

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Palisades, New York

*The touch of gentleness...*  
©2008 Ray Bagnuolo

---

Lectionary Readings:  
Song of Songs 2:8-13  
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

One of the meanings of “gentleness” has to do with the property of a slope being very gentle. Nothing too hard, too fast, or too steep. The sort of slope that you roll down when you are a kid, or maybe a bit older than a kid.

Sometimes, out of nowhere, this kind of gentleness emerges – usually in such contrast to everything else that it gives us pause.

When that happens, I often find myself slowed down, breathing again – caught off guard by the gentle fragrance of flowers, the calmness of the water that always draws me in, or the touch of the breeze, the sun, or the held-hand of a close friend.

Like the pauses in the crescendos and decrescendos of the symphony of life, the “suspension” can bring great meaning to our relationship with wonder; accented by the realization that “the mystery of more” – has us, again; calls us, once more, its own in some remarkable, tantalizing way.

It manages to get past our defenses, those protective coverings that we use to help us make it through each day. Gentleness likes this slips in, nonetheless, and just touches us – compels us into a state of pausing, reflecting, gentleness – proving once again that we are more than our thoughts or of our own design. It’s wonderful, unnerving (which is good, in this way) and can sometimes, wonderfully, be a bit overwhelming.

True, we have gotten smart enough in our understanding of the human physiological responses to stimulus, endorphin production, and all that to analyze this a bit... but we really have little idea of what it is that causes all this rush of the senses to be set into motion, startling and awakening, and even a bit awkward, at times.

Maybe you know similar awkward time...

It used to happen more often, now, once in a while, but I used to meet people in whom I was very interested, you know, the “spark” was there and somehow I

wanted to make sure I would make the best of impressions? And what would happen? I have no idea, but the mouth and the brain got all jumbled and I would talk as if I were speaking in tongues. I would become giddy, my words void of all syntax - globbly, and then I would blush... Oh my, I would blush, blush, blush...and make an absolute fool of myself. I was told it was “sort of” (emphasis on “sort of”) cute.

It was a great and silly and wondrous feeling...a way of the human being – being human in the whimsical on overload! It still lifts me up and makes me smile even now...and

there is some of that same energy for in this morning’s first reading, although we are reading words from a poet of the first class, touching more the emotion than the meanings, the rhythm and beat of the heart, and not losing his or her tongue in the process.

*The voice of my beloved comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over hills!*

That’s what I would try to say! And out would come out, well I already told you...

Truly the imagery in this brief reading is filled with the most marvelous of wonders and the pause of gentleness that arises when the heart falls in love. It is, some say, just that – a poem to the energy and uplifting nature of love, an allegory of love in human terms that reflects the fertility myths of long ago, when gods would come together in great loving ways and the fruit of their union would produce the seasons and harvest that follow. It is what brought humans and nature together into one broad and elaborate design: woven into heights of the emotions and the abundance that was produced when love joined love. It really is an amazing work of literature, which I encourage you to read at some point. And when you do, what you will discover is that there is no mention of God in any of the verses.

Of itself, Song of Songs might stand just as it is – tribute to the greatest of all attributes of creation: love. Love that moves hearts, raises mountains, causes gazelle to leap. Love stronger even than death, united beyond death stronger than before. Makes you stop and think, doesn’t it? Raises a calmness, a gentleness from somewhere deep inside that says, “It’s all going to turn out just fine...” or something like that.

Does it matter that there is no mention of God in Song of Songs? [It’s one of two books in the Bible in which God is not mentioned – the other being the Book of Esther or the Megillah, in the Tanakh, which is about the preparation for Purim.]

Should the absence of the word “God” be reason for exclusion of the book from the canon? Or does this in fact touch something more gently than we know,

communicating in some way that says, “Well, of course this is about God. God is Love. And this is about God, so it is about Love. The Love beyond the physical, as wonderful as that is in the warmth, affection, and intimacy that it spans, but Love between Creator and the created. Love that has no more of a definition or dimension than God.

It may very well be that it is this relationship between Israel and her God that was the foundation for this being added to the canon. In fact, it would seem certain to be so. The intense relationship between God and Israel is the foundation of all the writings, in themselves. So much more should its core be such love.

And the transition into Matthew’s readings of this morning might well be a reflection of more of the gentleness of God’s loving touch. The first few verses are perhaps insertions or later redactions to underscore the primacy of Jesus as the Messiah over John. Not everyone was convinced that Jesus was the one to come, and Jesus’ followers struggled to address some of the sects that still followed John, such as the Gnostic group known as Manadeans. Some of that may be evident in these lines of which we speak.

Also, the references to “Father and Son” would have been common terminology in those times, reflecting Jesus’ relationship with God and God with Jesus, however inviting those who would listen to Jesus’ message, to enter into such relationships, to listen to what he has to say, to hear – from the deep an loving place of his message – the God who knew each of them by name.

Again, we find ourselves in that “pause” of abundant grace and gentleness that breathes in deeply, lowers our whole physical frame, and fills us with assurance that we are not forgotten or lost in the love of God or those God has loved with us, whether present or no longer with us – for that love and presence exceeds this place, this knowledge, this time, this physical and cosmological composition, this everything! We are connected from the simplest of smiles, smallest and gentlest of vistas, to the grandness of love in all its ways – we are united with God, all of us, and so united together in the abundant and leaping love of God.

This is where that word thing happens again! I don’t have the words to describe what I can at best point to in myself and invite you to do the same, and then welcome you to stumble with me in describing such a true and steady presence of God.

The Hebrew word: *hesed* means “steadfast love.”

So steadfast, so assured, so guaranteed that Jesus says to us:

*Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke (my teachings) upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your*

*souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

And he might have just as well finished with, “And I love you.” Be kind and gentle toward one another, and know that you are loved well beyond all you know.

You know, that’s what we have to share with this world – and it is the only thing, I think, that is stronger than it all, for all its gentleness, indeed.