

Sermon 4 - "The Wisdom of Intimacy"  
Song of Songs 1:1-3 4:1, 9-10 5:10-16

Though the beginning of wisdom is reverence for the Lord, according to the Bible, we often reverence everything but God. Taylor Swift, Beyonce, Patrick Mahomes, Steph Curry, some other celebrity or sports hero. We are like the lady who encountered actor Robert Redford in a Santa Fe, New Mexico ice cream parlor. He was between movie takes. She was determined to stay cool, and pretended to ignore the presence of the movie star. But after leaving the shop, she realized she did not have the ice cream cone she had bought and paid for. Returning to the shop, she asked for her ice cream cone. Overhearing the conversation, Robert Redford said, "Madam, you'll probably find it where you put it - - in your purse."

Reverence is a strange thing and can do strange things to us. Reverence for the original blessing of God's creation should include reverence for the gift of human intimacy, at least according to the Old Testament book called the Song of Songs. In our busy world, intimacy is often lacking. The enormous communications industry of our day, through internet, social media, newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio, puts out an enormous amount of words and images. The industry thinks such communication will bring us together and solve our problems. But all the words and images often lack intimacy, and even when we do find out what a person has to say, we often like that person less, whether politician, family member, or preacher. We seem to be growing apart, and more lonely all the time.

Some years ago, award winning journalist Bill Bishop wrote a book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. In the book he tries to tell the story of why America is so culturally and politically divided.

Beyond our individualism and separations, we have spent decades sorting ourselves into like-minded communities, not by region or state, but by narrower and narrower groups, neighborhoods and cities. We choose communities and media compatible with our lifestyles and beliefs, becoming so ideologically inbred that we don't know and can't understand those who live a few miles away, even a few doors down. We long for deeper connection, but seem to be finding it with fewer and fewer people, even those within our own family circles.

Intimacy is something longed for by many, but so hard to find and experience. Recent observers of human behavior have identified at least 3 styles of human intimacy. One style is 1. *avoidant* intimacy. People with this style, about 30%, would rather do anything but talk about feelings. They would rather not depend on others or have others depend on them. They escape by watching others, reading about others, observing sports or events where others perform, checking in on others through social media. They are fiercely independent, and live with an emotional shield between themselves and others. Often these people come out of a family who treated them with some cold rejection. I have tendencies toward this style.

A second style is 2. *anxious* intimacy, encompassing about 20% of Americans. People of this style want closeness with others, but find others reluctant to get close to them. This makes them jittery, anxious, jealous, demanding of attention, prone to feel unloved, inappropriate in requests. Often these people come out of a family where parents treated them with inconsistency.

A third style is 3. *secure* intimacy, comprising the remaining 50% of Americans. People with this style feel safe with others, are willing to be close, to trust without fear of being hurt. They may have different interests than others, but draw others to themselves because they exhibit respect. They are able to talk about anything with anyone, even those outside their sort. Usually these people come out of a family where the parents showed consistent warmth and attention.

The third style of intimacy, secure intimacy, seems to be the kind of intimacy described in the Song of Songs. Amid the 5 love poems of the book, the man and the woman celebrate, not merely sexual love, but a deep, passionate intimacy of soul. This intimacy has at least 4 basic characteristics.

4. The intimacy of the Song of Songs is marked first by *permanence*. Note the phrase that appears several times in the book, the phrase "your love is better than wine." Down through human history, wine has been associated with social expression. Wine or some other alcohol supposedly lifts people from isolation into shared fellowship. It helps people from keeping everything within, from dwelling to much on the self and their own feelings of inadequacy. As a "yes" drug, it releases guilt and inhibitions. But alcohol's intimacy is usually superficial and temporary. Love's intimacy goes so much deeper. Love's intimacy leads to loyalty, commitment, long-term relationship, and permanence, being there for another, seeing another through when all others think they are through.

Preacher and storyteller Tex Sample tells of the time he and his wife returned from an after the midnight party on a sub-zero night. He immediately fell into a deep sleep under bone-warming covers, only to be awakened by his wife puking in the bath room. He wanted to sleep and stay under the covers, remembering the words of a psychologist "I'm not in this

world to live up to your expectations and you're not in this world to live up to mine, but if we find each other it's beautiful." But he knew the expectations both he and his wife had to be there for each other, for better for worse, permanently. He managed to jump out of bed, hold a wet washrag, mumble futile words of comfort, and to offer sleepy pats on the least engaged part of her puking body. Between heaves she apologized for waking him up.

Then in his own words, "For some strange reason, in those moments, I remembered the day we met and her laughing at my bad jokes. Now, with both of us half naked - - she on her knees and me on my butt - - I knew I was engaged in the school for learning intimacy. In moments like these eros becomes not sexual passion but agape, an empathic feeling for her. Between the violent disgorgements, she reached over to hold my hand, and I realized I would rather offer her wet washrags sitting around the toilet than drink wine and dance the cotillion ball with anyone else. In even wretched moments like these you find yourself participating in a Gift."

5. The intimacy of Song of Songs is marked, not just by *permanence*, but by the *personal*. The book begins with words about kissing. "Your lips cover me with kisses; your love is better than wine. There is a fragrance about you; the sound of your name recalls it." (Song of Songs 1:2-3) Other translations read, "Your name is oil poured out." In Hebrew, the words for "name" and "oil" sound alike. A name, representing another's being in sound, affects the ears, as the fragrance of perfume-like oil affects the nose. The sound and smell of a name is not just the sound and smell of any name. It is the sound and smell of a particular named person. As long as we are taught and addressed in mass, our name never falls upon us with the power that heals our wounds, lifts our hearts, and enables us to walk and rise. Only in intimacy, when the name is spoken in love, does the power of the name bless and heal.

