

## Singing the Song of Songs

Sermon by Mike Kinman at 11:15 a.m. on Sunday, February 7, 2021

*Your limbs are an orchard of pomegranates  
with luscious fruits, henna with nard.  
Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,  
with all kinds of frankincense trees,  
myrrh and aloes, with all superior spices;  
a garden fountain, a well of living water,  
and flowing streams from Lebanon.*

+

We long.  
We desire.  
We long to be desired

We ache  
We ache to be touched  
We ache from being touched.

We long.  
We desire  
We ache.

We wonder  
We fear.  
We hope.

We see our own bodies.  
We touch, we feel our own bodies.  
We wonder "is this good?"  
Is my body good?  
Is this the right body for me?

Who I am...  
Who I am becoming ...

Am I desirable?  
Am I lovable?  
Am I ... good?

Sometimes we feel no desire.  
Nor do we even wish to.  
We wonder "is that OK?"  
"Is something wrong with me?"

We wonder  
We fear  
We hope.

Sometimes we feel overwhelming desire.  
Desire rising up inside us  
Our bodies come alive  
Hearts racing  
Blood filling.  
Juices flowing.  
We long  
We desire  
Body for body  
Body for itself  
Longing to touch.  
Longing to be touched.  
Desire longing for desire.  
Longing to make another's heart race  
To be gazed upon with passion.

...Fearing  
...Fearing ... to make another's heart race  
Fearing our own heart racing.  
Fearing the gaze of the other.

For our bodies hold memories.  
Oh yes, so many memories.  
Memories, of touch past and present.  
Of being longed for and embracing  
Of longing for and being rejected.  
Of touch we craved and did not receive  
Of touch we did not ask for and received nonetheless  
Touch we begged to avoid  
Touch we fear we deserved.  
Of trespassing without consent or consequence to the trespasser.

Our bodies hold the scars.  
Our bodies hold the memories.  
Our bodies hold the desires.

Our bodies hold so much.  
Our bodies hold everything.

And so..  
We wonder  
We fear  
We hope

That our bodies, with all their memories  
Our longings.  
Our desires.  
Our very selves.

Are good.  
Are beautiful.  
Are holy.

If you receive nothing else from what I am saying this morning, please try to hear this.  
Please try to trust this.

That your body is good.  
Your desire is good.  
Your longing is good.

That your body, your desire, your longing is yours.  
It is precious.  
It is not to be shamed.  
It is not to be taken or used or coerced from you without your enthusiastic consent.

If you receive nothing else from what I am saying this morning, please try to hear this.  
Please try to trust this. I know it can be hard.

You ... your body ... is sacred ground.  
Your body is beautiful and holy.  
Your body is always deserving of respect and never deserving of shame.

The desire you feel in your body ... be it for your own body, a body differently made from yours,  
like yours, both and neither ... that desire is holy ... it is good.  
The pleasure you take from your body.  
The pleasure you take from other's bodies freely and enthusiastically shared.  
It is holy .. it is good.

The wounds, the scars, the memories your body carries.  
They are not shameful.  
They are holy, too ... not because they are good but because they are what happened to you,  
they are part of your story and your story ... all of it ... is holy because you are holy.  
It may need to be healed but it does not need to be hidden.

When you are ready.  
The wounds, the scars, the memories your body carries.  
They deserve healing.  
They can be healed.  
Because  
Love  
Can  
Heal  
Every  
Body

Including yours.  
Especially yours.

The gift of Dr. Wil Gafney's woman's lectionary is the gift of hearing parts of our scripture we don't ever hear. Parts of scripture that center the experience, the voice, the life of women.

The readings invite us to hear women's voices not just in scripture but throughout history unto today. It's why in a few weeks, we men will step aside and for the five weeks of Lent, women and only women will take their rightful place in the pulpit as primary proclaimers of the Word of God.

And ... on *this* day, these texts compel me from the position of one whose story and experience is usually centered. Whose sense of my body and other's bodies, of power and privilege over bodies, of honor and shame about bodies has been shaped for some good and an awful lot of ill by our scripture and the way it has been used for millennia.

These texts compel me as one who, in the words of our confessional prayer, through my own body and exercise of my sexuality has used my power to dominate and my weakness to manipulate.

These texts compel me to begin by accounting for and confessing the massive way the church I serve, whose privilege I enjoy, and whose ways I all too often mimic, has and continues to sow destruction and abuse in the bodies, lives and desires of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer images of God.

