

### “A Song of Love”

Regarding the reading of the book Song of Solomon, Twelfth Century Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux writes: in this book *it is everywhere love that speaks. If anyone hopes to grasp the sense of what he reads, let him love. Whereas someone who does not love will hear or read this song of love in vain* (Bernard, 79, 1).

A fair warning! One of the great gifts of God is the gift of exuberant romantic love between two people. To find oneself caught up in the mystery, the beauty, and the personality of another is one of life's wonderful experiences ... an experience celebrated by two youthful souls with great abandonment as recorded in this strange biblical poem, the Song of Solomon.

During all the years of my ministry, I have never written a sermon on this unusual book, opting for the Psalm, or the Epistle or the Gospel lessons when it appears in the lectionary. Now that I'm old enough to read such erotic literature, I thought I would give it a go! The Song of Solomon, like the Book of Esther, never uses the word God or Lord. Esther, however, is at least a story of Jewish survival and can be tied in to the nation of Israel. The Book Song of Solomon in a nutshell portrays the beauties of human sexuality. It is fair to ask then, why did the Hebrew and Christian Fathers include the Song of Solomon in the Hebrew and Christian canon of scripture? The answer to that question is the crux for interpreting today's reading. However, I first must dismiss the one reason that they were simply dirty old men!

From my scant reading, this book was the subject of considerable debate. The rabbinic scholars did not give their final blessing to include the Song of Solomon into the Hebrew Bible until about 90 AD. When forming the New Testament similar debate occur, but the same conclusion was reached ... that being ... the Song of Solomon was a book deemed authoritative in matters of faith because, in Hebrew thought, “it was judged to be an allegory on the love between God and Israel,” and in Christian thought, “the lovers were understood to be Christ and the church, or Christ and the Christian individual.”

Well, that's all well and good, but I have to tell you, some of the poems in the Song of Solomon are quite graphic and list body parts that I would find difficult to allegorize. Most commentaries suggest two ways to go with interpretation ... either “wear the spectacles of allegory and view the lovers as God and the people of God,” but the danger with too much allegory leads to reading too much into the text. The other way is to read today's lesson more literally and to listen to it speak of the God-given joy that derives from human sexuality, and some of the poems lend themselves to such interpretation.

I believe that today's particular lesson can be looked at with both sets of glasses, because the poem speaks of the renewing power of love, both human and divine ... that the love relationship that God has for us (the vertical) is similar in its intensity to the love relationship we have with our most intimate partner (the horizontal). We can best understand the intensity and the passion of God's love for us, when we relate it to the honest ... not jaded lust ... the honest, sensuous passion between two lovers. Passion first and foremost is coupled with love --- either in strong amorous desire or in platonic love, such as in Christ's passion on the Cross. Passionate expression, when pure and honest, is good and of God --- like the passion expressed so beautifully in the poetic lyrics of the Song of Solomon. Pornographic love-making, on the other hand, is disappointing and unfulfilling because it is pretend passion, not pure passion.

It is safe to say that passion is something we all long for and are attracted to; that we are all on a pilgrimage to honest passion, seeking someone or something to which we can totally and unashamedly give ourselves. If perchance we find *that* one or *that* cause that stirs our total being with pure passion, we ought not to hold back in expressing our love and devotion. Such passion is nothing to fear, but something to trust, nothing to squelch but something to express.

I am hard pressed to connect this to a relevant illustration, but one that comes to mind is the movie *Groundhog Day*. The actor Bill Murray portrays Phil Connors, a self-absorbed, cynical weatherman who is furious at having to return to the town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to cover Groundhog Day. He hates the small town, the “hicks” in it, as well as having to make cute television chatter about the groundhog. He takes his feelings out on everyone around him. Having stayed in a hotel in Punxsutawney, and actually put up in the “Bill Murray Room,” I totally understand!

Phil Connors expects to return home the next day but finds that he has awakened to the same day --- that he has entered a time warp and is destined to live that one day over and over again and again. The rest of the film is about how he deals with each event of that day ... over and over again and again! Phil Connors learns that he can manipulate his knowledge of the future, and get anything he wants --- except the lovely Rita, played by Andie MacDowell, whose moral scruples are such that she will not go to bed with him. She is wise enough to want pure passion, not lust. As Phil gets to know her better, he falls in love and stops seeing her as a potential conquest. As he learns to love her, he also opens up to the other people in the town, and really enters into the life of the little community.

