

“Kiss Me Like You Mean It”

A Sermon on Song of Solomon 2:8-13

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A woman is filled with excitement and joy as her lover approaches. She is young; he is not her husband. Their desire pulses with the quick beat of their hearts. She smells like apricots; he like newly cut hay. They are young. She is a farmer's daughter; he a soldier in uniform. She took a detour on a sunny morning, preferring the long, winding road that cut through the pasture where cows grazed lazily, tails swishing back and forth. He was off-duty, stretching his legs as the sun warmed stiff muscles and cleared sleep-fogged eyes.

Later, they would meet in the stand of trees beyond the farm's hedgerows, beyond the eyes of her father and his commanding officer. Nothing concerned them but the inevitability of the sun's rising that heralded their rupture; an unwanted interlude.

Flowers burst into fragrant bloom in their presence; trees reached leafy arms higher into a cloud-dappled sky; the moon glowed just for them. The whole of Creation conspired on their behalf – two young lovers in the throes of newly ignited passion – the spring bursting forth in perfect harmony with their love.

When I first met Mildred, the young farmer's daughter, she was on the cusp of her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her body maintained its strength – an upright spine connected to long legs that walked purposefully – but her mind had betrayed her – so much so that she needed the round-the-clock vigilance of a nursing home. Fragments of thoughts floated behind her clear eyes – some exiting her mouth in what seemed like gibberish, others settling back into her mind unspoken. She spent most of her days staring into the mid-distance of the linoleum-floored dining room on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor – the sounds of competing soap operas blasting from opposite corners of the room, the smell of baked chicken and pureed carrots coating the metal chairs and polyester curtains.

Once a week I entered the dining room carrying art supplies fit for a child's Sunday school class, or, in this case, a poetry group for residents with Alzheimer's disease. I scattered the table with brightly colored construction paper, glue sticks, and piles of words that I had cut out myself to resemble the poetry magnets that are *de rigueur* in freshman dorm rooms. With hardly a sound, arthritic fingers pushed words across the expanse of the table. Occasionally, a word was picked up, pondered, and placed tentatively on the paper with a smudge of sticky glue. Constellations of words formed in an ordered chaos. There were no sentences, but something much more powerful – scenes emitted from a still point in a turning world; images of a time long past, glimpses of an emotional life unrecognizable now to the naked eye.

Mildred sat at the head of the table, sorting words with a faraway look in her eyes that had, as if by some unseen magic, begun to sparkle. Words like 'cow' and 'spring' and 'happy' and 'love' began to populate the mustard yellow page. And I asked her to tell me about the memories that were so clearly blossoming, and she began to speak with a clarity and girlishness that belied her otherwise darkened mind. And she told me the story of the young British officer, walking down the road just beyond the fence, with the smells of cow manure and dew-soaked grass and sunshine hanging in the air. It was the story of her first encounter with physical desire, a sense-laden memory plucked from the quicksand of her mind. Her body, accustomed now to only the clinical touch of medical and nursing professionals, retained a physical remnant of its other capacity – to give and receive love.

The Song of Songs, which begins with the unambiguous declarative statement, "Kiss me with your kisses," has been called many things – including an allegory of God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the Church; secular erotic poetry; or the not-so-secret chronicle of King Solomon's secret affair with a peasant woman. And it may well be one or more or all of these things. But it is also the simple and unfettered story of young lovers exploring the multidimensional quality of their love. Songs of Songs is a poetic

celebration of two individuals finding access to the joy and pleasure of their God-created bodies in a mutual and loving relationship.

As a member of the biblical canon, the Song of Songs is a rebellious anomaly and a thrilling counter-narrative to the stories that wreak havoc on our confidence in Scripture. There is no exploitation; no abuse; no violence; no shame; no proprietary claims of ownership; no misogyny; no forced prostitution; no slavery; no sin; no falseness; no fakery. And with its rich description of the natural world, the Song of Songs mirrors the Creation story of Genesis by revealing a restored Eden inhabited by the creatures of God's greatest imagining fulfilling the covenant of God's faithfulness with every bodily sense. Our bodies are created Good, the Song proclaims. Our bodies are not objects to be plucked up and discarded, but valued and enjoyed. The young lovers in the Song of Songs luxuriate in praising one other – not in comparison to a determined bodily ideal, but in the warm light of love's gaze. The Song of Songs lifts up the possibility that human touch, administered in a loving relationship, has the capacity to be as holy as what goes on in Sunday worship, fulfilling the chief aim of humankind – “to glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

Over recent years, I have watched the church, the Presbyterians and so many other denominations, wrestle passionately about the contours of human sexuality and the implications for the Christian life.

I am so weary of it all. And while many would say, by way of conclusion or assessment, that way too much time is spent in church talking about what other people do in the bedroom, I think now, truly, that not enough time is spent talking about what goes on in the bedroom. If what goes on behind closed doors has the capacity to be the most faithful and exuberant worship of God that we can imagine, and also one of the places where our bodies are celebrated as God intended, then the church needs to protect against the threat that this beautiful aspect of our God-given humanity might be forced into hiding and become inaccessible to those who might be most in need of a positive word and a grace-filled moment.

