

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
St. Michael's Parish, Litchfield  
August 30, 2015  
Proper 17, Year B, RCL

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“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some find it odd that the Song of Solomon, sometimes called the Song of Songs, is in the Bible at all. It is, on the face of it, an erotic love poem. Some of its imagery is fairly explicit. Yet in the middle ages, more commentaries were written on the Song of Songs than any other book of the Bible.

Clearly, much depends on how one interprets these words. Who is the beloved? Who is the lover? If they are simply a young man and a young woman, it is a lovely poem. But what if the young man is God, and each of our souls is the young woman? God desires each one of us, and we respond to that divine wooing.

Or what if we take a hint from Paul, who sometimes calls the Church the Bride of Christ? Then the young man is Christ, and we collectively as the Church are the young woman to whom he calls, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

I have had several different spiritual directors over the years and I have been on several spiritual retreats where a director was assigned to me just for the time of the retreat. In every single case the most central theme that the director focused on was how I experienced God's love for me. Did I feel close or distant from God? Did I feel loved by God? Did I feel love for God? What was the nature of that love? Was God my father or mother, and I God's child? Was God, or Jesus a dear friend with whom I could share anything? Was God my lover, who desired intimacy

of body and spirit? In the words of Psalm 63, “My soul clings to you [, my God]; your right hand holds me fast.”

As you know, back in June I spent this past week on retreat at Adelynrood, a retreat center in Byfield, Massachusetts. I had no director on this retreat. Nevertheless, one of the major themes was still my experience of the love of God. I am happy to report that I felt closer to God, after that time and the effects linger on. It was truly deeply refreshing to my spirit, like plunging your head into a cool mountain stream on a hot, muggy day in July.

The fact is that God made us to be in relationship with God. God made us to be loved. God made us to be lovers. There is in us a God-shaped hole that no one and no thing can fill adequately in God’s place. Most neuroses, compulsions, addictions, and anxieties, fears, and dysfunctions come from trying to substitute something else for God at the heart of our souls. All of the things that Jesus says come from within in us and defile us —murder, avarice, deceit, envy, theft—come from the lack of God at our centers. This is why the Hebrew Scriptures constantly warn against the dangers of idolatry, putting any created thing in the place of God.

One of the reasons that keeping God at the center of our affections is so difficult is that all the competitors are happy to make us slaves. God, by contrast, insists on our freedom. God will never force, require, or ensnare our love. We can always walk away from God. Turning our back on food, alcohol, tobacco, power, or money is much more difficult, because they are all too happy to clutch us in their sweaty hands, regardless of our resistance.

All false gods are greedy. They take and grasp and covet. They do not care about our joy or freedom. They just desire to own and control us. God, on the other hand, is generous. James tells us today that “every generous act of giving is from above, coming down from the Father of

lights.” God gives us everything and will never seek to control us. God will woo us, but never force us. God hopes eternally that we will choose God.

In the Roman Catholic Church, a very few of the very best theologians have been designated Doctors of the Church. This means that the Church feels that their teaching is useful in any age, not merely relevant to the controversies or issues of their own particular day. There are now thirty-three of them, of which only three are women. The first woman to be designated a Doctor of the Church was Teresa of Avila, a Spanish nun and mystic, abbess and administrator of the sixteenth century. Listen to some of her words:

When my mouth touched His I became invisible  
the way the earth would if the sun  
took it into its arms.

The ecstatic death I know.  
What can touch His exquisite form is not anything that can be seen.

How do we make love to God?  
How does the soul make love to God?

How does the soul make love to God?

The heart has divine instincts;  
it just needs to be turned loose in the sky.

Does not every angel know where He lives,  
And will beat on His door all night if it is locked?

And lest you think it is a feminine bias to think this way about God, hear the words of another Doctor of the Church, St. John of the Cross:

God held the earth as if it were his lover  
and spoke with the most tender of feelings  
to all existences as He spoke to me,

“Look, dear son, I have made a bride for you,  
but she is shy; so how are you to consummate?”

I want all souls to consummate with me, so I devised a plan:

As each soul nears heaven differences will dissolve to such a sublime extent  
that when the heart looks upon any object in this world  
it will cry ‘Beloved!’  
and passionately run into an embrace with me.”

That blessed grace I now know.

I now see my Beloved everywhere.

God loves us. Jesus loves us. The Holy Spirit loves us. Therefore, it must be that we are loveable. Not when we are made perfect, but right now. As we are. God desires us. Hungers for us. Beckons to us. Even will drop a handkerchief for us to pick up, or bat an eyelash, flex a muscle, or do something beautiful and astonishing just to catch our attention. God has very little pride, and will go to any lengths to get us to go out on a date. How can we be so hard-hearted as not to try one date?

In the daily post from the Society of St. John the Evangelist, and Episcopal order of monks in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a few years ago, Br. Curtis Almquist wrote this: Whoever you are, really; what you are, where you are, however it is that you've become the way you are... God knows and God desires and God loves. God can't get enough of you. You make God's day!

So Song of Songs is erotic, and mystical, and contains profound theological truth and the secret to all joy. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

