



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Let's Stay Together
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 29, 2021
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

I'm not sure if the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Memphis is a lectionary-based church, but if it is, I wonder how the Song of Solomon text is being preached by The Reverend Al Green this morning.

Some would argue that the Song of Solomon, or more accurately the Song of Songs, has very little in common with any of the songs in our or any other religious hymnal, but has almost everything in common with the Reverend Al's signature secular love song, 'Let's Stay Together.' Both never mention God. Both are beautiful ballads of romantic love. Both don't seem to belong in the Bible. Or maybe, there's more going on than meets the eye or ear.

Ancient scholars thought the Song of Songs was an allegory with the lovers being metaphors for God and the Hebrew people or Christ and the Church. Most modern commentators see it as a purely romantic ballad, without all the hidden meanings. Ellen Davis, an Old Testament professor and one of our speakers at next year's Lenten Preaching Series, posits a third way. She says the romantic and religious understandings of the book are not exclusive, but mutually informative, and each is incomplete without the other. Davis argues that the Song of Songs is the most biblical of books. She sees the love song in the context of God's passionate and troubled relationship with humanity, which is the story the rest of the Bible tells.

She writes, "What we hear throughout the Song of Songs – and only here in the Bible – is mutual love speaking at full strength. In a word, it returns us to the Garden of God." And, Davis asserts that it informs how we should relate to one another. She adds, "Like the love of God, profound love of another person entails devotion of the whole self and steady practice of repentance and forgiveness; it inevitably requires of us suffering and sacrifice."

Al Green's inspiration for writing 'Let's Stay Together' in the fall of 1971 came not from a lover, but out of the troubling events of that era - the assassination of Martin Luther King and the riots that followed. He said, "I sat down and wrote it, 'Let's stay together. What you doing? If you burn up the town, we're going to have to build it again'" From that beginning he turned personal and "just started writing about my baby." And he did all this in fifteen minutes.

While it's a beautiful expression of lifelong love for a romantic couple going through thick and thin, it was also Al Green's way of saying, "Memphis and America, we've got to find a way to stop killing each other. We've got to find a way to talk, to listen, to build or rebuild trust, to let go of pride, to make sacrifices for one another. We've got to stay together."

He and his mentor Willie Mitchell argued over how Al should sing it. Al wanted to sing it loud with lots of punch. Willie said, "No. You got to whisper. You got to sing it soft. You got to let me hear Al Green." Al said, "I don't know who Al Green is." But Willie knew.

Willie knew that Al Green was a man full of longing. Longing for peace and harmony in this city he loves. Longing for love, especially maternal love. Longing for God. We hear that longing in how he seems to hold that first note, that first 'I', for what seems like an eternity.

That same deep longing that you feel when he does it, comes through in the images of the Song of Songs. A gazelle. Leaping. Bounding. Yet hidden. Looking. Gazing. The poet who wrote the Song of Songs knew what Willie taught Reverend Al. True longing is best expressed not in hot burning flames, but hidden in smoldering embers, gasping for air.

We too pant and long for the natural images expressed by the poet in the Song of Songs. Our images today seem so unnatural. The raging of the Delta variant, uncertainties and anxiety over the start of school, scenes of the evacuation and bombing in Afghanistan, the devastation of an earthquake among our diocesan partners in Haiti, fatal flooding in the center of our state, Hurricane Ida making landfall in our region today, a little girl on Friday becoming the 17th child to die in Memphis this year from the epidemic of gun violence plaguing our nation.

We long for the winter to be past. We long for flowers to appear on the earth. We long for the voice of the turtle dove to be heard in our land.

But the Song of Songs and Reverend Al invite us to see that reaching this longed-for season begins with a personal connection on our part – a personal connection with God and with each other. And these personal connections will entail personal sacrifice. I wear a mask not only to protect myself, but to protect you. I get the vaccine not only to protect myself, but to protect you and our children.

We can extend this mutuality of love as we think about how we live with each other in terms of caring for the environment, encouraging our educators and students, offering hospitality to refugees, helping disaster victims, and bringing an end to gun violence.

The Song of Songs and Reverend Al teach us that there is an intersubjectivity to our lives, and that we are all in this together. The Song of Songs reminds us that God longs to relish that kind of connection with us, and yearns for us to relish it with each other. And God longs to end our anxieties, to fill us with hope, and to inspire us to be that hope, by whispering in song, 'Loving you forever is what I need. Let me be the one you come running to. I'll never be untrue. Loving you whether times are good or bad, or happy or sad. Let's stay together.' *Amen.*