church category.

But in good Wesleyan fashion, we insist on the plain meaning of the text, at least this morning when the party-poopers are at the back of the bus. This is none other than a collection of Romantic oftentimes erotic love poetry by a variety of authors over a long period of time—neither religious—never mention's God—nor nationalistic in theme—curious in biblical book. It reflects many faces and dimensions of human love. Poems of longing and fulfillment, joy and desolation, poems in praise of the lover and those in praise of love itself. Throughout its 8 chapters, a man and woman take turns praising the physical characteristics of one another with detailed imagery loaded with sexual double entendre, illiciting from most readers a red-faced, "Too much information." I picture the lovers as young and infatuated, delighting in the

sheer wonder and glory of each other's bodies and personalities, but mostly bodies. Isn't it marvelous really that a book that takes time to celebrate the human body and joy of human love has found its way into our sacred scriptures.

This particular poem comes in the lectionary during the doldrums of late summer. If we were dragging our feet over the yearly movement from lazy summer holidays to academic rigors, this text will surely make us sit up and take notice. But the setting in this second chapter isn't late summer—it's all spring and newness and burgeoning life. Dogwoods and crocus and daffodils bloom while the sun melts frozen branches and we hear soundscapes of birds chirping and brooks gurgling. We see couples hand in hand blushing and giggling in the throes of virginal love.

This excerpt centers around a nighttime visit to the woman by her lover. Here, as in other parts of the Song, the lovers are assumed to be equal partners in the relationship: it's strikingly egalitarian, as if they've taken a time out from the normal constraints of the patriarchal society in which they find themselves. Though it is apparent that there are greater restrictions on the girl than the boy, within the one-to-one relationship they're pretty equal, their desires are the same, and their description of each other is similar. In fact, in this particular text, the woman speaks first—she has the first word and the man comes to us only through her voice.

She begins by telling us that the man comes to her house, with all the speed and determination of a gazelle or a stag in heat. He takes his place in Romeo-like fashion outside her balcony and peers through the latticework of the windows, searching for her (vs. 9b). Then he sees her, reminding her that it is springtime when the whole earth is awaking from winter sleep. Everything is fertile and receptive and open again. We walk in the sensuality of these images. Luxuriant and lush. For those in love, for those who have found someone to love, and to return their love, life feels like a desert has burst into blossom. Those in love simply cannot believe that the whole universe doesn't rejoice in their love. Birds are singing just for them. It's spring all over the world. So he invites the woman to come out from her house and to join him in lovemaking. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

Although the lectionary does not finish the poem, the remainder tells us that the lover has his doubts that she will come away with him for love-making, for she is like "the clefts of the rock, the covert of the cliff" (vs. 14), impregnable to his pursuit.

But she tells him that "the little foxes" (that is, her former suitors) "ruin the vineyard" (that is, have tempted her in the past). So now, she is not only tempted but more than willing to go with him for a time of joyous love-making. So "until the day breathes and the shadows flee" (that is, all night long), "turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains." Nothing shy about her!

Thank God Israel and the Church allegorized these texts so that they could be included in our canon. And thank God, we can receive the plain meaning of the text, 2 lovers who call us to

remember, to even notice one another—can we imagine how slighted God must be when we don't even notice his good creation cuz we're either so busy trying to be pious or because we've allowed our sex-drenched culture to tell us how to notice— often in demeaning and misogynistic ways—we're invited to rejoice in all the generous blessings of God, including physical, romantic love of a woman and a man. These are feelings not to be despised; rather a part of God's creativity, to be valued and enjoyed.

On other Sundays, there will be opportunity to speak of the dangers of over exuberance about such matters. There will be occasion for reminding us of our responsibilities for our feelings and bodies. And we'll be sure to speak of the ethical implications of our Christian view of love and how important it is to be prudent, careful and responsible. But this Sunday, if we accept the invitation of these two young lovers, we'll relax, revel, lighten up, and praise God for blossoms and breasts, stags and gazelles, and lovers in love. And we won't insist on infusing a "greater" meaning into this joyous experience. You'll note that the text doesn't take an opportunity to extol, or appeal for, the blessings of procreation, family, and prosperity. Love is its own justification.

