

Loving God with the Body

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Preaching on:
Song of Songs 2:8–13

The Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon, which we just read from this morning, is all about love. It's a love poem—a rather sensual and somewhat steamy love poem at points. Its inclusion in the biblical cannon has always been a little uncomfortable for some of us.

I remember once years ago in New York City browsing through a big Barnes and Noble bookstore lost in thought. I love just walking the aisles of a library or a bookstore and letting my thoughts wander through the titles—half the time I'm looking at the books without really seeing them, you know? I had just been speaking at a protest nearby, so I was wearing my clergy collar. Well, as I walking the aisles, I was pulled out of my daydreaming by some snickering from two other customers, and from the way they were glancing over at me I thought they might be laughing at me. I snapped out of it, and I looked around and saw that I had wandered—without realizing it!—into the rather secluded Romance novel section of the store, and I had been gazing intently at books with covers full of muscly men carrying off scantily clad women, all while wearing my priestly attire. Well, coming across the Song of Songs in the Bible can feel to some of us every bit as surprising and embarrassing as that little episode in Barnes and Noble.

The poem has been interpreted as being about God's love for Israel or God's love for the Church. This interpretation elevates the poem out of the embarrassment of the erotic literature section of the bookstore, but it only solves about half the problem. Even if the poem is really about God and the Church and not two young, beautiful lovers who canNOT keep their thoughts chaste or their hands to themselves, it's still surprising that an erotic poem—and not a traditionally spiritual or religious poem—is the Bible's chosen vehicle to describe God's love for us.

This morning I was planning to tell you all about why I love God. It's my second-to-last sermon as your pastor, and I thought I should be direct and try to leave you with a little inspiration. But as I was writing and rewriting this sermon, it was just kind of boring. Every angle I took, every sermon illustration I came up with, every good reason I have for loving God—it all just kind of fell flat. It was missing a spark. And so I sat down with the scripture reading and it was all right there—the passion, the longing, the desire, the erotic connection. Maybe more important than telling you why I love God, this morning I should tell you something about how I love God.

First, we have to deal with this word “erotic” and define it because it's a word that gets misused a lot. Often “erotic” is used as a synonym for “pornographic.” But that's not how I see it. The erotic, for me, is anything that connects me back to the rhythms, feelings, and experiences of my body. If the word “erotic” is too much for you, you could replace it with the word “somatic” maybe, except that the word somatic is kind of clinical and dead. The word erotic is full of the living energies of the body.

Sexual energy is what we associate most often with the word erotic, but that's only a part of it. Drinking a glass of water on a hot day, or going to a museum and looking at art, or making a piece of art, or eating a juicy clementine, or going for a walk with a dear friend, or working in the garden, or standing up in church and singing a hymn are all, by my definition, erotic experiences. Because in each of these activities I am connected through my living body to the world around me. Without my body, without the abilities and energy it brings, none of those very good things would be possible.

It's deeply troubling to me that we live in world where we're surrounded by the pornographic—which is a sort of exploitation and distortion of the erotic. This is kind of the way our world works—marketplaces want to sell us the highly processed, sugar-added version of things that would otherwise be good for us. The erotic is the whole, healthy food, not the all-sugar version. And so, of course, the church should be a place in people's lives where you are fed the whole, real food of the erotic. But so often, instead, the church is an erotic desert—a place of fasting and denial.

And there is certainly a healthy place for fasting in our lives, but hopefully that fasting is leading us back to balance, and not just to a life of abstinence. Because another way of defining the erotic is to say that it's just embodied spirituality—it is spirituality in a body which is the only way that any of us will ever experience the spiritual or the holy or God. Whenever we meet God in life, we meet God in our bodies and that means that God is meeting us and communicating with us erotically. And the Song of Songs reminds us that nothing is left out of that intimate connection—including the clandestine

passions of young lovers trying to find a way to sneak out of the house and get away together.

When we cut our bodies off as an acceptable pathway for connecting to God, our faith can become a little too heady and intellectual and talky. It also leads to endless guilt about the natural desires and needs of our bodies. Being taught that hunger or desire or dancing or whatever is bad and sinful causes all kinds of confusion and spiritual distress. You know, there are a lot of really good reasons that young lovers shouldn't sneak out of the house together, right? The Song of Songs acknowledges this. It says, "love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it." In other words, be careful, young padawan! There are a lot of really good reasons that young lovers shouldn't sneak out of the house together, but one of them IS NOT that God gets mad about the kinds of things that bodies desire and do, when they desire them and do them lovingly, justly, consensually, mutually, with full regard for the potential consequences, right?

Jesus tells us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. To me, this means, love God with everything you've got. Don't leave anything off the table. Certainly not our bodies, which are so central to our existence as God's creatures. Our bodies are not something to be defeated or dominated or gotten over or left behind, they are our only pathways to knowing and loving the world and God.

You know, every time one of my kids bonks his head or scrapes his knee, I feel it on *my* head, in *my* knee. I feel their pain. I explained this to Romey and he started punching himself in the arm when he got mad at me. "Do you feel that, Dad?!" But this pain I feel in my body when they feel pain in their bodies is partially instinct—a built in feature of human potential—and partially memory—activating that neural pathways laid down in my brain from decades of head bonks and knee scrapes of my own. It's my body's wisdom—a collaboration between God and experience—teaching me something about that most spiritual of virtues: compassion.

Because compassion and empathy don't live in a disembodied spiritual world, their roots are right here in the flesh. It's not surprising that our current culture war between extreme right and extreme left is mostly fueled by social media and played out online where our bodies are profanely removed from the interaction. Bodies have wisdom, love, compassion, care, and desire for pleasure and peace and togetherness built into them as basic components of embodiment. Much of Western religious culture taught us to be mistrustful of our bodies, and as those antierotic attitudes have secularized, we're now moving further and further away from one another physically. I don't think we can survive as a virtual species—we need to be in our bodies together to really do togetherness at all.

Just like we can't really have the best virtual relationships with other people, we also shouldn't have a virtual relationship with God. For me, this means becoming as aware as possible of my physical body: its desires, needs, pleasures, pains, abilities, and activities, and absolutely expecting that God is physically present within all of my physical experiences. God doesn't have a body separate from mine

or yours. But God is as fully present in my physical experience as God is present in my intellectual or emotional or spiritual experiences (all of which are really, if you think about it, physical experiences as well).

When you begin to allow yourself to love God with your body and with your physical experiences and activities, the whole world comes alive spiritually. Everybody should have at least one (to begin with) physical, embodied, regular practice that is specifically about connecting to God. Working in a garden is a good one. Singing in the choir. Walking the dog. The key is to give that activity over to God like it was a sacrament.

When we take communion together, that is a physical activity in which we fully expect God to show up. That's not the magic of the church at work. That's the magic of your own expectations. In fact, all of creation, I believe can be a sacrament. And God can show up physically wherever God chooses. The question is: Are you ready to experience it? Do you believe that your body is, indeed, holy ground? That your 15-minute walk with the dog in the morning contains as much potential for God's activity as the Temple's Holy of Holies? Because once you release your physical experience from the expectation of the profane, and invite God to show up to you, God will rush in and fill your body.

God will rush in and fill you with such passion and desire and playfulness and love and attention and care and excitement that you will begin to feel what the author of the Song of Songs most certainly knew: that God does not love us or desire us in a disembodied, intangible way. God loves us fiercely, passionately, even physically. God is panting at the window lattice of our inner-most private boudoir, calling to us to sneak away, to run together in the blooming fragrant world, and to be young lovers together, however old we may grow.