

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Twentieth-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 3, 2006

Reflection:

“It is only when we have the courage to face things exactly as they are, without any self-deception or illusion, that a light will develop out of events, by which the path to success may be recognized.”

- I *Ching*, Hexagram 5, Hsü, Waiting (Nourishment)

Readings: Song of Solomon 2: 8 - 13
Mark 7: 1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 - 23

Hymns: Hymn #304 There is a Balm in Gilead
 Hymn #507 I Come with Joy
 Hymn #435 We Are All One in Mission

Gazelles in the Window
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Shir HaShirim - that is the ***Song of Solomon*** or ***Song of Songs*** is a book of the Tanakh or Old Testament—one of the five *megillot* or scrolls of the third major section of the Hebrew Bible called the *Ketuvim* , “The Writings,” or the Hagiagrapha. It follows the Torah or teachings and the Nevi'im or Prophets.

The Five Scrolls - the Hamesh Megillot are:

1. The Song of Songs
2. Book of Ruth
3. Lamentations
4. Ecclesiastes
5. Book of Esther

As you might have been able to tell from this morning and previous readings, *Song of Songs* consists of a cycle of poems about erotic love, largely in the form of a dialogue between a bridegroom and a bride.

Interestingly, It is not quoted by any of the New Testament writers, but our own Martin Luther has called this book “das Hohelied” that is the “holiest of songs.”

Maybe our denominational origin had a little more life to it than we sometimes suppose!

It is unclear whether this text was “of” Solomon – written by him; or “for” Solomon. Some believe it was written by the men of Chizkiah, a king of Judah, and composed by David for his son.

Other traditions suggest that Solomon was actually responsible for writing this and two other books in the Hamesh Megillot: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

What is clear is that the text is all about love – love on many levels.

Knowing that David may have had a hand in this or that it is even attributed to him, suggests that the references to *eros* are accurate. Additionally, the presence of the text in the Tanakh and the familiar bride and groom theme – affirm the allegorical component of the writings (hagiographia) for a nation often effusively in love with God.

It feels like a love song, doesn't it?

I tend to veer away from Rome on most occasions, but ...

Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love) from July of this year refers to the Song of Songs in both its literal and allegorical meaning,

stating that erotic love (eros) and self-donating love (agape) is shown here as the two halves of true love, which is both giving and receiving.

True love: both giving and receiving...the eros and the agape.

The eros is certainly in the text, emerging in rising and falling crescendos, as much as any symphony. This is a celebration of the wonder and allure of eros.

- My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh, that lies between my breasts (1:13)
- I will hie me to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense (4:6)
- Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountain of spices (8:14)

And those are some of the milder texts!

A gathering of us were able to attend an adult ed presentation of Jenna Tiitsman's workshop S.O.N.G – Sexuality our Needed Gift, earlier in the year.

I'm not sure if the acronym S.O.N.G. was a reference to *Canticum Canticorum*, but part of the workshop invited folks to explore their attitude and response to themselves as sexual beings and what that meant.

Now, if you were brought up in any way similar to me, all of this talk of physical love and sexuality and eros was rarely a family topic. When it did somehow get into a public setting (let alone a church) – there would suddenly be generated – somewhere about here – an “*uneasy feeling*.”

If the conversation continued for more than a moment or two, the tension would begin to increase, with eyes starting to close or “wince,” and a shifting about in an unsettling sort of way, as the cells of the body rushed toward to center, trying to escape the language that was triggering “flee” responses!

I think that the writers of ancient times were just as familiar as modern authors with this potential effect of the written, read, spoken, and heard word. In other words, it was written for effect then – just as it is now!

Still, some of this we just want to say, “OK, that’s really more than I need to know, Can we move on? Geez, what do you need to talk about all this for. We get it. Let’s move on.”

Gazelles in the window. Peering in through the lattice and curtains moved about by gentle breezes on their way to beauty, love, eros.

OK - today, the idea of anyone peering in through a window is cause for alarm – and reports of gazelles doing such a thing would likely be a call for treatment.

