



Love, in the Flesh

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Song of Songs 2:8-17

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Scripture

Song of Songs 2:8-17

The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes,

leaping upon the mountains,

bounding over the hills.

My beloved is like a gazelle

or a young stag.

Look, there he stands

behind our wall,

gazing in at the windows,

looking through the lattice.

My beloved speaks and says to me:

“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,

and the voice of the turtledove

is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs,

and the vines are in blossom;

they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,

and come away.

O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,

in the covert of the cliff,

let me see your face,

let me hear your voice;

for your voice is sweet,

and your face is lovely.

Catch us the foxes,

the little foxes,

that ruin the vineyards—

for our vineyards are in blossom.”

My beloved is mine and I am his;

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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*he pastures his flock among the lilies.
Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle
or a young stag on the cleft mountains.*

* * * Poet Jane Kenyon has spoken of our "long struggle to be at home in the body, this difficult friendship."¹

Most of us know something of this struggle to be at home in our bodies. Every day, we are presented with idealized images of the body: youthful, perfectly toned, and made up. They are airbrushed and Photoshopped until they are more fantasy than reality. How could we help but fall short of these images of perfection? And so we struggle with our bodies. We try to make them thinner, or younger-looking, or more attractive.

Over the years, we experience this "difficult friendship" with our bodies in different ways. As young children, we long to grow up faster, to get taller or bigger. As we grow into adolescence, we struggle with bodies that are changing and unpredictable and don't seem to fit us anymore. When we confront illness, we may feel like our bodies have failed us and even become the enemy. As we age, our bodies no longer serve us as they used to -- our night vision fades, our walk becomes less steady.

This long struggle with our bodies is nothing new. In some strands of our faith tradition, we find a deep distrust of the body. The human body is seen as the source of brokenness and sin, apt to lead us into temptation and entice us to harm ourselves or others. As one writer notes, "There have always been Christians who have found the human body scandalous and repugnant."²

This complicated relationship with our bodies has made the Song of Songs a particularly challenging book of the Bible. It comes as a surprise, this short collection of love poems tucked in the middle of the Hebrew Bible. It is unlike any other text in the Scripture. It is spoken in the voice of a woman. This brief book does not reference God, or the Temple, or worship practices like prayer or fasting.

Instead, the whole book is a celebration of romantic love -- vividly physical, embodied love. In Songs, we meet two lovers who woo each other and long for each other. They speak in rapturous language about their beloved:

¹ Jane Kenyon, "Cages," *Collected Poems* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2005), p. 40.

² Stephanie Paulson, "Honoring the Body," in Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

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Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. . .
for our vineyards are in blossom.
My beloved is mine and I am his;
he pastures his flock among the lilies.

Now, we won't go through this text line by line. After all, poetry is often better experienced than analyzed, so I will leave to your imagination what the poet might have meant by "our vineyards are in blossom." I will tell you that my friend David assured his congregation that if they went home and read Song of Songs with their partner, it would be the best Bible study they ever had.

This earthy, sensual language in the Song of Songs has alarmed some Christians over the years. Some argued the book didn't even belong in the Bible at all. Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century monk and founder of the Cistercian order, counseled the novice monks that they should not read Song of Songs until their faith had matured. The book quite captured his own attention, however. He preached some eighty sermons on the Song of Songs -- never making it past the third chapter.

Over the centuries, many interpreters insisted that this book is not about human love, human bodies, and human sexuality at all. Instead, they read the text as an extended allegory in which the earthy images really represent our ethereal relationship with the divine. So, they claimed, the "lilies of the valley" symbolize Christ, or the "two breasts that are sweeter than wine" actually stand for the Law and the Prophets, or the Old and New Testaments, or Christ's mercy and goodness.

Now, it turns out, our Reformed ancestor John Calvin would have none of that. He defended the place of Song of Songs in Scripture, and criticized those who "tortured Scripture," "beating out allegories." He did not find Song's celebration of human love scandalous. He wrote, "The true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning" and held that the text "sings of the beauty of the Creator's handicraft and so it is presumptuous for anyone to reject what has been declared good by God."³

And indeed, this little book is a vivid reminder of a truth woven throughout Scripture, though often ignored: **Embodiment is central to our faith.**

Our faith affirms that God made the material world and called it good, and that God formed humans from the earth itself, in God's own image. We were created as embodied creatures. Through our bodies, we participate in God's activity in the world. Through our

³ William E. Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs" in Harold Bloom, ed., *The Song of Songs* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), p.19, as quoted by Rick Spaulding in unpublished Moveable Feast paper, 2015.

