

SERMON: 2018/09/02 (15th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - *Song of Solomon* 2:8-13; *Psalms* 45:1-2,7-10; *James* 1:17-27 & *Mark* 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

[Invite children to the front.]

Before you eat dinner, do you *always* wash your hands?
Yes or no?

[Wait for response.]

Only sometimes?
What about after you've been to the toilet?
Or when you've been playing in the yard?

It's important to wash your hands - a good thing.
Which is why God commands it in the Old Testament in regard to the sacrificial rituals associated with the Tabernacle and, later, the Temple: [Ex. 30:17-21].
He doesn't tell us to do these things for His sake, but to protect us - humanity - from getting sick.
Men and women, boys and girls.
To keep us safe from germs and viruses.

And, as time passed, this custom became a habit common among the Jewish people before *all* their meals: [7:3-4].
So, when they saw Jesus's friends, the Apostles, eating without having washed their hands beforehand, they got angry, and said, "Hey, stop that. You should do what we do."

And though this was, objectively, good advice, Jesus calls them 'hypocrites' because they weren't really concerned with the health of others, just that they conform and be like everyone else.[v.6]

But copying isn't always a sensible thing to do.
People can lead us astray and to do wrong things.
What *is* always right, however, Jesus tells us, is doing '[the] commandment[s] of God...'[v.8]

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

[Play the song: 'This Is The Air I Breathe' by Michael Smith.]

The *Song of Songs* - also known as *The Song of Solomon* - is one of the most enigmatic and perplexing books in the Old Testament.

It *seems* like erotic literature.

Like a random "slice" of the king's "porno-poetry."

A portion of something he wrote to one of his many, *many* wives perhaps.

Fifty Shades... of some very lurid colours, which should come with a PG-13 warning on it at least.

Every other line, almost, can be read as a double entendre, innuendo.

So much so that you start to see it everywhere:

'The fig tree puts forth its figs', for example.[2:13a]

Are we simply talking about the natural occurrences of springtime or of a woman disrobing and exposing her breasts?

The mind boggles.

And yet why, if this is just about sex, has the book been included among the Scriptures.

Certainly, in those Shakespearean anthologies that I'm sure most of us own, suddenly, among the plays and dramas, the publisher *squeezes* in a sonnet or two - and they can be pretty risqué too.

But in the Bible?

Isn't this supposed to be about God *and the sacred* rather than a carnal handbook for passionate lovers?

Well, yes, of course.

Is it possible, then, that the surface imagery, though distracting, may be not what it at first appears to be?

Let me speak clearer, *yes(!)*, the many references to apples, blossoms, nuts, pomegranates and swollen bunches of grapes etcetera *are* thinly veiled metaphors for genitalia - *this is undeniable(!)*, but this isn't to say that genitalia and reproduction are the *actual* theme of the text - the subject of our author.

Allow me to explain, she - and yes, this may be the only book in either Testament to have been written by a woman, in spite of the title[n.1] - conjures up passionate, *realistic* bedroom scenes so as to remind her readership of the feelings involved, their intensity; their depth.

We're not being merely "titillated" or "tantalised" by the scenes that she paints in our minds with her words; she's trying to *situate* us in them and *powerfully* so.

She wants us to stand in the sandals of her 'beloved', that 'young stag'[v.8-9]

To remember how it feels to be truly aroused; to be fully *enamoured* with someone; to know again an unjaded, unbounded attraction to another person.

To *long* for them.

To wish to *tear* off their clothes and roll around, carefree, in a summer meadow of wildflowers for hours.

To want to hold hands endlessly, and share every moment.

To have a burning, consuming commitment that 'transcends all monetary and other values of this world.'^[n.2]

Why?!

Because this is not only the appropriate type of love for married men and women to have about their spouses - the feelings that are necessary to bind them together for the life-long unions of 'one flesh' that God desires for followers of His son^[n.3] ^[Gen. 2:24] - *but also* because, and this is the "*thrust*" of the *Song*, she believes that that same, *electric* excitement is what we should feel toward our Creator.

