

“The Body, Desire, and the Faith Journey” by Billy Amoss

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Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Good morning. I'd like to ask you to close your eyes and breathe in and out. Just pay attention to your breath as you inhale and exhale. Now open your eyes and together let's take a deep breath in and let it out with a sigh. Let's do that again: deep breath in, and out with a sigh.

This simple practice can be very helpful in bringing us into the present and making us aware of the centrality of our physicality.

What if you started your daily prayer with these words,

“I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine.”

And the Beloved answered:

“How beautiful you are, my love,

and without a blemish.”

What if the words got a lot racier, indeed, highly erotic?

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,

Your love is more delightful than wine.”

“On my bed at night I sought him, whom my heart loves.”

The Song of Songs, a book made up a series of love poems attributed to King Solomon, celebrates the erotic love between a man and a woman. It is a book in the Hebrew Bible,

or Old Testament, and so it is part of holy scripture for Jews and Christians alike. And yet there is no mention of God, the Law, or anything else explicitly religious. Its passionate language is steeped in the physicality of the

two lovers, whose desire for one another drives them endlessly to seek, to find, to divide and to unite. The two lovers are animated by the life energy, by eros.

Jewish tradition understands this “greatest of all songs” allegorically: the relationship of the lovers is that between God and Israel. Christian tradition adopted the same explanation, though in Christianity the allegory becomes one of Christ (the bridegroom) and his Church (the bride). Of course, there are other interpretations, including the more obvious one, which is that the Song is a hymn to true love sanctified by union or marriage. And since God has given his blessing to marriage, the theme can be deemed to be religious and not merely of a physical nature. Phew! This makes it ok to be part of the Bible.

In modern Judaism the Song is read on the Sabbath during the Passover. If you are an observant Jew, then you are exposed to the passionate music of the Song regularly. In Christianity we have no such tradition. In this week’s Lectionary readings, a few verses of the Song are offered as an alternative to a passage from one of the more familiar – and definitely not erotic – psalms.

I believe this neglect of the Song is a loss, because a regular encounter with the Song can help us to bring our full physicality, including our desire for the erotic, to our relationship with the divine, with the Beloved, with God.

How do we find the sacred in the erotic? By erotic I mean life energy, which sometimes includes sex but is not the same as sex. Sex is a physical act; it is linked to

reproduction (whether practiced that way or not) and physical pleasure but not necessarily to a positive emotional connection. While the erotic in the Song includes sex, the Song is a celebration of the positive emotional connection between the lovers, the life energy that animates them, eros.

Richard Rohr, in his book *Falling Upward*, says that we respond to people's energy more than their words or actions. Why do I feel drawn or repelled? Rohr says that what we all desire and need from one another is that life energy, which he calls eros. It always attracts us, creates, and connects things. Its opposite – death energy- makes us numb, insensitive, irritable, and cruel.

Rohr states:

“This is surely what Jesus meant when he said that you could only tell a good tree from a bad one by its fruit (Matthew 7:20). Inside of life energy (eros), a group or family will be productive and energetic; inside of death energy there will be gossip, cynicism, and mistrust hiding behind every interaction.”

The lovers in the Song operate inside of life energy, inside eros. They are in harmony, they desire each other, and the language they use to describe their desire for one another uses images of beauty drawn from the natural world. They rejoice in their intimacy.

The bridegroom speaks of his bride as a palm tree,

“its fruit-clusters (are) your breasts.

I will climb the palm tree, I will seize its clusters of dates.

May your breasts be clusters of grapes,

Your breath sweet-scented as apples,

Your speaking, superlative wine.”

The question arises: If the Song is about the intensely passionate and sacred relationship between lovers, be they the divine and the human, or man and woman, or, to make it fully relevant to our culture, man and man or woman and woman, does sacred, life-affirming love always have to be so intense, so all-consuming? Surely, if we lived every day the way the lovers in the Song live, we would soon be spent, and we would withdraw from exhaustion.

