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The Wedding of the Soul

Texts: Song of Songs 2:3-17; James 1: 17

During the Middle Ages no biblical book generated more serious theology than the *Song of Songs*. Every major and minor theologian wrote a commentary on it. Even though the *Song of Songs* is itself only eight chapters long, many of those commentaries ran into several volumes. Furthermore, the theology in them was significant. If you want to know the heart of a medieval thinker, you usually need to go to his commentary on the *Song of Songs*.

How could a book that few people ever read anymore and that is represented only once in the lectionary's three year cycle have been so significant? It is often puzzling to us why the book attracted the attention it did. The *Song of Songs* is not really theology at all, at least not on the surface. It has no arguments like the letter to the Hebrews; no message directed to the reader, no seemingly Good News, much less great news. It is very simply a love song, supposedly between Solomon and his beloved, who is simply known as the Shulamite. God is not mentioned once in the book. It is even a bit racy, although it uses metaphors of love that we probably find bizarre, employing as they do frequent references to fruits and domestic animals. For example, this line: "Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love." Or these metaphors: "How beautiful you are my love...your eyes are like doves...your hair is like a flock of goats...your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing... your neck is like the tower of David...your two breasts are like two fawns...." You see the problem.

But despite all this, there is, nevertheless, a straightforward reason why this book was considered so spiritually significant, namely, this love song was seen as an allegory of the love

affair between God and the soul. As such, it is easy to see why it would be possible to spin out large volumes on it, as its subject matter seen as an occasion to write complete treatises on the spiritual life.

Nobody comments on the *Song of Songs* this way anymore. The chief reason is modern biblical criticism's extreme distaste for reading biblical texts allegorically. Allegorical readings, many contemporary biblical scholars argue, are simply whimsical readings *into* the text of things that are not there, things we wish were there, but which have little or no textual support. With respect to the *Song of Songs*, this ban on allegory is supposed to liberate the text. It is a human love song, the argument currently goes. To make it into an allegory of spirituality is to sweep its bold physicality under the rug, and to aid and abet a puritanical impulse of shame and disgust over physical love by changing it into an ethereal spiritual love. Thus modern biblical criticism not only claims that it reads such texts more accurately; it also asserts its own bold moral superiority and realism. Yet, as a result nobody reads it at all.

They have it all wrong. It is we moderns are the ones who are really the prudes, and the ones who are embarrassed about love whenever it gets down to the details. Or at least, that is the case with respect to spiritual love. For consider how we so often talk about God's love. We easily talk about God's love for us. We talk about how free it is, how giving and accepting it is, even how uncritical it is. Our God, unlike the god of fundamentalists the world over, is a God of love. This love that we talk about, of course, has no judgment or criticism in it so it is a pretty easy love and it is easy to talk about it. It is *nice*. Yet our very ease of talking about God's love in these ways, and only in these ways, may be an indication of how *we* have sanitized that talk and how airy fairy it really is. There is nothing that we say about it that cannot be said in front of children. If so, then I suspect that you may now blush when you think out the implications of

taking an expression of God's love as seriously and as concretely as the *Song of Songs* does.

What I want to suggest is that in the spiritual life we need to talk about something more than God's rather generalized love; we need to talk about *God making love to us*. We need to talk of God wooing us, and attracting us with gifts and with beauty so that we might love God back. We need to talk about the spiritual *fecundity* that occurs in the soul when God makes love to it, bringing back an old and unused word that means fertile, and reproductively generous and overflowing. Fecundity is the fulfillment of the command given humanity in *Genesis* to be fruitful and multiply. It can mean physical fruitfulness and multiplying, but it can also refer to the fruitfulness of the soul, too. That is what the mediaevals thought the *Song of Songs* was saying. They were not spiritualizing it and avoiding hard and frank talk about love; they were using concrete talk of human love to be even more concrete and frank about the love that God has for us, and about what God wants for the human soul. What all of those writers wanted with respect to the soul was that it be filled and pregnant with God's Spirit. With respect to the soul, then, we are the ones with weak stomachs and overly refined sensitivities, despite our penchant for portraying with brutal and frank realism everything *but* the spiritual life.

As one colleague observed, modern theology seems to have followed an unfortunate cultural trend. For, in worrying about giving full range of expression to our bodies and celebrating our physicality, we at the same time seem to care not at all about denigrating our minds and spirits, and even are squeamish when talking about them in any robust sense.

God making love to the soul. I wish that were an original thought, but it is not. It is actually the Bible's. The prophet Hosea, for example, talked about Israel as a faithless whore with many lovers who deserved casting out for her adultery. Jeremiah did, too. Hosea also went on to prophesy that God was going to woo that faithless lover back into loving him, and to

prophesy that a re-marriage would take place. So, too, Isaiah gave Judah new and specific hope when he told the people, after their seventy years in exile in Babylon, that just "...as a young man marries a young woman so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

The Gospel writers also rely on the imagery of marriage to announce the Messiah and to give his appearance full bodied meaning. Think, for example, about Jesus' first miracle, that of changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The miracle itself is impressive, and perhaps would draw attention to anybody who could do it. But it isn't just the physical miracle that John wants to draw our attention to. It is important, he thinks, that this miracle takes place at a *wedding*. For ever since prophets such as Hosea and Isaiah, weddings in their everyday commonality and promise of an earthly joy pointed to a more profound wedding that was to take place in Israel when the messiah came. When Jesus then changes the thin water of the old purification rites into the wine that symbolizes his blood in the Eucharist, John is telling us that the wedding that the prophets had foretold was now taking place. God would now make full and direct love to the souls of believers, and as a result they would show genuine spiritual fecundity. The numerous parables that Jesus tells about wedding feasts have the same root and intent, as does the book of *Revelations* when it talks about the wedding feast of the Lamb which is in heaven.

