

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2021

Lenten Lessons from the Garden

Part Four: The Garden of Intimacy

A Sermon Based on Song of Songs 4:12-5:1

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

First Christian Church

Murray, KY



“His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me...”

Song of Solomon 2:6~ By Amy McCutcheon

We are on the fourth part in my Lenten sermon series “Lenten Lessons from the Garden.” We started this series by visiting the Garden of Eden, where we met our primordial ancestors Adam and Eve, who, upon their creation, received their Original Blessing as God proclaimed them to be not just good but very good: *Tov Me’od!* Unfortunately, not content with the innocent security of the walled garden, they and we were expelled / pushed from the womb (so to speak) into the wildness, struggles, and challenges of life, losing that direct communication we had with God where we could walk and talk with God face to face in the coolness of the night of the Garden of Eden. Even though we still retain our original blessing, we now can only see as through a glass darkly.

Yet all of the saints (including the contemporary Fr. Richard Rohr) speak of two experiences that allow us to sense God’s presence in a profound way: (1) great suffering and (2) great love. And it is fascinating to me that these two experiences are also depicted in gardens, which, like the wilderness in the Bible, are places where important spiritual lessons are taught.

In two weeks, we will travel with Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane and, with his disciples, we will try and stay awake with him as he prayed, remembering how he suffered the betrayal of his closest friends and struggled with the awareness that he soon would be unjustly executed. In the Garden of Gethsemane we will learn the spiritual practice of welcoming pain.

Today we will travel from the Garden of Eden in the opening pages of the Bible across time where we will enter into another garden found in the book known variously as the “Song of Songs,” or the “Song of Solomon,” or the “Canticle of Canticles.” While I called Eden the “Garden of Original Blessing,” I call the garden in the Song of Songs the “Garden of Intimacy” where, through love, we can sense God’s presence and learn important spiritual lessons about relationships. Listen to how this garden is described in the Song of Songs 4:12-5:1: *¹²A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed. ¹³Your channel is an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard,¹⁴nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices—¹⁵a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon. ¹⁶Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits. I come to my garden, my sister, my bride; I gather my myrrh with my spice, I eat my honeycomb with my honey, I drink my wine with my milk. Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.*

Let's all open our Bibles and locate the Song of Songs. Many of you know that there are three different genres of writing in the Old Testament or Hebrew scriptures. First there are the Historical Books that speak to our past. They go from Genesis to Esther. Second are the Prophetic Books from Isaiah to Malachi containing prophecies that make predictions about our future. In the middle are the beautiful Poetical books or "Writings" of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Known as the "wisdom books," they transcend all time and space to speak directly into the present moment, asking important existential questions about matters such as the meaning of life, death, suffering, beauty, relationships. In them we find Job reaching out to God in the midst of terrible suffering bringing up the theological issue of theodicy or why God allows suffering. The book of Ecclesiastes is painfully honest in its attempts to address life's many limitations and our mortality. Proverbs, through the voice of lady Wisdom, provides pithy statements to keep us on an ethical path. In the 150 beautiful Psalms (or songs) we find every nuance of human emotion expressed from the most sublime joy to the deepest of anguish and despair as the writer both laments and shouts out praises to God.

So many love the wisdom literature above all else in the Bible because they are the most honest, painfully raw, and transparent of all writings. The wisdom literature of the Hebrew scriptures is directly inspired by God, understood to be the source of all wisdom, who is even personified as Lady Sophia or Lady Wisdom, who cries out in the streets (Proverbs 1:20-33). But in the Song of Songs, God is not mentioned a single time. For the Song of Songs is a love song sung to the goodness of creation, human sexual love, and the importance of human companionship. But, even though the name of God is not mentioned, it is a deeply spiritual book because it teaches about God's gift of love in our lives.

