

Love Divine Does Not Coerce

Sermon by Sally Howard at 1:00 p.m. on Sunday, February 7, 2021

Today we celebrate the fifth Sunday of Epiphany, the season we remember the glimpses we have into who God is as revealed in the life of Jesus. These readings and stories help us know not only who God is, but also illuminate who we are. They train our eyes to look for more epiphanies of God, particularly in the face of every human being we encounter. Our readings today are loaded with love, one of my favorite topics. The words and attitudes expressed in these readings are ancient, and although they are inspiring, require a closer look. Our understanding of love and marriage becomes clearer when we look at marriage as a sacrament, rather than a social contract. Let's go treasure hunting in today's lectionary!

The Song of Songs is among the most beautiful collections of love poetry that has come down to us from the ancient world. In our Christian tradition it is has often been seen as an allegory of God's love for us. This is true, that poet's writings reveal a divine lover. God says to us, "You have taken my heart sister, brother, gender fluid one, and I ravish you and ardently desire your love." We are beautiful and fragrant to God in our whole selves-body, mind, spirit.

That is the G-rated version of the Song of Songs! But God is revealing so much more. This poetry is also about erotic human love! These are two young lovers— who sneak off to enjoy all of the sensual aspects of touch, sight, and fragrance of sexual relating. It has been proposed that these are wedding poems, and they may be—but they are also about love that is not contained by legal categories. "If all writings are holy," said Rabbi Akiva, "the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."

How much different might our stories be about God and ourselves, if we saw our varied sexual orientations as Holy epiphanies of God's supple abundance? We could know our bodies as holy epicenters of joy. Seen from this perspective, would women have ever been held to blame for the fall of creation? Would we have been held responsible for the sexual assault of our bodies by men? Surely people whose sexual gift is homosexuality or whose gender is non-binary would not have been treated with the vicious exclusion and violence that have been suffered by so many.

On the other hand, these ancient texts got a lot right. It is vitally important to note in this holy song of songs, that the love expressed is consensual. These lovers are of equal power and participation, each one alluring the other. This is the way of love that reflects the image of God. God desires us and draws us in to love God back. God is not coercive. Her throne is not a place of dominance, but a dwelling place of tender and passionate love.

Jesus' first miracle at the wedding of Cana also honors human love. First, it honors the love and trust between a mother and son. You see it is Mary who helps Jesus recognize that the time has come to reveal who he is, and the moment is in this community celebration of love and joy. Marriage is often used as a metaphor that symbolizes the faithful relationship between God and Israel, and Christ and the Church. It is important to recognize the difference between marriage

as a sacrament, and marriage as a social institution. As a *sacrament*, it reveals the outpouring love of our Triune God, unity across diversity ever flowing and elaborating difference. This view of marriage gives us a glimpse of God the Lover who is always inviting us to the party, to an intimate dance. This One surprises us with the best of all that is.

Marriage as an *institution* is socially constructed, in the bible and beyond, not by the word of God. This was made so evident when marriage was denied to interracial couples or same sex couples just a few years ago! And it is disturbing to recognize that marriages in the Bible included abduction, marriages of sexual assault including rape, and hierarchal domineering marriages that few today would call epiphanies of God's love. Even in today's royal wedding psalm, the human king's wife is called a consort, and the verbs involved in the psalm indicate sexual violence. It may even be that this wife was a royal *hostage* used to secure peace between the conflicting powers of nations.

We must be clear that sexual coercion is not love, it is violence. Sexual abuse occurs across all groups and all ages. It occurs outside marriage, and also within. According to the CDC, one in four women is estimated to have experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact during their lifetimes. That's at least a quarter of us gathered together today. We must be brave enough to see it and name it, in our scriptures, in our national history of racism, in our families—and in our churches. We must create safe conditions for truth telling, and support those brave enough to tell it—like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez .

The epiphany of God's love in the Song of Songs and in the life of Jesus is a love, both human and divine, that does not coerce. It is the fire of the burning bush that does not consume or harm. Our bodies are the epicenters of sensuality and holy joy to be cherished and shared —if we so choose. The life of Jesus illuminates the Lover Divine and in so doing, illuminates who we are, and who we are called to be. May we love fully and respectfully, always cherishing ourselves and others as the beloved of God.