

## “Divine Desire”

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Based upon Song. 2:8-13; Eph. 3:16-19

Barbara Brown Taylor once said, "My relationship with the Bible is not a romance but a marriage, and one I am willing to work on in all the usual ways: by living with the text day in and day out, by listening to it and talking back to it, by making sure I know what is behind the words it speaks to me and being certain I have heard it properly, by refusing to distance myself from the parts of it I do not like or understand, [and] by letting my love for it show up in the everyday acts of my life."<sup>1</sup> Would you describe your relationship with the Bible this way? If marriage was the dominant metaphor used in the Church to describe how we relate to Scripture, would you say your marriage was passionate and long-lasting, a romance just beginning to blossom, or one that has run its course? What if marriage were a metaphor to describe your relationship with God, not Scripture? Would your answers change? I ask because for the next four Sundays, I am going to invite us all to consider what the Bible has to teach us, not just about the word of God, but also about love. Years ago, C. S. Lewis wrote a whole book about the “Four Loves” in the Bible: *eros*, *storge*, *philia*, and *agape*, otherwise known as passion, affection, friendship, and self-giving love.<sup>2</sup> But given the amount of divisiveness and hatred in our society right now, I thought it wouldn't hurt for us to spend a few weeks revisiting those loves again. Some of them make sense to us, others, when applied to God or our neighbors may shock or challenge us. But all of them are gifts from God. My hope is that by considering these divine loves, we will not only be strengthened in our marriage with the Bible, we will also be strengthened in our relationships with God and our neighbors.

The first love on the list, thanks to the Lectionary's assigning a lesson from *Song of Solomon* today, is *eros*. *Eros* is romantic and erotic love, the kind that sweeps you off your feet and fills you with desire. Being Protestants born out of a Puritanical, and somewhat prudish history, we don't talk about *eros* much in the Church, except to describe it as a feeling which is potentially dangerous and should properly lead to marriage. Influenced by everything from the shame Adam and Eve felt when they recognized their nakedness in the Garden, to the apostle Paul's preference for celibacy, unless marriage was necessary to contain the fires of passion, the Church has led many to feel as though the all-consuming passion of *eros* is sinful. But in between Adam and Eve and Paul in the Bible, right in the center-fold, so-to-speak, the *Song of Solomon*, (or the *Song of Songs* as it is called in Hebrew), sits in Scripture proclaiming the glories of romantic and sensual love. It is a whole book of love poems which describe *eros* in such evocative terms that I wouldn't be surprised if thousands of years ago, long before authors from Shakespeare to D.H. Lawrence to Judy Blume introduced generations to love and longing, people curled up with *Song of Solomon* to whisper, giggle, and dream.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley Pub., 1993), 56.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy, Reflections on the Psalms, The Four Loves, The Business of Heaven* (New York: Inspiration Press, 1994).

Why is this text in the Bible? Given the subject matter and the fact that God isn't mentioned once in the whole book, many have felt that it shouldn't be. The poems tell the story of the relationship of a man and woman characterized by deep romantic love, physical intimacy, and yearning. They chase each other through fertile fields and gardens of flowers, delight in their time together and ache when they are apart. Feminists have loved this text for years because most of the relationship is told through the eyes of the woman, not the man. She is not treated as an object in this text, as women sometimes are in Scripture; she is treated as a human being whose thoughts and desires matter as much as the man's. But that bit of encouraging imagery aside, there is little else in the text that makes it obvious why it was canonized between the wisdom of *Ecclesiastes* and the prophetic words of *Isaiah*, or why a famous Second-Century Rabbi named Akiba rhapsodized about the text, insisting "God forbid that anyone ever had doubts about the Song of Songs! For all the world is not equal to the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."<sup>3</sup>

The Holy of Holies, you may remember, was the inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem, the room where God was believed to dwell. It was considered so sacred that only the high priest could go into that room, and even then, only once a year. But as odd as it sounds that Akiba would equate the *Song of Solomon* with that place, his comment, which is one of the oldest on the text ever found, has helped scholars to unlock the secret of why this text was canonized. It was included first in the Hebrew Scriptures and then later in the Christian Bible because people of faith saw in its poetry an allegory about God's relationship with humankind. To the Jews, it was an allegory of God's relationship with Israel, and to the Christians, of God's relationship with the Church. But both traditions see as an allegory about spiritual desire. Humanity is the woman in this story filled with yearning for intimacy with God; God is the man, whose love makes the woman feel ecstatic, whole, and alive. The text was seen as a reflection of the union that was possible between God and individual souls, and between God and the collective soul of a community. That is why, I suspect, that Rabbi Akiba thought of the *Song* as the Holy of Holies. In it, we gain access to intimacy with God.