*Groundhog Day* is like the fairy tales where a kiss from a princess turns a toad into a handsome prince. I think is also is a parable about our lives. We are all bound by time and circumstance, but even so there are tremendous variations possible, depending

on our choices --- the most important being how we view God and the God-like ideals in life, and how we view others in the light of that view. If we manage to capture passionate love for another person and express our love for that one and broaden that into compassion for others, our world can be transformed. The power of passion can unlock for us the beauty of each day, be it Groundhog Day or any other day!

We love to hear about stories of powerful passion. We are attracted to these stories because there dwells in us a strong desire to experience such passion, to discover that one all-consuming person who will make us lose ourselves in total bliss. This is why they make “chick flicks” and why men should go with their wives to see them! This is why such movies or plays like *Romeo and Juliet* are timeless. My favorite is the true story of the King of England, Edward the Eighth, who abdicated the throne in 1936 for the passionate love of Mrs. Wallace Simpson, a commoner. When criticized for his excessive display of passion for the American divorcee, the departing king replied, “In love there can be no excess.”

Well stated which in turn defines the unconditional love of God. When asked to describe God, we often reply that God is omnipotent and transcendent. We’re down here. God’s up there. We’re down here, muddling along as best we can. And God is up there, looking down on us, but not too actively involved with us. It seems that this all-powerful God has set up natural laws while remaining distant and detached, as recent world events and current affairs seem to indicate. One writer responds to this line of thinking by stating: “Who told you that we believe in that kind of God? We believe God is love, that God’s love is vulnerable to us. We believe in the kind of God who came to us in Jesus. You talk as if we think God is a lawyer! Our God is a lover!”

Indeed! God is love ... passionate love ... but what does that mean? Jesus responds. God is the shepherd who abandons the 99 sheep and goes to look for the one lost sheep, and when he finds that one lost sheep, he puts it on his shoulders like a child and throws a party for all his friends. God is the woman who, upon losing a lost coin, turns her whole house upside down and, when she finds that coin, shouts to her friends, “Come party with me, I found my coin!” God is not the cosmic bureaucrat, sitting safe in his office saying, “If you need me, you can contact me during office hours.” God goes out beyond the camp ... seeks, searches, and saves. That is how much you are valued by God and the extent of God’s passionate love for you ... that God has never and will never abandon you. God is the prodigal child’s father ... waiting with love.

What great hope there is here for us! If you think that your faith is something that you do, something that you summon forth, a matter of your hard work and earnest desire, think again! Faith is when you get sought and found by God who loves you passionately! Our text, from the Song of Solomon, is an ancient Hebrew poem about two young, adolescent lovers, which is true but at the same time, for thousands of years, the church has also read it as a love song sung by Israel to her God. Faith is not a cool, calm, or rational matter of belief. Faith is a thing of love ... of being loved by God and loving in return. When we worship here each Sunday ... when we gather an offering and send a portion out to help others ... when you volunteer in church work and services projects ... when you are active in community ministries, you love God and is a love in return for God’s love for you. Our witness of faith here and out there is our song of love to our Beloved God.

In Jesus Christ, God becomes the seeking shepherd, the searching woman, the one who expectantly, eagerly, and passionately moves toward us. One person reflecting on this text summons it up quite nicely: “You don’t have to have made a fool of yourself in junior high school over your first love. But it sure helps if you are trying to understand the God of Israel and the love of Christ.” Our passage this Sunday from the Song of Solomon invites us to join with two anonymous lovers of three thousand years ago, and enjoy God’s gift of romantic love.

She speaks, “Look, he comes ... like a gazelle or a young stag ...”

He responds, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone ... flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come ...”

Be renewed in you faith! Be passionate about what you believe! Sing and dance! Praise God for “chick flicks!” Love ... love ... unencumbered!!

### **Prayer:**

For all Your gracious gifts, we give you thanks, O Loving God, particularly for the gift of love. We have not been left alone, to make our way on this planet. From the first, others have loved us, cherished us, and touched our lives. For the love of parents, friends, family, and lovers, we give You thanks.

O God, make us better lovers. Enable us better to express ourselves with others, better to give to others, less willing to take from others. Teach us to look upon one another in love, not to remake others into our image for them. Help us to see the gentle, loving, and lovable aspects of others. Give us patience with the craziness of others, forbearance with their weakness, in the hope that they will be patient and forbearing with our craziness.

Above all, remind us that we love because we have been loved. Having been so totally, unconditionally, and committedly loved by You, O Lord, we are better able to love others. May others see, in our attempts to love them, some measure of the love with which You have loved us. Amen.