It shouldn't surprise you (especially if you take the time to read it) that the Song of Songs is perhaps the most controversial book in the Bible. You can only imagine how much the repressed, stiff-laced Puritans hated it. But there were those who found insight and beauty in it, including Origen, Gregory the Great, and Bernard of Clairvaux. The famed second-century Rabbi Aqiba wrote that "*all the Writings are holy, but Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.*" In fact, it was so holy that he forbid it from being sung in popular secular celebrations, saying that "He who sings the Song of Songs in wine taverns, treating it as if it were a vulgar song, forfeits his share in the world to come." (Phipps, William E. (1974), "The Plight of the Song of Songs", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 42:1 (March 1974), pp. 81)

Because it was controversial, it did take some time for it to even be included in the official canon. After much heated debate and discussion, it was only included in the Hebrew scriptures in the second century CE because it was argued that it was written by King Solomon. Solomon was said to have written some 3,000 Proverbs and 1,005 songs. Because this book is called the “Song of Songs” we suppose that the Jewish people were saying that this was Solomon’s best song, his greatest hit which quickly rose to the top of the charts! But, of course, they could not read this book literally as an erotic depiction of the love between a man and woman. They had to sanitize it, which they have done through history. Within Judaism it was read allegorically as God’s love for Israel. Christians have understood it to relate to Christ’s love for the church or the relationship between Christ and the soul. In the modern era it has sometimes been seen as a satire, even an early feminist text thought to have been written by a woman. But the Song of Songs can neither be sanitized through an allegorical or metaphorical understanding nor reduced to a post-modernist interpretation.

Even though it might make us uncomfortable, we should name it for what it is: a form of Biblical erotica with its graphic love scenes between a man and woman that has a deeply spiritual message for all of us. The Song of Songs is, in fact, a collection of 25 lyric love poems that are an unapologetic depiction of the growing relationship between two lovers. In its description of five meetings in the garden it portrays their longing, desire, and intimacy as they move through various stages of love from attraction, flirtation, budding romance, courtship, consummation, heartbreak, to the ultimate spiritual transformation as they celebrate human sexual love in all of its dimensions.

I remember my first exposure to the Song of Songs in my childhood home in Boston when I was about ten years old. I overheard my parents tell some close friends of theirs that they had read the Song of Songs to each other on their wedding night. I didn’t know what it was so I got out a Bible and started reading it and turned red and said “uh gross”! Of course, that isn’t what I thought when I myself much later was exposed to the sacred wonders experienced in the love between two partners when I got married.

So what do we find in the Song of Songs? First, it is one of the most beautiful songs in the Bible in praise of the beauty and goodness of the created order! These words set the scene:

¹¹for now the winter is past [we are happy here in Murray it is over, aren't we, after that awful once-in-a-century winter storm we just experienced a few weeks ago], ***the rain is over and gone*** [well the rain in Murray and around Kentucky may be gone but we still are experiencing problems from the recent flooding]. ***¹²The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.*** ***¹³The 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.*** (Song of Songs 2:11-13)

Not only is there beautiful scenery, but one needs to sniff one's way through this book of the Bible by taking an olfactory tour of the garden. We can smell frankincense, myrrh, henna, lily of the valley, roses, apple blossoms, cypress, lilies, grape vines, fig trees, honey, spices, nard, saffron, calamus, cinnamon, aloes and more (Song of Songs 4:14). The Song of Songs is a totally sensuous book, for smell is the most primal and sensuous of our five senses. It is a Biblical essential oil experience that DoTerra would pay big bucks for. In fact, DoTerra just this past Christmas brought out a special Ancient Oils selection that included myrrh, frankincense, galbanum, hyssop, cistus, and common myrtle, four of which are mentioned in the Song of Songs. Needless to say, my house has smelled like a heavenly garden and I truly thank the person who gave these to me! Not only is the Song of Songs ripe with olfactory information but there are lots of sounds and music. Indeed, artists, writers, poets, minstrels, and musicians including Palestrina and Bach have used texts from the Song of Songs for centuries.

