**"Just Give Me an Old-Fashioned Love Song"**

**Song of Songs 2:8-13**

**Introduction: In Love**

There is an experience that I have had before, which I have shared a few times when doing a wedding homily. I was hanging out on the bike path along Chicago’s lake shore and saw a young couple very much in love with each other walking hand in hand on the path. They were just so amazingly lost in the moment of love for each other. I could hear them laughing and see them give each other adoring looks and smiles as they walked. At one point, I noticed that they were so attuned to one another that they were not very attuned to the world around them.

I attempted to say something, to warn them. But it was too late. Before I could say “watch out,” the two of them had run into a pole and were down on the ground. They were stunned for only a moment before falling into a long laugh. Anyone watching could not help but to have been a bit envious of the sort of joy that couple was having with one another. They were so much in the moment and so in love.

**The Book of Song of Songs**

I think about this young couple in love when we read together from this tiny little book of ancient love poetry. Martin Copenhaver calls it "the little book that just won't behave." These young couples speak poetically about every aspect of their lover’s body and beauty. Their longing for each other consumes their thoughts and their dreams. At times, the images and the figures of speech only vaguely hide more explicit expressions of a sexual experience. Shockingly, the truth is that this book nowhere speaks of these two lovers being married, though many interpreters want to keep the two lovers pure by suggesting that they are at least engaged. And it is remarkable that nowhere is God mentioned even once.

All this might make you wonder how this book found its way beyond the censors who assemble our collections of books in the Bible. The answer is that it almost did not make its way into the Bible. The Jewish people included it because they saw in its images of two lovers an allegory of the love between God and the people of Israel. Christians also almost excluded the Song of Songs from their Bible and only included it because they found a spiritual, allegorical reading of the story rather than a literal reading. For them, the book is about the love between God and the church, or God and the individual believer. It is a story of how intense love can be between us and our maker.

As interesting as it is to read these love poems as allegories, might we find it more interesting to actually assume that this poetry of romance and sensual love is just what it looks to be? Might it be first and foremost erotic poetry? And if that is the case, is there really a problem with this for us?

**Views of Sex and Sexuality in the Culture and the Church**

We need something that will challenge our schizophrenic way of seeing sexuality -- something between our culture's extremes in its idolatry of romantic love and the celebration of lust, and the church's history of fear and sexual repression.

In our culture we hear, “Sex sells!” and it does. There is a consumerism of sex and sexuality that is pervasive. In our economic system, everything is reduced to a commodity. We are tempted to see the value of others and ourselves as what we/they can offer for “sale.” The expression, “He is in the market for a girlfriend” is not so far off. The focus is on our usefulness and how useful others are to us. Our intrinsic value as human beings created in God’s image is lost in this transaction.

As a psychotherapist working with single people, I often found that by the second or third date, if things were going well, having sex was the expected next step, often entered into without the slightest bit of conversation (and usually quite a large amount of alcohol). I am not a prude about these things. What was disturbing was that sex and sexuality were so often disconnected from the whole person, or getting to know the whole person. I found many people getting hurt over and over again because what they really wanted was not just a good sexual experience, but the experience of being known, loved and valued for all that they were.

On the other hand, there is the way the church has traditionally dealt -- or not dealt -- with sex and sexuality. About the only instruction I remember from the church and my family was, “Don’t have sex before marriage!” We don’t seem to like to go much further than that. We have a history of leaving our young people to “just figure it out” in a world where people marry 10 to 15 years later than did previous generations. Shockingly, in my home state, Mississippi, where traditional evangelical values are espoused, there is little sex education other than to wait till marriage. We have left a moral void on this hard-to-talk-about subject. Think about it: how many sermons have you heard on this topic?

I find it helpful to recognize that this avoidance and these problems that Christians have with developing a healthy and loving ethic of sexuality have deep historical and religious roots. This has much to do with how we see the body and also with the way the church has worked to maintain an inequality between men and women. The theology of the Apostle Paul and Jesus were remarkable in their equality of men and women. Also, in the Apostle Paul’s letter, Paul is very Jewish in how he understood the complete integration of the body, the mind, and the soul. In our culture, we tend to think of the body as only a shell that is holding a soul. The soul is what is important and the body much less important. But this goes against how Paul and the Hebrew people understood the goodness of the WHOLE person (including the body), who were created by God and declared “very good.” For a Jew, there is NO separation of the body, mind and soul. In fact, if you read Paul closely, you will see that Paul does not talk about the soul ever leaving the body. That is unthinkable for a Jew, and not possible. When we die God gives us a new self, like unto the old one, but one fit for eternity. Body, mind, and soul are still united in some new mysterious way.

Greek thought soon overtook the church, and we have suffered ever since for this. The Greeks thought of the soul as being trapped in the body. The soul was the true self and superior to the body, the body being just a shell. The desires of the soul are to leave the body, which is always corrupting the true self. The passions of the body are a temptation for the soul. Therefore the body is considered corrupt, even evil by many. To grow spiritual soon came to mean finding a way to overcome the pull of the body, which is a source of endless temptations.

