

## “Listening to Our Longing”

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e-Worship, Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Song of Songs, 2:8-13

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Only two books of the bible omit God's name: The Book of Esther, and Song of Songs. For some important reason, this thin book of erotic love poetry wiggled its way into our holy scriptures. Many biblical scholars tried to take the steam out of Song of Songs. In Judaism, the Song of Songs is often read as an allegory for God's love for the people Israel. In Christianity, it has been read as symbolic of Christ's love for the church. It is as if tradition wanted to throw a cold shower on any heat rising up from within the text.

But could the truth and power of this book of scripture come in its face value? Can it be read and celebrated for the joys and passions of young love, desire, and intimacy? Although God is left out of the book, does the holy have a role in our sexual desires? Later this month, we'll have the Rev. Anna Taylor Sweringen as a guest preacher. Did you know that in addition to being a Minister of Word and Sacrament, Rev. Anna is also a published author of romance novels? Let's explore some space where our earthly and physical desires might have a holy and spiritual dimension.

First, our desires help us reconnect with our bodies, and those bodies whom we love, as being made in the image of God. Imagine if you wrote a love letter to yourself, or to someone you love, using the kinds of imagery in Song of Songs. Adjectives we use today for someone we are attracted to fall short of the fertile images in Song of Songs. We may say someone is hot, or looks fine, has nice eyes, dresses well, smells good. But what if your lover told you, “Your belly is a mound of winnowed wheat edged with lilies.” Or, “the smooth curves of your thighs-- like fine jewelry, the work of an artist's hands!” Or, as the speaker in today's passage announces, “Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or young stag.” All these comparisons connect the lover to something magnificent in God's created world.

My wedding anniversary is coming up this Tuesday. I have a feeling that I need to up my game.

In this time of pandemic, when we are cut off from one another, still, in such drastic ways, to think about the awakening of love, like the flowers appearing on the earth after winter, the voice of the turtledove, the fig tree putting forth its fragrance-- in awakening to the spring, and to the desires of love, we might also be awakening to the grace God puts in our lives. The biggest grace of all is the ability to love and be loved, something Jesus put us to.

For many of us it is hard to feel the grace of that during these times especially. Yesterday, when I was watching *Hamilton* with my family, I was particularly moved in the song during the Battle of Yorktown: "The World Turned Upside Down." Those words impacted me more deeply than when I first heard the song 5 years ago, because it feels like our world has been turned upside down since March. And perhaps for that reason, a couple of months ago I said yes to a request I wouldn't normally say yes to. A couple had contacted me and asked if I could officiate at a wedding. They were not a religious couple, and they had been planning a big ceremony in South Korea; however, due to various restrictions from the coronavirus they could not get married in the ways they had planned. I normally only do weddings for people interested in a faith-rooted wedding; however, because the world had turned upside down, I decided that helping a couple feel more connected through the vows of marriage might set the world right a little more. Selfishly, maybe I needed to witness a little connection and joy for my own well-being. They wanted just a simple wedding in their backyard, and so to prepare them I led them in the premarital counseling conversations I always have when I marry a couple. A week later I headed to their backyard in Fort Lee. While I approached their townhome in my mask and stole and met the bride with her two witnesses, the groom pulled up with a carful of balloons: a Mr. and Mrs. balloon, as well as a bride and a groom balloon. Smiling, he tugged the balloons along with him as he came forward to greet me, awkwardly offering his hand and then pulling it away-- we were in the peak of the pandemic, after all. In that same moment, the groom balloon loosened from his grip and floated away. I hoped it wasn't an omen for their marriage! They got hitched without a hitch, and when the time came to kiss the bride; instead of lifting a veil, they each lifted their facemasks.

Even in the constraints caused by the pandemic, it was refreshing and even healing to support the vows of young love in that backyard wedding. The conditions of this pandemic make us think finding connection is impossible; we feel like we are that groom balloon that escaped its partner, into the sky-- or, we are the balloon left behind, watching the ones we long to connect with just out of our grasp, and moving further and further by the second. But a balloon is just a balloon; even when there is no physical proof for love, love can still be there. For this couple, they did not have the big party, or family, or even balloons; but they had each other, and they had love; that would be enough.

These words about romantic yearning can point to a dance of desire between God and we, God's people. In her *Shewings*, the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich describes an erotic relationship with Jesus Christ. To those who think, "No way, let's keep God's love to something safely sterile," consider this: Maybe God flirts with us using the colors of a sunset, and woos us with the smell of honeysuckle. Maybe the feeling we get when we caress the velvet of a dog's ear has something of the touch of God in it.

Jesus tells us in Matthew that this generation is like children in the marketplace, calling out to one another "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We wailed, and you did not mourn." I wonder what God may be doing in your life right now, to draw you in sensually, evoking your overflowing joy, your tears, your passion-- but you are cut off from it. In her novel

The Color Purple, author Alice Walker wrote, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all God cares about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back."

I know when my daughter did an improv camp a couple weeks ago with Chicago's Second City, the first lesson they taught her was, "Yes... and." That is the most important rule of improv, because then together you can build and add drama and meaning and humor. So, if I hand you something and say, "here, take my pet snake," and you-- my partner-- says, "that's not a snake, that's just a rope!" then the skit just falls flat. One of my daughter's classmates had a very hard time with the concept of yes... and! I could not help but overhear, even though I signed Kai up so that I could focus on my work.

Scene: you're living in Candyland.

Kid one: this is tasty!

Alex: I don't like it

Teacher: Start each line with "yes, and..."

Alex: Yes, and I don't like this candy

Kid one: Yes, and skittles make me feel sick. Let's go find the M&M's instead!

Alex: Yes, and I am bored.

Kid one: Yes, and the fun hasn't even started yet. Let's go discover more treats!

Alex: Yes, and my tummy aches and I am bored.

Kid one: Yes, my tummy aches too. Do Tums count as candy?

Alex: Yes and can we leave now? I'm bored.

Teacher: And, scene. Ok, good job with using Yes and... I heard an emotion in there. Alex, I could hear you were bored in Candyland.

Alex: that's because I hate Improv. The only things I like are heavy metal and ninja warriors.

Audre Lorde, in her famous work "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" tells us that our desire has something to teach us. "For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within. In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, and selfdenial." When we awaken to God's longing for us, and when we start longing for God as well, then our desires become closer to what God desires. We desire justice. We desire well-being for those around us, not just for ourselves. We desire restoration of the earth, God's creation. Our desires become yoked to God's will.

So for those of you who are weary of this world we are living in, I know I am with you. I am tired of the divisions I feel everywhere. I am disappointed in the kinds of things people say and do-- I tend to believe in the inherent goodness in humanity, but these days I honestly have my doubts. I am tired, and I know that I come from a place of certain privilege; I can only imagine how

exhausted those whose struggle is amplified because of their race or class or immigration status might feel. I can only guess how the burden might feel for someone whose circle of living has become drastically smaller because their age or disability or other health condition makes them more vulnerable to COVID-19 than I am.

But there is hope. Jesus says that we when become yoked to him, yoked to God's will, the yoke is easy, and our burden becomes lighter. When we are yoked to God's will, we know we can't do it all alone; we don't have to. We are tied to a higher power, and it does not all rest on our shoulders. With Jesus Christ helping us to carry the load, we have time for rest. We have time for noticing and being enticed by what is good and desirable in God's creation. We can listen to our longings, and in connecting with them we can fall into the grace of God's love.