

GOD'S LOVE SONG

Song of Solomon 2:8-13, James 1:17-27, Mark 7

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The Rev. Connie Clark

When I was in high school, I was ridiculously romantic. I cannot imagine how my parents put up with me. I spent hours and hours mooning over various boys or ideas of boys, because love at that age did not actually require knowing the object of one's love. Indeed, it was easier to love from afar – to love the figment of one's imagination – than to deal with the reality of the beloved, in this case, another teenager, only male.

I was also a religious girl, a church girl who taught Sunday school and did good works with the youth group. But even my religiosity suffered from an overlay of romanticism. I wouldn't use a contemporary Bible, but found an old, moldy one around the house whose pages were falling apart. It had somebody else's writing in it, underlines and notes, and I loved that. I would press flowers between its pages. Occasionally, in a spate of faithfulness, I would actually read the Bible, sticking mostly to two books: The Psalms and the Song of Solomon.

Ah, the Song of Solomon, the lusty, strange, frankly sexual, and slightly embarrassing book of the Bible! In my girlhood, it was such a comfort to know that Christianity was NOT all prudery and starchiness and repression. It's still good to know that!

It's good to know there is room in the Bible for this poem celebrating erotic love ... that no matter how many times the church takes puritanical, repressive turns, the Song of Solomon is still there to bear witness to loving sexuality as God's good creation.

It's good to know that the Song of Songs inspired more commentaries in the Middle Ages than any other book of the Bible, and that Bernard of Clairvaux thought so highly of it that he wrote 86 sermons on it ... and those 86 sermons focused on just the first two chapters!

It's good to know that erotic love can be used as a metaphor for the love between God and his people Israel, or in a Christian context, the love between Christ and his church.

Indeed, that has been the primary way scholars and pastors and rabbis and prophets have approached the Song of Solomon. They see it as a gift from God that helps us understand the greater gift of God – God's love for us.

Sounds pretty important – and it is. But today marks the only time in the lectionary's three-year cycle that we hear any part of the Song of Solomon read in the church. The only other time you might hear it is at a wedding. I wish we heard it more often, because this racy love poem helps us put a lot of other scripture in context. It might also help us put our selves in context – and our culture, too.

The Song of Solomon is poetry – some say the most lyrical poetry of the Bible. Poetry is strange stuff. Now I have always loved it, and started writing it when I was very little. I'm sure I wrote very bad poetry, especially in those teenage years. But regardless, it has always been second nature to me.

Poetry is supercharged language. When it works, it is miraculous. The poet uses so many tricks of the trade, from sound and rhythm to metaphor and allusion. The language can be dense and difficult or simple and song-like. I've learned to my surprise that a lot of people don't like poetry. They are afraid of it, or annoyed by it, or put off by a bad experience of poem dissection in high school or college. I can understand that. There are some poets I avoid because they seem to be difficult on purpose, and if all poetry seemed that way to me, I'd avoid it like the plague.

But we as Christians can't avoid poetry, because according to one well-known scholar, at least half the Bible consists of it. I don't think that's an accident. Poetry chases after mystery. Poetry – like music and visual arts and other arts – poetry tries to express things that cannot be expressed in simple prose.

The Song of Songs is a perfect example of this. I can tell you, all nice and direct, “God loves you like a lover loves his beloved, like a bride loves a groom.” And you can hear that and nod your head and go, “Uh-huh, that's nice,” and go on about your business. The words I said might register, but they would not touch your heart or echo in your ear or draw your eye to the page. But when the lover actually speaks – speaking to you and to me from thousands of years ago – when the lover says these words, you are going to have a different reaction:

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 time of singing has come! What? What is this about? Who is this speaking, and what are they saying to me? Put it prosaically, and you can dismiss it. Say it in poetry, and you really can't. It will catch your attention at least for a little while, especially when the poet says things like, “*Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved.*” HELL-o! Certainly this is not your average Bible passage! Wake up! Poetry will do that to you – it will wake you up, and make you think about what it is that God is up to.

Poetry does not yield its greatest gifts to rational analysis. This could also be said for scripture. There is value in scholarly study of scripture, but more value in the daily

use of it, the breathing of it and chewing on it, the living of it. Guy and I were blessed to witness this phenomenon at a banquet last night held in honor of a group called the Women of Restoration. These women have had major struggles in their lives. They have been addicted, homeless, abused, in prison, impoverished, and in some cases, all of the above, but they claim today that Christ has changed their lives. Women of Restoration is a Christian 12-Step program, and it is working wonders.

Most of the women and their supporters are African-American Christians, so the night was full of preaching and praise dances and testimony and song. I had a great time! And one of the things that felt so good to me was the way these women – and almost everyone at the banquet, it seemed – spoke scripture verses frequently and naturally. Some of the people at the banquet were clearly Bible scholars with many years of serious scripture study under their belts. But the women doing the testifying were new Christians, and already they were using the Bible's poetry to describe the poems taking place in their hearts and in their new lives. We kept hearing, "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but the Lord has given us a spirit of power!" "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." "Be transformed through the renewing of your minds." "Put on the whole armor of God!"

That's what happens when you live immersed in the Bible. You start to live and breathe God's poetry. You do find yourself transformed by the renewing of your mind in a way you cannot wholly understand. The Holy Spirit works on us in so many ways, and poetry is chief among them. We are people of the Book, and the Book is largely poetry. The Book tells us of God's love in metaphor as well as story and proverb and instruction. The message is so very important, God uses so many ways to make sure we hear it.

The message of God's love is so clear in the readings today, not just in the passage from the Song of Songs, but in the passages from James and Mark as well. But those passage, full of morality and instruction and dos and don'ts, can sound difficult and burdensome. They can be wearying – unless you realize there is one simple reason for the instruction and the moralizing and the warnings: There is one simple reason, and it takes us right back to the Song. The reason is love. We are warned against false religiosity and defilement – in no uncertain terms – why? Because we are loved, loved to the point of folly. God knows, Jesus knew, James knew that deceit and licentiousness and falsehood can kill us, kill the spirit and kill the community. God loves us passionately, as a bride loves the bridegroom for whom she waits with intense longing. God does not want to see us destroying ourselves, and therefore gives us stern teachings that can sometimes seem a little harsh. But listen again. Listen again in the context of the poetry of love, the Song of Songs, the bridal poem addressed to you and me by the King of the Universe, and you will understand these teachings to be just a little bit more love poetry – pragmatic and direct, but love poetry nonetheless.

There are a million ways to respond to God's love poetry, a million ways to respond to God's love. I know all of you are responding, in your own ways, to that love in ways that are known to the world and ways that are hidden. Some of God's servants – even a couple here among us, like Nancy and Susan – have been given the gift of

responding to God's love poetry through poetry of their own. I came across a poem last week that I'd like to share with you as part of my response to the poetry of the Song of Solomon. I am borrowing it from a poet I admire, a woman named Jane Kenyon. It is a love poem to the world that God made, a poem of assurance and rest that could only be written from inside the security of God's love. The poem is called, "Let Evening Come."

Let Evening Come

BY JANE KENYON

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

Amen.