

When Our Thirst Becomes Great Enough

Song of Songs 5:1-8

I come to my garden, my sister, my bride;
I gather my myrrh with my spice,
I eat my honeycomb with my honey,
I drink my wine with my milk.

Eat, friends, drink,
and be drunk with love.

I slept, but my heart was awake.
Listen! my beloved is knocking.
'Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one;
for my head is wet with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night.'
I had put off my garment;
how could I put it on again?
I had bathed my feet;
how could I soil them?
My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,
and my inmost being yearned for him.
I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
upon the handles of the bolt.
I opened to my beloved,
but my beloved had turned and was gone.
My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him, but did not find him;
I called him, but he gave no answer.
Making their rounds in the city
the sentinels found me;
they beat me, they wounded me,

they took away my mantle,
those sentinels of the walls.
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
if you find my beloved,
tell him this:
I am faint with love.

If the Song of Songs walked into an elegant, old bar and sat down with the rest of the books of the Bible and the church walked in, I imagine the would church would sit right down next to her, right down next to the Song of Songs, tap her on the shoulder and say, “What’s on earth is a book like YOU, doing in a nice place like this?”

As far as I can tell this is largely the way the church has treated the Song of Songs for two thousand years. We’ve kept it at arms distance, if even that close.

And really, what on earth IS the Song of Songs doing in the Bible? Did you wonder about that when you were hearing those texts read? A lot of people have, including the rabbis who gathered at the coast city of Jamnia in AD 79, who met to decide, once and for all, which books would make it into the Bible and which would be left on the cutting room floor.

Most of those rabbis were against including the Song of Songs. It’s secular love poetry, they argued. The scroll ought to be kept in a brown paper wrapper and not sold where minors are present, they argued, or something like that. What they literally said is that the book “defiles the hands”. (ABD article on Songs)

And worse than this, others shouted, there’s a theological problem, here. Not only is it hotsy totsy, but the book never, NOT EVEN ONCE, mentions God.

And, even though none of them said it out loud, the other galling thing about this book, is that most of it is spoken from a woman’s perspective. Some scholars today argue it

may very well have been written by a woman. And it wasn't just any woman, but we learn from the First chapter she's a black woman, a woman darkened by working in the fields.

To have to listen to a common woman talk about her love life- well it just didn't fit in with the rest of scripture. Maybe it's decent poetry, they said, but it just doesn't belong in the Bible. And even though it squeaked its way into the canon, that didn't mean people had to like it. Song of Songs is right up there for most neglected books of all time. I'm embarrassed to say that this is really only the second time in my entire ministry I've even preached on the book. No, the church has put up with Song of Songs being in the Bible, but we've made the choice for two millennia now to all but ignore it.

Now, we all make choices about our faith. We're all selective- we choose to lift up some things and not others. And most of the time I think it just comes down to what makes sense to us at any given time. For many the rest of the Bible is so CAREFUL about sexuality- it provides so many RULES and warnings. And this book, with these two unwed lovers just reveling in each other- just going on and on about how beautiful the other is and going off in the night searching after one another. It's just so excessive and passionate- it feels more like a Romance novel than scripture.

Now, I've heard a LOT of people warn about picking and choosing like this- I've heard lot's of people warn against this sort of thing. They say, "Oh, you've got to watch out for cafeteria style religion where people are just picking and choosing what to believe. It's got to be all or nothing!" And I understand the concern. If we only listen to things that make you feel good, we miss out on opportunities to grow and change in ways we really need to. We miss out on times when we're being called to change- called to amend our lives.

I get this, I do. But the truth of it is- to some extent we're all a little bit like those Rabbis when it comes to our faith. All of us make choices, all of us pick and choose what we pay attention to and take to heart about the faith, and what aspects we treat as less important.

Poet Mary Karr learned about this the hard way. Only for her it wasn't Song of Songs that had a beef with- it was prayer. When she was waking up to the presence of faith in her life- there were all these people asking her about praying. Was she praying? And what was it like? And how was she doing it? And it was driving her nuts!

Now you have to know something about Mary Karr for this to make sense. Mary was not, shall we say, raised to be a church person. Her mother, who for most of her life was a raging alcoholic and tried to kill Mary and her sister one terrible night- her mother taught her from the time she was a little girl that religion was for weak minded people who couldn't handle the world as it is, and needed a kind of crutch to get by in it. Now Mary grew up in Texas like I did- and no offense to Texas, but she found plenty of evidence for religion being a pretty negative force in the universe.