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bodies, we encounter the divine. The life we have been given is an *embodied* life. There is no other way for us to live.

And because these bodies are created by God and precious to God, they are to be honored. We see this so clearly in the life of Jesus. Just think: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."⁴ God's love for us was embodied in Jesus, so that we could know the love of God "in the flesh." And so Jesus came into the world, as each of us does, tiny and vulnerable, born of a woman. And he became a teacher and healer who honored the bodies of those he encountered. He put his hands on those considered untouchable -- a man with leprosy, a bleeding woman. He healed the bodies of those who were sick. And he was always eating. He provided food for hungry crowds, and shared tables with prostitutes and tax collectors and his disciples. In his life, Jesus showed us the power of love enfleshed.

And when he knew that his time grew short, he gathered with his disciples around a table one last time. And in that moment, he did not tell them "Think this" or "Believe this." No, he said "Do this." And then, with his hands, he washed their feet -- their dirty feet, weary from the day's walking. With his hands, he gave them bread to taste and wine to drink. He said, "This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, given for you." And he did give himself, completely. He experienced every part of this embodied life, even unto death.

And the gospels tell us that when he was raised, he was raised in the flesh. He was no mere spirit. "Look at my hands and feet," the risen Christ said, "Touch me and see."⁵ And they could touch the wounds of his body. He ate and drank with his disciples. At Emmaus, it was only in the breaking of the bread that the disciples recognized him.

After the resurrection, the disciples went on breaking bread, every time they gathered. The apostle Paul later wrote, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,"⁶ and he described the church as the "body of Christ" in the world.⁷ We are members of the body of Christ, the way God's love is made flesh today.

Embodiment is at the heart of our faith. I want to point out two implications of that for us:

First, we are meant to enjoy creation and this embodied life. Calvin thought it presumptuous to reject what has been declared good by God. An ancient rabbi once said, "A [person] will someday have to give an account to God for all the good things which [the] eyes beheld and which [they] refused to enjoy." We are meant to enjoy this embodied life: Enjoy the sight of wildflowers growing along the roadside. Enjoy the sound of young

⁴ John 1:14.

⁵ Luke 24:39.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:19.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:27.

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children laughing. Enjoy the taste of the first tomatoes of summertime. And yes, enjoy the touch of your beloved.

Writer Alice Walker urges such enjoyment in her novel *The Color Purple*. She writes:

Listen, God love everything you love – and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration...I think it [ticks] God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.... People think pleasing God is all God care[s] about. But any fool living in the world can see it['s] always trying to please us back.⁸

We are called to honor and enjoy this material world that God called good -- including our bodies, as much as those exuberant lovers in *Song of Songs* enjoy one another. No matter how difficult our friendship with our bodies, they are a gift from God, to be received and honored and enjoyed with gratitude.

Second, when we honor our own bodies, we cannot help but be connected with all those other bodies out there. After all, this is what we share. We all share bodily vulnerability. We all have breath and beating hearts. We all have flesh that will bleed, and one day all of our bodies will turn to dust.

This vulnerability of the body connects us with every other human body. What is suffered by one can be suffered by all. Our flesh ties us to one another. As Daniel Berrigan said, "It all comes down to this: Whose flesh are you touching and why? Whose flesh are you recoiling from and why? Whose flesh are you burning and why?"⁹

If we can begin to grasp that God loves us, even in these bodies with which we struggle, then we begin to realize that God loves all bodies, everywhere.

The body of the black teenaged boy lying on the sidewalk, bleeding from a gunshot wound.

The body of a refugee toddler, washed up on shore, and the body of his father ravaged by grief.

The body of the immigrant making her way across a desert, thirsty and afraid.

The body of the elderly man lying in the nursing home bed.

⁸ As quoted by Rick Spaulding, unpublished *Moveable Feast* paper, 2015.

⁹ In Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), p.45.

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The body of the young girl trafficked like a commodity.

Bodies matter. They are created by God and loved by God, who came among us in the flesh.

God still comes to us today, in the material, in this ordinary bread and cup. We are invited to the table -- to use our bodies to come, to taste and see and enjoy the goodness of God. To be fed.

But we are fed not just for ourselves. We are fed that we might be strengthened to be Christ's body in the world. We are fed so that we might go out and embody God's love -- in the flesh.

Thanks be to God. Amen.