

All Good Gifts

I'm a regular reader of *Sojourners* magazine, as I know some of you are as well. If you don't know it, it's a monthly glossy from the progressive Christian social justice organization of the same name, headed by Jim Wallis, the author of God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It and other books. I look to *Sojourners* for articles that present a reasoned, Biblical approach to issues of the day, particularly as they impact the poor and marginalized. So, imagine my surprise when the most recent issue arrived with this uncharacteristically sensational cover...

"Six Rules for Shameless Sex" sounds more like a cover story for *Cosmo* than for *Sojourners*. I'm pleased and relieved to report that the article itself is very much within the spirit of the magazine's normal fare and bears very little resemblance to what an article with a similar title in *Cosmopolitan* might be. Not that I would know about such things, of course. The author is Keith Graber Miller, chair of the Bible, religion and philosophy department at Goshen College, a deeply Christian institution in Indiana, founded and maintained by Mennonites, a branch of the same Anabaptist tradition that gave rise to the Baptist movement four hundred years ago. The article is adapted from a presentation Miller gave at Eastern Mennonite University earlier this year and is part of the early work on a book he is writing on sexuality and spirituality. So despite the titillating title, it's a very thoughtful presentation of some very important topics: why should we talk about sex in church and what does a faithful Christian sexuality look like?

Miller's article is paired with a sidebar generated by two questions the editors of *Sojourners* sent to their Twitter list: "What do you wish you'd learned in church about sex when you were younger? And what do you wish you were learning in church about sex now?" The questions went to 4,261 "followers" (if you don't know about Twitter terminology, ask one of our teenagers) and generated some pretty interesting responses, given the 140-character limit on "tweets," including one that said, "That sex is beautiful. It's given to us by God. It's not to be squandered as a commodity. Also, sex is always about another person's soul."

Miller himself addresses the polarities of thought about sex; at one end, the often repressive and negative views on sexuality so often associated with the Church (and particularly the Puritans), and on the other, what he calls "a certain naiveté or excessive optimism about our sexual selves." He writes, "Somewhere between the earlier demonization of sexuality and our current movement toward celebrating something passing itself off as 'sexual freedom' must be a healthy balance, a middle way – no, a higher way. That higher, redemptive way must be informed by both the positive affirmation of sexuality as God's good gift, on the one hand, and on the other hand our capacity for the sexual exploitation of each other."

This issue of *Sojourners* and Miller's article arrived some weeks after I'd sketched out my sermon topics for the end of summer and coincides neatly with the Scriptures I'd already chosen for this morning. All four of the passages in the Revised Common Lectionary for today either focus on the joy of God's gift of human intimacy or speak in general about our appreciation of the gifts of God and how we must not neglect them. As today marks the only appearance of the beautiful book of the Song of Solomon or Song of Songs in the three-year cycle of the lectionary, I'm going to draw mostly from that book with some brief references to Psalm 45, part of which we used as our Call to Worship, and to Mark 7. But as we consider the truths found in the Bible's great love poem, what it means about our sexuality and our relationships with each other

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as well as what it reveals about our relationship with God, my underlying theme is the affirmation from Jesus' brother, James, that all good gifts are from God, "coming down from the Father of lights."

The fact that the Song of Solomon makes only one appearance in the lectionary's three-year cycle is perhaps emblematic of its troubled history in the interpretation of Scriptures. There was an enormous debate among Jewish scholars as to whether to include it in the canon of Scripture during the first century of the Common Era. Many rabbis considered it no more than a rather bawdy song for drunkards. But the great scholar and mystic, Rabbi Akiva reportedly said, "The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." To understand Rabbi Akiva's proclamation, it is important to remember that the Song from the very earliest days was seen not only as a poem about the love between a man and a woman but also as an allegory about the love between God and Israel. In the time of Akiva, when the reality of the destruction of the Temple was still a fresh occasion for mourning among the Jews, the Song of Songs (or, in modern parlance, "The Greatest Song Ever") and its allegorical description of the bond between Yahweh and the people was seen as a spiritual replacement for that other great work attributed to Solomon – the Temple and its Holy of Holies. In her excellent commentary on the book for the Westminster Bible Companion series, Ellen Davis writes, "Though the visible Temple be destroyed, through the medium of the Song, it is still possible for those who pray to enter the presence of 'the King'." The Song, by the way, was almost certainly not written by Solomon. The Hebrew of the book contains many words borrowed from Persian and Aramaic and probably dates from the Fifth or Fourth Century BCE, at least 500 years after Solomon.

In contrast to the modern neglect of the book among Christians, the Early and Medieval Church made extensive use of it. The distinguished Third Century theologian Origen wrote a ten-volume commentary on the Song of Songs as well as basing many homilies on it. In the Twelfth Century, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote a series of eighty-six sermons from the book and never made it past chapter two! As the studies of the book by Jewish scholars focused on the allegorical interpretation of the love story of the man and the woman representing the love between God and Israel, so the work of the Christian writers interpreted the book as concerning the bond between Christ and the Church.

