

***No Need to Blush* – Song of Solomon 2:8-13**

Rev. Matt Nieman

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Did that text make you blush? The Song of Solomon has been forever known as the one text in the Biblical narrative that could be read as a romance novel (it's one of only two books in the Bible that does not reference God).

Written from the female perspective, these verses are quite illustrative: "The voice of my beloved...like a gazelle or a young stag. My beloved speaks and says to me: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

This is rather tame, actually, compared to what we find later on from the male perspective in chapter 7 of the Song: "How graceful are your feet in sandals, O queenly maiden! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus. Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses. How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden!"

In 25 years of preaching, I don't think I've ever read those words in worship.

To generations of Christians, the Song of Solomon — or the "Song of Songs," as it's sometimes called — has been a bit of an embarrassment. Something about it makes many of us feel

uneasy. This has as much to do with the hangups of our society as with the book itself.

Within the church, we've historically been uneasy about talking about physical attraction and sexuality within the context of faith.

Back in the Middle Ages, Bible scholars went to elaborate lengths to interpret this book as highly symbolic. Some taught that this love poetry was really about the soul's relationship to God. Others — rather strangely — claimed it was about God's love for the virgin Mary, and she for God. If you think you're hearing lovers sighing to each other in a moonlit glade, then think again, say these medieval scholars. When you hear the woman's voice crooning, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine," all this is secret code for an earnest and devout — and thoroughly chaste — piety (1:2).

Is it, though? That sounds pretty far-fetched. What possible reason could the author have for hiding religious sentiment behind steamy love-poetry?

And today, within our culture generally, our society tends to understand human love as an "either or." Love is either idealized and spiritual, or sensual and physical — and those two components, we're told, shall not meet. On the one hand, you have lacy valentine hearts and bouquets of roses. On the other hand, you have physical attraction and steamy intimacy. And it seems like we're still reluctant to have both elements in a healthy relationship.

Whenever I conduct a wedding, in the run-up to the ceremony, couples blush when I remind them that we are sexual beings. And that sexual intimacy is an important part of marriage

and that they shouldn't be afraid to seek help when they struggle with that area of their marriage.

The Song of Solomon knows no separation between the physical and the spiritual. "Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave," the poet writes. "Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame" (8:6-7). The author sees no need to construct a wall between the spiritual and the physical. To this divinely inspired poet, they're two sides of the same coin.

It's more faithful to take the Song of Solomon at face value. It's a joyous celebration of committed love — in every aspect, including the physical — as a wonderful and perfect gift of God.

So, on one hand, this text is about the bonds of human love, and the passion of it. It's meant to be intense—in every sense of the word. He is your person. She is your person, after all. In all aspects, we are made to be intimate within the context of a loving and committed relationship. And to deny or be embarrassed by any aspect of it, is to deny our full identities.

And so, it's not correct to insist that these texts from the Song are strictly metaphorical, that they *only* serve to underscore something spiritual.

However, it is fair to additionally interpret these words in light of something broader. It is fair to consider how these words may serve to instruct regarding the passion necessary in our quest to be the best followers of Jesus Christ we can be.

This understanding finds the love between man and woman to be *analogous* to that of God for Israel and Christ for the church or for individuals, along with human beings' loving response to God.

Have you ever noticed the similarities between secular love songs and much Christian devotional music and poetry? Laura

and I were in the car a week ago and had music on, and after a song concluded, we both wondered if it was designed to speak about the God-human relationship or that between humans. We couldn't necessarily tell.

Sometimes when you first hear or read lyrics, you must pay close attention to the fuller context to see what type of love poetry it actually is. Even though the Song of Solomon itself should be interpreted as erotic love poetry, there are undeniable parallels in Scripture *comparing* love between a man and a woman to that of God/Israel and Christ/church. In Ephesians 5:21-33, after a discussion of the mutual responsibilities of wife to husband and husband to wife, the writer compares their relationship to that of Christ and the church.

It's a call for passionate devotion—the church for Jesus much like Jesus is totally devoted to us.

The word passion can be used in all kinds of contexts. It's easy to see how it might be used in the context of sexual relationships here in Song of Solomon. But just as importantly, it's not out of the question to draw legitimate comparisons to that of the church and Christ in a relationship with each other and with a joint passion to fulfill the kingdom of God.

I wonder how we think of this relationship we have with Christ. To put it in the words of a dating language today, are we just still getting to know one another? Have we just gone out on a few dates? Are we going steady? (there's a term we don't hear anymore.) Are we still trying to figure out who the other is before we get serious? Or are we totally committed and passionate about walking in tandem with each other in a common calling?

The second chapter of Song of Solomon is to be understood in light of the book as a whole. This passage is from the woman's

perspective. The woman's beloved is like a strong gazelle or young stag (see vv. 9, 17). He invites her tenderly and lyrically to arise and come away with him into the springtime of their lives. The foxes (hindrances to the blossoming of their love) that might spoil their vineyard are to be caught. "My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies" (v. 16). God still invites us to enjoy human love *and* to become part of the mutually passionate love-relationship between God and God's people through Jesus Christ.

A poignant story is told by the surgeon and author, Dr. Richard Selzer. Here it is in his own words:

"I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve.

"Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily?

The young woman speaks. 'Will my mouth always be like this?' she asks.

'Yes,' I say, 'it will. It is because the nerve was cut.'

She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles.

'I like it,' he says. 'It's kind of cute.'

All at once I *know* who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he

bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.”²

“Kiss me,” says the woman in Song of Solomon.

“Kiss me — full on the mouth! Yes! For your love is better than wine, headier than your aromatic oils. The syllables of your name murmur like a meadow brook. No wonder everyone loves to say your name!” (1:2-3, *The Message*)

A husband still finding beauty in his wife’s disfigurement.
And Christ still finding beauty in a flawed but cherished people.
There’s no need to blush at this.