

Song of Songs 1:1-2, 15-2:6 Colossians 1:15-20 **"The Wisdom of Original Blessing"**

Reverence for God is the beginning of wisdom, according to the Bible. Such reverence is born out of wonder and the courage to ask the deep questions of life. A boy once came into the kitchen where his mother was preparing supper and asked her one of those deep questions. "Mom," he said, "where did I come from?" The Mom knew that this was it. Her legs went to jelly as she grabbed the counter for support and launched into the answer she had rehearsed long ago. An hour later she finished her explanation of the mysteries of the birds and the bees, before asking. "Any questions?" "I guess not. I was just curious. Jimmy said he came from Washington, DC.

Today we look at a book that asks some of the deep questions of life regarding the created world itself, in the context of sexuality. The book is traditionally known as the Song of Solomon, but more accurately as the Song of Songs, meaning "the best or greatest" of songs. Though parts of the book may date from the days of Solomon in 950 BCE, Persian, Greek, and Aramaic words and phrases point to a third century BCE date. Like many other wisdom writings, the Song of Songs was tied to Solomon, who according to I Kings 4:32 was one of the great founders of the wisdom movement and the writer of 3,000 proverbs and 1005 songs. The book talks about a queen and a king, but this was a typical way of speaking about two lovers, especially during the festivities of an ancient, week-long wedding feast.

The Song of Songs is a collection of 5 love poems, though some put the number at 24 to 30 love poems. The love poems celebrate the pleasure and power of sexual love between an ordinary man and woman. The subject matter of the Song of Songs has made it one of the most neglected, and at times forbidden, books of the Bible. It was accepted into the Hebrew canon late and with some reservations, given its sensual dwelling on sexual love and the physical attractions of the human body. Even more suspect was the book's failure to mention God in its writing.

The book found acceptance though, because it came to be interpreted as an allegorical song about God's intimate relationship with the Jewish people since the Exodus days. Christians have often taken this allegorical method of interpretation, and seen the book as celebrating the intimate relationship between Christ as the bridegroom, and the church as his bride.

These allegorical interpretations of divine and human intimacy may have legitimacy, but in its origins the book is primarily a collection of songs celebrating the passion and pleasure of human intimacy. As such, it has important implications for how we view the created world about us, the world we experience through our bodies and our senses.

One of the more creative thinkers and theologians of the late 20th and 21st centuries has been a former Catholic named Matthew Fox. He was a Dominican priest, once speaking to the 1985 Church of the Brethren Ministers Association at Annual Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. He eventually left the Catholic priesthood, under duress by church authorities, but was later welcomed into the priesthood of the Episcopal Church.

Though branded a heretic by some church authorities, he could well be one of the more important prophets in our modern day world. His ideas are visionary and imaginative, but his basic message is clear. The people of the Bible, and especially Jesus, saw the world as a gift from God, a world that is good, a world that is to be enjoyed, a world that is to be cared for, a world that is the most original blessing of all.

But Matthew Fox pointed out that we in the Western church and Western society have squandered this original blessing. Under the influence of such thinkers as St. Augustine in the 4th and 5th centuries CE, we have formed a faith almost solely around the idea of original sin and our need to be saved. We think that when we are born we are free only to sin, and only in Jesus can we be saved. We have come to see the world as tainted, pleasure as suspect, the senses as misleading, the body as a burden, sexuality as questionable, and ourselves as souls needing to be saved primarily for another heavenly life. Our negative attitude about the created world is revealed in a variety of ways, such as the Catholic church presenting celibacy as the most pure state.

Back in the 16th century, the Catholic Inquisition forbade translating the Song of Songs into Spanish. One poet, Fray Luis de Leon, was put in a prison dungeon for 5 years, simply because he translated this book into the common Spanish language. In recent times, Italian Catholic bishops issued a document telling church followers that remarried divorcees, unmarried couples, and separated Catholics could receive church sacraments, as long as they promised to give up sex.

The implication seems to be that one of the primary reasons for depriving people of communion is misused sexuality, the so-called sins of the flesh. In the church and in the workplace, sex scandals get people canned quicker than anything else. But what about the so-called sins of the spirit, things like pride, greed, jealousy, hatred, gossip, and betrayal? We have an assumed negativism about anything sexual, sensual, or related to the world about us. We fail to see that we can never understand sin, which we assume to be almost solely sensual or fleshy, without properly understanding original blessing. Original blessing means that we find joy, unity, love, intimacy, and God, in and through the world about us.

Sensual experiences, like those described in the Song of Songs, are to be seen as spiritual experiences, experiences flowing out of God. God is in nature, friendship, intimacy, sexuality, dance, music, sports, the arts, camping, work, hospitality, giving

birth, the smells and squeals of babies, walking the streets and roads, sharing a picture or poem, lying in the sun, darkness, crying, suffering, dying, hugging, loving, and simply being alive.

Writer Annie Dillard was once asked how her mind had changed over many years. She wrote, “I know one thing for certain: there is holiness. Maybe there is a divide between people who honor holiness – who bow down before it, who pray on their knees – and people who don’t. The opposite of holiness is selfishness, egotism, pride.”

