

“The Will to Love”

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

September 2, 2018

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

So we start with a love poem. The Song of Solomon is undeniably a love poem but there is debate on how we should read it; it speaks of pursuit and hiding, passion and longing, desire and attraction it uses unusual metaphors for our time to be sure, but candor and openness that allows no shame so we may hear it as affirmation of God’s desire for us to have deep and wonderful intimate, sexual relationships. Others however interpret it as an allegory for the intimate and deep way God loves us.

As we can tell by the title, it is attributed to Solomon – a man who reportedly had 700 wives and 300 concubines – I suppose someone thought he’d be an expert on the subject. But there is an unpleasant reality behind this; as was true in the culture in his time, all the women in his life (with the exception of the Queen of Sheba) were his property or subjects, none could be equal partners in the relationship whether attraction was present or not.

Hebrew scholar Renita Weems says that the title of the book would be better translated as “The Song of Many Songs” or “The Song Comprised of Many Songs” or, my personal favorite, “The Most Excellent of Songs.” In this book, Weems hears the voice “of a female protagonist along with the Jerusalem daughters” who provide advice, all speaking so authentically that she refers to them as “the only unmediated female voices in the Bible” which prompts Weems and others to the belief that the author of this book could have been a woman (Women’s Bible Commentary, 156-157). This is startling just to think about. And then it’s empowering. Male or female, if we are to hear this as a holy book, it must be an unmediated voice describing a partnership of equality and mutuality.

Finding and reading this book in the Bible is a rite of passage, sadly one that some never experience. I think we are living in a time of both/and scholarship with regard to the two interpretations. In a way, we are all here because we’ve heard God say, “Arise my love and come away” and that has brought us into this community. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, “There is almost a sensual longing for communion with others who have a large vision. The immense fulfillment of the friendship between those engaged in furthering the evolution of consciousness has a quality impossible to describe.” For us, the triune God is that vision, that invitation to community.

And, (meaning both/and) we as human beings learn and know the power of love most excellently through our human relationships. The power of pleasure and intimacy cannot be denied and should not be diminished; it is so powerful it is the source of human life in conception and if we unashamedly lifted up the most excellent and incredible power of carrying and delivering a baby to its sacred heights as it should be, perhaps wars would end.

Through time, our response to that power has been more geared toward control of others in sexuality and child bearing and, in our modern communications, we diminish love by using relationships and sex as marketing tools; it is an attitude of Empire; it’s a 700 wife, 300 concubine attitude has that put Harvey Weinstein into places of riches and power for many years and spawned the ‘Times Up’ movement in Hollywood; it is under fire because the hashtag/# *metoo* movement around the world. These twists and controls around love and sexuality bring us up against the likes of Larry Nasser and Jerry Sandusky, and, very sadly for all of us, the on-

going priest scandal within the Catholic Church. Because it's not just about sex, it's about spirit; the defilement of this good gift can cut people off from spirituality.

It is also the place we meet Jesus' teaching for today – he is speaking to their past, so we will take a look at their past.

At one time, the ancient Hebrews could see God with them; when they wandered, God wandered too. God was ahead of the Exodus as a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire at night. God revealed God's self to Moses on the mountain top and Moses was never the same again. When he came down from the mountain, he wore a piece of fabric over his face because he glowed; Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses portrays small horns coming from his head which is another way to interpret the Hebrew word that attempted to describe the change in his appearance. That is what it's like to meet God.

But eventually people's experience of God shifted, when Moses brought the tablets down from Sinai were put into the Ark of the Covenant as a representation of God with them – the Ark was placed in the Tabernacle and finally into the Temple of Solomon.

In the Hebrew temple system, the women could only get so far into the building and the common men could only get that much further into the building and the Pharisees could only get a bit further into the building than that. And then there were the priests, lots of them; together, they functioned as a "Temple state under the imperialistic domination of the Roman Empire" (Rhoads, p. 153). It was the chief priest and only the chief priest who could go into the Holy of Holies. That is the place where the Jews were taught that God lived. Every faithful Jew believed that God was present in that central, hidden and exclusive part of the temple.