So if it is indeed biblical to talk about God making love to the soul so that he might marry the soul to him and make it fecund, then it behooves us to ask just how, exactly, does God make love to us?

The answer is easy. The way God makes love to us is surprisingly like the ways we make love to each other, which of course is precisely why a book like *Song of Songs* is such a

good allegory. First of all God entices us by beauty. Simone Weil described beauty as a trap that God sets for the soul. And indeed, it is often in looking at the beauty of a sunset, or in the waves of the ocean, or in the starkness of the desert, or the majesty of the mountains, that we start to fall in love with the maker of the world. We are furthermore entranced by the moral beauty and goodness of the examples of his incarnate Son and of his saints. In their love for others, saints such as St. Francis show something of the beauty of God's love for humanity. The beauty of God's steadfastness is shown in the courage and hope of the martyrs. Those who have given their minds and tongues to expound the mysteries of God, as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Luther and Calvin did, have shown the beauty of God's light by helping to shed God's light on us. All these show a great deal of the beauty of the mind of their maker. All of these saints simply reflect one part of the beauty that their Lord had already shown.

Beauty is not all, however. The second way that God makes love to the soul is by promises. He gives us a promise of marriage, and he makes promises of what we will become and what we will have if we love him in return. He promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation; at Mount Sinai he told that nation that he intended to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, his own possession among all the peoples of the earth. And that is a promise that he fulfills at the marriage supper of the Lamb which is in heaven, a place and a state of being where every tear is wiped dry.

And God, like all good lovers, makes love to us by his conversation with us. In prayer there is an intimate conversation between God and the soul. He listens to us patiently, even though he knows what we need before we ask him, and knows what we need better than we do. But, he not only listens, if we are silent and attentive enough, he also speaks to us, as he did, for example, to Elijah with a still, small voice, a voice that does not overwhelm us, but that whispers

because what is said is meant just for our ears. And by his Word then he fills our attentiveness with his Spirit, and his Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

But finally, like all generous and good lovers, God makes love to us by giving us gifts. Certainly these include the gifts that we receive at the hand of the nature he has created – the capacity to love, and the communities in which we live, our friends, our families, the bounty of the earth. Just as we should look at the beauty of creation and fall in love with the creator, we ought to look at our natural communities and also fall in love with the mind that made them.

These, however, are not the only gifts that God gives us. God also gives us spiritual gifts, and these gifts are the most important way of all that God makes love to us. Paul lists many of these gifts: there is the gift of utterance of wisdom, and the gift of the utterance of knowledge; there is the gift of faith, and the gift of healing. To others are given the gift of miracles, and to yet others the gift of prophetic witness, and the gift of discernment of the spirits that weave in and out of our spirits. Now all these are very special gifts, for as Paul describes them, they are not things, but something more like callings or vocations. They are not laid upon us, they are what we are to do. As Calvin was later to insist, each person, *everybody*, is given a calling, both with respect to all the things that all Christians are to observe and do, and each also has a special calling. Thus with respect to each of these gifts, they are a call to the possessor to do something.

That makes these sorts of gifts special in a very different way than most gifts that we get from lovers. Often the gifts that we get from lovers are things that are just for us, and we can take them into our rooms and admire them for themselves and by ourselves. A couple of years ago, for example, Brenda gave me a set of recordings of the complete works of Bach. For six months I greatly enjoyed them in my car as I drove between the church and home. But spiritual gifts, callings are different, for in giving them God is actually drawing the soul closer to himself.

How? By accepting them and using them as we ought we actually *share* in God's own life. In receiving them and using them, we act like God. James in his epistle which we read this morning makes this point when he says "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..." Which is to say, when we give generously, when we give gifts, well, this generosity is a gift that is given to us from God who is the greatest gift giver of all. Thus any number of the jobs we do in life can be a gift of God to draw us into God's life. In this spirit, one medieval commentator wrote a book showing how all sorts of jobs done by human beings by aiding human welfare, are divine in origin and capable of drawing us into God's life.

Luther had a similar thought. He was once asked why God did not do anything about evil and why the poor and destitute were not cared for. Luther replied that God would indeed do something about evil and God would care for the poor. But, Luther said, God was extending the invitation to us to share in that love. The gifts of a calling are in this way gifts that are meant to draw us into God's own life.

That is something that is not always easy to understand. I used to tell students, that is, prospective pastors, that God had not called them to ministry because they had talents God needed for the church, talents which they tended to overrate anyhow. Nor had, in the first instance, God even called them to save other people. God called them, God gave them a vocation in order to save *them*, and to save them by that vocation. Students often resisted that description; they wanted to see themselves as caring for others first and not themselves. That is a fine way to think for indeed it is by starting to think that way that they would fulfill their vocation. But they also needed to understand that this calling was from God not because he needed their help, because God doesn't. He wants their souls, and it is by the way that they love and serve God and

others that he makes love to them and weds them to himself, and gives them spiritual fecundity.

But it is not just prospective pastors. It is all of us. When Calvin talked about vocations, he wasn't just talking about ministers. He was talking, like Paul and like James, about every spiritual gift that builds up the common good of Christ's church. So he was talking about elders and deacons; he was also talking about musicians and sextons; he was talking about greeters and ushers, and secretaries and Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders. He was talking about committee members. He was, in short, talking about you.

You each have a vocation, and it is God's gift to you. Acting on it is God's way of making love to you to change you and make you share in his life, and to bear his image in light. As we then enter a new program year, as we look to find the common good of the church, let God make love to you, and find out to what he is calling you in the church, for he is calling you. And then love God back, by filling that vocation. And if you do, you will be his, and he will be yours.