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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 1, 2024

Proper 17, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Song of Solomon 2:8-13](#)

[Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10](#)

[James 1:17-27](#)

[Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

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“Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.”

They call it the Song of Solomon. Maybe he wrote it; even if not, the legend is a pretty good fit, because like his father David, Solomon was well known for being a passionate lover of God and a passionate lover of, well, lovers.

This is the only passage from the Song of Solomon we get to hear in all three years of the lectionary. That’s too bad, because there’s no other book in the Bible that’s as full of sheer joy and passion. It’s a book of erotic poetry about two young lovers. Right there in the Bible. The passage we heard today is romantic, but not particularly racy—but the rest of the book gets pretty suggestive. One time on a middle school youth retreat my seventh grade boys discovered chapter 5 and thought they were really getting away with something.

They say Song of Solomon made it into the Hebrew Bible by the skin of its teeth, only because it was interpreted as an allegory for the spiritual life. That's certainly how it's often been interpreted. And to my mind, that can be done in a really unhelpful way, or a really helpful way. The unhelpful way is a kind of sanitizing approach that assumes anything physical or sexual has to be explained away as code for a "real" spiritual meaning that's safely removed from bodies and messiness and pleasure. That way leads to puritanism, and repression, and sometimes even ends up in the furtive and toxic acting-out of the exact behaviors being condemned. But the helpful way is to say that, far from repressing it, this kind of passion is exactly what life with God is supposed to be about: joyful and embodied and lusty. The kind of sensual pleasure in this love song is a pointer to the kind of pleasure God takes in us—and the kind we're designed to find in God.

St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote that the only thing worthwhile in life is becoming God's friend. And some of the Christian mystics have taken that even farther. They say there are three movements in the spiritual life. The first is becoming God's servant. The second is becoming God's friend. And the third is becoming God's lover; God's spouse.¹ Each one informs the others, so we never stop being God's servant or God's friend. Yet the goal is knowing God in both passionate desire and tender intimacy. That's what we're here for—otherwise why even bother with this church business? It takes a lot of time and effort and there are easier ways to get together with others or enjoy good music or serve our community. The thing that makes church worthwhile—and honestly the thing that makes life worthwhile—is the joy of falling in love with God. A kind of God who says to each one of us, "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away."

¹ See [Robert Davis Hughes, *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life* \(New York: Continuum, 2008\), 264.](#)

I heard a story somewhere of an English woman in Eastern Europe, visiting one of the great Orthodox cathedrals, full of chant and candles and gleaming icons. An old monk came in and went from icon to icon, crossing himself and praying quietly, talking to each icon like an old friend. Afterward he greeted her in fluent English and so she plucked up her courage and shyly asked, “Father, why is it that you Orthodox venerate the icons like that?” He crooked a finger for her to come close, leaned in, and pronounced: “Because ... eeet’s FUN.”

God longs for us to have fun together, for us humans to learn to take as much pleasure in God’s company as God takes in ours, like an old monk at prayer and at play, like the best of friends, like a couple of young lovers delighting in each other’s hearts and minds and bodies. God created us for this. Today we are beginning a special season of prayer for creation, and we might remember that creation story where God creates a world basically for the joy and pleasure of it all, pronouncing after each day that the earth is *good* and the sea is *good* and the plants and animals and birds and fish are *good* and the people are *good* and all of it rolled into one is *very, very good*.

We can so easily underestimate the power of fun and joy and pleasure, or think they are luxuries we can only afford after we’ve done our homework or eaten our vegetables or solved the world’s problems. But oppressed people around the world often know better than anyone else just how crucial and how powerful is the joy no one can take away from you. Kleaver Cruz, an activist who founded a center called the Black Joy Project, writes that “Black joy is a form of resistance.”²

² Carlett Spike, “What 'Black Joy' Means and How It Grew,” February 15, 2021, <https://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-2021/black-joy.html>.

People who are wealthy or powerful often confuse joy with material prosperity, but people on the margins through the centuries have created joy through family traditions and folkways and foodways and music and art and created visions of Beloved Community that hold up an alternate reality to the status quo. As we celebrate Labor Day this weekend we might remember the early labor activists a century ago who fought for an eight-hour workday with the slogan “Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.” Insisting that poor people also have the right to leisure and pleasure was radical then and can still be radical now.

Now in today’s gospel Jesus is challenged by a group of people who are stuck in that first phase of the spiritual life—being God’s servant. They serve God through obeying God’s commandments, as they understand them. And that’s not the problem. The problem is that they want to keep others stuck there too. They go on the attack when Jesus and his disciples follow a different practice. In the first century there were many ways of interpreting both Torah and oral tradition. This particular group of Pharisees seems to follow one of the strictest interpretations when it comes to ritual handwashing. Other Jews of that place and time followed simpler practices or perhaps none at all. So the different practices aren’t the problem so much as the way they become a means of demonizing others. And this wasn’t an issue between Christians and non-Christians so much as an issue that ran right through the early church. Meal practices and food purity would become *the* issue that first-century Christians argued about—every bit as much as sexuality has been in the twenty-first century. Paul’s letters, the book of Acts, Revelation, and lots of the rest of the New Testament are full of references to hot disputes over clean and unclean foods, Jews and Gentiles eating together, and so on.

And I think of us today, when food may not be our hot issue, but we still live with the question: how do we live with tradition, how do we discern the right way to live in continuity with what God has done before, while also staying open to what God's doing now? I think the answer has to have something to do with that passionate love of God we saw in the Song of Solomon. We may or may not get things right. But if we can stay focused on falling in love with God together, rather than condemning those we disagree with, it's more likely the Spirit will lead us into truth over time with less collateral damage along the way.

Now as Episcopalians we have our own ritual handwashing practice. Most Episcopal parishes practice a custom called the lavabo, the ritual washing of hands before the eucharistic prayer. You don't have to do it. The Prayer Book says nothing about it. It's one of those ancient customs we picked up from the Middle Ages, and have held on to, because ... well, because it's fun. Usually an acolyte or another minister will come to the presider with a pitcher of water and a bowl, pour a little water over the presider's fingers, then let the presider dry their fingers on a little towel draped over the acolyte's arm. Church supply companies actually make special little linen towels just for this purpose. Then usually they exchange a little bow. It's a sweet and gracious kind of interaction, lovely, ritualistic in the way so much of liturgical Christianity is.

And just like so much else, we can do liturgy in a helpful way or an unhelpful way. We can treat our worship as a set of prescriptions to be done just right, and we can kid ourselves that by doing that we are making God love us more or that God somehow needs our worship.

Or we can enter into it in the spirit of that old monk and do it because it's fun, experience our worship as a form of holy play, godly play if you will, a kind of choreographed courtly dance where we act out some of the ways we will act toward each other in the real Beloved Community: where everyone gets a place at the table, where we dress up in our finest regalia, where we greet and salute each other with gestures of love and respect, and where the whole silly and exuberant thing has one sole and single purpose, to usher us more and more deeply into falling in love with God through Jesus Christ and living a life that's saturated by the absolutely radical and revolutionary pleasure of joy in that love.