

The Most Unbiblical of Biblical Books

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; 8:6-7

The erotic language of the Song of Solomon causes great difficulty for both Jews and Christians. We don't read it very often. Only once in the three-year cycle of the Lectionary. And wouldn't you know it, the only Sunday that I'm here, it's the Hebrew Bible reading for this Sunday. But it won't occur again until 2024. So I couldn't let it go by. The traditional way of interpreting this book is to allegorize it: for Jews it depicts the love of God for Israel, and for Christians it depicts the love of God for the church.

Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the most influential religious voices of the 12th century, composed *86 sermons* on the Song of Solomon. And it seems quite bizarre to us: here is a celibate monk in a monastery poring over the erotic language of the poem and writing 86 sermons. So I figure I could preach just one sermon on the Song of Solomon. But of course, Bernard of Clairvaux viewed it not as a physical passion between two human beings, but as a spiritual allegory revealing the soul and love with the most lovely divine lover. So the first verse, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth", refers to the pure kiss of the mouth that only can occur within the deity between the Father and the Son. And human beings can only receive this fullest, purest kiss through the Holy Spirit and the incarnation of Christ.

This, my friends, is not the way to read the Song of Solomon. It's an imposition of a Christian understanding of God on this book, which is Hebrew poetry. So the Song of Songs is a poem about the sexual awakening of a young woman and her lover. It is ancient Hebrew love poetry. And in fact, we dramatized this here at Robertson-Wesley for the church. I don't know whether you remember: it was in the '90s, I think it was about 1999. Shauna Gibbons played the Shulamite girl, and the youngest son of Vernon's was the lover. They stood in front here and read a dramatic version of that poem. At that time, I thought it was important to bring out the distinctive voices in the Song of Solomon. The voice of the young woman in love and the voice of her lover and the voice of King Solomon. But there remains stationary reading it. I didn't preach the sermon, I gave a kind of introduction to it. They did a wonderful job, they really did. It's unforgettable. What I didn't realize at the time, though, was the movement in the poem. So if I did it again, I would have the actors running all over the sanctuary, depicting the

running from garden to meadow to vineyard, calling out to each other, because there is so much movement in the poem. There's so much action.

The cast includes a young woman, referred to as a Shulamite, her lover, and also King Solomon. The poem is set in early spring, the rains of the winter season have just ended and the vines are in blossom. The air is alive with fragrances and birdsong. The two lovers live in harmony with the natural world as they freely cavort through gardens and vineyards. At the beginning the Shulamite says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth", but there's no time for this. She says, take me by the hand, let us run together. And they're off! Running through the meadows with flocks of sheep, and she worries about getting lost. And he reassures her, just follow the tracks of the sheep. That will take you to the shepherd's tent. She goes. And then her lover brings her to a banqueting house where there is wine and raisins and apples. She declares, "let me lie among the vine blossoms in a bed of apples, I am in the fever of love." But then she hears suddenly the voice of her lover; he comes leaping upon the mountains like a gazelle – what an image. There he is! Standing behind a wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice, and saying, "Arise, my love, and come away. Look, winter is over. The rains are done, wildflowers spring up in the fields. Let's go!" And they run through the fields and vineyards, yelling, "Catch the foxes raid our vineyards!" But suddenly this running around is interrupted, this night, and the Shulamite dreams about calling out to her lover but he doesn't answer. In this nightmare she wanders through the city streets looking for him. She asks the watchmen, "Have you seen him?" And then suddenly she finds him and she brings him to her mother's house. But wait – who is that coming up from the wilderness, carried aloft in a palanquin? I had to look that up. What is a palanquin? It's a litter holding the king aloft, and it's made of silver and gold carrying King Solomon aloft, and he is accompanied by 60 men and weapons of war. It is King Solomon who probably intends to add the Shulamite to his harem saying such convincing words like, "Your hair is like flock of goats, your teeth are like a flock of sheep, and your neck is like the Tower of David." I...I don't recommend these words for any young person to be in the pursuit of wooing one's beloved. And that's what you have to do in the Song of Songs; there are words and there are *words*. Some words are conveying lust, other words are conveying the essence of erotic love. The Shulamite flees to her locked garden. Her lover comes knocking on the gate. She says, "My love reached in for the latch and my heart beat wild." She reaches for the door bolt, even though her fingers are dripping with myrrh. She opens the door to her lover, but alas, he has gone. So out in the city she runs. Now it is not a dream calling out to him. Her friends, the daughters of Jerusalem, ask her to say where he is and they will seek him with her. She replies that her lover has gone down to his own garden where he feasts in the field of lilies. The daughters of Jerusalem implore her, "Return! Return, O

