

A LOVE STORY

Sermon preached by Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

August 30, 2009

Scripture: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; James 1:17-27

Let me begin with a nontraditional love poem I recently encountered, entitled ‘A Conversation with Someone Who Can’t Believe That Alice is Fifty’:

“No way,” you say.

“It simply cannot be.

I would have guessed

That barmen often ask her for I.D.”

“I know, I know.

She has that youthful glow

That still gives young men vapors.

She’s fifty, though.

I’ve seen her papers.”¹

The author of the poem is writer and satirical poet, Calvin Trillin, and the subject of the poem is his wife Alice, who died in 2001 of complications from radiation treatment for lung cancer twenty-five years earlier. In his 2006 book, *About Alice*, Trillin shares a tender portrait of the woman he first met at a Manhattan party in 1963. It is an 80-page love letter to a 35-year marriage --- a buoyant, joyous, grateful-every-day marriage.

Trillin tells his version of the story of how they met:

When I saw Alice at [the] party, she was wearing a hat. At least, I’ve always remembered her as wearing a hat. She later insisted that she’d never owned a hat of the sort I described. Maybe, but I can still see her in the hat- a white hat, cocked a bit to the side. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. She had blond hair, worn straight in those days, and a brow just a shade darker than her hair... She was... so very pretty, but that wasn’t the first thing that struck me about her; it might have come as much as two or three seconds later. My first impression was that she looked more alive than anyone I’d ever seen. She seemed to glow...²

He goes on to share countless anecdotes of their life together- reflective for its elevation of the ordinary stuff of life- school plays, dinner parties, cancer treatment. Theirs was an enduring love story that we all crave and hope to experience- their love a delicate balance of passion and practicality, infatuation and level-headedness. When I perform weddings at the church, I often use a definition of love that Edee Fenimore shared with me. I’m not sure if she’s the original author, but it sounds a lot like her:

Love is friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing and forgiving. It is loyalty through good and bad times. It settles for less than perfection and makes allowances for human weaknesses. Love is content with the present, hopes for the future and does not brood over the past.

Maybe I'm thinking about romantic love because I've been as busy as an Elvis impersonator in a Vegas wedding chapel this summer, officiating six weddings in almost as many consecutive weeks. I've had six opportunities, all told, to listen to couples share their stories- how they met, how they came to the decision that marriage was the next step, how one proposed to the other, how they envision their future together, how they plan to weather the storms that appear as inevitably as hurricanes during the stormy seasons. Six opportunities to watch jittery grooms put their hands in their pockets, pull them out again, fiddle around with buttons of their jacket, anxious and excited and sweating bullets at the front of the church. Six opportunities to observe the brides- flush with anticipation, checking and rechecking their lipstick, pulling loose strings from their dresses, lining up at the back of the church with their bridesmaids and their parents, everybody fluttering about, waiting for Tony's cue to walk. Six long-awaited kisses and the accompanying applause, and six couples skipping down the aisle when it's over, relief and happiness painted across their faces. I am unrepentantly sentimental, a sucker for the sweet stuff. I know better than to start sniffing as I pronounce the couple husband and wife, but the urge to shed a few tears is strong. I get caught up in the moment; don't we all? Who doesn't enjoy a good love story?

At almost every wedding, the couples choose one of two Scripture readings- the first is that famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13, you know which one I'm talking about: Love is patient, love is kind... The second most popular Scripture reading is a portion of Song of Songs, that tiny book sandwiched between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah in the Old Testament, filled with titillating verse about the sensual love between a fair maiden and a skittish shepherd. Except for this week, weddings are just about our only opportunity to hear Song of Songs in the Presbyterian Church. In the 3-year cycle of Scripture reading called the lectionary, this week is the only week when Song of Songs appears.

Nestled among the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, Song of Songs is a collection of love poetry, attributed to King Solomon probably in an attempt to associate the work with the wisest and most notorious king in Israel's history.³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to Song of Songs as 'creation theology,' presumably for its focus on the act of pro- and re-creation (sometimes pronounced recreation). And theologian Renita Weems describes Song of Songs as an unashamed and unapologetic elaboration on the physical pleasures of love.⁴

There are at least two, well-argued ways to read Song of Songs. The first is a literal reading, which accepts Song of Songs for exactly what it looks like, "poetry of physical love. Sexual yearning and fulfillment... sung without reticence, moral judgment, or ... deference to social constraints. [Song of Songs] sings the love of a passionate woman and her sometimes elusive and sometimes importunate lover... Overtly, the poetry is wholly secular: neither God nor any religious practice or belief is mentioned."⁵ A second popular reading is an allegorical

one, comparing the love between the two individuals as either the love of God for Israel, from a Jewish perspective, or the love of God/Christ for the Church/community of faith.

There is no reason why we must decide which of the two readings is more convincing. They each have something to offer to us about a different kind of love than we typically encounter in Scripture. Song of Songs elevates romantic love, in contrast to the platonic, parental and selfless love that permeates much of our Scripture and theology. Song of Songs is a love story, plain and simple. Nowhere else in the Bible is love so explicitly unabashed, unfiltered, and raw. And nowhere else does the Bible so directly remind us that Christianity is, first and foremost, a love story, a great and enduring story of God's overwhelming, unconditional and life-giving love for us. The entire Christian enterprise is, at its root, love. God so loved the world that God gave a Son for us; that son, Jesus, so loved the world, that he gave his life for us. And our faith, at its root, is the project of acknowledging that love, accepting that love, and returning that love. Everything else is commentary!

