

## **Eros and a God of Love**

A Valentine's Sermon on the Song of Solomon

Sunday February 11, 2007

Trinity United, Ottawa

Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

Wednesday is Valentine's Day, reason enough to pluck from our scriptures a reading from the Song of Solomon, the passionate love story of King Solomon the wise and his beautiful dark-skinned bride. Bob chose a reading from this 'Song of Songs' for our wedding ceremony, and he agreed to read it with me again for you today.

Valentine's Day was originally set on the calendar in Mediterranean springtime, as a celebration of the birds and the bees. In Ottawa in February, well, maybe our fervour has frost damage! So may this reading melt into your heart, and evoke the Springtime of true love for you - in the past, the present...or the future!

Bob: (Song of Songs 1:10b-1:13)

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,

the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its fruit

and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away!

Ellie: (Song of Songs 8:6-7)

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;

for love is as strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love,

neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love all the wealth of his house,

it would be utterly scorned.

How many of you have read through this most sensual book of the Bible? Furtively perhaps, as a young person? Have you ever recommended it to your children or grandchildren, to kindle their interest in scripture?

The erotic poetry of the Song of Songs is a wonderful contradiction to the widespread assumption that sexuality and religion must be kept worlds apart. Its a mistaken assumption clearly, because this story that celebrates passionate love has always been held sacred in both the Jewish and Christian canons. So sexuality must have something to do with our relationship with God!

Our human sexuality is a precious, healing gift from God, too long nervously denied - with disastrous social consequences in our day. Julia Cameron, in her delightful book "Some People Say That God is No Laughing Matter" puts it to us frankly:

"God invented sex. Every bit of it. God made the parts that fit together the way they do. God wasn't embarrassed by any of it. God was in the on the whole thing. God invented making babies. God invented making whoopee. What I'm wondering about is how we got so embarrassed about all of it? What I want to know is, who decided God was a prude?

And who got the idea that God would like us better if we gave up something so nice. Isn't it a little like giving back a really great birthday present? Maybe when we decided we should give up

sex, we were actually giving up part of God?

One of the things I've noticed is that making love does seem to cheer up a lot of people and make them nicer and a little less cranky. Sex can even make you sure there is a God, and you've just gone to heaven."

So who did decide that God was a prude? The short answer is 'the ancient Greeks'. Way back in the second century after Christ, when the Bible circulated in the Mediterranean world in Greek translation, Scripture's messages were filtered through the then dominant neo-platonic philosophy - Greek dualism. The world was understood in terms of blacks and whites, rights and wrongs, goods and bads. Unlike Jesus' Hebrew culture, which knew no separation between body and spirit - indeed had only one word to cover both, 'nephesh' - the Greek dualists separated our very being into two - body versus spirit - and judged spirit as good and body as bad. Idealized 'platonic' love was thus good, and earthy eros a lowly thing. We Christians, who celebrate a God who is love and Jesus as the embodiment of the Holy, disembodied human love! What a contradiction!

This Greek legacy has been with us in our Christian religious culture ever since, fostering celibacy and secrecy, a sense of shame and the shadow of sin. Our culture has been so crippled and confused about how God's love works as eros, that parents and children and church communities have been too embarrassed to even talk about it. Perhaps it is still a surprise to many that a minister would even couple the two words sexuality and spirituality? Please, forgive me if this is uncomfortable for you! It risky territory for me too. But today, I believe we are called to talk about sex in church...for the sake and the safety of our young people - if not for the health of our own marriages and partnerships!

For too long, church and culture were silent on this subject. And culture - like

nature - abhors a vacuum! So since the sixties, when the damn finally broke, popular culture has rushed into the vacuum of our silence about sex. Rushed in with images and misunderstandings of human sexuality that strip eros of its precious spiritual dimension and even its vital emotional context.

Our children are bombarded from such a tender age with unhealthy and explicit sexual imagery. At school they may learn a little about safe physical sex. But where can they learn about 'emotionally safe sex' and 'spiritually safe sex', if church and family are silent on this subject? Have you ever thought about that?