We as the Church made and continue to make a Faustian bargain with misogyny, homophobia, bi-phobia and trans-phobia much in the same way we continue to make that same bargain with White Supremacy. We as the Church have sold and continue to sell our theological soul, the Good News of the revolutionary love of Jesus, for earthly power over the bodies of women, nonbinary and LGBTQ images of God.

For millennia we have chosen to be Pharaoh instead of Moses ... treating women's bodies as commodities, as transactional capital. Using shame and fear as instruments of control and abuse as surely, exactingly and devastatingly as the overseer uses the whip.

Just look at the Psalm Dr. Gafney chose for this morning.

In her text notes, Dr. Gafney reminds us that Psalm 45 is a royal wedding psalm. In verse 9, "the royal wife is called a 'consort,' *shegal*." (shay-GAWL). Shegal was not a term used by Israel for its royal women. Dr. Gafney notes "As a verb, *shagal* indicates sexual violence ... it may be that the consort was a royal hostage to secure a peace."

For thousands of years, this psalm has been sung by communities of different faiths .. and what we are singing about, what we are celebrating is women's bodies existing not for themselves, but for men. What we have been singing about, is not love and desire freely offered and shared ... not bodies as holy ground ... not bodies celebrated as autonomous sources of wisdom and power ... but women's bodies as property to be owned and controlled by men.

And just like Eucharist, we become what we take into our bodies. As the Church, we have cultivated, amplified and internalized these messages. They are part of us. They are a part of me. We have used their supposed divine sanction to shape public policy. They are demonic, and it is time for an exorcism.

As the Church, we have cultivated, amplified and internalized the message – for everyone, but especially for women – that "the flesh" is sinful and evil. That our longings, far from being of God, are in opposition to God. And that if it is OK for those in power to control women, then certainly it is OK for that control to extend to anyone those in control deem to be somehow less than themselves.

In her book, Indecent Theology, Marcella Althaus-Reid (ALT-House) writes: "Christianity has been an immense sacrificial altar for women, and, moreover, its life seems to have been nurtured by that sacrificial death of the Other throughout history."

The messages have been particularly toxic for women and LGBTQ images of God ... and ... the damage is not limited to those most targeted. The enslaver is also dehumanized by enslavement. I know I experienced this in my own life. The Churches of my youth ... both the Episcopal Church and Self-Realization Fellowship ... infused me with messages that had and continue to have paralyzing effects on how I judge and express my own sexuality, my own longings and desires.

Touching yourself is bad.

Sexual desire is delusion and distracting from the spirit life of God.

Marriage means you somehow magically shouldn't be attracted to anyone else ever again.

The Church has so much to say about sexuality because our sexuality is a power source. The wildness and unrestrained nature of our physical longings is the very heart of revolution. There is huge power in our sexuality, in our longings and desires for generativity and joy. And we know that because of that, it can be used to wound. We know that all too well. It can be used to wound and dominate and control.

And in this knowledge ... for century upon century upon century the church has failed to distinguish between the longings and what we do with them. In our fear or desire to use the power of our longings, we as the Church have suppressed the deep truth that our longings are part of who we are. They are natural and good. In and of themselves, they are generative and joyous even if it can be agonizing when they are spurned or directed toward those whom love demands we honor with our restraint.

In our fear or desire to use the power of our longings, we as the Church have suppressed the deep truth that God is desire.

We were created out of desire in the image of desire.

We are created as beautiful creatures of desire and deeply desirable ourselves.

And we are entrusted with the care of these longings and desires – not just individually in some “you’re on your own ... good luck with that” sense, but communally, with deep relationships of support and accountability to an ethic not of control but of love and justice.

We are entrusted individually and communally with using our longings and desires in ways that honor self and others without shaming.

Of using them in ways that heal and not wound.

Of expressing them with mutual enthusiasm.

Of knowing the joy of the poetry of Eden, what it is to be together or even alone, naked and unashamed.

God is desire ... and that desire is power. And throughout history, we as the Church have either been so afraid of that power or so desirous to use it destructively for our own designs of control that we have, in the words of Nadia Bolz-Weber in her beautiful book, Shameless, substituted purity for holiness as our goal.

Purity separates us from one another. It judges not our actions but our very selves as good or bad, worthy of being in and acceptable ... or shamed and cast out.

Nadia writes: "Purity is easier to regulate than holiness... but no matter how much we strive for purity in our minds, bodies, spirits or ideologies, purity is not the same as holiness. It's just easier to define what is pure than what is holy, so we pretend they are interchangeable.

"Purity," she continues, "most often leads to pride or to despair, not to holiness. Because holiness is about union with, and purity is about separation from."