Yet, for a minute, let’s just breathe and remember –

All of us have admired and, I hope, will continue to admire beauty in its myriad forms. I think, too, that all of us have thanked God for the loving presence of another, self-forgetting ourselves in the process. And, everyone here, I know this, has been moved to action by compassion for another. Eros, agape, and the *philia* of “sisterly/brotherly” love.

I think love is always a response: a Song of Songs, a love song, a painting, sonnet, an outstretched hand, an embrace, a smile, a tear, a longing – a sense of the presence of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit. And, I might add to Benedict’s words that true love comes together as a triad of *philia*, agape, and eros – full of life, spirit: of God.

While physical intimacy (oops there he goes again!) may be a part of this combination, it is not required – not required to be in the fullness and presence of this kind of love. In the presence of this kind of love **nothing** is missing.

This is the heart-racing, shortened breath, somewhat faint stuff of awe and presence. While it can happen in the company of others, it is most powerful when we come to know it ourselves in the loving presence of God – just as being: “Be still and know I am God.”

This is about a love affair between a people and their God. It is the cycle completed, unbroken, finally home.

I feel it here all the time. I am repeating this story for some, but I remember the first time I offered Communion here. It was startling, in its own way. I was struck by this feeling of awe. Here I was, holding the bread and offering it to you, you taking a piece, dipping it in the fruit of the vine. I was so engaged, engrossed, overwhelmed, overcome – over... I don't know! It was funny, I so lost track of time and space that later someone had to gently and kindly remind me to offer the words the Body of Christ as we both touched the same bread in the presence of this community in communion!

After that first experience, I was talking with my friend Susan, who preached here last week. I was trying to describe the experience, experiencing the inadequacy of words to articulate what I had felt. I could hear her smiling over the phone as she said, “You were in a place of real intimacy and love with the congregation and God. Amazing, isn't it?!” Yes, that was it. And yes, it was and continue to be amazing and awesome.

In a few minutes, we will again be entering that sacred space with one another. I could feel the trembling beginning, even as I wrote these words preparing for this morning.

As we prepare for coming to the table, I can't help thinking that this is what some of Mark's writings this morning are pointing to. Here were Jesus and his disciples

being criticized by the scribal elders for not following the ritual of hand-washing before eating. Could you see Jesus sort of responding with, “What?! “

Shaking his head incredulously. “What are you talking about? Do you know these men and women, their faithfulness, their stories? Have you lived with them over the last few years, seen them struggle and grow? Do you know their love for God and one another? Can you feel God’s love for them? Are you going to stand there and use your power and privilege to demean these faithful – because you can and it elevates you? I don’t think so!”

Jesus was not about to fall victim to those who sharpen their mind by narrowing it. Instead, he calls on the prophet Isaiah:

“The people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

“In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Wash your hearts, he might have said – before worrying about us washing our hands.

Now, the Pharisees and those who practiced some of these newer traditions weren’t wrong because they adhered to or even gained meaning from the traditions. What was wrong was that they judged others wrong: wrong by appearance and behavior – wrong because they were different, wrong because it made the Pharisees feel right and righteous, wrong because it missed the heart of the matter: that is – they missed the language of the heart itself.

You abandon the commandment of God: To love your God with all your heart...
To love you neighbor...

Don't replace commandments of God's with those of you own and expect me to be quiet.

Power. Dominance. Oppression. Marginalization. Vs. Love and the Heart. Any wonder we follow Jesus? Any wonder why we need to remember what he taught?

The writers of this morning's readings knew this. They knew it's always been about heart and love and love and heart. The love of eros, agape, philia – David, Solomon, Chizkiah, Ruth, Mary, Esther – you and I. All of it.

It's the love of God: that's who we are. We are of and for love.

Whatever takes us away from seeing love as less than this –that is defiling, judgmental, and antithetical to the heart that beats with the rhythm of God's creation and breath.

As we come to the table this morning, let us enter into that intimate and loving space with all our love and beating, racing hearts, open to the presence of God like lovers and the brides and bridegrooms of ancient and present times. For make no mistake about it, this is a love affair: gazelles and all.