



Song of Solomon 1:15-2:2, 14-16

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline | Sermon for Sunday, February 6, 2022

The reading today comes from the book of poetry the Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs. This book, often attributed to Solomon, is a lengthy erotic poem that is a dialogue between two lovers. This book uses sexual language that falls somewhere between thinly veiled to outright explicit. And history has gone to great lengths to avoid that fact. The influential 3rd century theologian Origen of Alexandria wrote at length about the Song of Songs and proposed a vision of the book wherein the Shulamite (the female voice) represents the Church, while the Beloved (the male voice) represents Jesus. Nothing in this book is to be taken literally, he essentially tells us. Everything from start to finish is a metaphor for how Jesus loves the church. Nothing to see here, folks. He justifies this position by saying “the divine scriptures make use of homonyms; that is to say, they use identical terms for describing different things”. Which to me is a pretty broad brush way of basically saying that because the Bible sometimes uses allegory, this must also be allegory. This was a dominant view of this book for centuries. Out of our stodgy traditionalism, and a discomfort talking about sex, we have decided to see this book and think “gee, this deeply erotic, sexual imagery must be about how Jesus loves the church”, or “this is obviously about how God loves the people of Israel”. To put it another way, when you read the book of Job, and see the way that

God sent calamities in his life one might say “boy, Job really got screwed by God”, and if you read the Song of Solomon through this lens you might say “boy, Israel *really* got screwed by God”.

But this interpretation does not particularly stand up to scrutiny. The book is an erotic poem about two people who have sex. It’s words are about sex. The subject and content are sexual. It’s metaphors are sexual. The poem is a description of sex. Like, big time. Look at chapter 5, verses 4 and 5, and before you get mad at me for being too raunchy, remember this is the Bible’s fault, not mine.

“⁴ My love put his hand in through the latch hole,
and my body ached for him.
⁵ I rose; I went to open for my love,
and my hands dripped myrrh,
my fingers, liquid myrrh,
over the handles of the lock.

That is straight up lewd. To insist that this book is about the relationship between God and Israel, or Jesus and the Church is like insisting that the erstwhile Nails Tales statue at Camp Randall was just about football. (insert image). The imagery, subject, and plain language of this poem point to this being about erotic and physical love between two people. Perhaps Origen knew this fact deep down, because he warned the readers of this poem by saying, “if any man who lives only after flesh should approach it, to such a one the reading of this scripture will be a hazard and danger. ... He will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the divine scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust”! Basically what he’s saying is that if you read this book about sex and think it’s about sex then you’ll want to have sex, and you’ll start blaming the Bible for all of the sex you’re having.

But this book is part of our scriptural canon. This is in our Bible, in all its carnal, salacious, titillating, glory. It exists as part of the collection of texts that we turn to when we seek to discern who God is and who we are.

Interestingly, this is one of the two books of the Bible in which God is not mentioned, along with the book of Esther. But what makes this different from Esther is that the Song of Songs doesn’t even allude to God. There are no conversations about religious festivals or identities. It is a strange addition to the

Bible, but it is present nonetheless. So we can either engage with it, or completely ignore it. But if it's not about God, what can we learn through it?

The first and most obvious thing is that sex can be beautiful and sacred, not merely procreative. The sex in this book is passionate and physical. It is an erotic poem that couches vivid descriptions in metaphor (and sometimes not much metaphor). This is the Bible saying that we are made for this, and that to ignore the desires of the body is to sublimate a part of who we are.

Earlier in this sermon I identified the female voice as the "Shulamite", which is a traditional name given to this narrator indicating that she comes from somewhere called Shulem, and in the very beginning she affirms her identity as that of an outsider. "I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem... Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me". At the outset she addresses those who would stare at her for her differences, and she declares that their opinions do not hold sway in the unfolding relationship. And we also need to recognize that her Beloved is a man of note, of reputation, of importance. This love is taboo and forbidden. But this fact does not diminish the love. Those who raise issue are sent to the background of the narrative, and the lovers remain to indulge in their passions for one another. Theologian Christopher King wrote a commentary on this poem using a queer lens, and the transgressive nature of this relationship lead him to write "The Song of Songs does not let the Shulamite's queerness vanish away into the consensus normality of the collective. It defends her 'otherness' as a more sublime standard of perfection".

Relational barriers, this book suggests, are mere constructs. Those who enforce those barriers may sit and stare, but the love remains. This book takes relationships that society deems unacceptable and lifts them up to be celebrated. What barriers do we put up concerning others? What intersecting identities do we as a culture declare should not mix? Whenever we see these barriers, we need to take a look at ourselves and try to understand what is keeping us from seeing love for what it is. Breaking down barriers and taboos is something that echoes throughout scripture. In the Song of Songs it is the artificial sexual barriers, but we also follow a transgressive Messiah for whom the arbitrary and artificial barriers stood as a stumbling block to true righteousness. In faithfulness, we can continue to walk this path, affirming that love is love, and our opinions of if it's appropriate are inconsequential.

But the lesson of this poem is not just to throw away any and all boundaries that exist relating to sexual or relational intimacy. While the sexual relationship is the most obvious characteristic of the poem, at its core it defines this through a deeply reciprocal relationship. The passage we read today is interwoven with a dialogue of mutual adoration. He says to her “Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves”. And she responds “ah, you are truly beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely.” In chapter two he affirms her beauty, saying “As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens” and she immediately responds “As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men”. Even with the social imbalance that is placed on their relationship, the ways in which they see each other is in complete harmony.

In this mutuality we see a sexual ethic that feels prophetic. Enthusiastic consent, mutual agreements, dialogue. Because sex is vulnerable. In sexual encounters one is often literally stripped bare. It is a physical act that contains within a great deal of emotional risk. In the Song of Songs, the willingness to be vulnerable intensifies the vibrancy of the physical acts. In their love for one another they give to each other fully. As a different translation of this passage states in verse 16 “I belong to my lover, and he belongs to me”. She is in possession of herself and chooses to give herself to him. He is in possession of himself and chooses to give himself to her. This is a radical leveling of the relational plane that defies the patriarchal definition of “biblical marriage” that too often dominates our discourse. They belong to one another.

To take this scripture seriously, we can see that sex should not face one direction. Sex between two parties involves two parties, two desires, two hopes, and two souls. It is not on me to proscribe what this mutuality looks like for any given relationship, but we read this poem and must know that consent and mutuality are at the center of healthy sex. It needs to be a decision, one in which everyone is held as worthy. The Shulamite says, “do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready”. Even as her body entwines with her Beloved, she communicates the care that goes into the giving and receiving of one another.

So maybe this book doesn't teach us about Jesus' love for the church, or God's love for Israel. But it does teach us some important things. We can hold this book as holy, bearing the lessons it imparts on us, in the hopes that it impels us to treat one another with deep mutuality and seek to break down the barriers that we erect in our world.

I want to leave us with the words of Reverend Dr Renita Weems, “The Song of Songs advocates balance in female and male relationships [and I want to add all intimate and romantic relationships], urging mutuality not domination, interdependence not enmity, sexual fulfillment not mere procreation, uninhibited love not bigoted emotions. It adjures us not to disturb love but to allow relations to ripen into full bloom following their own course, not to impose on relationships our own biased preconceptions about what is appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior, who makes a suitable mate and who does not”.