Song of Songs offers us new words, new images, new symbols for describing that love. It helps us find the words that will open up the incomprehensible notion of God's love for us. We are familiar with thinking of God as parent, of Jesus as friend and companion. And we have overlooked a form of love that adds so much to our exploration. God's love is passionate; God's love revels in our physicality- I mean, God created us, gave us bodies as gifts to be celebrated. The two lovers in the Song of Songs joyfully celebrate one another. To celebrate with them is to celebrate God's good creation of the physical universe.⁶

And God longs for us, and we long for God, like two lovers separated. We are God's beloved, and God is ours. God calls out to us, saying, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth their fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." God invites us out of the winter gloom and into the spring of new life. God invites us to enjoy the goodness of Creation, to reap the fruits of earth's fecundity. God desires good things for us, and God seeks us out from beyond the wall and behind the lattice, bringing us from separation to reunion.

Song of Songs is our love story, both literally and allegorically.

And Song of Songs tells another story- the story of how great love changes us. According to the text, the beloved is no longer satisfied with her former life behind the 'lattice' and knows that her future and that of her lover are one. Love changes us. Once we have received God's love in our hearts, we can not be the same.

The author of James invites us to reflect on what it means to live in the faith community and participate in the Christian practices of receiving and giving love. How do we live in love? How do we manifest the change that occurs when we acknowledge, accept and respond to God's enduring love? For James, the answer is simple: Be doers of the Word, not just hearers. The Word of God is already implanted in our hearts, so we need to let the Word have its full effect on our lives. James is writing to Christians, describing what it looks like to live in an everyday

faithfulness that is the most fitting response to the grand love story of Christianity. James offers examples of how we might "be love," by giving to and receiving love from those who are vulnerable.⁷

When I counsel couples before their wedding, I talk about the 'Christian' aspects of marriage. I often speak about marriage as a movement toward greater discipleship. Last weekend, I married a college roommate and her longtime partner. They have committed their lives to eco-justice, sustainability and conservation. And so I suggested as partners in marriage, they give strength to one another to pursue their vocation to care for the Earth and its creatures; provide support to one another when that charge is difficult to carry out; and offer new insights to one another in their individual and combined pursuits. Their love story includes an increase in their personal discipleship. During the groom's vows, he said, in essence, that his partner 'makes him a better person.' Maybe a little like Jack Nicholson to Helen Hunt in *As Good As It Gets*, but less schmaltzy. The sentiment is precise. Love engenders both transformation and discipleship. We are transformed by the love of another, and by the love of God, and we live out that transformation by sending the love we have received back out into the world.

In the love story between God and humans, we find ourselves wanting to be better people, better disciples, better doers of the Word. Not to prove anything, not to deserve anything, but out of desire to give out to the world some of the love we have received.

Love changed Calvin Trillin, and he spent his life trying to impress Alice. In his writing, she was sometimes his subject and always his muse. The dedication of the first book he published after her death read, "I wrote this for Alice. Actually, I wrote everything for Alice." In our own love story with God, we do well if everything in our lives is done for God. It won't be done perfectly, and we will rely upon the words I shared earlier, that love settles for less than perfection and makes allowances for human weakness. Surely, nothing can sum up more God's perfect love for us, despite and perhaps because of our imperfect natures. And like that other famous wedding Scripture, love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Song of Songs is not a perfect love story. According to Weems:

It is ideal for examining the pull and tug of romantic and spiritual commitment... The book reminds us that intimacy can be as frightening as it is fulfilling. It is fraught with dangers, unknowns, demands, and unforeseeable consequences. Not simply a commentary on the fragility of human intimacy, [Song of Songs] captures the dilemma of the divine-human drama... Intimacy with God and with each other costs; it costs us our time and our energies. A willingness to be present, to remain, to be accountable, to see things through, to come out from hiding are necessary to nurture relationships.⁸

Ultimately, we cannot take our love for granted, and we must be mindful that "beauty, love, joy, abundance, the sacred, and the possibility for happiness surround us in the ordinary routines of human living if we only take the time to notice and nurture them."⁹

I think this is what strikes me so much about Calvin Trillin in his writings about Alice. He found beauty, love, joy, and happiness in the ordinary routines of life with his wife, even going

so far as to write silly love poems for her, trivial if it looked at from a distance, but so intimate when seen up close.

Weems suggests that perhaps we should try rewriting the love story between God and human creation in our own modern jargon and imagery, comparing our symbols for love and passion with those of our biblical ancestors. In doing so, we might discover new depth to our understanding of the elemental love story to which we confess belief every time we enter these doors, open the tattered pages of our Bibles, bring our children for baptism, and take the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper. Who among us would not relish being the subject of so great a love story? And, indeed, we already are.

¹ Calvin Trillin, *About Alice* (New York: Random House, 2006).

² *Ibid.*

³ Renita Weems, 'Song of Songs,' *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume V* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

⁴ Renita Weems, 'Song of Songs,' *Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

⁵ Robert W. Jenson, 'Song of Songs,' *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

⁶ Fred B. Craddock et al, *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993).

⁷ Katheryn Matthews Huey, 'Be Love,' <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/august-30-2009-eighteenth-sunday-1-1-2.html> .

⁸ Weems, *NIB*, p. 394-395.

⁹ *Ibid.*