

Sermon – Come with me¹
St. Clare's Church
September 2, 2018
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 17

Song of Solomon 2:8-17 (*note the 4 additional verses plz!*)

Psalms 45:1-2, 7-10

James 1:17-27 (10:00 am service only)

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Dedication verse of prayer:

"He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."² Amen.

"Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come"

Oh, to write such words as these. ...

As some of you know I teach information science in the context of disasters and management. It is not yet been two years at the university. I began as a young theologian; an

¹ A page of poems and writings I considered while writing this reflection, may be found on my poetry Blog, here: <http://poetryworkbook.blogspot.com/2018/09/poems-for-sundays.html> and in the footnotes of this document.

² Ecclesiastes 3:11, *New International Version* (NIV)
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes+3%3A11&version=NIV>

unlikely beginning for what followed. For 40 years, I was immersed in the practice of technology, and the last 17 of those working for humanitarian organizations. But for over 50 years I've also been a writer, ever since an 8th grade English teacher said, "we are now going to write poems," and we were terrified.

So, I approach the poetry of our text from a variety of perspectives, but perhaps most as a graying poet among the faithful.

1) The call of lovers

The Song of Solomon or Song of Songs is often read at weddings. It is foremost about the passion of lovers, and it's in a sacred text. What's not to like?

Since God, religion and ethics are not mentioned, its position in the Jewish canon was disputed for many years, until settled in the 1st century. It was then that the religious meaning became an allegory of the love of God for his people, Israel, that was read during Passover, in the springtime. The Christians adopted the allegory but saw it as the love of Christ for His Church.³

Well, doesn't that just get your blood pumping?

The poet and scholar, Edward Hirsch, says this is the "greatest love poem ever written" filled with "extravagant comparisons."⁴ I love the richness in the phrase "extravagant comparisons."

Sometimes we grasp at such comparisons to the world around us to speak of things ineffable –of love and the holy. But it is also the reality that it is familiar, it is near, woven into

³ *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 1971, p. 324f

⁴ Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem, and Fall in Love with Poetry*, 1999, p. 108.

our reality as the God who comes to us. The poet-writer of the Song of Songs gathers all that is within her reach to describe the natural joy of love.

If you ask an eight-year-old child to count the animals in the poem they may find five, and the older child may name the five flora and the five landscapes. There is song, and the voice of birds; the fragrance of blossoms.

(I want to pause here and pay homage to the tapestries that now grace and frame the cross at St. Clare's; here there are trees, valleys, fruit and flowers, just as are in the poem. If ever a poem and a work of art sang harmony, it is today's text and these tapestries.)

The poem is steeped in the familiar. We are immersed in the senses. It is almost as if the author is seeking to bring all that is about, that is before us, to the task of comparing, of metaphor,

One of the games I'd play with my son is stretching my arms out and saying, "I love you this much." To which he'd point to the ceiling and say, "I love you that much" "I love you more than the whole world," I'd expand; and he'd reply, "I love you to the moon and back." You get the picture. Each time, we'd try to reach further to describe how big our love is. I sometimes wonder if God was doing some of that when, with the creative expansiveness of the universe, He said, "Let there be light!"

The poet speaks like this. "Come away with me," beyond all the things you see living and not. He speaks of love in all these familiar nouns, *and* more than them. Love is at the same time the great "Other," beyond; and the One who is familiar, near. We are called to both. How can we speak of such things without metaphors, of things familiar?

I often write poems in cards I give to Shirley. They start with a painting or photo on the cover. For one of our wedding poems, the painting on the card was by Lynn Tait, of two chairs

outside an old farmhouse with blue shutters, from a place in Greece near where we honeymooned. The chairs have become a metaphor for how we connect with each other. Allow the common elements to speak...

Two Chairs⁵

*We may look at these two chairs
that face us as empty,
sitting outside this rugged house
with the closed blue shutter
and stucco falling from the field stone,
but I see all the conversations
that have not yet happened,
the laughter that has not yet
rung out across this path,
the glance that comes
before the kiss;
what has been behind this window
tied shut with a bit of straw
has been,
and what is yet to come
cannot be kept within these walls;
come sit with me*

⁵ Lynn Tait, "Santorini, Two Chairs", The Lynn Tait Gallery, Essex, UK, 2010; poem by EG Happ, 18 Dec 13; the artist's photo is here: <http://www.thelynntaitgallery.com/card-detailed.asp?cardid=239&RangeID=27>

and start a story
as if it were tomorrow,
and I will dream with you.

2) The call of God

What if *God* were speaking in the Song of Songs. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." This is the call of the lover that is also the call of God. How do we approach such words?

M. Scott Peck talks about the God who pursues us as a lover; like the famous poem the *Hound of Heaven*, "He chases us with a vigor that is matched only by the vigor with which we may flee from Him."⁶ A God who *chases us*!

There is a wonderful scene in Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, where Jesus is calling one of the disciples to follow him, and the reaction is not one of adulation but of frustration and exasperation... "What does he expect me to do?"⁷ Yet still Jesus pursues him...

Again we hear, "Come away with me."

Is this not His call to us also? ...But here is the paradox, we are called to action *in* the world. In the here and now. This is the familiar context of the poem; Christ's love is compared to the flowers, fig tree, vines in blossom, lilies-- all of the things that are near to us. This is not a call to flee, but to be *fully present*.

My mother sends me a birthday card each year where she underlines some words in the card, sometimes three times, with exclamation points, to add her emphasis. I am grateful she read the card that closely. It is a bit more personal, and I look forward to receiving it.

⁶ M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, 1993, pp. 230-231.

⁷ Franco Zeffirelli, *Jesus of Nazareth*, TV Mini-Series (1977), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075520/>

I sometimes wish the Bible's authors would underline a word or two. What does it mean? Or are we called, like the lovers in the Song of Songs, to just let it be, let it wash over us and simply ask what comes to me in this poem?

3) The call to home

If this poem is about the lovers and about God's love for us, is also a call to home. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away"

Coming home has many meanings, for lovers, for family reunions, for pilgrimages. Ultimately it is about the end of time as we know it. We say "he was called home" when a loved one dies. It's a euphemism, indeed; but it also reflects the deeper meaning in the poem.

A group of my students are studying how refugees communicate and use the Internet. We have spent much time talking about what it must be like to be a refugee. What information we would hunger for if we were a refugee. On a deeper level, we may think "this could be us." And we would be right. We are all refugees in a very real sense, and we long to be home. It was Pascal who said "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each [of us],"⁸ one that can only be satisfied by our Creator. The One who calls us home.

All this has hope and possibility with the art of poetry. Sometimes intended, sometimes appropriated, but here we are; we come with the expectation that God will call and we will hear his voice, *now*, with our loved ones, and in the poetry of the words and blessings we say and sing as we worship this day.

⁸ Blaise Pascal, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/801132-there-is-a-god-shaped-vacuum-in-the-heart-of-each>

This is the mystery of the Song of Songs: The One who calls us home is the One who pursues us here and now, like a lover who yearns for her mate.

May it be so for each of us.

The priest, who assisted at our wedding, always ends with this blessing, which is always a joyful reminder:

“Life is short.

We don't have much time to gladden the hearts

of those who walk this way with us.

So, be swift to love

and make haste to be kind.”⁹

Amen.

⁹ Henri-Frederic Amiel Quotes, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1040289.Henri_Fr_d_ric_Amiel and see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri-Fr%C3%A9d%C3%A9ric_Amiel