Traditionally this opposite of holiness has been called sin, which is all that separates us from God, our better selves, others, and the world. Sin separates us from the original blessing of God's world, disconnecting us and preventing us from seeing the holy and embracing others and everything in love. Sin happens when we set ourselves up as the subject, and everyone and everything else as an object, be it God or self or others or the world.

Gifted priest, preacher, and academic Barbara Brown Taylor put it like this, “The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor and everything else as much as we love ourselves – to encounter another human being and the world, not as someone or something you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince, or control, but simply as someone or something who springs you from the prison of yourself.”

Sin is the failure to love, a shortcut to love. This is what Adam and Eve are portrayed doing long ago when they saw themselves as the main subject and God as an object to be disobeyed. This is what Cain did with Abel, treating his brother as an object to be killed. This is what the people of Babel did when they set themselves up as the main subject and the world as object to be built upon and escaped from into the heavens above.

Today, we often follow these ancient examples. We treat God as an object, wondering what the divine can do for us. We treat people as objects, whether they be parents, spouses, children, relatives, co-workers, church members, ethnic minorities, those of different sexual orientation, people of another political party, people of other countries, enemies, those outside our group or tribe. We forget, ignore, compete with, take advantage of, abuse, even kill other people. We treat the creatures of the world as objects to be used and abused at our whim. We pride ourselves as people of the world, materialists and sensualists, not realizing we are only falsely worldly, materialist, and sensual. Simply indulging in all we can get of material things, sensual things doesn't guarantee real enjoyment.

I think of Rocket, who was the resident cat of the Agecroft Manor house museum till his recent death at age 14, described by *Richmond Times Dispatch* writer Bill Lohman in a recent article. Rocket was born to a feral mother, adopted by a family for a year and a

half, before they had to give him up because of a move. He was taken in by the manager of tour services at Agecroft, but the other cats in the family made life tough for him. Then the tour manager heard that cats were needed to control the mice at Agecroft, so Rocket was volunteered, though he turned out to be scared to death of the job. After one week he disappeared, but 3 months later was found emaciated, and nursed back to health by Agecroft staff. He hung out with one staff person particularly, a woman named Susan Edwards, even staying where she left him or coming when she called if he relocated. He would charm visitors, and became a star on Facebook and Instagram by rubbing up against legs, posing for pictures, riding in the laps of staff workers on utility vehicles, hopping from one freshly dug flower hole to another, sunbathing, and simply lazing in the shade.

Though Susan Edwards was a dog person, she found her heart expanded by Rocket to include cats. She summed up the cat called "The Lord of the Manor," with these words, "Rocket showed me love, true devotion, acceptance, and contentment, living beautifully in the moment. He lived a life of complete forgiveness of any slights he had to endure. He never showed he focused on the negative, only the positive that is all around us. Rocket made the best of each moment given."

This "Lord of the Manor" cat treated others as subjects, not mere objects, pointing to the enjoyment, and true celebration that comes when we reverence and show gratitude for even one creature of God's original blessing.

The Song of Songs, a book that begins with the Hebrew word for "kiss," tells us that we are called to celebrate the original blessing of our created world, a world that comes through other creatures, other people, our senses, our bodies, and our sexuality, if enjoyed properly. The Song of Songs, as one of my seminary professors pointed out many years ago, reveals that the Jewish religion was and is one of the most joyful, sensual, and materialistic religions on the face of the earth. The Hebrew word for "rejoice" means "to dance with the body."

The Christian faith echoes this joy. It talks about incarnation, God being "enfleshed" or "incarnated" in Jesus, in the material, sensual body of a human being. This is something we celebrate at Advent, the story of a couple's long journey, the sounds of a clopping donkey, an inn with no room, the sensual birth of a baby in a manger, the pains of a mother, animals and manure, shepherds and the commonness of peasant life in an ancient world. But the Christian faith proclaims more, for in the words of Colossians 1:15-17, Jesus is imaged as the visible, material, sensual likeness of the invisible God. God's plan is to reveal that the divine is present not only in Jesus, but in all humans, in all the world, in the original blessing of the entire universe. The kingdom of God, in the words of Catholic theologian Hans Kung, is nothing else but "creation healed," creation

made whole in eternal love. Creation has been whole from its origins, but we humans have decimated it with our delusions and greed.

The words of American author and environmental activist Edward Abbey are telling. “How strange and wonderful is our home, our earth, with its swirling vaporous atmosphere, its flowing and frozen liquids, the croaking things with wings that hang on rocks, and soar through fog, the furry grass, the scaly seas . . . how utterly rich and wild . . . Yet some among us have the nerve, the insolence, the brass, the gall to whine about the limitations of our earthbound fate, and yearn for some more perfect world beyond the sky. We are none of us good enough for the world we have.”

In these days of advent, let us focus once again on the eternal love incarnated in Jesus, incarnated in everything that is, in the original blessing. Let us receive the wisdom of the Song of Songs, properly experiencing God in all that is within us, and in all that is about us, and in all that is beyond us. Let us wisely learn to love each other and the world, with a more intimate sensuality, which is really what creates a more passionate spirituality.