

THE VOICE OF MY BELOVED

Pentecost 15 Year B

Song 2:8-13; Ps 45:1-2,6-9; Jas 1:17-27; Mk 7:1-8,14-15,21-23 Gladstone 02/09/2018

Lovers are notoriously possessive. They demand to know each other's whereabouts, they insist on commitment, they expect accountability, and they take every opportunity to remind each other, and those in earshot, of their special claims on each other.

Nowhere is their possessiveness more apparent than in the choice of pet names they use to describe each other—names like, honeybun, cutie pie, munchkin, buttercup, teddy bear, stud monkey, cuddle muffin—and the list goes on. You certainly wouldn't want to be that person who returned to their new and expensive Mercedes Benz just recently, to find his partner's new pet name for him spray painted along its side, Cheater (and other, perhaps more explicit, names as well).

This morning, I am going to do something that I have never done before from the pulpit—I'm going to preach from the Song of Solomon, otherwise known as the Song of Songs. It's not that often that the lectionary readings take us to the Song of Solomon. Even less often do ministers choose to preach from it. The question often raised by this book as a whole centres on whether or not it should be read purely as a secular love song—or is there something more to it. After all, nowhere does God appear in the poem.

In fact, this is one of only two books of the bible, Esther and Song of Solomon, where there is no mention of God. The songs or poems are spoken by a man, a woman, and a chorus that periodically comments on what's happening between the two lovers. Unlike most books in the scriptures, the woman's voice is clearly heard. In the intimacy and anticipation of love, her voice rings out in close to 75% of the book.

This song is a conversation between two lovers. It is erotic in nature. And while the language is poetic and full of euphemism, it is fairly easy to figure things out. We're just not that comfortable talking about sex in church. But, yes, I think there is more to it, as well.

Psalm 45 – a wedding psalm – a psalm of love.

So, what do we do with this song? It sits there within the borders of Scripture. It is sacred scripture. Perhaps it's the link to Solomon that cemented its place there, but it's still there. Biblical and historical tradition leads us to interpret it as it was most surely first written—a secular love song between two lovers (who may or may not have been married). At the same time tradition invites us to read it allegorically as a love song between God and God's people (Jesus and the church). Could both be possible? Let's see.

Throughout this book, the protagonist constantly refers to her anonymous male lover as "my lover" or "my beloved." Elsewhere she refers to him as "my friend" or "he whom my soul loves." His names for her are perhaps more inventive and diverse. He uses terms like "fairest among women", "my darling", or "my love", "my fair one" or "my beautiful one", "my dove", "my perfect one" or "my flawless one", and so on.

These epithets that they apply to each other, all have one very important thing in common. They are all preceded by the first-person singular possessive pronoun "my." This is not just an example of romantic drivel, typical of new lovers. Something more is at stake here. The constant use of the word "my" here and throughout the book (more than 50 occurrences) strongly suggest that they are not just asserting their mutual devotion—they are insisting on it.

In this passage that we are looking at this morning, we hear her voice as she reminisces and anticipates love. She is neither shy nor reticent and the onset of spring stirs her desire for the one who loves her. Frequent references to nature are an indication that both understand their love to be "in agreement with the goodness of God's creation." A glimpse of her beloved is all she needs to reflect on his voice calling her to love. Not once, but twice in these few verses, she imagines his voice inviting her to "come away." Completely enthralled, later in verse 16 she affirms, "My beloved is mine and I am his."

This passage is filled with intensely subjective experience and even fantasy regarding the sensuous expressions of touch, smell, hearing, sight, and taste between two lovers who are kept apart, and who long to come together. In some sense, it's the recounting of a dream about love's longing, as of yet unfulfilled, with all the accompanying excitement of anticipation for the day when it will be realized. The physical bodies of the lovers are described in intense detail, as well as their hungering and thirsting for one another's embrace. They are captured in the rapture of a young love that imagines life apart as a

form of exile, and life together as a type of heaven. It is a tale told of an ancient Romeo and Juliet. It is a tale told of love.

Awake, arise, and come away. Flee with me to a place where we can be together, unrestrained by the watchful eyes of our families and friends. These are the kinds of refrains appearing in this wonderful book. We are called to images of pastoral scenes in the country, beautiful valleys, and gentle hills, blossoming with the fragrance of spring. There's a clear indication of trouble between the lovers and the world around them, which views their relationship with some hostility. The guard on the walls of the city seeks to capture the Beloved, while the women of Jerusalem catch and beat the Lover as she searches for her Beloved in the night.

It's not difficult to understand how a besieged Jewish community awaiting a messiah to deliver them, or a fledgling Christian community, persecuted for their new found faith, would interpret this Song as the embodiment of their hope, faith, and love. We need Messiah to come. We want to be saved. We want to be swept away, to be raptured by a love that will not let us go, and takes us to the place of our dreams—a paradise of beauty and celebration. It's not difficult to understand because it's precisely that kind of love that's been promised to us, and it's precisely that kind of love we want to be realized in our lives. We wait for it. We hope for it. We pray for it. We can, at times, imagine it as present, and yet, the reality is, we still wait for its appearance in both ourselves and in the world around us.

Consider for a moment the proposition that God loves you no matter what. For most of our lives we've heard those words from parents, teachers, and preachers. I say them all the time from the pulpit. But how do we understand those words to be true? It's easy to understand God's love within the context of our sinfulness being overcome by Christ's sacrifice on the cross on our behalf. In this context, however, God's love for us is seen primarily as a measured trade off of his Son for my sin. Now, there is certainly value in that sacrificial, cross-centred understanding of God's love, but we also have to remember that God's love for us is not meted out in doses of rationality. It's also the reckless, unabashed, all-consuming love that we find depicted in the Song of Solomon.

Like a transfixed lover, God looks upon us with unquenchable love. No blemish, no disfigurement, no distraction can keep him away. In the words of the poet, God says to

us, “You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you” (4:7). Humans in every generation have known that kind of blinding love, but who could think of himself in those terms when standing in the presence of God? Although we might pursue God with such passion, who could claim that God loves her like that? Yet that’s the invitation of the Song of Solomon. That’s why this strange and erotic book belongs in the bible. These holy verses invite us to consider ourselves as lovable in God’s eyes—not because we are perfect—not because we deserve God’s love but simply because God loves us like that and because his love makes us loveable.

In conclusion, there are three things this passage reminds us of. First, this passage and indeed, the whole book of songs is a great reminder of how passionate our God is. God gifts us with passions, and despite the fact that we may misuse them or confuse them; they are indeed gifts from the One who is so passionate about us. No matter how many times we give God the cold shoulder, no matter how many times we disappoint him, or take up with another “love,” God remains passionate about us.

Second, we are reminded about the fact that God is an old-fashioned romantic. In our culture, when folks pair up in books/movies/TV, it’s almost an instantaneous move from “hello” to physical intimacy. But remember those romantic movies from the 40’s and 50’s, where romance took time, where there was a gradual unfolding of the loving relationship, there were flowers and chocolates, there were candle-light dinners, there were violins (literally or figuratively) playing in the background, there was conversation and communication and connection? When we gather at the Communion Table (as we will again very shortly), we have a visible reminder of the One who longs for solid, committed, long-lasting relationships with us.

Finally, the Song of Songs/Solomon reminds us of how lovesick our God is. When we’re apart, God yearns for us—when we don’t return God’s messages, God sits there staring at the screen of his mobile phone, hoping a text might appear—when temptation entices us with new thrills, God knocks on our door and says, “arise, come away with me, find true love, enduring love, hopeful love.”

Come away, indeed!

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.