

Reveling in Romance

Song of Solomon 4:1-7

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Nestled in the Bible between the ponderous pronouncements of Ecclesiastes and Isaiah's ringing calls to repentance is this little book that just won't behave. The Song of Solomon (also known as the Song of Songs) is an ode to the joys of erotic love. It is so giddy with the intoxicating charms of sensual love that, like young lovers kissing in a public place, it seems not to care who else is around or what they might think of such carrying on. The Song of Solomon is composed of the love songs sung by a man and a woman who can see only each other.

But see each other they do. The lovers linger over every inch of each other in voluptuous celebration, savoring all the physical characteristics of the beloved. It is almost enough to get the Bible banned from public libraries. If young adolescents ever happen upon this torrid little book, they might begin to read the Bible with flashlights under the covers at night.

It is little wonder, then, that the Song of Solomon almost did not make it into the biblical canon. Elsewhere in the Bible human sexuality is viewed as something that must be carefully governed. But here the cup of love overflows. There is not even any indication in the verses of these love songs that the rapturous lovers are married, although some interpreters have conjectured that they are engaged, just to make an honest man and woman of them.

The Song of Solomon doesn't even have the decency to mention God. Not once. It is one of only two books of the Bible guilty of that omission, the other being the book of Esther. So some interpreters, stuck with a book that could melt a Puritan winter, have tried to make of it an allegory, the most pedantic of all literary forms, just to bring it back in line. Many through the centuries have read it as an allegory for Christ's love for the church or for the individual Christian. St. Bernard Clairvaux followed this line of interpretation in a series of 86 sermons on the Song of Solomon, a series that covered only two chapters and three verses. Eighty-six sermons can take the joy out of any subject, it seems to me, but I can't help but wonder if the dear saint protesteth too much. Even after such thorough allegorization, one cannot escape the impression that the author of Song of Solomon actually was doing what he appeared to be doing—namely, celebrating human love with poetry, reveling in romance and sexuality.

Those who are aware of the ways our culture can make an idol of romantic love and can even celebrate lust (which is romance's cruder expression) may be uncomfortable with the Song of Solomon. But in its context as scripture, this book is not permitted to roam through the imagination unchaperoned. This unbridled expression of romantic love is flanked by the likes of Ecclesiastes and Isaiah and surrounded by other scriptural witnesses that, when considered together, remind us that romance is wonderful, but not the only game in town and certainly not the sum total of life.

Were it not for the Song of Solomon, readers of the Bible might conclude that we have to choose between a culture that understands only romance and a faith that leaves

no room for romance. The presence of the Song of Solomon in the Bible reminds us that we can have God, fidelity, all the higher expressions of love, and still have our romance, too.

Encountering these love songs in the pages of the Bible reminds me of the time when, as a teenager, I discovered ardent letters written by my grandparents when they were both in the throes of young love. The discovery corrected and completed my picture of them. They were real people, after all, animated by the kind of impulses and yearnings I knew quite well. These dignified and upright people—who before my discovery I could only imagine going to bed fully clothed—also had a love for one another that was as hungry and tumultuous as the sea. And as their lives demonstrated, passionate love for another person need not eclipse God, but can enlarge a life in ways that make room for God to be manifest—something I might have missed if those letters had remained undiscovered and my picture of my grandparents had remained incomplete.

We are often reminded that the Greeks had a number of words for the single English word love. There is the *eros* of lovers; there is *philia*, the brotherly love we also associate with friends; there is *agape*, self-giving love that is unconditional. It is *agape* that is used to describe God's love for us, a high and holy love that we are invited to manifest as well, a self-giving love that makes no distinctions, an unconditional love that is our surest experience of grace. From their delineation of different kinds of love, we might assume that the Greeks knew more about love than we do, much as when we hear that the Eskimos have so many different names for snow. We assume that is because they know snow so much better than we do. There are times when it is helpful and appropriate to delineate different kinds of love. But there are other times when we can see that all forms of love spring from the same source.

Perhaps that is why love poetry was never purely secular for Israel and why Jewish and Christian interpreters found God looming in the midst of this romantic revelry. So even though God is not mentioned in the Song of Solomon, and even though we should resist making it a strict allegory, the presence of God does seem to pulse through the song's romantic imagery. The ebullient springs of romantic love can be traced back to their source in God, even if not all lovers are inclined to do so.

A few important distinctions need to be made here, particularly between sexual desire, romance, and lust. And, let me say that I recognize that those distinctions are almost certainly easier to maintain in a sermon than in life. The distinctions are important, nonetheless.