The *Song of Solomon* is not the only text in the Bible that reveals God's heart in raw emotional terms, or course. In other parts of the Old Testament, particularly in the prophets, we get hear God's longing described romantically. *Hosea* and *Ezekiel* both describe God like a bridegroom and Israel like a cherished bride. The marriage starts off well, but when the bride turns to idols, that leaves God the husband, feeling betrayed and crushed. The prophets used this metaphor to motivate people of faith to be more faithful to their marriage vows with God. But not everyone is motivated by guilt that way, and not everyone thinks of him or herself as being married to God. So, *Song of Solomon* gives us another way of getting at the problem of faithfulness by telling our side of the story through the voice of the woman. How she longs for her love! How she suffers when she feels that he is absent! Since the woman's yearning is our yearning, many through the ages have concluded that her satisfaction can be ours too. They have devoted their lives to seeking joy, ecstasy, and wholeness through union with God.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mishnah Yadaim* 3:5.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries especially, this was the goal of a branch of Christian theology called Christian Mysticism. Julian of Norwich, an anchoress and Benedictine nun who has become the face of Christian Mysticism, dreamed of union with God, and recorded numerous visions she believed she received from God in a moment of mystic communion. But she was not the first to dream of God this way, nor was Mysticism a theology embraced only by women. Centuries before, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a French abbot, wrote 86 sermons on the *Song of Solomon*, such was his desire to become intimately connected to God. He dissected the text so closely looking for that intimacy that in all those sermons he never made it past chapter two!<sup>4</sup> He, Julian, and the other Christian mystics sought union with God through meditation, prayer, and self-denial. They believed that in their moments of merging with the transcendent God, God imparted to them wisdom that they were supposed to share with the world.

It is hard for many today to understand how people throughout the ages could have sought mystic union with God this way. For many, there is a certain “ewww” factor that comes with thinking of God as a lover or even a spouse. We are more comfortable with God as parent, teacher, savior, or friend. Perhaps for that reason, the Lectionary assigns *Song of Solomon* only one Sunday in the whole three-year cycle of assigned texts. But the *Song* and the theology of the mystics have informed our understanding of Christian marriage, nevertheless. In our Reformed Tradition, we believe that when two people covenant to spend their lives together in marriage, bonded by the love they have for each other, God is a party to that covenant as well, and because of that triple fusion, the goal of Christian marriage is for the couple to witness to God’s love for the world in Christ, through the way that they love and care for one another. In a sense, their mystic union in marriage becomes their *Song of Songs*, a living allegory of how much God loves us and wants a reciprocal relationship with us that blesses all parties involved.

Very few marriages are able to witness perfectly to God’s love for the world in this way. Human beings are imperfect creatures, and even when in the best of relationships, are prone to exhibiting selfishness, pettiness, arrogance, and insecurity that God never embodies. We also tend to miss the mark because in our culture, we worship *eros* as a god. We behave as if experiencing romantic or physical love itself were the reason to have a relationship, instead of seeing those feelings as means by which we can discover something deeper about ourselves, the ones we love, and God. But when I do weddings, I still remind every couple that this is the purpose of Christian marriage, to witness to God’s love for the world. The desire, longing, and passion that leads us to connect with another human being are not gods themselves to be worshiped, but they are gifts from God that can lead us and others to greater wholeness, joy, and wisdom. They can lead us to God, and a deeper form of love called *agape*, that I will talk about in a few weeks.

In the meantime, ew-factor aside, I think we all could benefit from thinking about God through the lens of *eros* more than we do, if for no other reason than to make us think seriously about what the actual basis of our relationship with God is. Do we seek God out of love, or out of a desire to get something? Do we relate to God as a love-sick person would, ranking our time

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<sup>4</sup> Copenhaver, Martin, “*Reveling in Romance*,” CHRISTIAN CENTURY, Aug. 10-17, 1994, 747.

together as more precious than anything else in our lives? Do we think about our unfaithfulness to God as causing the kind of pain that infidelity causes in a relationship? Do we, when we are feeling hard on ourselves or lonely, read the Scriptures like love letters to our souls, reminding us just how much God loves us exactly as we are? Our ancestors in the faith were not afraid to explore faith through the lens of passion, so we shouldn't be either; if we did it more often, then maybe we could have an easier time approaching passion, through the lens of faith.

In today's text from *Ephesians*, the author prayed that Christ would dwell in the hearts of his audience. He prayed that they would have the power to comprehend "the breadth, length, height, and depth" of God's love in Christ, so that they would be "rooted and grounded in love" and "be filled with all the fullness of God." This is not the prayer of someone who wants us to comprehend with only our minds how much God loves us in Christ; it is a prayer that we will feel that love in body, mind, and spirit. If the prayer were answered, each of us would be able to write a love poem of our own: "God loves us higher than the highest mountain, longer than the longest highway, wider than the width of the universe, and deeper than the bottom-most depths of the sea." But if we really understood all that with our hearts as well as our minds, then we wouldn't be content to leave the poem one-sided that way. It demands a response from the beloved who has captured God's heart. How deep and high and wide and long is your love for God? May God hear the answer to that question in all of our songs, and may the world find inspiration in our loving witness, now and always. Amen.