

## Proper 17B: Song of Solomon 2.8-13

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By Friday afternoon I was running out of week and casting about for something that might illuminate the racy reading from Song of Solomon that just made a few of you blush. For reasons that aren't entirely clear even to me, I started reading commencement addresses.

One of them was delivered at Syracuse in 2015 by a memoirist and poet named Mary Karr. She started out by saying that when she told her friend Dooney she was getting an honorary doctorate that day, he said, "Being a doctor who can't write prescriptions is like being a general in the Salvation Army." This probably isn't directly relevant to the Song of Solomon, but it felt unloving to read something that good and not pass it along.

She went on to tell the eager crowd in their black gowns and mortarboards, "I hope you all learned what you came here for and what you didn't. If you're lucky, you fell in love here. And if you're really lucky, you had your heart broken. Because that made you a deeper person and maybe forced you to find friends to lean on. [This place] is now your alma mater, your soul's mother, and mine."

It's an odd thing to tell a fresh bunch of graduates you hope they opened up their hearts enough to fall in love while they were in college. Which means those hearts were open at least as wide to heartbreak as well. But there is a wisdom in this life that can't seem to make its way into us any other way, isn't there? Today I'm wondering whether this might be one of the reasons why the risky thrill of ordinary romantic love is what the Song of Solomon sings about from its beginning to its end. Could opening our hearts enough to fall headlong in love actually have something to teach us about life with God and with one another?

Plenty of scholars over the centuries have assured us that Song of Solomon is an extended metaphor for the love of God for God's people. I don't disagree. But sometimes reducing something to a metaphor too quickly is a way of keeping our distance from it. Saying romantic love is a metaphor for God's love feels like getting an honorary doctorate for delivering a commencement address, when actually falling in love is more like four years of med school plus an 80 hour a week residency in the ER at Regional One. One is a polite honorific. The other is so all consuming it might just do you in.

This distinction might be made even starker when we remember that the Solomon who pleased God by asking for wisdom is the very same Solomon the love song is attributed to. The judge and ruler whose cool, discerning wisdom was unmatched by any king before or after him is also the giddy lover in a poem. Whether Solomon actually wrote the book or not, our spiritual tradition sure seems to be telling us that, while the life of the mind is a good gift from God, the wise ones among us will also know how to open their hearts in the risky project of love.

Our reading today began, not with an observation so much as a gasp. "The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands..." Passionate and ecstatic as those sentences are, it does seem like we can broaden this experience beyond the bounds of

romantic love already. This kind of sheer delight at the sight of someone or something could be an aunt at baggage claim, waiting for a favorite nephew whom she hasn't seen in years or even a child bounding downstairs on Christmas morning to see what's waiting under the tree. This is not love as a decision or an obligation. This is love as expectant delight, and there are probably plenty of ways other than romance for each of us to access something like the feeling the Song of Solomon evokes.

But did you notice that the voice in this passage is not Solomon's? The voice is of the woman he has fallen for. The woman who's fallen hard for him. In fact it is this unnamed woman whose voice is most prominent and most alive throughout the book. Solomon speaks enough for us to know he's every bit as smitten as she is. But she steals the show. And by giving her most of the lines, the focus shifts, if only slightly. We might say that even more than a song about being in love, this is a song about being the object of someone else's love. It's about the life changing experience of being seen as that bounding gazelle or the person that loving aunt is waiting for at the bottom of the escalator or maybe, if your imagination is really nimble this morning, the wrapped up package a child leaps from his bed at daybreak and comes running for. This is a poem about being rapturously *desired*, isn't it.

In 1989, Rowan Williams delivered a lecture titled "The Body's Grace" to a group of gay Christians in England. This was years before same sex marriages would be acknowledged by the state or the church. It's a remarkable piece of theology. One of the most interesting ideas he explored was this. For millennia, Christians dealt with the messy, embarrassing, thrilling, fraught topic of erotic love mostly by averting our eyes and saying the main purpose of marriage was the procreation of children. Eros is dangerous stuff, but at least its to a noble and necessary end.

Williams wasn't saying gay people couldn't have children or raise them in stable loving homes. But he was saying that this wasn't the first thing gay people were asking for when they hoped to simply have their relationships acknowledged and blessed. In the process they were opening the eyes of all of people to the power of what he called a "non-functional joy." The joyful experience of love not for the sake of some broader purpose. The transformative and joyful experience of simply realizing that we are loved. Of being changed by simply seeing that we are objects, in the most life giving way, of someone else's desire.

And so it is in our life with God, he says. "The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this; so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God." And then Rowan Williams says this about the Church: "The life of the Christian community has as its rationale ... the task of teaching us this: so ordering our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy."

Perhaps the Song of Solomon really does tell us something essential about our life with God and one another, whether we currently happen to be in romantic love with anyone or not. The strange way Christians have of talking about God as trinity is surely in part so that we can imagine the giving and receiving of love as intrinsic to who God is. God is one. But it's closer to the truth to say that God is like a dynamic exchange of love among persons than to say God is like a self sufficient individual. And the Christian story is not only that this Love made the world, but that you and I and all of creation were made to be

caught up in that Love. Being so caught is how we become our fullest selves. And seeing that we are so caught is how healing and wholeness and restoration and reconciliation will ultimately come to be.

The purpose of the Church, then ... the purpose of Calvary in Memphis ... is to be the kind of community in which people begin to see themselves as desired by God. A place where we see ourselves as occasions for divine joy. A place where each stranger who stumbles into our midst sees themselves as an occasion for joy. Perhaps that place where we come to understand that we'll never be able to help a stranger see that she is an occasion for joy if we haven't yet come to see that we are too.

What might it look like, then, to assess everything we do by whether or not it helps people see themselves as occasions for joy? Not tolerance. Not acceptance even. A sheer, divine joy that sees each of us and says something like, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

It makes sense that a community formed around such a mission might do a lot of different things in different times and contexts. It would make sense that they'd be offering kindness and friendship and dignity, as well as food, clothing, and shelter to people who have been most damaged and diminished by a world that does not view all human beings as beloved occasions for joy. A world that sees people as objects whose worth is measured only by what they can produce. Of course the Church is called to treat the vulnerable as the objects of divine joy they truly are.

It also makes sense that this would be a community that sings together, that creates and tends to spaces for prayer and hospitality and confession and laughter and grief and learning and beauty, all of which can open and awaken us to our essential belovedness. Such practices will almost certainly teach us more about the nature of God than any creed or doctrine. I'm not suggesting we throw out the creeds and the doctrines. Just that we remember that they've always been the windows and the lattice through which we see the one who is bounding toward us. The One who loves us each so passionately. I mean, if you fall in love with the latticework, you're missing ... well ... everything, right?

Calvary is not by any means a perfect Christian congregation. We never will be. But I do believe that when we're at our best, we order all that we do to stir up the sense in every human being that they are the object of God's deep desire. That you are an occasion of divine joy.

My friend Spencer Reece once wrote in a poem, "All I know now/ is the more he loved me the more I loved the world." Is this not the wisdom of Solomon's song in the end? Is this not the heart of the Christian good news? That the more we know in our depths that we are loved, the more you and I will come to love the world? And to love ... isn't that why we're in this world at all?