

Kate Amoss: C'est L'amour

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Sermon for Seekers – August 31, 1997

In the months before my mother's death on the seventh of this month, there was a minor drama going on within my extended family. My mother's younger sister, my aunt, was actively concerned that my mother was going to die without naming Jesus Christ as her savior. Her sister, who is the wife of a Methodist Missionary, would call me or my mother's best friend from time to time to anxiously inquire if we, whom she perceived to be in her camp, had made any progress with my mother. My aunt also had a prayer chain that probably circled the globe more than once in order to pray for my mother's conversion. Needless to say if you knew my mother, my mother won out. When I was given the task of planning my mother's funeral service, I was emphatically told by my step-father to avoid any religious imagery. My mother's determination to shun organized religion, in spite of my aunt's determination, had only increased as her end had approached. The day before the funeral, four of us sat around designing a service that carefully avoided any mention of the hereafter, prayer, or god. Nonetheless, I believe that we ended up with a ritual that was deeply satisfying. We blended music, personal witness, and poetry to create meaning. The quilt that this community helped me make for my mother was draped over her casket, perfect in its proportions. Several people approached us afterwards to tell us that the experience had been far more spiritual than any that they had had in a church.

The gospel lesson today from Mark 7 is a story that

underscores the importance of authenticity in ritual. Jesus chastises the Pharisees for confusing the traditions of the church with the traditions and laws of god. Jesus reminds his listeners of the words of Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." He is reminding us that the letter of the law and the spirit of the law are not the same. The spirit can emerge, as it did at my mother's funeral, without a temple, a priest, or a proper doctrine. This, of course, is not news to us here at Seekers. Yet, I still believe that it is worth exploring more deeply what it means to honor god with our hearts. If we refer again to the gospel lesson, we are told what to avoid – fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and folly – but we are not told what to do. How do we honor god with our hearts? What is the spirit of the law?

I believe that one of the best expressions of the spirit of the law is contained in the Old Testament reading for today, the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is in the heart of the Bible, right in the center. Even though it has traditionally been interpreted by a church that abhors the body and the sexual act as merely an allegorical expression of god's love for Israel, it is more correctly seen and understood as an unabashed love poem. It is ripe with the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of sensual love. There is some evidence that links the Song of Songs with the much older poetic tradition of the goddess Innana of Sumeria, Sumeria being a civilization of the Bronze Age that settled on the fertile land between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. Innana had important links with an even earlier but largely unrecorded Neolithic goddess tradition where the creation of the world was an act of love between Heaven and Earth. Divine love and human love were perfectly equated. There are echoes of this in the passage from the Song of Songs. The bride calls out, "The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a

gazelle or a young stag. Look there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me, Arise my love, my fair one, and come to me." The bridegroom arrives, leaping upon the mountains much in the same way that the sun arrives every morning, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over hills, gazing in windows but at the same time the image is also fully human and recognizable to us. It is a moment of intense joy and perfect fulfillment.

The "Song of Songs" is also a story of harmony and plenty. The bridegroom announces to his bride when he sees her, "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 fragrance." In this poem, the couple is at home in creation. They can trust in its abundance. The joy of the two lovers is a deep soul joy that ushers in goodness. To meet someone or something soul to soul is always special. Such meetings leave fingerprints on our heart. All differences in age, sex, wealth, intelligence, sexual orientation, race, and appearance become irrelevant. A connection between souls is founded in complete equality. This is what we mean when we speak of communion and what Martin Buber had in mind when he said that all living is meeting.

Soul is not a complicated idea. It is simply about having a real, authentic experience, one that moves us in some way. An experience of the soul is one that we can believe in because we have been changed somehow. Soul is not a grand idea either, not like spirit which reaches for perfection. A soul change is about getting down, letting go, and putting your feet up on the coffee table. Soul is about feeling more at home in this world. It is a big belly laugh or a good cry. Soul is about singing on Friday nights with Jesse and Glen. It is any experience of joy and belonging. Soul is a tangled garden of zinnias, peppers, and tomatoes. Soul is about enough. Soul is

at the heart of the gospel.

I want to tell you a story about my mother because I believe that my mother taught me something very important about living authentically.

Not too long ago my mom told me that when she was growing up that her dad used to call her a prickly pear cactus. This really amused me because in many ways the description was quite apt. My mother was inflexible in her convictions. When she intended to do something, she did it. This was a quality that every speaker at her funeral alluded to. She was also prickly. In general, she spent little energy in trying to be pleasing just to get along with others. She spoke her mind. She also knew how to survive in the desert – an aptitude that you will see more clearly when I tell her story. And finally, as I had the fortune and grace to discover, her being was filled with a life-sustaining nectar that had the capacity to nourish those in need.

