Practical Faith

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
September 1, 2024
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

It seems incredible to me that this really stimulating poetry (from the Song of Songs/Song of Solomon) *made it into* the Hebrew Scripture Canon. But it did, the Song of Songs, also called the Song of Solomon. It faced a great deal of debate among Rabbis, in the early centuries around the inclusion of the Song of Songs being included in the Canon, but a major champion of the book was Rabbi Akiva, a prominent scholar who once said, "For all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."[1] How is that for a scholarly testimonial?

Later, it was the Early Christian Church that had to struggle over the Song of Songs, deciding, prayerfully if it would be included in the Biblical Canon which included the Hebrew Scriptures alongside the Christian Scriptures.

Here it is, uncomfortable as we may feel, this poem of passionate – and sometimes blatantly sexual – love, appearing among our liturgical readings.

I led Monday night Bible studies at a church in Oshawa about 20 years ago, with a group of about a dozen women. They were so much fun to spend time with, grappling with Biblical texts. When I proposed that we study the Song of Songs, the turnout *increased*! They wanted to see this male minister blush. And blush I did. Passionately, we navigated through the chapters of this, at times racy, Book of the Bible, laughing and marvelling that these are part of our Bible.

The Christian Tradition, through its 2,000-year lifetime, has too often held that the (human) body is not at all beautiful and to be cherished from a faith perspective, but instead that it is to evil, to be shunned as we wait for our "pure" heavenly body. Yet, somehow, in spite that of that perspective, the Song of Songs maintained its place in the Bible. The way Fathers of Christian faith rationalized that this Love Story in the Song of Songs is Scripture, but only by interpreting it as "allegory" – not really human love poetry, but, instead, love poetry between Christ and is Church.

Benjamin, you did a remarkable job reading from the Song of Songs – be thankful that you didn't have to read some of the other chapters that would have made you blush. I could have skipped this reading, because it seems to say little about God or Jesus. But don't we live, don't our children and grandchildren live today in hypersexualized culture, a culture that skews the images of what is natural, what is healthy, to the point that we come to accept harmful norms about attractiveness, about gender and power, and identity? Perhaps it is good for us to blush together in celebration of the main character in this book, a woman, who possesses the power to define her own embodied self.

[1] "How Did Song of Solomon Get Into the Bible Anyway?" relevantmagazine.com August 11, 2022 https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/church/how-did-song-of-solomon-get-into-the-bible-anyway/

Thank you to those ancient men, particularly that superstar Rabbi Akiva, who accepted that embodiment is to be celebrated rather than shunned.[2]

Now to the James reading, the Book of the Bible that Tradition held to have been written by James, the brother of Jesus. There really is little factual evidence about who the author of the Book of James is, but some scholars do point out that this book holds firm to many of the principles that Jesus taught.

Dr. Joy Moore suggests that we might imagine for a moment, the lessons taught in the Book of James might have originated in Jesus' childhood home – taught to the boys by mother Mary.[3]

Central to this faith is an understanding of the contrast between "Good" and "Bad" religion – true religion (verses 26-27), "True religion watches out for the vulnerable and also for one's own vulnerability." [4]

Consider that ever since the Israelites entered what Biblical text calls the "Promised Land", that is, modern day Palestine and Israel, the colonizing Israelites were tempted to incorporate the indigenous religions of those they plundered into their own Judaism. James is speaking to the those who claim ancestry in the Israelites, Jewish Christians. James reminds them of their Torah teachings, God's rules for good living – to not just *believe* in Torah, but to *live it*. We modern Christians might do well to ponder what we believe in, and whether we not only speak it, but do we fully live out what we believe? Do we love our neighbours, but fundamentally, do we love and value ourselves? These are values entrusted to us by our Jewish and Christian ancestors, to love our God, to love our ourselves and our neighbours. This is not an abstract adherence to laws and regulations, this is a legacy of love left to us – a legacy of generous, no, I dare say "extravagant" love poured on us first by our Creator – and we, in turn, are to pour out that love on absolutely every neighbour, especially the most vulnerable ones.

This is wisdom at its best – teaching us how to live righteously, that is, to live in right relations with our Creator and with our neighbours. This is the call from James to live according to God's vision, not just say "Ok, I'll do it later", and then neglecting to do it. "Good Religion" is about *doing* the faith, now.

James contrasts this Good Religion with a more passive faith, suggesting a great metaphor. Imagine, James says, looking into a mirror at yourself and then forgetting how you appeared – "hearing", but not "doing." One Bible commentator calls this phenomenon spiritual forgetfulness, and offers an example:[5]

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[2] For more stories about Rabbi Akiva, read this most interesting article https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/do-the-song-of-songs-and-ecclesiastes-belong-in-the-bible/

[3] See "Sermon Brainwave" on WorkingPreacher.org, https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/980-fifteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-22b-sep-1-2024

[4] Aaron L. Uitti, "Exegetical Perspective", *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ). © 2011 WJK.

[5] Ibid. Peter Rhea Jones, "Homiletical Perspective".

> There was a man who began cutting his grass on a scorching Saturday. He had a lot of lawn. Perspiring, he thought how good a tall glass of lemonade would taste. He went inside into the air-conditioning, poured an oversized glass, and settled into a big easy chair. He decided to look up the word "weed" in the dictionary and found "any plant growing where it was not wanted."
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> He went back outside, surveyed the lawn, and decided that every blade stood exactly where he wanted it! He rationalized away doing.

How do we exercise our spiritual muscles of love and justice, not just daily, as if fulfilling a quota or satisfying a rule? Instead, how do we live out those core principles grounded in love and equity and justice every waking moment, as naturally as breathing? Someone says or does something to trigger an angry reaction inside of me. How do I not supress anger, but instead to pause long enough so that the anger I express is grounded in love rather than malice? Someone among us might have a spiritual “to do” list on their minds today – read that new book on the Gospel of John that piqued your curiosity, or you hear in the grapevine that volunteers are needed on Friday night at the Mission. Ah, yes, I would really like to do that, but I’ve got so much to do – cooking dinner, getting ready for the grandkids arriving tomorrow, having a nap.

Let’s consider strengthening our “spiritual muscles” this week, keeping that forgetfulness-of-faith at bay. Perhaps that is Practical Faith in practice. Amen.