

Proper VII Year B: 1 September 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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Song of Solomon 2: 8-13
James 1: 17-27
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Psalm 45: 1-2, 7-10

“Episcopal priest, professor, and theologian Jay Emerson Johnson writes of this sacramentality when he says: “When Christians speak of Jesus, we speak of the incarnation of God’s own desire, the divine Lover yearning for communion with the beloved . . . [where] the Eucharist bears witness to the loyalty of love.””

During my recent visit to the Netherlands, I spent a day exploring Amsterdam with a friend. Both of us wanted to see what is called the “Red Zone” of the city where adult sex emporiums exist openly. After all, what we here term prostitution is legal in the Netherlands. At first glance, it didn’t seem any different from all the other areas I had seen that day. That is, until a door opened on the alleyway I was walking and a man exited while a scantily clad woman held the door open. It was then that I really noticed the women standing in various windows throughout the quadrant, advertising their wears so to speak. All of it elicited an emotion within that surprised me.

I’m hardly a prude. I’m very open minded and self-describe as progressive. I’ve studied the theology of human sexuality and hold very expansive opinions in that regard. However, in that moment, I felt profound sadness. I wasn’t being judgmental by any means. I was simply feeling melancholy. As I sat with the emotion, I came to realize that underneath this feeling was an understanding that the conjugal act is more than simple pleasure. For me, it has become a

gift of self-giving that moves beyond the physical, which is so well voiced in the Song of Solomon, a piece of scripture which is also known as the Song of Songs.

I doubt any one here today came to church to hear poetry, especially love poetry. It's not that poetry isn't allowed – we'll hear some throughout the season of creation – rather, it's the notion of romantic poetry and its sensual implications that may startle the more sensitive among us. After all, sex and sensuality are one of two topics (politics being the other) that we, in polite society, don't talk about, most especially in church. Yet, here we have a reading from the Song of Solomon, laden with beautiful imagery, which voices a discourse between a lover and the beloved.

This discourse isn't only sensual, it's erotic. It's centered in the desire for the other as only a lover can experience. For the sake of clarity, the root of the word erotic comes from the Greek word *eros*, which is defined as an ardent and fond *desire* for the other; not quite what it's come to be associated with in our enlightened world of modernity, which has infused the word with negative and exploitative connotations.

Imagine, for a moment, God as our lover and we the beloved. It might be difficult for some, but these love poems give voice to a reality where we are the beloved of God, where God desires us *such* as we ought to desire God. What better way to express this mutual indwelling of lovers than through the sensuality of intimacy, for that's the transforming power of love.

The *eros* of the Creator is for the created – for all creation, which reflects the inner life of our Triune God. This *eros* is an expansive love that opens itself to others and all creation in an act of selflessness. God peers through the veil of our lives, the gates that guard our hearts and pines for the intimacy that brings forth life: spiritual as well as physical. It's a movement from longing to invitation, from cautiousness to vulnerability. It's the Creator and the created in an intimate dance of sensuality and oneness. Such a love is to “be in love [where one lives] beyond the boundaries of the self and [enters] a realm of sheer delight, in which the human and the divine can merge.” What better way to voice this desire for intimacy than through human sensuality.

I was troubled in Amsterdam, not by the act of exchange between two consenting adults, but by the commodification of that exchange. Such an exchange tends to prioritize

ambition over intimacy; profit over people. It reduces a sacred exchange to its merest physical components. Human sensuality is neither clean nor unclean, to paraphrase Jesus. Rather, it's our intention towards our *eros* – our desires – that either celebrate life or diminish it. It's not what's done externally as much as what we internally surmise as the foundation of our acts. Hence, we must speak about human sexuality and sensuality in churches in positive terms that give voice to the mutuality of selflessness in giving of our bodies to one another in ways that respect and honor one another. If we don't, then we allow social media and online dating apps to define said intimacy.

John Philip Newell, in his book *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* writes: "The desire for union for a coming together between masculine and feminine, and the yearning for creativity and giving birth, which are fundamental to the goodness of creation, are reflective of God at the very heart of life . . . [that] in our secular-materialistic age with its obsessions with the outward and the physical, the problem, it seems, is not our interest in sexuality, which is essentially God-given and good, but rather a fascination with it in a way that distorts our sexual desires and prevents them from being a manifestation of God's passion for self-giving and commitment and creativity." In other words, "our sexual energies reflect, in their goodness, God's yearnings for intimacy, creative expression, and new life."

There are many expressions of human intimacy that affirm and give voice to the Sacred desire for union. Not all are monogamous nor marital. Some are polyamorous and covenantal. Whatever the expression, it's the intention towards mutuality and selflessness that lies at the heart of a sensual and sexual relationship that is life giving and life affirming, which thus embodies the sacred dance of Divine *eros*.

I wasn't surprised that day in Amsterdam because I'm a puritanical snob experiencing disdain for such public displays of human sexuality. I'm very far from that. What struck me was this notion of divine communion between the lover and the beloved; that human sexuality and sensuality are good elements of a selfless giving of our bodies in mutual respect and enjoyment that not only celebrates life, it brings forth life. As such, sexuality and sensuality become sacramental.

Episcopal priest, professor, and theologian Jay Emerson Johnson writes of this sacramentality when he says: “When Christians speak of Jesus, we speak of the incarnation of God’s own desire, the divine Lover yearning for communion with the beloved . . . [where] the Eucharist bears witness to the loyalty of love.”

What a rich, beautiful image for the Eucharist: communion as invitation into the dance of Divine Eros. An invitation to participate in a cosmic celebration of life – of the beloved entering into the joy of Sacred Love itself. It’s no wonder that, when in Amsterdam walking alley way in that particular quadrant of the city, I felt melancholy at the wanton display of sexuality as commodity; of embodied sensuality as a means to an end. For me, **the Song of Songs – and the sacred writings of scripture – offer a different prospective of intimacy and human sexuality, where communion, the coming together of the lover and the beloved, becomes an expression of Divine intimacy between the Creator and the created.** To participate in such a communion is to be invited into the transformation of love itself, something truly desirable and beyond measure. May each of us feel the longing of the Divine, sense the sensual desire of our Creator to be at one with us, to be in communion with us, and, as such, may we willingly accept the invitation to join in the cosmic celebration of life with the Lord of the Dance. That through our interpersonal relations – sensual, sexual, and otherwise, we may embody this sacred desire for union, for sacred communion. Therefore, come to the altar. Be fed. And let us dance!