

Don't Look Now...But You're Blushing"  
Song of Songs 2:8-17  
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Have you ever *really* read your Bible? Now there's a book worth banning!

When overzealous school boards in Kansas want to purge their libraries, they should start with the Scriptures. This is a book whose greatest heroes regularly killed ten of thousands of people, because God told them to. This is a book in which a case of child sacrifice is considered virtuous (and I don't mean Abraham and Isaac), in which there are countless scenes of rape, prostitution, unethical trickery, dirty political maneuvering, and even attempted genocide, and its not even in the fiction section, like "Catcher in the Rye"! The same subject matter has gotten more than a few books pulled from the shelves in some parts of the Western world, and alas, has caused some authors to receive death threats, but where the Bible is concerned, our consumption of it is fully permissible because it is our Scripture, even with all its G, PG, PG-13, R, and X rated sections included. It's not what goes in, right? But rather what comes out.

And so if you've *really* read your Bible, you know about its dirty little secret, its foray into religious romance literature, the famous Song of Songs, which offers us a glimpse of how what might make us a little uncomfortable can be revelatory about God's character, grace, and plan for the world. Far from being just a Sunday evening expedition into seldom seen and potentially provocative Biblical

texts, this passage from Song of Songs illustrates the value of reading the whole Bible, for doing so does not let us escape the texts that make us blush or which make us angry or which make us flinch with horror. Whether we like it or not, in addition to the wonderfully affirming stories about Jesus, and the groundbreaking theology of Paul, the Bible is full of all those stories that could get it banned if it did not hold such an exalted position. But along with blood and guts and sin, thankfully the Bible is also not shy about depicting joy and happiness and the genuine love we human beings share with one another. It is the sum total of what is in our Bibles that helps us to know fully what it means to be one of God's creatures.

For centuries, the Song of Songs, this book of love poems ascribed to King Solomon, was interpreted as an allegory, as poems which really stood for something else, for they could not possibly mean what they really say. Surely, the thinking went, there must be a more spiritual meaning waiting to be discovered. How could a breathless, heart-pounding collection of poems about young, passionate, and yes, even physical love possibly be included alongside Biblical landmarks like Isaiah, the Psalms, and Exodus unless it said something about the divine? Indeed, God is not mentioned even once, while a beautiful young woman's breasts and thighs and navel are the subject of constant attention and adoration, and a virile young man's legs, lips, and arms are described in luxurious detail. Oh the flirting, oh the fantasies, oh the steamy soliloquys, like "O that his left hand were

under my head, and that his right hand embraced me.” Don’t look now but you’re blushing!

It is not my intention this evening to embarrass you or to set you up for some difficult questions from your children. Rather, it is to explore the value of a fairly steamy section of our Holy Scripture, and to see how it might profit us by reflecting on it. Our passage from chapter two this evening is actually one of the most G-rated parts of the book, and not one of those that extols, in detail, the physical virtues of the protagonists. Rather, it is a longing remembrance of an encounter between the two lovers. It is a remembrance of romantic love, a sweet, sweet memory of a beautiful spring day, full of promise in the fields, and promise in their hearts. There is the memory of his approach, his poetic words describing the abundant land beneath his feet. And there is the provocative banter between the two: “Let me see your face,” he says, “let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely.” And she teases him a little when she says “catch us the little foxes that ruin the vineyards”” teasing, poking him for being the very kind of sly fox who destroys the vineyard, even as she reminds him that she, the vineyard, is indeed in full blossom. It is a sweet and tender moment, the kind we have all experienced or imagined. And yet there is nothing more grand or divine about it than that! It is simply young people recalling some very pleasant memories, and looking forward to making some more. In the grand scheme of things, it’s really rather mundane.

And that is exactly what is glorious about this text, for there is perhaps no more human, nor mundane – in the finest sense of that word – no more human or mundane part of the Bible than the Song of Songs, a book which records the briefest snapshot of one ancient near eastern couple’s romantic life. But their story is our story, their emotions our emotions: longing, joy, satisfaction, giddiness, flirtatiousness, passion. Everything the Song expresses, we know something about. They know what it means to be alive and we know that they know it! This is not to say that the Song of Songs does not have any redeeming spiritual value. Quite the contrary. The spiritual “value” of the Song of Songs is this: that its beautiful poetry, its tantalizing images, remind us of God’s great gift of not only our humanity, but our very bodies as well, the hands we used to offer the peace of Christ earlier in this service, the vocal cords which we cause to resonate when we sing our songs of praise, the balls of our feet which will carry us out into the world to spread the gospel of the incarnate Jesus Christ. The gift of the Song of Songs is to remind us again that the realm of the spiritual is not opposed to the realm of the body; they cannot be separated, for if they are, we Christians are left with a hollow Jesus, or a half-Christ, or our God just “seeming” to be human, but not really human after all, and thus, a Savior who knows nothing about what it means to live and suffer and die.

In a few moments we shall participate in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and we shall recall the night on which a very real Jesus sat around a table with

twelve very real disciples, a very real hunk of bread and a very real goblet of wine. And we will recall the very real words which Jesus used to identify himself with those tangible elements of our earthly existence, elements which are needed by every culture in every time, every person in every place, elements necessary for life, bodily and spiritually. Grace really happened then and it's really going to happen tonight because the Lord's Supper is not an exercise of the mind where we transcend the need for bread and wine. It is an intentional celebration of the very real gift of Christ's body and blood, the sweetest bread and the finest wine we will ever taste.

I wanted to lift up this passage from The Song of Songs on this World Communion Sunday because it unashamedly, unabashedly celebrates the very thing which makes our sacrament meaningful and necessary: the human body, the human being, the lives and loves of the people of God. The Song of Songs does not need to be understood as an allegory in order for it to be considered spiritual. In many ways, it speaks more loudly about spiritual matters than some of our favorite Bible passages, for it is grounded in activities and emotions with which we are intimately familiar, in characters with whom we can connect. The Song of Songs is a commentary on our creation, a meditation on the mystery of life, and more than that, a manifesto on the importance of the incarnation of our God, who became like us, a man of flesh and blood, tears and smashed carpenter's thumbs, a man of longing, a man of prayer, a man of passion.

This is why the Song of Songs is included in our Bible. This is why in the second century, Rabbi Akiba wrote in the Mishnah, one of the most important texts in Judaism, “For the whole world altogether is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. If all the sacred writings are holy, then the Song of Songs is the holy of holies.” This is why every so often, it is important to read aloud these texts about the glorious mundanities of human existence, as if love can ever be considered mundane. So go ahead, read those eight short chapters, even if they make you blush. And may we each take heart that our everyday existence is the stuff of which the Bible is made, and the reason our incarnate Lord gathered his disciples around a table in an upper room in Jerusalem. Let us pray:

And the table will be wide.  
And the welcome will be wide.  
And the arms will open wide  
to gather us in.  
And our hearts will open wide  
to receive.  
And we will come as children who  
trust there is enough.  
And we will come unhindered  
and free.  
And our aching will be met  
with bread.  
And our sorrow will be met  
with wine.  
And we will open our hands to the  
feast without shame.  
And we will turn toward each other  
without fear.  
And we will give up our appetite for  
despair.

And we will taste and know  
of delight.  
And we will become bread for a  
hungering world.  
And we will become drink for those  
who thirst.  
And the blessed will become the  
blessing.  
And everywhere will be the feast of  
Jesus Christ, in whose name we  
pray. Amen.