Like most of you, I suspect, I grew up believing that sex was shameful business, an offence against God, until marriage, somehow, magically transformed it into the sacred act of procreation. (Protestants were at least allowed to enjoy sex within marriage.) The church seemed to be as obsessed with sex as a sin, as our mainstream culture today is obsessed with everybody having sex. (And yes, there is a connection!)

So we need to correct the misimpressions about sex and spirituality, by sharing some of God's truths and our own. By daring to do that, sharing the wisdom of all our generations, we can make our young people more safe in their world.

Downstairs, we took a tentative step in that sharing by writing on Valentine's hearts, the qualities of relationships between couples that help turn a youthful passion into a lifelong love story. We listed some of the vital elements in a romantic love that can harness that powerful energy of attraction, as a motivation to grow and heal and learn together for decades. We gathered up our hearts and found these words on them: trust, respect, vulnerability, equal power, acceptance, patience, forgiveness...

These are the elements of 'emotionally safe sex' that our kids need to be able to recognize very early, as being present - or absent- in couple relationships. But words alone will not be enough. Children learn from modelling. They need our personal and family stories about this aspect of life, as about any other. Not every family has happy stories about sexuality and marriage, but together, we can paint a picture that will model hope. Tales of experience that can help us all to recognize the good, loving and safe context in which to set sexual exploration.

Young folks need us to consciously and intentionally share the learnings we gleaned from our love stories - and even our broken hearts. We can help them by telling the story about how grandma learned she could really trust grampa, because... The story about how dad first realized he had so much respect for mom when she... That time that Mom burst into tears... or Dad threw up... and they found it was OK to be that way with the other. Collectively, we can illustrate to our youth that though our culture might label it 'weak', it is right and good - and endearing even - to reveal our self and be vulnerable together, where there is earned trust and commitment, as well as attraction.

And what about 'spiritually safe sex?' Surely this kind of education is in the domain of church and family? If you're like most good Christian folks, you're fetching around in your mind for what the heck that might even mean, right?

As the Song of Songs illustrates, sexuality is one form of God's passionate love for us and among us. This divine allurements draws us into intimate relationship with the other, and with our self - and the All.

Someone in our church sent me this quote by her favourite writer a few days ago:

"Spirituality separated from sexuality loses its fire...Sexuality separated from spirituality loses its heart - the real intimacy of knowing the other as a manifestation of the same divine presence that lives within you." (Orah Mountain Dreamer)

Sex is God's very agency of creating a human being. But it is also a means of 'salvation' - as we spoke of it last week - one of God's many ways of healing our lives into wholeness. Sexuality is part of how a truly loving and enduring partnership gradually calls us to grow more whole...and to be literally touched by the holy.

Sexual passion is the only form of love that can motivate most of us to venture out of our safety zones, across all the boundaries of our separateness, in search of a 'not aloneness' that is ultimately with God...and we may find it! Reaching out to one another physically though, we inevitably touch some wound deep in the other...because our bodies are maps of our whole life's experience. Every joy and every hurt is writ there!

When we are touched in our old wounded places with loving acceptance, those old soul wounds begin to heal. Our feelings of loss and abandonment, fear and shame, guilt and unlovableness, are tenderly contradicted until they begin to disappear over the years! Conversely, in this ultimate vulnerability, if our old wounds are touched with judgement - oh the pain! The heart break! Sexuality without the vital element of loving acceptance can be soul destroying. This is what we would rather our young people **not** experience.

So we have to share with them the good stuff, the right stuff, the spiritual stuff, about sex. God's gift that gives healing and creation and even occasionally 'at oneness' with the universe.

We don't all have that kind of love story, but like any experience of a gift of God's love, we can share our love stories in community. We can celebrate and learn from each other's passion narratives. Perhaps the shared wisdom will allow new, true love stories to blossom for some of us? And every young one needs a share in a Valentine's love story that models God's healing love in passionate partnership. Because eros at its best, is a love that lets us know that God *must* love us, to give us such healing joy. It is one of many ways that our God of Love gives us heaven on earth.

Lets' sing with passionate thanks, for our God who is love.

VU # 490 Our God, Creation's Loving Source