Psalm

Just when we thought we were out of the woods once we left that frisky Song of Songs book, this morning's Psalm 45 dares to continue the theme for it's a poem written for a royal wedding, describing the sexual desire and tension of the approaching wedding of the king and his virgin princess, and their mutual longing for the wedding night.

The Psalmist surely knows that conducting the affairs of state is hard work, (afterall, he's probably written this on the king's dime—its effusive description of the king suggests that this court writer knows not to bite the hand that feeds him) but just for today, on the ruler's wedding day, "let's party!" "let's celebrate!" Rejoice in the beauty of young and old, in the wedding night to come, in children running down church aisles, and in laughter that lasts long into the night.

Gospel

The Gospel lesson, while it doesn't celebrate the intrinsic beauty and value of romantic love, it does remind us that those who insist on life lived by a strict adherence to the pious letter of the law are still the Minority Report.

Imagine with me. Jesus and the boys have just come from some really big events. Feeding of the 5,000, then Jesus decides to defy the laws of physics and walk on water a bit, then he heals the sick on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. These guys are exhausted. They need some alone time without the crowds so they sit down together and share a meal. We can well imagine. They're blowin off steam. Telling jokes, playing one-up, debriefing, exchanging baseball scores. Enjoying each other's company. And some long-nosed nitpickers gather around watching them, and start criticizing them over breaking a few of the 613 Mosaic laws about ritual purity. Washing of hands and cups is the center of the problem in this reading

Jesus listens for a while. Then he gets up and delivers a withering rebuttal. He won't have any of it. "You've got to be kidding!" You boys just aren't getting' it. Life in the kingdom isn't dissecting law codes and lists of "don't do's." We're trying to have a picnic here. We're laughing, enjoying each other, relishing the delectable fried chicken and potato salad. And you guys get your girdle in a knot because someone didn't wash the dishes right. You want to make this about outer cleanliness, about handwashing and pots and kettles and kosher foods. The deeds of evil come from within and are not erased by washing hands or cups or saucers. Lady Macbeth has been washing the spots off her hands for centuries and will never rid herself of the "damn spot" by all that scrubbing.

In this passage, Jesus takes on the purity system. He sets aside the tradition of the elders. Oh, how that must have horrified these guardians of the tradition. He basically tells them that what they have believed in the past is frankly just wrong. It is wrong because they have failed to understand God. He refuses the notion that ever-vigilant scrupulousness (holiness) is the appropriate response to God. This is not because Jesus isn't concerned about God's holiness; rather, it is because of his radical reinterpretation of divine holiness. God's "holiness", for Jesus, is seen in God's compassionate love that welcomes rather than excludes, is gracious rather than judgmental, and embraces the excluded, the despised, the marginalized, the ones who didn't wash their hands. And anytime there's a conflict of purity vs inclusion, inclusion wins every time! The God whose Kingdom is such Good News – especially to the poor and excluded – could never have intended a system that couldn't invite people with dirty hands.

Quit being such killjoys and party-poopers. Get to the back of the bus. This Sunday we're partying.

Epistle

At first glance the lesson from James, or "that Epistle of Straw" according to Luther, might feel like a killjoy or party-pooper. James the teacher gives us certain "rules" of community, a list of imperatives and we postmoderns don't really like lists of commands with lots of should's and must's and need to's but, like the Rule of Benedict, their goal is not obedience for its own sake but behavior that brings health and joy to community life, behavior that helps us see Christ in ourselves and one another. Summed up in v. 27, the climax of this passage: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for widows and orphans in distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

We care for widows and orphans not only so that they might live, but so that they can live well and live better. Freed from survival issues, they can enjoy the fruits of relationship and culture; they can appreciate song and poetry and spring and young love and picnics with Jesus. "God wants us to enjoy; God wants all of us to enjoy." Enjoyment that's grounded in generosity, companionship, and mutuality.

We can choose to live as killjoys, making the code of ethics an end in itself, but we'll really be missing the point. Does how we live contribute anything to beauty, to experience, whether

human, non-human, or divine? Can we respond to these texts this morning by living in the over-the-top generosity of God?