

30 August, 2009; Proper 17b
Song of Songs 2:8-13; Ps 45 1-2, 7-10
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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A few days before the recent film *Julie and Julia* appeared in the theaters, Brooks Barnes pointed out in the *Times* that it was one of the few movies to portray a happy marriage.¹ Armed with that lens, I went to the theater, and I had to agree: all the excitement and joy which most films and books reserve for courtship, this movie depicts within the marriage itself. Julia and Paul Child are clearly people who love being together: clothed and unclothed, eating and sightseeing and just walking in the streets. They are a team, and what they do together is better than what they do apart, be it furnishing an apartment, working on a cookbook, or weathering difficult relatives. In times of stress, they encourage one another; rarely have two actors been asked to laugh so much or radiate so much delight. They reminded me of my downstairs neighbors in New Haven, an artist and pediatrician whose warmth and affection and overflowing hospitality made them a joy to be around. They did not care if the house was messy, if people had to push piles of papers and dishes of figs off the sofa to sit down; they cared that the door was always open and something wonderful was always cooking on the stove.

In today's world, showing such a couple is a revolutionary act, almost indecent. Everything around us (TV, most movies, books, magazines) gives the same message: life is about finding a mate; courtship is about love, sex, and being together; but marriage is Work. Courtship involves giving and receiving flowers, fancy hotels, nights at the theater; marriage is working out a mutually-agreeable schedule for childcare, dividing the household chores, buying kitchen appliances rather than diamond rings. Advice columns suggest that when you are looking for that perfect someone, you consider stability, employment history, communication, financial status: they rarely mention that you might look for someone with whom you can have *fun*. It's like that with our spiritual lives, too: sometimes we get so caught up in *rules* like those in James (*Do this; don't do that!*) that we forget that it's supposed to be about a love-song bubbling up in our hearts.

Perhaps that's why it's startling to stumble upon the Song of Songs; the Bible, we are told, is a serious book. It contains "all things necessary to salvation" (Thirty-Nine Articles, BCP p. 868): divine revelation, profound moral teachings, gripping stories. It also contains, it turns out, a long, sexy love poem: eight chapters of erotic images, lovers searching for one another, and finding their beloved.

Religious leaders have been wary of Song of Songs, not sure just what to do with it. The ancient rabbis had a long discussion over whether to include it in Scripture at all (*Is this stuff really holy?*); surprisingly, they concluded that "all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." (Rabbi Akiva) Still, men under the age of thirty were forbidden to read the text. The most popular way to "deal with it" (or neutralize it) was to reinterpret it as an allegory, an extended metaphor about some other kind of love, certainly not sexual. For the Hebrews, it was about God and Israel, for Christians, about God and the church.

Mystics love it. Those men and women of prayer who devote hours of each day to contemplation find in its imagery and ardor a reflection of their own, adoring love for Christ, their passionate search for God, and the joys of the times when they were found by him. St. John of the Cross, that paragon of austerity who lived barefoot in snow-bound caves and suffered long years in prison, reworked Song of Songs from his prison-cell, writing:

¹ "Full Stomachs, and Full Marriages, Too", July 31, 2009.

Why, since you wounded
this heart, don't you heal it?
And why, since you stole it from me,
do you leave it so,
and fail to carry off what you have stolen?

Extinguish these miseries,
since no one else can stamp them out;
and may my eyes behold you,
because you are their light,
and I would open them to you alone.

Reveal your presence
and may the vision of your beauty be my death;
for the sickness of love
is not cured
except by your very presence and image.²

But, of course, there is another possibility. It is possible that this poem, which seems to be a long erotic love song, is...well, an erotic love song. Is it so incredible that, in the midst of a book about the love of God for humankind, God would allow us to place one poem about human love, the kind which brings delight and heartbreak to so many people? If the Bible is about learning to give and to receive, to open ourselves and our lives to God and to receive back grace and love and strength, then, surely, these two loves, carnal and spiritual, are inextricably intertwined. For most people, the love of other people, embodied people, is the proving-ground on which we learn mercy and forgiveness and joy.

Perhaps we grow such strong hedges around the erotic precisely because we fear its power. Of all the things in our lives, it is one of the most compelling, perhaps *the* most likely to be worshiped in place of God. Anyone who has ever had a teenage crush knows all about obsession: suddenly, we throw our pride out the window, follow rumor and innuendo, take note of every shirt and shoe that touches our beloved's skin, hang upon every word that falls from his or her lips (*He said he was having pizza for lunch -- isn't he brilliant!*). The other person takes over our lives: what we wear, what we eat, where we go, how we dream -- and we submit, gladly, to the interruption of our selves.

But the interruption of self is at the heart of all love. When we kneel in prayer and say, "Your will be done," when we offer water to a stranger in the heat, when we wait at the bedside of a dying spouse, when we stand at the altar or in the kitchen and say *I do* in a thousand daily ways, what are we really doing but offering our selves to be pierced and interrupted by the presence and need of another? We, who disdain submission, submit gladly to the needs of our beloved. We, who cling to independence, learn to cling to one another. We, who have studied and worked and prepared ourselves for life, who have cultivated our minds and trained our bodies for serious business, suddenly find ourselves giddy with laughter and awash in joy.

Love has a real power to humble us. If we do not worship it for itself, it can reveal to us much about ourselves, both about our desirability and about our failings, our shortness of temper, our generosity in giving, our need for patience, our beauty and defensiveness and reluctance to trust. It shows us that we *need* grace, the grace we receive from God, and the grace we extend toward one

² *Spiritual Canticle*, stanzas 9-11. Sounds more like Shakespeare than a monk, doesn't it?

another. Even in Song of Songs, love is not uncomplicated. The author writes, “My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone....I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer.” (Song of Songs 5:4-6)

It is a terrible risk: that we will open our hearts and our doors to one who will vanish away. It is a terrifying thing, to open our lives to the touch of the living God. But these are risks we must take, everyday, if we do not wish to be trapped in the tower of our loneliness. The Song of Songs reminds us that there is only one love: Christ shows up at kitchen tables as often as on altars. Amid the clatter and rush of dishes, amid the chatter of the day, there is a sudden, overwhelming joy that points us to a Presence we cannot see.

I think that, when Rabbi Akiva compared Song of Songs to the Holy of Holies, he had chosen his words with great care. The Holy of Holies was the dwelling-place on earth of the living presence of God, the place of commandments and miracles and awe. The danger with the erotic, the danger with temple or church or art or any good that is in this world, is that we can get stuck in the outer courts, which are so tantalizing that we can forget there is more within. We can become mesmerized with the beauty of the body or the delight of the senses, and forget that there is also the matter of soul. We can get hung up on hymns and stained glass and church politics, and neglect our search for the God who alone gives them life. We can fail to deepen, to grow, to mature. But when we allow our loves to lead us far within, when we allow them to teach us ourselves, when we allow our roots with one another to deepen through long years, when we risk the desperate leap toward grace, then we stand on holy ground indeed.