With 613 commandments in the Torah, they thought they had every moral contingency covered – they believed that the cleanliness laws they observed, pleased God; even more important, was the belief that if God became dismayed with them, because they didn't observe a proper religious lifestyle, God would depart. In the words of scholar David Rhoads, "These notions of clean and unclean have nothing to do with our modern ideas of sanitation. Rather, they are unseen forces capable of making things pure or polluted, holy or defiled, clean or unclean" (p. 153).

Christianity is so firmly rooted in our culture and our lives that we sometimes forget how radical Jesus was. Yet, Christianity has continued that Temple pattern of how far one person versus another can get into the building; women could get only so far into the building for the better part of two millennia; in 2018 years, the PCUSA, women have been ordained as deacons for only the last 112 years, as elders for 87 years, and as ministers of the word and sacrament for 62 years. Though many congregations ordained LGBT elders and deacons, it was finally written into the Book of Order by a vote of the 2010 General Assembly (8 years!). God is calling God's beloved to ministry, God calls out, "Arise my love and come away," and instead of receiving those called, for many years, allowed prejudices, fears, and judgments, to subvert God's will. In steering people away from their book of order, so to speak, Jesus advocated behavior that would, in the minds and hearts of the religious leaders of his time, change their identity as the Chosen People by driving God from their midst. He pushed those boundaries so hard because he needed them to grow – he still needs us to grow into his reality.

Today we might refer to Jesus as Love's Most Excellent Song, and in him we see the ideal of the love of God and human love together – he is the place where the both interpretations of the love poem ring true. God says, "Arise my love and come away," Jesus said, "Come and see."

Jesus set up a polarity with the Law. The entire Hebrew nation had been brought up to believe each person had their place within the order. They believed, "To be sacred is to remain in place. To break out, to cross boundaries, is to open the world to the threat of chaos, to commit transgression" (Rhoads, p. 163).

Jesus, on the other hand, chose “to be unbounded, to be liberated” (163). Jesus demonstrated that “positive sacred power is to be gained from the violation of the given boundaries of the world, from the transcendence of the way things ordinarily are” ((164). He doesn’t do this for personal gain, he does it so defiled spirits can heal and to begin the “reign of God to those who are outcasts” from the system.

It means Jesus – radical as he is, unbounded and liberated as he is – is a boundary for us, a boundary that provides clear parameters and yet broadens our horizon. He asks us to have an internal dialogue in all that we say or; to ask ourselves: Will what I say or do create shame or hurt for another? Will what I do or say expand the other or in any way diminish them? Will what I do or say empower this life in love or detract from their belief in love? Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner once said, “In the days ahead, you will either be a mystic (one who has experienced God for real) or nothing at all.” Tragically, the likes of sexual abuse, child pornography, and ethnic cleansing have been done in God’s name by the old and new hierarchies of empires and religions; in this broken and fearful world, many cannot hear the invitation to arise and come away with trust or openness. Just as it was in the world when Jesus was born. The work goes on.

This work of discipleship, the will to love, is radical, hard work, it is strenuous work – like childbirth itself. Giving life, in the words of some fathers and mothers who are friends on Facebook, is breath-taking, captivating, self-less, miraculous, intense, stunning, transformative, bewildering, inspiring, humbling, generative, exciting, excruciating, frightening, awesome, amazing, life-changing, laborious, overwhelming and messy.

Our sexuality and what we do with it, like our whole bodies, minds and souls, is part of a larger unity –no one! No one stands alone! Acts alone! Or is exempt from consequences of their actions in balance to the wellness of the whole! We as lovers of God and beloved by god are living into a mission that requires the highest levels of integrity and gentleness if we are to pass on the love of Christ to a broken and fearful people.

As disciples – all that fills our lives with love – good and mutual love – is intended to help us be life-bringers where we work and play and where we live and worship. And when we labor on, in the words of Teilhard, “Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, [humanity] will have discovered fire” (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin).

Thanks be to God. Amen.