But the Song of Songs does not simply contain a song to the goodness and beauty of creation, a beautiful song welcoming the arrival of spring. Rather it provides the background scene, scents, and music for the songs between two lovers who, we might say, were exiled from the original Garden of Eden but are now reunited in a new beautiful, lush garden where they again relate to each other in their nakedness and vulnerability. The very first words of the Song of Songs begin with the woman saying: ***Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth! More delightful is your love than wine!*** (1:2)

Listen to the wonderful exchange, the metaphors, illusions, the flirtatious lure in the lover's voices in a few other parts of the poems:

The man says to the woman: ***Ah, you are beautiful my beloved, ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves!*** (1:15)

And the woman says to the man: *“As an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my lover among men. I delight to rest in his shadow, and his fruit is sweet to my mouth. He brings me into the banquet table and his emblem over me is love.* (2:3-4; note isn’t there a song that goes “he brings me to his banqueting table and his banner over me is love”? I wonder what our parents would have thought if they knew we VBS kids were singing intimate verses out of the Song of Songs?)

“Hark! my lover [the woman says]—here he comes springing across the mountains, leaping across the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag (stud)” (2:8-9)

And the man says [in our scripture passage for today]: *How beautiful is your love ... my bride, how much more delightful is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your ointments than all spices! Your lips drip honey ... You are an enclosed garden ... that puts forth pomegranates, with all choice fruits ... [and] all the finest spices ... Arise, north wind! Come, south wind! Blow upon my garden that its perfumes may spread abroad. ... Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.* (4:10-11a, 1-16)

Pretty steamy stuff, eh? But how can this be a sacred text, one might ask? And, importantly, does it contain any lessons about relationships and human sexuality and love that we might pass on to our children or those entrusted to our care? And the answer is absolutely yes, because the Song of Songs provides a glimpse into healthy love, wherein there is respect, genuine fondness, and faithfulness in a relationship. So, based on the Song of Songs, what can we tell our children about God’s gift to us of human sexual love that we learn in this garden?

First of all, we can tell our children that this text calls upon us to claim the goodness of all that is created, including the goodness and beauty of our bodies and the pleasure that God’s gift of love and loving gives to us. For after all, aren’t our bodies called temples that house God’s Holy Spirit in us? Since the Biblical view is that our bodies are sacred and holy, sexuality is a deeply spiritual act.

Kent Nerburn had that special talk with his middle school aged son (you know the one all of us parents dread) and he told his son the following about making love: *“Son,” he said. “We are neither animals nor angels. We are something else—we are humans—part physical like animals and part spiritual like angels. In us those two parts are combined into one.*

A true sexuality [has] both these dimensions and tries to embrace them both in the act of love. ... [Son], having sex is what animals do. Achieving mystical union is what the angels do. We humans alone can make love, where the physical and the spiritual come together in a single, joyous act.” (“Letters to My Son,” cited *Spiritual Literacy*, pp. 541-2) As an act that is both physical and spiritual, sexuality is a gift from God and a way of seeing God in each other and sensing a closeness to God. Indeed, the Jews, who have a healthy view of sexuality, encourage couples to make love each week on the Sabbath! It is seen to be a Mitzvah, or a divine obligation.

Now it is all well and good to teach our children that our bodies are sacred, but we need to add something else to this teaching that pertains to whom we should share our bodies with in intimate ways and the quality of the relationship. Some of you may have spent money and taken a few hours out of your lives to either read the book (actually it is a Trilogy) or see the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which played in Murray a few years ago and now can be seen on any number of movie channels. In my view, it is a modern depiction of an unhealthy perversion of the sexual relationship between a man and woman in which God is not present. It is a story of power and control and sexuality being depicted at times as crude bestiality in which an older man exploits a younger woman and then convinces her to engage in controlling sexual acts. Yes, I know that the third book eventually has a good ending but the end doesn't justify the means. The end doesn't justify the big screen glamorization to our young people of something that is harmful to their bodies and souls.

