

Sermon preached August 30, 2015
Year B, Proper 17
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

During my sophomore year of high school I had an exchange of letters with my aunt and uncle and secured for myself a summer job on their ranch in Montana. There they ran a camp for teenagers. I would be the dishwasher. So that summer I washed dishes by hand for about 20 people six days a week. On my day off I would often saddle up a horse and go riding over the gorgeous landscape, or hike along the many trails, or go fly fishing, or any number of lovely activities.

But one of the greatest events was when the whole camp gathered up

their sleeping bags and went out to a bluff overlooking the Smith River Valley. We spent the night outside. With no electric lights for 50 miles, the stars were amazing! They were so rich and deep that you felt you could fall into them, and so close it was if you could touch them. We were awestruck. It was as holy and Godly an experience as I've ever had in church.

The reading this morning from the Song of Solomon is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible and is often used as the reading for weddings. But it is out of a book which is also one of the most controversial in the Bible. There were great debates by the ancient Israelites about whether the Song of Solomon should be included in the Old Testament, as well as debates by early Christian leaders whether it should be included in the final canon of our Bible.

It is a provocative book because it deals so openly with romantic love and sex. In fact, the book as a whole is downright erotic. The story is a

back and forth between a man and a woman who are deeply in love and about to be married. It is a beautiful poem in which they speak of their love for one another and describe the beauty of each other. Some of the passages not included in today's reading are quite explicit. Interestingly, it is also the only book in the Bible that doesn't mention God.

At one point the bride describes the groom by saying, "My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand... His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh... His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend" [Song 5:10, 13, 15b-16a].

One of the most unusual lines in the book is when the groom says to the bride, "I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots" [Song 1:9]. Now, frankly, this doesn't sound like

much of a compliment. Who wants to be compared to a horse?! But the bride knows the back story, which is that ancient Egyptians only used stallions to pull their chariots. If an enemy wanted to create confusion among the Egyptian army, they would let loose a mare in heat among the chariots. It would get the stallions all riled up. The bride is being compared to this mare. She is a woman who turns men's heads.¹

The Song of Solomon, along with Proverbs, the Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes is part of what is called the “Wisdom Literature” of the Bible. Wisdom Literature in the Ancient Near East “is characterized by sayings of wisdom intended to teach about divinity and about virtue. The key principle of wisdom literature is that while techniques of traditional story-telling are used, books also presume to offer insight and wisdom about nature and reality.”² So this book has always been understood as a story which is meant to convey an

¹ <http://www.songofsolomonstudy.com/1447/if-your-guy-compared-you-to-a-mare-would-you-think-it-was-a-compliment/>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom_literature

important message, but what message? What do you do with a religious book that is less like The Pilgrim Progress and more like 50 Shades of Gray?

Because of the very earthy and graphic nature of some of the passages, Biblical interpreters have been unsure how to handle this book. Most have chosen to “spiritualize” it. Ancient Israelites said the book was an allegory for God’s love for his chosen people Israel. Christians have often interpreted the book as an allegory for Christ’s love for the Church. In recent years, however, there has been a move to accept the book as it is written.

To hear the words of love as a joyful affirmation, by God, of our bodily existence. We are not merely spiritual beings, but also earthly physical beings, and that is a good thing! God himself didn’t remain purely spiritual, but took on a human earthly form as Jesus. It has been noted that the entire book takes place in a garden and some have suggested that this is an allusion to the Garden of Eden. A time when

humanity was in harmony with each other, with flora, fauna, the earth, and God. A time when our spiritual and physical selves were in balance, and love prevailed among all creation.

Too often when people think of church they think of that old Saturday Night Live character, the “Church Lady.” She was prim and proper, judgmental and sour. Her only pleasure was in removing joy from the lives of others. Church is portrayed as a place of mindless, judgmental people living dull lives, out of which all joy has been stripped.

This is unfortunately how many people still see the church. But the Song of Solomon stands in stark contrast to this vision! This is a lively, juicy book which revels in our physicality and shows, when undergirded with respect and love, our physical selves to be a wonderful gift of God! Being religious is not about quietly sitting on your knees in prayer 24/7. Being a Christian is not about self-flagellation and waiting to go to heaven. We were given a full set of

experiences by God: spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical, and we use them, every one of them, for love and goodness for ourselves and others. And this physical use is not only for sex, but for sports, and laughter, and tears, and running, and dancing, and hugs for children, and feeding the hungry, and jumping for joy on a sunny day just because it feels good! The Song of Solomon affirms our physicality as a great gift from God.

But more than being simply a gift for goodness, the physical is also a way to know and grow in the spiritual. The physical is not separate from, or in opposition to the spiritual, but rather integral to our spiritual lives. Science affirms that matter is just another form of energy. $E=MC^2$. The priest, scientist, and theologian Teilhard de Chardon once said that “Matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen.” I believe that when I experienced those stars in Montana, God was revealed to me in them. When we create a painting, or a song, or a

cake, or a thought, we are using and forming the physical to express the Divine. We learn and grow in our spiritual lives not just by prayer, but by life. We learn trust as children from our parents. We grow wise by overcoming challenges. We learn love from giving and receiving from other physical beings. We learn compassion from suffering. Our physical existence is both a gift and a school.

Richard Rohr says, “If God became flesh and entered this world in Jesus, then the hiding place of God is this world, in the material, in the animals, in the elements, in the physical. These are the hiding places--and the revelation places--of God!”

Let us remember with joy and gratitude all our gifts from the Creator, and today with special thanks for our physical existence.

Amen.