In a similar way, both Jewish and Christian teachers allegorized the Forty-Fifth Psalm. The literal meaning of our Psalm for the morning is a celebration of the marriage of a king of Israel to a foreign princess, an occasion for which it was surely written. In the era of the synagogue, however, the Psalm became seen as a poem about the future metaphorical marriage between the Messiah and his bride Israel. In Christian interpretation, this also became a poem about Christ and the Church and the Psalm was regularly linked to the passages in the Book of Revelation in which the Church is portrayed as the Bride of Christ.

These metaphorical or allegorical understandings are important and I will return to them shortly. But I think it is important not to give short shrift to the more literal meanings of either Psalm 45 or of the Song of Songs. The inclusion in our Bible of a song written in celebration of a marriage and of love poetry that is frankly sensual and even erotic points to a very important truth about God. In the midst of our concern about the temptations that we must overcome to

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truly serve God and God's people, in the midst of our seriousness about being about the Father's business and building up the Beloved Community, we must remember to stop and celebrate the good gifts with which God has showered us – all good gifts.

Scott Hoezee, a Christian Reformed pastor whose web commentaries are hosted by Calvin Theological Seminary's Center for Excellence in Preaching, notes the rather ironic, slyly subversive nature of this week's lectionary passages. "Are the people who put together the Common Lectionary winking at us this week?" he asks. "The Lectionary across its three-year cycle contains exactly one text from the Song of Songs... and this is it. But it occurs on the same... Sunday when the Gospel lection is from Mark 7 where Jesus makes it clear that those who are focused on a legalistic keeping of the rules miss the point of God's good creation and of the grace of God in which we all live if we are true followers of God." I won't take the time to read that story now; I encourage you to do so later. The basics, however, are that Jesus' disciples are taken to task by the Pharisees for not washing their hands in a complicated ritual manner before enjoying a meal. Jesus retorts that the Pharisees' hands are certainly clean but that selfishness of their hearts is a far worst affront to God than any amount of dirt on someone's hands. They are so concerned with ritual that they neither enjoy the meal nor consider how to live out God's righteousness and mercy. To truly enjoy what God has given us to enjoy is part of the lesson of the Song of Songs and of Psalm 45. Again, as James reminds us, all good gifts come from God.

It is impossible to miss the sense of delight and enjoyment in the Song of Songs. The young man and young woman whose poetic dialogue and monologues make up the book are clearly in love with each other and, as is common with people in love, the whole world sparkles for them. Listen again to the call of the young man to the young woman in chapter two: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." How the devisors of the lectionary could resist putting this passage sometime in the spring is beyond me! The young woman's description of her beloved in our passage is one of the tamer celebrations of physical love in the book but it is still passionate and joyful. "Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag." How can one read such poetry and not be convinced of the goodness of God who created the world in love? William Willimon writes, "If you accept the invitation of these two young lovers, relax, revel, lighten up, and praise God for blossoms, and leaping stags, and silly young fools, and all the rest. How much the poorer we would have been without this frivolous book of the Bible, how much the poorer our lives would be without these gifts of God."

One of the time-honored lessons of the book is that the love of the young couple, indeed the love of any couple, is a restoration of the Garden of Eden, the original home of humankind when their relationship with the Creator and with each other was fresh and unbroken. As the lovers describe each other in the poetry of the Song of Songs, it is clear that, like Adam and Eve in the Garden, they "were naked and were not ashamed." In Genesis 3:16, part of Eve's doom for accepting the temptation of the serpent is "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." Part of the nature of human brokenness is the tendency to inequality in our most intimate

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relationship – that one partner should dominate the other. But in the Song, the partners always seem very much on equal footing. The young woman rejoices, “I am my beloved's, and *his* desire is for *me*.” Kathryn Schifferdecker of Luther Seminary in St. Paul writes, “The lovers share a mutual ardor for each other... the Song reverses the curses of the Garden of Eden, including the rupturing of the relationship between man and woman. There is a mutuality about this love that repairs that rupture and places the lovers back into the Garden.” It's also worth noting that the imagery of the Song of Songs contains many descriptions of lush gardens and ripened fruit but not a single thorn or weed.

The imagery of the Garden restored is our cue that the relationship of the lovers in the Song should be our model for marital love. Their joy and delight in each other and in their world is one part of that. And, to return to Dr. Shifferdecker's article, “It is worth noting that the Song describes a love marked by fidelity and mutuality. The lovers are faithful to each other. They have eyes for no one else: “My beloved is mine and I am his” (2:16; 6:3). “My vineyard [the woman], my very own, is for myself; / you, O Solomon, may have the thousand” (8:12 – referring to Solomon's thousand concubines)... The Song celebrates faithful human love. For that reason alone, it could be argued, the Song deserves a place in Scripture. In a culture saturated with sexual images but sorely lacking in prominent examples of lifelong faithful love, this text celebrates love between a man and a woman that is marked by mutuality and fidelity.”