And when you couple this kind of experience with her working her tail off to become a poet and be accepted by the literary establishment, many of whom treat faith as a kind of oddity- it's curious, and interesting, but, like most diseases, probably something better to observe than to catch.

But, like mother, and in her case, like father, too- Mary wound up living with a severe alcoholism. Her drinking became so heavy at one point she required hospitalization. Still not enough to stop her, what finally pushed her into recovery was losing control of her car one night after she gave a reading. She wound up turned around on the other side of

what was normally a very busy four lane road in Boston. And for her, that was when she knew she couldn't go on like that.

And she entered AA, and she followed everything they asked- except the higher power and the prayer part. To give you a sense of how hard this was for her, she writes: "If you'd told me even a year before I start taking my son to church regular that I'd wind up whispering my sins or on my knees praying, I would've laughed myself cockeyed. More likely pastime? Pole dancer. International spy. Drug mule. Assassin." She said for most of her life when she heard the word "God" it was like she had a reflexive flinch that coughed out the word idiot in her head." (p. 218)

So she wanted to turn her life around, she did. She was even willing to inch her way into a faith tradition. She just didn't see what was so important about prayer. When she tried to pray, she said she felt like an idiot- just sitting in a room by herself talking to who? To what? It seemed ridiculous. Prayer just didn't seem to fit, and she didn't see why she couldn't opt out.

Well, sometimes even when you want to opt out of something, you're stuck with it. And that's how it's been with the church and the Song of Songs. As far as I can tell most leaders have just wished the darn thing would just go away, but you know, once you're in the canon it's hard to get rid of you. So, we've done our best to ignore the thing, but every ONCE in a while someone was bound to read about it, so the church had to come up with some way to deal with it, to cope with it. The church was looking for some way to read the book, while not really hearing it. And we did- over the years we developed a way of reading it that kind of puts a fig leaf over our eyes.

What we've done is we've allegorized it. We've allegorized it. You know whenever I hear the word allegory, I get this picture in my head of a giant alligator chomping up a book in one big bite. And while this is kind of silly, I don't think it's a bad way to think of it- especially with the Song of Songs. See when we allegorize something, we are saying it doesn't really mean what it seems to say- we say that, yes, it sounds like it's talking about one thing, but REALLY, REALLY, down deep, it's talking about something else.

So, for instance in this case we've said, yes it *sounds* like it's two unwed lovers chasing after each other and taking the camel out to lover's lane. It does SOUND like that, but this isn't really what it means. See, really what's going on is it's a story about Christ and the church. See, the man is a SYMBOL for Christ, and the woman is a SYMBOL for the church. But that's it- it's SYMBOLIC. It's not really about two lovers, it's this really nice allegory about how much Jesus likes the church and the church likes him back.

And if you're like me, you kind of take this in for a minute- and at first I always wonder if this is really that much better. I mean is it really better to imagine Jesus as The Bachelor? But then I think, well, ok, I'm sure Jesus does like the church, and most of the time we do seem to like him back, mostly. But then I think, "Hey wait a minute. Where did you get THAT reading from? Where does it say THAT in the text? It doesn't say the man and the woman are symbols- it doesn't say that at all. And it's not like the Bible doesn't know how to clue us in when it's being allegorical. When Jesus tells a special kind of allegory called a parable- he says, "And the kingdom of heaven is LIKE this," and then he tells the story. You know from the very beginning that he's not being literal, that he's telling a story, and it's going to have some kind of allegorical meaning. But that's not what happens here- not at all. The book doesn't say God and the soul, or Christ and his church are like

this woman and this man. No, it's just the story of their love, of their search for each other- period.

And honestly, the funniest thing to me is that my friends who are always wanting to tell me how literally we're supposed to take the Bible- when it comes to the Song of Songs they're all like, "Oh no, this isn't literally about two lovers. Oh my gosh, Ken, you're being so literal. No, this is about Christ and the church." ☺

So, even though we've found ourselves stuck with the Song of Songs, we've found ways around it- we've found ways to cope with it, whether by ignoring it or allegorizing it away. Although when you read it, you can't help but thinking, "Hmm, for two symbols they sure go into a lot of detail, don't they?"

Mary Karr was the same way with prayer. Eventually her sponsors, the woman that were helping her to recover and to heal, just kept at her and her, pestering her, pointing out to her that the one thing she had never tried in all her life was prayer.

