

August 30, 2009
Song of Songs 2:8-13
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
“Love Song”
Rev Jeffrey Cheifetz
The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

Song of Songs 2:8-13

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 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 fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Swedenborg:

It must be observed, that one cannot be purified from evils, and the falsities thence, unless the unclean things that are within come forth even into the thought, and are there seen, acknowledged, discerned, and rejected. From these things it is evident, that that which enters into the mouth, signifies, in the spiritual sense, that which enters into the thought from the memory and from the world; but that which comes out of the mouth, in the spiritual sense, signifies thought from the will, or from the love. For the heart, from which it comes out into the mouth, and from the mouth, signifies the will and love of man; and since the love and will constitute the whole person, for as is the love so is the one's quality, therefore those things which proceed therefrom into the mouth, and out of the mouth, make one unclean. That these are evils of every kind, is evident from the things there enumerated. In this way is this saying of the Lord [Matthew 25: 11, 17-19] Mark 7:21-23] understood in the heavens.

Apocalypse Explained #580

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1) Spirituality that is significant at all has to do with relationship. Relationship with self, neighbor, and God. There are different ways of doing it. Some are non-institutional and freeform, and some are highly liturgical, but all are expressions of the heart's longing for connection and for meaning that transcends the merely personal. Some are highly intellectual, and some are primarily

emotional in expression, but a spirituality that changes a life, and changes lives, involves the body, the intellect, the emotions, the soul, and the community. We might say that spirituality is a search for the ground of all being, or for answers, wholeness, or inner and outer peace. We truncate it when we emphasize the inner world over the need for compassion and justice in the world, and vice versa. Somehow it must encompass the interior and exterior, the details as well as the great sweep of creation.

2) Here is one picture of what the interior life of a seeker of God, of truth, of reality, looks like, according to the mystical writer of the Song of Songs:

We are pursued by an insistent lover who tries to get our notice through the dusty window of our intellect, rattles the lattice that offers the illusion of protection from insight, and seduces with sweet words about running off together and starting a new life. Do we listen? Perhaps. Do we abandon ourselves to the impulse to run and fling open the door, and disappear into the night with our suitor? Or do we even hear the noise of his approach, of his existence, of his words? Do we even know that a Lover is just outside the walls?

Now, this business about being pursued is mighty inconvenient. Why? Well, we have our own agenda. We have plans, dreams, and anxieties. We come up with ought's and should's and could-be's. We have things to do, places to go, and people to see. We have spent our lives building our house with its secure walls (or perhaps they are not quite as secure as we would like), windows that let in a little light but not too much; and then, with second thoughts about having windows at all, we obscure the view with some nice ironwork.

We have our own rules about life; we know what works and what does not. Our other love affairs have gone more or less well; what can else can one expect? We have heard inviting words before. They either lead us into dead ends, or eventually we run into our own limitations; and, then, believing that it's all up to us, we give up, drop out, or think of some excuse for not continuing with the love affair that has become a commitment, a struggle, a duty, a chore. We lose sight of the spiritual, forgetting that it is right in front of us in our material existence, hidden away and yet really there, waiting to be seen. We become cynical, 'realistic', hardened, stubborn, jaded, tired, unsure.

If it weren't for those annoying truths and insights that pop up out of the woodwork once in a while, jump up and down, and demand attention. If only the busyness of making a life didn't get in the way of becoming more spiritual. If only those other people we are supposed to love would be easier to like. If only they didn't get so grouchy and tetchy and demanding, church....oops, life would be easier. And, when the sweet seductive words of the Lover start up again, just outside the door, we begin having convenient headaches.

3) Now if you think I am overdoing it, then you need to be reminded by educator and lay theologian Verna J. Dozier (in **Springtime Rhapsody!** http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_940849_BProper17&week=B_Proper_17; author of *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cowley Publications), and *The Authority of the Laity* (The Alban Institute) that the ancient author of the Song of Solomon wrote "wonderful and exciting poetry, pulsating with youth and vigor. One wonders what form of denial was operating that made the old King James version caption these exuberant frolics of young love as "Church's Love for Christ" and "The Love of Christ and His Church." That Christ and that church were hardly a part of human experience when these wedding songs were written. The ancient Hebrews knew what they were about when they acknowledged sexuality—the full range of the body as worthy to be celebrated, a fit offering for God. Perhaps a pale glimpse of this experience lingers in the Havergal hymn we sang in Sunday school:

*Take my hands and let them move
At the impulse of thy love:
Take my heart, it is thine own
It shall be thy royal throne.*

The psalm is an ode for a royal wedding.”