When mother was fifty-six, she risked everything for authenticity. This is a common enough story. She had been in an empty marriage for ten years. She had fallen into patterns that negated life. She and my father quarreled constantly. Mother pulled away from social contact and lost any meaningful contact with her parents, her siblings, her friends and neighbors. I did not know her. She spoke openly to no one. She endured this state of affairs until the three of us children, myself and my two younger brothers were more or less grown. I was twenty-seven and about to be married when my mother told me that she was divorcing my father and marrying our neighbor who was also planning to divorce his wife. I was partly shocked, partly relieved, and mostly amazed. I never thought that my very proper mother would have the courage to do such a thing.

Mom risked everything for a love that she believed was true. We lived in a small town in Connecticut and the social

pressure to stay married was intense. She knew that the cost would be high but she never could have guessed how high. My father took the divorce well enough. He suffered but he also benefited in the long run. Curt, my mother's new husband, was not so fortunate. Audrey, his ex-wife, was devastated. She was a well-known figure in town. She had been our region's representative in the state senate for years. She was an excellent legislator and was beloved by all who knew her. Two years after the divorce, she slit her wrists and slowly bled to death in some nearby woods. She died on the day before she was scheduled to be remarried to my father – but that is another story.

As you might imagine, the repercussions were terrible. My mother was considered to be a murderess. People spat at her in the grocery store. Her social circle abandoned her. She and Curt were cut out of the usual rounds of parties and events. And to make things worse, a week after her mother's death, Curt's daughter, Meredith, a recent graduate of Harvard University, suffered a psychotic break and was hospitalized. Her schizophrenia which she had successfully managed until that time became the defining reality of her life. She would spend the next ten years of her life in an awful state institution. Curt's son, Ron, outraged by his mother's death, also cut my mother and his father out of his life.

For many years my mother lived in comparative isolation. I never, ever heard her complain, however. She was genuinely sorry about what had happened but she was also clear in her heart that she had chosen life and authenticity at whatever cost. My mother's happiest times were spent in foreign lands. Among strangers, she and Curt had a lot of fun. When at home, she dedicated her life to helping Meredith cope with her schizophrenia. I felt distant from my mother and my heart was weighed down by a heavy stone. I felt as if I should be making things better but I was at a total loss of how to go about it.

When I first heard about my mother's cancer over a year ago, I

felt a terrible aching loneliness. I was about to lose a mother that I hardly knew. I had a glimmer of her strength but even that I could not see fully. During this past year, we have had several soul encounters but the most important one was the meeting with the quilt. Last April, I was feeling overwhelmed by life. I was heading toward the last few months of a two-year masters program during which I commuted out to California once a month. I was scheduled to take my oral exam in June. My internship was more than I could handle and my mother was dying. I felt as if I was just hanging on by a thread. There was never enough of anything – time, love, or energy.

During this time, Jackie McMakin convinced me to take a walk in the woods with her one day. She challenged me to imagine how I could shift from surviving to thriving. That felt like one more demand that was beyond my reach. At the time I told her that perhaps I could make a quilt for my mom. By the next day, this idea seemed really crazy so I ditched it. I was in the midst of studying for my orals, I didn't have time to make a quilt. A week later, I laughingly mentioned the idea to another dear friend and she said to me, "But you don't have to do it all by yourself."

This possibility had never occurred to me. I had been in the midst of many wonderful community quilts at Seekers but the thought had never crossed my mind. At first I was scared. I thought I would send out white squares of cloth to various friends and family just as we have done with other Seeker's quilts. I couldn't imagine who I should ask. Slowly, I was able to feel my way into the project from my mother's perspective. Who would she want to be represented in this quilt? I called person after person, calls that went out to Hawaii, Texas, Oregon, Washington state, New York, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Connecticut. Everyone was enthusiastic. They were so grateful to me. I discovered that without my realization, my mother had slowly over the years mended the

important bridges in her life. All the squares came back to me promptly four weeks later.

Two weeks before my orals in California and my mother's birthday – the two events happened to fall on the same day in June – I put together the quilt in one day with an enormous amount of help from this community. Sallie organized everything for me. Margarita, Liz Vail, Diane, and Juanita all showed up. I had a real experience of abundance that day. I was able to discover the meaning of what it is to thrive instead just survive.

My mom loved the quilt. I called her from California on her birthday after having passed my exam and she couldn't stop talking about the quilt. She said that it was the best present that she had ever gotten in her life.

I was able, through my mother, to know the sweet taste of nectar in the desert.

The offertory music is Edith Piaf. This is the piece that we chose to close my mother's service as a tribute to her life. You might recognize a touch of the New Orleans jazz funeral in this selection – that would be Billy's influence. The song, *C'est L'Amour* means it is love. It is love that gives us soul.