For millennia, we as the Church have cultivated, amplified and internalized a culture of purity instead of holiness with devastating results – particularly for women and LGBTQ images of God.

We have told women that your bodies are not about you but about men.

That you are there to be gazed upon and used by men.

That you must be covered because you are sources of temptation and evil for men.

That the longings and desires that well up in you must be denied because if you act on them, you will be unlovable by men.

That if you have no longing and desire for men there is something wrong with you because you are supposed to want men.

That you need to "find your Boaz" because surely you can only find fulfilment in life with the protection and in the service of a man.

For millennia, we as the Church have cultivated, amplified and internalized a culture of purity instead of holiness that has left women shamed and blamed, subjugated and closeted.

This must be said ... and we must look at what restorative justice looks like in the face of millennia of the Church literally appropriating the voice of God to tell God's beloved children they are less than and shameful. We cannot just acknowledge briefly and move on, because as Representative Alexandria Occasio-Cortez said this week:

"What they are asking for when they say 'Can we just move on' ... what they are asking is 'Can we just forget this happened so I can do it again without recourse?'"

What we need is a revolution. A revolution of love that overturns the tables of purity and invites us to embrace the holiness of our bodies, the holiness of our longings and desires, the holiness that does not isolate but brings us together in love.

That's the beauty of the Song of Songs. Oh, that we had readings from this piece of scripture every time we gather! The Song of Songs is an ancient collection of love poems. We don't really know where it comes from, but we do know what it sings ... that sex, our bodies, our longings, our desires are not just good, they are exquisite and sacramental. They reveal the divine.

That God.  
Dwells.  
In.  
Your.  
Body.

The Church has tried to ignore the Songs of Songs, or selectively quote it to affirm male sexuality and the existence of women for the male gaze, or, all else failing, to view it allegorically as God's passion for the people. But it is about none of these. It is a celebration of women's sexuality, bodies, longings and desires. And it is time for us to sing it loud, proud and strong.

The Song of Songs celebrates the sexual pleasure of women, by women and for women.

The Song of Songs celebrates the truth that our bodies don't lie ... and that we need to listen with grace to what they are telling us.

The Song of Songs celebrates what Tara Owens writes in her wonderful book, Embracing the Body: Finding God in Our Flesh and Bone:

She writes:

*"Sexuality is ... all of the ways we go about trying to reconnect, with ourselves, with others and with our world.... When it comes to our bodily desires, we're used to either appeasing them or denying them—not living in them... The most fundamentally true thing about our sexuality is that it is good. Stop for a minute and (hear) that sentence again. Your sexuality is fundamentally, at root, beyond all else, good.... The problem isn't that we've given sexuality free rein, but that we haven't encountered it enough."*

Jesus says, "This is my body ... given for you." Our bodies are meant to long for one another, to honor one another, to be given with enthusiastic consent to one another. And our world and certainly our church is meant to be a safe place where we never fear our bodies being abused or our longings and identity denigrated. The free giving of ourselves, our souls and bodies, in joy and celebration is our very model for community, the model of Beloved Community toward which we strive and for which we hope we are destined.

In another amazing book, Carnal Knowledge of God, the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel writes:

*"Sexuality, then, is what draws us to make love and justice in the world. It invites us to manifest erotic power. It draws and drives us toward another person. It urges and compels us into deeper connections, deeper bonds. It is deeply personal and expressed between lovers. But it is also what draws the artist toward passionate acts of creativity; the parent toward a child in ways that are relentlessly life-sharing and transcend exhaustion; and drives the revolutionary whose deepest desire is for her people. Cornel West says that 'just as justice is what love looks like in*



*public, and tenderness is what love feels like in private, deep democratic revolution is what justice looks like in practice.’ Sexuality, then, is deeply intertwined with justice.”*

Our bodies. Our sexuality. Our longings.

These are to be celebrated and their use held to the standard of love, healing and mutual joy.

Our bodies. Our sexuality. Our longings.

They are, we are, the stuff of revolution. Of liberation. Of God’s beloved community of justice and compassion, healing, love and joy

God gazes on you.

Breathes you in.

Whispers in your ear.

God sings to YOU

*Your limbs are an orchard of pomegranates  
with luscious fruits, henna with nard.  
Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,  
with all kinds of frankincense trees,  
myrrh and aloes, with all superior spices;  
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When you are ready.

When you are ready.

The wounds, the scars, the memories your body carries.

They deserve healing.

They can be healed.

Because  
Love  
Can  
Heal  
Every  
Body

Including yours.  
Especially yours.  
Amen.