6. The intimacy of the Song of Songs is marked, not only by permanence, not only by the personal, but also by *pain*. Note the places in the book where longing, tension, difficulty, delayed fulfillment, pain, are involved in the man and woman seeking each other.

In chapter 5, the man knocks, but it takes effort for the woman to get up, to get dressed, and to answer the door. When she does, the man is gone. She goes searching for him in the night, and is beaten by sentries on the street. But she continues the search. Intimacy is always searching for the heart and love of another, even amid pain, difficulty, and dark nights of the soul.

My wife and I have been fans of the British TV series *Doc Martin*. It is the story of a doctor who has no people skills at all, in part because he was raised by parents who didn't want him. He bluntly tells people to stop talking, calls them idiots and imbeciles, but is a brilliant doctor, with a blood phobia that causes him to throw up or pass out. So he ends up, not in London as a precocious skilled surgeon as most of his educators thought he would be, but in a small seaside village as a general practice doctor, treating and saving the lives of quirky characters. But somehow *Song of Songs* happens to him. He falls in love with a village school teacher. On their first kiss in a car, he indicates her oral hygiene needs improvement, getting him booted out of the car onto the road. Eventually though he marries her, and together they endure great pain, turmoil, separations, counseling, and the birth of two children.

But after one supposedly final separation, with him projected to leave and take a job in London, he saves the life of a husband whose wife took the doctor hostage at gun point, forcing an improvised medical procedure on a hillside. Afterwards, Doc Martin sits with his estranged wife on the

hillside. The *Song of Songs* conversation goes like this. She says, "Well done. You saved his life." "It was an unusual situation," he responds. "But it's all unusual. You know, I think I made a terrible mistake. I think maybe, I'm a bit obsessed with everyone having to be normal. People aren't, are they?" "No." "I'm not. You're not, are you? Your unusual." "Yes."

"Everyone said you had left me for London. But I knew you would never let me down. I just knew you wouldn't. I knew it in my heart. You're the only person who has never let me down." And he responds, "I am never going to change the way I feel about you. I've tried." "I don't want that," she says. "I tried, but it just made everything worse." She says, "Can we go home now?" And they kiss, revealing the series as a modern day Song of Songs love story, with all the pain and reality that every such a story involves. It is the story of the gospel. I'm abnormal. You abnormal. We are each one unusual, saved in love, the love exemplified in Jesus.

The gospel story, the Doc's story, and our stories call to mind the words of famed spiritual writer and Catholic theologian 7. Henry Nouwen. He said, "In our woundedness, we become sources of life for others. Nobody escapes woundedness. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, 'how can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed but 'how can we put our woundedness in service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."

8. The intimacy of the Song of Songs is marked, not only by permanence, not only by the personal, not only by pain, but also by *passion*. Such passion goes beyond communication, and ends up in deep communion. Communication involves

words used to sell things, to ask for a dish on the table, to direct traffic, or to teach algebra. But communion involves words that tell stories, that nurture, that develop trust, that help create love, that forgive, that share the depths of soul.

A pastor tells how he used to take his young daughter with him to visit nursing homes. He observed that she was more valuable than any Bible reading and his prayers. Residents brightened immediately when she entered a room, delighted in her smiles, touched her skin, and stroked her hair. One resident, in the advanced stages of dementia, told the daughter a story from childhood. When she finished, the woman told the story again and again and again. Finally the pastor ended the visit for fear his daughter was uncomfortable. On the way home, he commended her for patience and attentiveness, reminding her that the woman's mind was not working the way it was supposed to. "Oh, I knew that Daddy. She wasn't telling me anything. She was telling me who she is." This daughter knew the power of communion through the passion of intimacy.

It should not surprise us that the Song of Songs, a book describing intimacy between a man and a woman, has been used metaphorically to describe intimacy with God and Jesus. It was Jesus who told us to love our neighbor as ourself. This is the second commandment. But the first commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength. This is the commandment to intimacy with the Divine.

12<sup>th</sup> century Catholic monk of the French church, Bernard of Clairvaux, in trying to help his people fulfill this commandment, preached 86 sermons on the Song of Songs, and barely got beyond chapter 2. Intimacy with God involves the same characteristics as the intimacy between the man and the woman of the Song of Songs.

Intimacy with God involves permanence. We make a permanent covenant, a commitment, a continual "yes," offering the essence of all we are to God, even as God offers the Divine self to us.

Intimacy with God involves the personal. Whatever else we believe about God, we believe God is somehow relational, personal. Metaphorically, we can believe that God speaks our name, and invites us to intimately address the Divine as abba, daddy, father. Intimacy with God involves pain. There is always, in the life of faith, the dark night of the soul, times of absence, questions, seeking, yearning, finding, and sacrificing. But intimacy with God, above all, involves passion, communion, trust, forgiveness, sharing one's soul, deep love making, abandonment.

Is this not one of the meanings of the communion ritual we often share? When we repeat the simple words of Jesus, "This is my body, this is my blood," these words do not merely describe. They reveal, point, reach, embrace, make us intimate in the passion of deep communion with the God we love through Jesus. These words reach back to the Jewish Passover, which is the feast at which the Song of Songs was and is still read. In a world where there is so much persistent sin, separation, big sorting, violence, lack of peace, let us be the people who experience and witness to intimacy, not only with one another, but most of all with the one we call God.