This text, you see, is actually about God, even though '[it] barely mentions [Him] and contains '[n]one of the customary designations'.^[n.4]

That we would *desire* Him.

(Exactly as the '*greatest* commandment' says we should: ^[Mt. 22:36-38] - 'with all your heart' and so on.)

And, conversely, feel sincerely lost and bereft without His palpable presence and close companionship.

Incomplete.

As the first couple must have felt when they were first expelled from exquisite Eden.^[Gen. 3:23-24]

Now, your response to hearing this should be one of feeling challenged.

Likely, this *isn't* how you *feel* about the LORD.

Perhaps, your reaction to my saying that we're supposed to *desire* Him was, "Ewww."

And perhaps you felt that way too when you heard the worship-song that I played at the beginning of this sermon:

"And I... I'm *desperate* for you... Your holy Presence living *in* me," he crooned.

Men especially might recoil at such lyrics;

at such...sentimentality; at such...neediness.

No, we like our religion turgid, starched and straight-laced.

Victorian.

Puritan.

No humor.

No emotion.

Grey or biege, please.

But today's text implies, "No, that isn't enough."

Mild appreciation.

Subdued gratitude.

This is an inadequate - *and the incorrect* - response to who our Father in Heaven is, and to what He's done on our behalf.

Turn over your bulletin(-card) and see the image (on the reverse).

That is a closeup of the statue of the 'Ecstasy of Saint Theresa' by the Italian master Gian Lorenzo Bernini, carved from a flawless white marble in 1652.

Look at her face...

Rapturous; *orgasmic!*

And this is a nun.

(One who threw aside our comfortable Middle Class reserve and allowed herself to be "lifted" to 'another level' - to glimpse the 'eschatological paradise'.[\[n.5\]](#))

This isn't to say that we should think of Jesus as our "crush;" a "fling."

'[T]he biggest problem with thinking of Jesus as your boyfriend is not that the image is too intimate.

Actually, it is not intimate enough.'[\[n.6\]](#)

Consider, the Psalmist tells us that '[He] formed my inward parts [and] knit me together in my mother's womb.'[\[139:13\]](#)

And, elsewhere, that He's counted 'the hairs of your head'.[\[Mt. 10:30\]](#)

And, elsewhere again, that He carries us, spiritually, all our lives, 'as one carries a child'.[\[Deut. 1:31\]](#)

That we're His own bride,[\[Rev. 19:7\]](#) the '*fairest* among women'.[\[SS 5:9\]](#)

And he guards us, fiercely, proudly, as a lion.[\[Rev. 5:5\]](#)

One who, *willingly*, 'took our infirmities and bore our diseases'.[\[Mt. 8:17\]](#)

How can we be lukewarm about hearing these claims?

Or only moderately pleased to believe them.

As one hymn writer with whom you're probably more familiar puts it:

"Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."[\[n.7\]](#)

Let's reflect.

Footnotes:

1. LaCocque, André and Ricoeur, Paul (1998), *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, David Pellauer (Trans.), Chicago, I. L.: The University of Chicago Press, 243.
2. Hess, Richard S. (2005), *Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Baker Academic, 243.
3. Duguid, Ian M. (2015), *The Song of Songs: An Introduction & Commentary*

(*Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*), Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 37: As wisdom literature, the Song is designed to show us an idealized picture of married love, in the context of a fallen and broken world.'

4. Hess (2005), 37.
5. Kingsmill, Edmée (2009), *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: A Study in Biblical Intertextuality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 5-6.
6. Wilson, Andrew (20th of May, 2016), 'The Real Reason You Can't Date Jesus', *Christianity Today*, available at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/june/why-you-cant-date-jesus.html> (accessed August 28, 2018).
7. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/When_I_Survey_the_Wondrous_Cross.