Women were thought to be inferior to men because they were closer to the earth and more sensual. Men justified controlling women and seeing themselves superior to women because they thought of themselves as more spiritual and closer to God. After all, God made Eve second, not first. (Women today say, yes, but the second time is the charm!) “And Eve was the tempter of Adam, was she not?” And Adam was the blamer of Eve for all his problems. Our blaming women continues to be something that we men are very good at doing.

We have been living for centuries with this gross fear and suspicion of sexuality as a device for domination and control of women. True respect and intimacy have been hurt greatly by this. True love and loving sex happen best when there is a mutual respect and equality between the sexes.

Many of you know that I attended Loyola University’s Institute of Pastoral Studies to earn a degree in Pastoral Psychotherapy. Our two-year program was a group experience. Twelve of us went through each class working together as a group to learn what it means to sharpen our skills and understanding of healing through intentional listening and valuing the other. At the end, we each produced a thesis paper. My thesis was “Inversion of the Hero Myth: A Psychology and Spirituality of Fatherhood in Masculine Development.” Anyone having trouble sleeping, just let me know. I have the solution!

One of the women in our group was a committed Catholic lay woman. She was going through an awakening to the ways she, as a woman, had been taught to see and act as if she were less valuable and powerful than the men in her life. It had been for her a painful awakening and struggle to claim a more powerful sense of herself and somehow to also renegotiate her relationships with the important men in her life. One essential part of this was learning to see her sexuality as mutual and respectful, especially her body. Her thesis was a shocking and stunning reclaiming of the goodness of her own body. All throughout the pages of her book were pictures of nude women in all forms and shapes, not the replicas of the ideal beauty, but real women willing to be seen for who they were. I realized how powerful her thesis was as it challenged our traditional ways of seeing and valuing women. She was reclaiming her voice and her power and challenging us as both men and women to see a different pathway to being in relationships with one another.

I also came to realize how my own attitudes towards women and my unexamined assumptions about male privilege had caused great harm, not only to women but to myself as well. While in school, I had a good priest friend from my home state of Mississippi who joked with me once, “Allen, you don’t have a racist bone in your body (not completely true), but you sure can be sexist,” he laughed. It was meant to be a joke, but it hit too close to home. I was beginning to realize how my sexist attitudes had been harmful in my marriage that had come to an end.

**New Possibilities**

I see the Song of Songs, this badly behaving book, as a way to reclaim the goodness of our bodies and the equality of men and women in their relationship with each other. Just think about it. Without this book we’d only have the rest of the Bible and our culture to instruct us about such things. Not a very nice thought. With this book we are given a full-throttle embrace of love and sex and desire. Yes, there is lust in this book! But that lust is also kept in check by a deep appreciation for the goodness and the wonder of the other. The interplay between the man and the woman is an expression not only of a desire for sexual fulfillment, but the desire for love and respect and appreciation and being fully known and understood.

Now is the time for us to talk about these issues and reach back to our tradition and find a more life-giving sexuality and sexual ethic for ourselves and our children. As a parent of a teenager, I think about how I want to do this differently than was done by the adults in my world. Here are some changes that would make a tremendous difference. Our young people do not need more fear. I know, we are fearful for them, but do we want fear to be our message to them when God made them so wonderfully? What they do need is a sense of awe and reverence and respect for themselves and those they are in relationship with. They need to see the power of their sexuality and of sex itself. Also, let’s talk about sex and sexual desire as natural, wonderful, a gift from God, and our hope that in their life they will have much pleasure. Let’s do this early on, so that it seems like just another part of life, not some taboo topic. Not talking about it leads to shame that may inhibit them from ever expressing the fullness of their sexuality and relationship potential.

But let us also counter our cultural messages about sex and sexuality. Sex is not the ultimate goal of fulfillment. Deep intimate relationships, whether sexual or not, are at the center of our fulfillment, not the least of which is our relationship with our Maker. This also means that you do not have to have a mate to be a happy fulfilled person.

* Let’s help them to understand that a mature relationship will have the qualities of truthfulness, an ability to talk before getting involved.
* It involves a deep respect for our own bodies and the bodies of others.
* It means being clear about our limits and the limits of the other person.
* It means making sure that they are mature enough and responsible enough to deal with the consequences of becoming sexually involved.
* Let’s talk about how premature sex can cloud our judgment about what we want and what we really want from another person.
* Also that our being sexually involved is giving a part of ourselves away to another person, and that is a very vulnerable thing to do.
* Let’s talk about the place of commitment as being the fullest expression of love, that it is in a committed relationship that we can let down and be more fully ourselves.
* Let's remind them that what we most want in this world is a relationship where we are loved and that sex is not our ultimate goal, but the fruit of a loving relationship.

Closing

So, here is your homework. I bet you cannot wait for the sort of homework I am going to give you in a sermon about sex. Go home and read this love poetry. Better yet, read this book together with someone you are in love with, if that is your situation. You’ll laugh at some of the antiquated analogies use to describe the lover’s body. But you might also wake up to the wonder and the goodness of our bodies and our sexual feeling as a wondrous gift of God. Erotic love, Eros, is not the lesser form of love. It is what draws us out of ourselves. Without it life would be colder and duller. Erotic love just needs to be held together with the other forms of love, like friendship love and the agape love, all of these loves we see in Jesus and have with God. Amen.