I am painfully reminded of the story of another young woman – an auburn-haired beauty with freckles scattered across her cheekbones and clear, green eyes – who gazed in the mirror and saw something ugly, undesirable, and unlovable. Captain of her high school soccer team, editor of the school newspaper, surrounded by friends and a supportive family, her outward achievements masked an inward deficit – her inability to find anything of worth in herself to share with another. A body image already balanced precariously on a cliff was destroyed in an instant when she became the victim of a date rape during the summer after her high school graduation. She carried the guilt for the crime perpetrated against her, certain that a lack of self-discipline was to blame. If only she had been prettier, she said to her mother, it wouldn't have happened. As she entered her freshman year of college, she began to control her shattered environment with food – or, more specifically, with the denial of food to her slowly starving body. Within months, she was admitted to the hospital. The pleas of her parents and friends bounced off of the stony plaque that had grown around her heart like some deadly weed, choking the life out of her. Her death was a tragedy for a thousand reasons, not the least of which was the tragedy of knowing that she had been worn down by a culture of artificial perfection and then physically violated by a young man likewise consumed by a culture of instant gratification and the sexual exploitation of women.

The population of the West Village today has grown by tens of thousands, as folks line busy sidewalks, pile onto decorated floats, dangle their feet from the fire escapes, to celebrate Pride weekend in New York City.

Many of those marching today will be young. For these new marchers, this will be a time that at some future moment elicits memories of profound exploration and expansion, of affirmation and validation, the sure sense of others' support. But for others, this will be remembered as a fraught and scary time; what pride is revealed on the streets of New York City will be unwelcome in their own homes.

And I wonder, what does the church have to say today to those young people who lack support and caring concern? Will the church be known as the place that spends all its

time arguing about concepts and institutions? Or will the church be a place where the created body is to be celebrated, venerated, explored, respected, and honored, in all its varied expressions?

In recent months, I have adopted a new framework for my standard wedding homily. I begin now with a paraphrase of James Weldon Johnson's poem, 'The Creation':

*And God stepped out on space,*

*and... looked around and said,*

*"I'm lonely—*

*I'll make me a world."*

*And as far as the eye of God could see*

*Darkness covered everything,*

*Blacker than a hundred midnights*

*Down in a cypress swamp.*

*Then God smiled,*

*And the light broke,*

*And the darkness rolled up on one side,*

*And the light stood shining on the other,*

*And God said, "That's good!"*

*...*

*And [God] set the sun a-blazing in the heavens...*

*[And God] spangled the night with moon and stars..*

*[And] then the green grass sprouted,*

*And the little red flowers blossomed...*

*And God said, "That's good!"*

*Then God walked around,*

*And God looked around*

*On all that He had made...*

*With all its living things,*

*And God said, "I'm lonely still."*

*...*

*And there the great God Almighty*

*Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,*

*Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,*

*Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;*

*This Great God,*

*Like a mammy bending over her baby,*

*Kneeled down in the dust*

*Toiling over a lump of clay*

*Till He shaped it in His own image;*

*Then into it [God] blew the breath of life,*

*And [we] became a living soul.*

What is so powerful about this telling of the story of Creation is the picture of God it offers – a God who gets lonely; a God who desires relationship and creates humanity to fill the hollow of God's own loneliness. A God who creates us with an eye for beauty and enjoyment. A God who pulled out all the stops in the process of our Creation.

And the relationships we are invited to enter into are clear and uncompromising – relationships of love, where power and exploitation and abuse are entirely absent, where mutuality and pleasure and the uplifting of the individual are preeminent, where another individual can shine God's light of love upon us, and our best selves are revealed.

A few years ago, my aunt finally succumbed to a cancer that had been waging war with her body for over thirty years. As a result of her illness, she lost the use of her left arm. This did not stop her from traveling with my uncle to China, Thailand, France and Israel, visiting their adult children and first granddaughter and celebrating the recreations of retirement. But she could no longer do the simplest things. In an unguarded moment

during his remembrance of her at the funeral, my uncle shared this tiny detail – that each morning, he had to hook her bra, because she could no longer do it for herself. And I thought of the Song of Songs, and the lush descriptions of a lover’s body – hair, lips, navel, breasts – sung in the heat of first passion. And I realized that for my uncle, the light of love’s gaze still revealed his beloved in the very same way.

For Mildred, the farmer’s daughter, some sixty odd years after the flush of her passionate first love, she still carries in her heart the fragile bird of love’s memory – an indelible reminder of who she was in the eyes of that young officer, and who she remains in the eyes of God.

God is our first admirer, who crafted us in love and for love, delighting in our bodies and enlivening us with the gift of sexuality. If it is true that the purpose for which we are embodied is to glorify God and enjoy God forever, then that purpose pervades all the ways we use our bodies. The story of two young lovers in the Song of Songs, of Mildred and the young officer, of my aunt and uncle, these are the stories to share, the illustrations that reflect God’s purpose for us – stories where desire is shaped by and revealed in affirmed commitments of mutual love, expressing through our the physical body “the desire God feels for us and has created for us to feel for each other.”<sup>[1]</sup> Let this be our confession of faith for all, and especially for those for whom this truth has been hijacked or hidden.

Let us, all of us, with our whole lives, glorify God and enjoy God forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Mark Douglas, from *Sexuality, the Bible, & the Church* (The Covenant Network of Presbyterians, 2006).