Sexual desire, in and of itself, is both natural and neutral. It is natural in that we are created with a capacity for sexual desire. It is neutral in that sexual desire is not good or bad in itself. Rather, it all depends on how sexual desire is manifest and expressed. Presbyterian minister and novelist, Frederick Buechner, writes, "Contrary to Mrs. Grundy, sex is not a sin. Contrary to Hugh Hefner, it's not salvation either. Like nitroglycerin, it can be used either to blow up bridges or heal hearts."

Sexual desire fuels both romance and lust. They have that in common. But, oh, the differences between romantic expressions of desire such as found in Song of Solomon, and the lustful expressions of desire that seems to have an increasing grip on our culture. So let me make a few distinctions here. The focus of romantic sexual desire is on the other person, on that particular person, and delights in that particularity. No other person will do. So the two lovers who sing to one another in

the Song of Solomon linger over every characteristic of their beloved. They delight in the particularity of their beloved. By contrast, the focus of lustful sexual desire is not on the other person. The object of one's lust, who that person is in all his or her particularity, is almost irrelevant. Obviously, in internet pornography, casual hooking up, other forms of sex for sex's sake, the focus is not on the other person. The late Henry Fairlie, a British journalist and essayist, writes, "Lust is not interested in its partners, but only in the gratification of its own craving.... Lustful people may think that they choose a partner at will for sexual gratification. But they do not really choose. They accept what is available. Lust accepts any partner for a momentary service. It has nothing to give, and so it has nothing to ask."

Here is another difference: romantic desire seeks continuance. You want to be with the beloved always. Separation is restless sorrow. In reunion the world seems complete again. That's why words like "always" and "forever" quite naturally come to those who love in this way: "I will always love you." "I am yours forever." That is also one reason—one reason—why marriage vows include phrases like "until death do us part" or "as long as we both shall live." Romantic desire seeks continuance.

By contrast, lustful desire is fleeting, in the moment. Again, I appreciate the way Henry Fairlie puts it: "Love wants to enjoy in other ways the human being whom it has enjoyed in bed; it looks forward to having breakfast. But in the morning Lust is always furtive. It dresses as mechanically as it undressed and heads straight for the door, to return to its own solitude. Like all sins, it also makes us solitary."

John Mayer, the popular singer-songwriter, had a hit song a few years back called "Your Body Is a Wonderland." At first listening you might think that this song is a celebration of the beloved, something like a secular version of Song of Solomon, which conveys a kind of wonder at the physical features of the beloved. But when you listen to that song carefully, it is clear that the view of the body expressed in the title does not convey wonder in the sense of awe. Its view of the other's body is that it is one's own personal amusement park. It's a place to have fun and explore and get excitement, and then, at the end of the day, you are free to leave.

One more difference: Romantic desire seeks the good of the beloved. When you are truly in love with another person, you find yourself doing all sorts of things for the other person—giving flowers, taking out the garbage, listening from the depths of your own heart—because you want good things for that person. When they grieve, you grieve. When they rejoice, your heart is gladdened. Your desires and yearnings are inextricably interwoven with those of your beloved.

By contrast, lustful desire seeks whatever it can get for the self. Philosophy professor Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung writes, "Lust makes sex and sexual pleasure a party for one. Lust makes sexual pleasure all about me. It is a self gratification project.... In a nutshell, lust is the excessive desire for my own sexual pleasure."

Song of Solomon is a reflection of what sexual desire can look like when it does not devolve into lust. It is, in its own way, incredibly romantic. And the presence of God does seem to pulse through the song's romantic imagery.

After all, to be in love with someone is to find your whole being tied up with the beloved, to want to be wherever the beloved is, to want good things for him or her. You can no more forget the one you love than you could forget your own name or forget that you are alive. No one else will do. You want to share yourself, all of yourself, with your beloved, and you want all of him or her in return. Separation is

restless sorrow. In reunion the world seems complete again. Those who are caught up in such a love for another can catch a fragmentary glimpse of the love God has for God's beloved. God loves you that much. God loves each of us as if we were the only one.

When I was in grade school, we would celebrate Valentine's Day in the classroom. We would bring Valentine cards and give them to our classmates. But there was one rule: you had to bring a card for everyone. You couldn't just bring cards for those you cared about. You couldn't just bring a card for Carol Porter or Susie Mattis, even if that is what you wanted to do (which I did). You had to bring a card for everyone in the class, even those people you didn't particularly care for.

When God is giving the Valentines, everyone gets one, and each one is treated as if he or she is the special one, as if the object of God's own heart's desire. When we love one person that way, that one special person, we catch a glimpse—just a glimpse, but a glimpse—of how God feels about each and every one. And that, I think, is the biggest reason why the Song of Solomon, this passionate ode to romantic love, made it into our Bible.