And so she eventually caved in and tried it. And she felt so awkward the first time. She said her first prayer went something like this: "[God], where the (blank) have you been?" And then she felt enveloped by this silence- and it did not feel good. Then, like pulling teeth, she said, "Thanks for keeping me sober today. And then she added, "Help me, help me, help me." (p. 220)

And then, for the first year of her sobriety, every morning she would say, "Keep me sober," and every night she would say, "Thanks". And while I probably would have been really positive with her and told her it was a great start- she says herself that she wasn't really doing this honestly- she was just doing it to placate her friends. Really, she was just coping with prayer, but not really allowing it in. And indeed, it turned out not to be enough.

After a year, she started to crater. She didn't start drinking again, but this terrible depression just started slammed her down. And she started having thoughts about suicide. And one day, after she started driving around with a hose in the back of her car, she checked herself into a mental hospital. And there, terrified out of her mind she might lose her son, terrified her entire career would be lost, there, one night, literally on the floor of her bathroom, she kneeled, and she prayed, really prayed, for the first time in her life. And all of it came out- her anger, her pain. And most importantly, at the very end- some gratitude, too. In the end she was flooded with gratitude for her son. Gratitude for her life. Gratitude for the friends that were surrounding her. She writes: "And the boundaries of my skin grow thin as I kneel there squinting my eyes shut. For a nanosecond, I am lucent..." And then, and I have to say this is what makes her SO amazing- she is as funny as she is profound. In this amazing, deep moment, she then adds: "And then it hits me. I'm actually kneeling before a toilet. The throne...how many drunken nights and slungover mornings did I worship at this altar, emptying myself of poison. And yet to pray to something above me, something invisible, had- before now- seemed degrading." (p. 277)

The one thing that saved her was the one thing she liked least at first- was the thing that she tried her best to opt out of.

And I wonder if it isn't the same with the Song of Songs. Rabbi Akiba, the one given credit for getting the Song of Songs into the Bible said, "All of the ages are not as sacred as the day the Song of Songs was given to us. All of the scriptures are holy- but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." This book that we've tried SO hard NOT to read for two thousand years. I wondered this week if it isn't the book we need most right now.

We've spent so much time worrying about whether it's Rated R or not, that we've missed it's point. We've missed that while it is an erotic book, it is sexual- it's so much MORE than that. It's SO much more than that. At it's deepest level, the Song of Songs is really about longing, our thirst- especially our longing to be known, and our thirst to be loved.

This week as I read and reread this woman's story about her longing leading her into the dangerous night to search after her love, and how she was found by the soldiers, and was beaten, and stripped- but still her only thought was of her beloved. How could I not hear this story as I watched an image of a Haitian mother heading into deadly rubble, searching, clawing after her loved ones.

And that line at the end- when the woman sings that love is stronger than death. I never understood that line. It always confused me. Love being stronger than DEATH? I would have thought she would say love is stronger than hate. But again this week, I feel like I've finally understand. For our Haitian family, hearing that love is stronger than death- why this may be the only wisp of good news they may have for a long, long time.

We need the Song of Songs because it is the most human, the most raw, the most honest book of the Bible. We need it because it asks us this- what do you thirst for, what do you ache for, really? And are you willing to head out into the nighttime after it?

Really, ask yourself that right now. Down deep- what are you thirsting for really?

And while you think about that I'll leave you with the words of Mary Karr, a woman who knows more about thirst than most:

Disgraceland

Before my first communion at 40, I clung
to doubt as Satan spider-like stalked
the orb of dark surrounding Eden
for a wormhole into paradise.

God had first formed me in the womb
small as a bite of burger.
Once my lungs were done
He sailed a soul like a lit arrow

to inflame me. Maybe that piercing
made me howl at birth,
or the masked creatures
whose scalpel cut a lightning bolt to free me--

I was hoisted by the heels and swatted, fed
and hauled through rooms. Time lapse photos show
my fingers grew past crayon outlines,
my feet came to fill spike heels.

Eventually, I lurched out to kiss the wrong mouths,
get stewed, and sulk around. Christ always stood
to one side with a glass of water.
I swatted the sap away.

When my thirst got great enough
to ask, a stream welled up inside;
some jade wave buoyed me forward;
and I found myself upright

in the instant, with a garden
inside my own ribs aflourish. There the arbor leaves.
The vines push out plump grapes.
You are loved, someone said. Take that
and eat it.

Amen.