Shulamite!" To where? To her lover's garden? King Solomon's garden? Oh heck, enough of this running around. She declares at the very end, "My vineyard, my very own is for myself!" Too bad, so sad. King Solomon and her lover are out of luck. At least that's my Miller version of the Song of Songs. How the movement happens...I don't know, but actually, my own summary of the action ends with a rather cheeky tone. But that is actually being true to the text.

The Song of Solomon was written by a Jewish poetess. As one scholar puts it, it is a women's song from beginning to end. It is a cheeky, subversive poem. But someone might ask, well, how can it be because it's the Song of *Solomon*, right? Didn't Solomon write it? Well, no. In fact, it's quite common in the Old Testament books or Hebrew Bible books for the title to be added later as a kind of superscription. So the first verse of the Song of Solomon reads the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's, but that was added to the text many years later. It is the same with the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are not names of the original authors of the four gospels. Those names occurred a century after those gospels were written. So that was a common procedure in the ancient world because it gives the text some kind of authority. I mean, I Kings 5:12 reads that Solomon composed 1000 songs and 3000 proverbs. So, okay, why not attach Solomon's name to this poem and maybe people will pay attention to it. But he did not write it – in fact, he comes in for a lot of criticism in this poem. It is indeed a woman's song from beginning to end. It is a subversive poem. So I want to, for a few minutes, discuss the ways in which it is subversive.

First of all, it's subversive of traditional marriage. And this is a bit difficult to understand or accept, because we all believe in the institution of marriage. But it is subversive of *patriarchal* traditional marriage. The poem celebrates the love between a man and a woman. The Shulamite is not praised for being a wife or a mother, but she's praised for being a lover. There are no references to the institution of marriage in this poem, and in ancient Israel, the rules of marriage, of course were controlled by fathers making deals with each other. In this poem, there's no mention of a father. Very important. No mention of a father and there are five references to the Shulamite's mother's house. Interesting. It convinces scholars that the author must have been a woman. The only men that are mentioned are interfering brothers and King Solomon, whose main concern seems to be adding wives to his harem. And the final comment in the poem from King Solomon is, "if one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned." Amen to that. In the ancient world, women were considered as property of their fathers and husbands. The Shulamite protests that she does not belong to anyone. My vineyard belongs to me.

I was really impressed reading the Song of Songs from the point of view of understanding our emphasis on the importance of valuing ourselves and standing up for ourselves. The modern poet who was most influenced by the Song of Songs is Walt Whitman. His famous poem, "Song of Myself", has all kinds of allusions to the Song of Solomon in it. I'm very impressed, it's a very long poem. But it begins with the opening line, "I celebrate myself and I sing myself" I think we would all agree that in modern times, spirituality has focused on recovering our sins and the value of ourselves. And it's remarkable to find this Hebrew poetry in the Hebrew Bible that so focuses on the importance of valuing ourselves. That we value ourselves over and against the forces of patriarchy and the forces of sexism which tend to devalue especially women.