I would much rather you tell your teenaged kids to stop reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* and take out their Bibles and read the holy hot and spiritually steamy Song of Songs! Unlike *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and actually set in a patriarchal period in which women were merely seen as property to be used and exploited, the Song of Songs breaks free and sings out a new and healthy view of human sexuality as a respectful relationship between equals in which there is no exploitation!

It is truly astonishing to see who the woman in the Song of Songs is. For starters, she is a Shunammite woman. Cynthia Bourgeault wonders whether it is perhaps Abishag from I Kings, who was chosen to be a helper and servant to King David in his old age. The Song of Songs describes her as “black, but comely / lovely.” That phrase struck me. Not because she is black but because the word “but” was added after it: black, but lovely. So I asked the Hebrew master Rabbi Rami Shapiro about this translation and he told me it was false, with the “but” being added by translators in a culture steeped in notions of

white supremacy. The correct translation, he said, was “black and lovely.” No buts and no commas. So she is a lovely, black woman whom some have seen as a precursor to the famed black Madonna. Here we have an inter-racial relationship being depicted in the Song of Songs (another reason this would have been seen as a highly controversial book even in our recent past).

Not only is she black and lovely but she is one strong, feisty, self-confident, independent woman, who has her own voice and agency, owns her own property, handles her own money, runs her own business, and won’t let her brothers tell her what to do!

In this way we are reminded of the woman depicted in Proverbs 31, who is a strong independent woman, running her own household and who, like wisdom, is more precious than jewels (Proverbs 8:11). Pay attention teens to what the Song of Songs says about this woman! She is a mature person. In modern terms, we would say that she isn’t still in high school. She has completed her education and is out in the working world and knows who she is and what she wants out of life. Only at this point is she ready for a mature relationship, ready to experience the great mystery and gift of love and sexuality that God has given us. Only then is she ready to be an equal partner, for this text shows that good relationships are between two people who treat and respect each other as equals.

When you read the Song of Songs you may be startled to see that this is not a song written by a man about a woman whom he objectifies. Rather, it is the woman who takes the initiative, who calls out to the man, who then responds. There is reciprocity between the two partners. There is no co-dependency. They come out to meet each other. Their love is not simply physical libido and lust but mature spiritual love in which there is genuine respect and appreciation for the authentic personhood of the other in which no one is coerced and each is free. Like partners in a dance, sometimes he takes the lead and sometimes she leads.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh described something like this in her book *Gift from the Sea*:

“A good relationship has a pattern like a dance and is built on some of the same rules. The partners do not need to hold on tightly, because they move confidently in the same pattern, intricate but gay and swift and free, like a country dance of Mozart’s. To touch heavily would be to arrest the pattern and freeze the movement, to check the endlessly changing beauty of its unfolding. There is no place here for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand ... Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back—it does not matter which. Because they know they are partners moving to the

same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it.” (cited p. 423)

And finally, as we teach our children that making love is a sacred act between two mature equal partners, we should emphasize that it should always include great respect, gentle tenderness, and profound gratitude. And to make this point I might share with them the following beautiful story that has profound spiritual lessons:

*“In ancient Japan it is said that after a night of making love, the man had to write a poem so that when his lover awakened she might find the poem next to her sleeping mat. This ancient Japanese custom was intended to link together sensuality and love. The poem and the consideration behind its creation was a reassurance that the sexual exchange was a fruit of love and not just a “taking” ... The thanksgiving of the poem was but one way to assure the woman that she was truly loved. Not only women, but men as well, need to be frequently reassured that they are loved. Expressions like that of the lover’s poem, expressions that are both thanksgiving and affection, are essential to any human love affair. **They are equally essential in our love affair with God.** ~ Edward Hays, Secular Sanctity*

Closing Prayer: Loving God you created man and woman in all their beauty and potential to have a desire for intimacy and union. We thank you that the controversial Song of Songs was included in the Bible to show us the goodness of human sexuality as it depicts a man and woman who have consummated their desire for each other as free and mature human beings in something that reminds us of the beauty of the original Garden of Eden with all its sights, scents, and sounds. Amen.