The psychologist Barbara Fredrickson studies the biology of love, or what she terms shared positive emotion. She claims that love blossoms virtually anytime two or more people connect over a shared positive emotion, and that this fundamental essence of love is the same across all relationships, whether between romantic partners, parents and children or total strangers. Fredrickson says that although such experiences may be fleeting, their physical and psychological effects lead to deeper bonds and even improved health. Her current research investigates these micro-moments of love. When two people feel positive emotions in each other's company, you can see it in their body language: the way they move, how engaged they are, how their gestures mirror each other. There's also facial mimicry: one person smiles and the other smiles back. When people share a positive emotion, certain biochemicals in their bodies rise in unison, and there's a similarity of neural firings. This neural synchrony could also happen in larger groups, such as a stadium full of people who all stand up and cheer at the same time. Or maybe a piece of music brings a crowd's movements into sync. This real time sensory connection is a precondition for micro-moments of love to emerge. “When you and I are connecting,” Fredrickson says, “and I express a positive emotion, it can bring out the same emotion in you, which, as you express it, is going to amplify my emotion.” Rather than trying to degrade love,

Fredrickson wants to enhance our understanding of love by elevating these momentary experiences we typically trivialize. The immediate effects of these positive connections to others may be short-lived, but a steady diet of such experiences creates long-term benefits. Fredrickson's research shows that, "the positive experiences we have with others are like nutrients: we need a daily dose of them to stay healthy."

(Example of facial mimicry: Smiling).

I believe that God, or the Beloved, or the divine, can be experienced in our loving connections to others, and that this loving connection can include strangers. This understanding of love then greatly expands our access to the divine to include our daily interactions rather than limiting it to the intensity of the relationship expressed and glorified in the Song. If LOVE writ large is on a pedestal, these micro-moments of love belong up there, too.

What are the practices that nurture loving connections, the shared positive emotions that create the experience of love and thus generate feelings of warmth, caring and friendliness toward oneself and others?

Well, one practice familiar to most Christians is prayer, daily prayer, prayer as we move through the rhythms of the day.

Take a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. Hold up one hand, and make slow smooth movements with your hands; now make some fast and smooth movements with your hand; now hold your hand in stillness and notice that it is making a shape. Make another shape with your hand and hold I in stillness, and another shape. Now touch some part of your body with your hand; now touch a different part of your body. I've given you some tools to play with. Now I'm going to put on a brief piece of music and I'd like you to make some movements

with your hand, and include stillness. I'd like you to bring to mind someone you care about, or a situation that's on your mind, and I'd like these movements of your hand to be a wordless prayer for that person's well-being, or for that situation to be blessed and healed.

If we want to be fully alive and experience love and joy and not just live to be free of pain and survive, then play can be immensely helpful. As we've just experienced, prayer, too, has a playful dimension.

InterPlay offers a set of tools that open us up to the creative process, which is at the heart of play.

Our culture trivializes play, often equating it with silliness or something you might do in your leisure time – if you happen to have any. Play, as understood in InterPlay, has everything to do with exploring ways to make connections to one's deepest self and to others through movement or dance, storytelling, vocalizing, as well as stillness. And InterPlay offers very definite forms that create the container in which all of these things can happen. The forms are the necessary "limitations" or boundaries that the creative process needs in order to flourish. As research shows, play promotes plasticity of the brain, something we adults all need, especially as we age. But more to the point, play creates micro-moments of love, to use Barbara Fredrickson's term, and we need a steady diet of these loving connections, however fleeting they may be, to be healthy. I would add that we need them to feel momentarily whole.

The lovers in the Song of Songs are driven by their desire for each other, but no sooner do they find one another than they are separated again and the yearning and seeking for one another begins anew. At the heart of their passionate seeking of one another is a playful interaction that just barely keeps the yearning from becoming overly heavy,

obsessive, and debilitating. The lovers actually have each other only briefly. This is the essence of desire. Desire is not about having, it is about wanting, it is about seeking passionately and allowing play to be part of the quest. And desire is at the core of our seeking union with the divine, and with each other, and wanting to feel whole.

Esther Perel, a well-known therapist who specializes in the dynamics of long-term relationships, says “desire resides in separateness. Desire is about curiosity and discovery. It is not about security. When we’ve won the object of our desire, it’s a type of loss. Getting what we want takes away the thrill of wanting it, the deliciousness of yearning, the strategies of pursuit, the charged fantasies. “

Isn’t this what is at the heart of the Song of Songs, of the two lovers who never grow tired of pursuing each other because they can never actually have each other except in grace-filled moments of ecstasy? Don’t we all desire and endlessly yearn for and pursue abiding connection with our true self and with each other, but only experience this in the fleeting micro-moments of love? It may be outside of our capacity as human beings to experience wholeness and connection to the divine and all of creation in every moment, but through practices such as prayer – and InterPlay- and with the gift of Grace, love can blossom in moments of shared positive emotions, and these life-giving experiences can build up over time and give us a taste of being whole in the here and now.