So that's one way in which this poem is subversive. Another way is that it's subversive in respect to religion. Because in the Song of Solomon, there is no mention of God in the poem. There are no priests, no prophets, no rituals, no prayers. Plus the title of my sermon, "The Most Unbiblical of Biblical Books", because you can't find a book in the Bible which doesn't have all kinds of God language and references to prophets and priests and so on. But not this book, and you wonder, well how did it get in the Bible? It's so secular in character. No one really knows, because we don't really understand the whole process of the formation of the canon of scripture. By the time Jesus, the Rabbinic Jews gathered after the time of Jesus in upper Galilee, they already had in their hands a Hebrew Bible which had the Song of Solomon in it, and so no one really knows about the process of the formation of the Hebrew Bible canon. So it is a most unbiblical Biblical book. Scholars have pointed out that there are oaths in it where the Shulamite woman appeals to the daughters of Jesus to take an oath, to swear. But they're really secular. We usually hear, "I am your God and you are My people." Instead we read, "My beloved is mine and I am his". Or in the passage that we read this morning, my beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. The Shulamite girl invites her friends to make an oath. She doesn't use the name of God, but instead says, "I assure you by the gazelles or the wild does, do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready." This is a secular oath made in the name of two animals frequently associated with two lovers. So it's quite amazing. The Shulamite is, in effect, sticking her tongue out at the establishment. She doesn't want to have anything to do with the temple or priests or prayers to God. That's not important. What is important is the recognition is that the divine lives within her and her lover. And the divine is present in the whole natural world. That's surely something that we ought to have a better understanding of today.

So the third way in which this poem is subversive is that it never mentions nature as *God's creation*. Everywhere else in the Bible, nature is always secondary and subordinate to the religious passage. But not here. In the Song of Solomon, nature is beautiful in and of itself. The Shulamite, as a woman in love, is referred to as a lily, as rose, a garden, a

dove...honey, milk, wine, the dawn, the Sun, the Moon...she truly represents the beauty of the whole universe. There is no hierarchy, no domination, no opposition between humans and animals. This is a new garden of Eden in which divinity lives within the humans and their gardens and vineyards. The Earth is all of paradise they need to know. This is a profound message for our time, as afflicted as we are by climate catastrophe. More than ever before, we need, what I call, a spirituality from below. Not a spirituality from above. So much of our spirituality that we've inherited from our Christian traditions is based on the old dualisms of heaven and earth. Of body and soul. Or even to two loves, Eros and Agape. It's interesting, in the Hebrew Bible, there is no distinction between Eros and Agape. Love involves bodily, physical passions. I think we need to define our spirituality in terms of our rootedness in the earth. In terms of our bodily existence. Body and soul are one; Eros and Agape are one. We live in one world, where the future of our world depends on our ability to really *feel* that the earth is sacred. That our bodies are sacred, that our loves are sacred. So a good subtitle for the Song of Solomon is "A Gardener's Guide to Spirituality." The song's imagery delights in describing the natural world, the world of gardens and flowers and plants, and indeed focuses our attention on Earth as all the paradise we need to know.

In the middle of the Shulamite's description of the garden is the image of the fountain, 4:15, a garden fountain, "A well of living water." For me, and you know, this represents a change in my theology over the past 17 years since I've left Robertson-Wesley, because I'm much more inclined to be attracted to the symbols like fountain, or well of water as being symbols of the divine. Call it I'm moving towards a more secular theology, maybe. For me, images like the fountain really convey to us the coming to presence of the divine in our world. I mean, a fountain is continually recycling its own water, living water that is pouring out and passing away. It's a symbol of life's ceaseless self-renewal. A symbol of healing and repose. That's why there're fountains everywhere. Fountains in City Hall and the Legislature. We love fountains. I'd love to have a fountain in my backyard. That'll be great. Some of you remember when we were on a trip, in the year 2000 we went to Italy and Germany. Peggy and I led the trip. We arrived first in Rome. And it was very very hot, about 35° and we started we went to the Colosseum and we walked by the old ruins of Roman buildings, the downtown core. Finally, we reached the Trevi Fountain. A beautiful place, flowing waters and just to sit beside the Trevi fountain and have the mist of the fountain waft in our faces, it was such a wonderful moment. This is, of course, the fountain of the famous three coins in the fountain. It was just, that to me was a moment of eternal now. When one can just rest, repose, in the peacefulness of the flowing fountain. So, my friends, the message of the Song of Solomon is that a spirituality from below is available to all of us. The everlasting fountain of living waters flows for all of us. Amen.