Some months ago, in researching our “Soup, Salad & Soul” study on the Song of Songs, I came upon an excerpt from a work by the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, that I thought perfectly summed up the lessons of the Song in a God-honoring ethos of sexuality for today. In an article entitled “The Body's Grace,” Williams suggests that because we are created in the image of God, we are called to embody the creative ethic of God. Or in Williams' words, “to desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire...it is to ask the moral question: “How much do we want our sexual activity to heal and enlarge the life of others?”” In her own work on Song of Songs, Rev. Dr. Susan Andrews comments on Williams' work: “asymmetrical - unbalanced - sexual relationships are simply not part of God's vision. Sexual behavior that exhibits power over the other, sexual behavior that focuses on me instead of thee, sexual behavior that hides in the shadows of shame instead of unfolding in the sunshine of God's delight - such behavior does not “heal and enlarge the life of the other”.” In the work of these two authors, we find a crisp delineation between the picture of a God-honoring, partner-blessing sexuality found in the Song and the brokenness of sexuality so commonly found in the culture of our time – a sexual libertinism that features casual “hook-ups”, “friends with benefits”, the objectification of the other in pornography and “soft-core” advertising, sexual violence and predatory behavior and many, many other problems.

Connecting the Song of Song with the writings of Paul that call for marriage partners to be mutually submissive to one another, Susan Andrews says, “I know in my body and in my soul what God celebrates. Sacred sexuality is about glorifying and enjoying God with the full worship of our bodies. Sacred sexuality is about reflecting the image of God in us by desiring the joy of the one we desire. Sacred sexuality is about shaping erotic love with agape love - healing and enlarging the life of the other - even at the cost of sacrificing our own needs. Sacred sexuality is about sharing our bodies in the context of covenant - a faithful and monogamous and enduring relationship that reflects the dependable fidelity of our utterly faithful God. And sacred sexuality

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becomes - in the wide grace of God's redemptive plan - a way to be beneficial - a way to edify and build up the larger community of God's people."

An author whose work I nearly always find illuminating, Frederick Buechner, wrote the following about sexuality and the sacred: "Sex is like nitroglycerin: it can be used either to blow up bridges or heal hearts. At its roots, the hunger for food is the hunger for survival. At its roots the hunger to know a person sexually is the hunger to know and be known by that person humanly. Food without nourishment doesn't fill the bill for long, and neither does sex without humanness. In practice, Jesus was notoriously soft on sexual misbehavior. He saved the woman taken in adultery from stoning. He did not tell the woman at the well to marry the man she was living with. Possibly he found their fresh-faced sensualities closer to loving God and man than the thin-lipped pieties of the Pharisees. Certainly he shared the Old Testament view that the body in all its manifestations was basically good because God made it. But he also had hard words to say about lust and told the adulterous woman to go and sin no more. When the force of a person's sexuality is centrifugal, pushing farther and farther away as psyches (souls) the very ones being embraced as somas (bodies), this sexuality is of the Devil. When it is centripetal (bringing souls together), it is of God."

But as witnessed by all those centuries of Jewish and Christian interpretation that look beyond the literal meaning of this great love poem, the message of the Song of Songs is not just for those who are sexually active. For all of us, the married and the unmarried, the widowed, the divorced, the decidedly single and those for whom a decision for marriage or singularity lies in the future, the lesson of the Song is also about the union between God and God's people. The metaphor of God as the husband of Israel or Christ as the husband of the Church is found again and again in Scripture. In the books of Jeremiah and Hosea, especially, we find the love of God for God's people described in this way and, sadly, we also find the description of God's grief over his beloved's infidelity, our infidelity. But in the Song of Songs, we see not only God's extravagant love for us but also the long-awaited fulfillment of the love of God's people for God in return.

To speak of the incredible love of God for us and the joy of spiritual union with Christ is perhaps best left to the mystics, the poets and the songwriters. There is a reason that the Church continues to sing songs that express both God's love for us and our love for God in terms normally reserved for our human lovers. The song, "I Have Found a Friend in Jesus" or "The Lily of the Valley," is full of imagery from the Song of Songs, images used by human lovers for each other that also speak of our love for Christ. We sang of "Fairest Lord Jesus," we will sing of the "sweetest name" we know. We might well have sung, "O, How I Love Jesus." We often express our deepest feelings of human romance in song and so we express our most intimate feelings for God in song, just as an unknown poet in the guise of Solomon did some 2500 years ago in a poem dubbed "The Song of Songs," "The Greatest Song Ever." It is the greatest song because God's love for us and our love for God are indeed the greatest loves ever. We were created to love God, to enjoy him forever, as some of the old catechisms say. We are restless, as Augustine wrote, until we find our place in God, just as those in love are restless without their lover. For me to speak of such a thing is to be aware that I can, at best, grasp the hem of His garment. It is, I hope, enough to say that God calls us Beloved, that God calls to us to arise and come away, to come away from all of the vain things that charm us most, to come away from the idols that our culture sets before us, to come away from the empty tumult of the world and to

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come into a relationship with our Loving Creator, a relationship in which we are fully known for all that we are and can be, a relationship in which we will at last come to know ourselves and to know Love in its purest, most holy form. For God's love through Christ Jesus and for the witness to God's love for us and our love for each other in the Song of Songs, thanks be to God!