Rabbi Akiba, (**Akiba ben Yossef** (ca.50–ca.135 CE) a Judean Rabbinic sage of the latter part of the 1st century and the beginning of the 2nd century (3rd tannaitic generation). He was a great authority in the matter of Jewish tradition, and one of the most central and essential contributors to the Mishnah and Midrash Halakha. He is referred to in the Talmud as "*Rosh la-Chachomim*" (Head of all the Sages). He is considered by many to be one of the earliest founders of rabbinical Judaism.), fought to include the Song of Songs in the Biblical canon. He wrote, "The entire universe is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5).

In the 12th century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux preached 86 sermons on the Song of Songs and never got beyond the 3rd chapter.

4) Usually this passage and others like it in the Song of Songs are taken either as secular love poetry or theological metaphor of God and the people. But we need to read it first of all as love poetry with all the passion and physical quality that falling in love demands. Only with the power of the very real sex drive in background does the overwhelming focus of the metaphor of falling in love with God (and vice versa) come into focus.

Now if that makes us nervous, so be it. The Song is in the Bible, and is part of God's word to us. The image of our relationship with the divine as one of being pursued by the divine lover is an old one, and we ignore it to our loss, to our poverty of spirit in this anxious time of real and imagined fears.

5) I must say that I am not much of a contemplative, or a mystic. There are times I seem to see beyond the veil of physicality, beyond the surface of this reality, but most of the time I do not. There are times I seem to hear words beyond the ability of the physical senses to hear, but not often. I have had some interesting experiences of guidance in the midst of seeking, and sometimes when not seeking. I do find words of wisdom suddenly leaping out of books, articles, movies, which demand, which rivet, my attention, which seduce me to think again, look again, pray again, love again.

I suppose that will have to do; others have their own ways of seeing, hearing, and responding. And response is where the rubber hits the road, where spirituality has its outlet, its proof. How we respond outwardly to inner truth is the test of true inner change of heart and mind and soul. It is the true test of whatever we call our 'spirituality'.

6) We read in the Gospel that Jesus takes the religious experts to task for criticizing his disciples' lack of ritual purity practices. It is quite the polemical argument. We have to know that the issue of purity was very important at that time. It was the way that people addressed their concern for distinguishing the sacred and the profane. Purity codes structured the world so that people, things, places, and times could be evaluated as godly or ungodly. Purity codes helped determine who was part of the sacred community, of 'our group', and who was not. God was understood as pure and most concerned with purity. The Pharisees were trying to maintain that orthodoxy; we cannot fault them for doing so. However, it is the failing of religious authorities everywhere at all times that the correct form, which is meant to guide us toward God, can outweigh the ultimate importance of the authentically devotional heart. Jesus was critiquing not just an overemphasis on outward practices to the detriment of genuine devotion and inner sincerity, he was critiquing a concept of God. There were very high stakes in this argument.

It is a truism that Jesus called people beyond mere ritual and religion of purity codes to genuine devotion to living out God's will. Hurtful stuff that comes out of our life reflects the corruption of our soul; the good that comes out of our life demonstrates the health and wholeness of our life. God's concern is that inner self and actual life become congruent in terms of active good. God is present and active in the world, accomplishing that which is good, honest, compassionate,

generous, and of lasting value. God's glory is grace, not ritual sanitation. Jesus refused his contemporaries, and refuses us, the comfort of a carefully regulated religion.

7) The sacrament of baptism is a reminder that both form and substance are vitally important to our spiritual lives. Ritual helps us encapsulate eternal realities in a form we can handle. Ritual is not an end unto itself, something we do and then walk away from, forgetful of its meaning and implication. Ritual is a doorway through which we pass, as we move from who we are now, to who we are meant to become.

Ritual is important because whether done in private or in community, it assists us in focusing our attention on the relationship we have with God. It can be a doorway into another, deeper life, in which we experience the love of God deeply for ourselves, and then act in the world with love and wisdom.

8) In ending, God's love is sometimes communicated to us in poetic form (S of Songs), and sometimes it comes via rebuke (Mark 7). God searches for us like a lover - will we accept his entreaties? God also speaks to us like a prophet - will we hear, and change, and deepen? Our response is what is important - that is, what comes out of us into the world - for it may or may not be in harmony with our professed love for God. That is our journey - seeking congruence between what we say we believe, and who we are, so that become "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22).

May it be so.