



**“Falling in Love with God”**

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Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, August 30, 2009***

***Song of Solomon 2:8-13 (NRSV)***

Somewhere past two hundred I lost track of just exactly how many weddings I’ve presided at during my twenty-one years of ministry. For better and for worse, I’ve racked up this record because I have always served “cathedral churches.”

That is to say, I have always served churches that are located in densely populated areas and that have large sanctuaries. Those churches, including this church, have also practiced what is called “open door wedding policies,” which is a fancy way of saying that couples do not have to be members of the congregation to be married in the church.

I cut my teeth in the wedding ministry at The Old South Church in Boston, which is located on Copley Square, and adjacent to some of the world’s finest hotels, restaurants, and shops. Who, after all, wouldn’t want to be married in Copley Square? Not many, I tell you—at least not many with the means to do so.

Back in the day when I lived and served in Boston, it was common for Old South to host a wedding or two every weekend, including weddings for famous people. The most famous couple that I ever married was a couple of writers for the TV series, “Murder, She Wrote.”

More often than not, though, we ministered to garden variety yuppies who were not members of our congregation. The senior minister did not perform weddings except for members, and members’ weddings were few and far between, so guess who presided at most of the Old South weddings?

I’ll never forget one Veterans Day weekend when I found myself presiding at no less than five—count ‘em five—weddings. Two weddings were commitments that I had agreed to a year or more in advance. Another was for members, because my boss was in the hospital. The fourth was a stand-in for a colleague who had died. And the fifth was lateralled to me by my yet another colleague who had left to serve a church on the West Coast.

Taking to heart the words of the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, who was famous for saying, “Pray without ceasing.” My prayer that Veterans Day Weekend was simply this: “Please, God, help me get the names right!”

By the end of my second year of ministry at Old South Church, the staff had dubbed me “Marrying Sam.” By the end of my third year of ministry there, I convinced my boss to bring a pastoral counselor on the staff to help with our wedding ministry. The idea quickly took hold, and my friend and colleague, Cal Genzel became the new “Marrying Sam.” Bless his heart; he is still on the job!

## II

I realize that I’m not the only person in the congregation who has had a career in the wedding ministry. Loris Coburn, I am sure, has played for as many or more weddings as I have presided at during her career, and there are other musicians in our congregation and members with large families, who could regale us with variations on the theme of “My Big Fat Greek Wedding.”

Any of us who have been to more than a handful of weddings probably recognize the prelude, postlude and scripture reading featured in today’s liturgy. Pachelbel’s “Canon in D” has settled many a wedding party’s nerves just before the procession, and Henry Purcell’s “Trumpet Voluntary” has accompanied numerous couple up or down the aisle over the last three hundred years. Likewise, today’s scripture reading from the Song of Solomon has made frequent appearances in Judeo-Christian wedding liturgies.

Christians and secular humanists alike are often surprised to find that the Church has not been in the wedding business quite as long as most people tend to think. Historically speaking marriage was originally the purview of government.

There are numerous examples of monogamous and polygamous relationships in the Bible—particularly in the Old Testament—but the Bible offers no examples of wedding liturgies, *per se*. Instead, what we find in the Bible are a few poems and stories about love and about couples, and these few are the passages most frequently cited in modern wedding liturgies.

It may interest you to know that most of these passages about love pertain to God’s love for human beings or for creation, or they refer to the type of love (agape) that Christians are expected to show towards one another as a sign of faithfulness to Christ.

The kind of romantic love that we associate with modern couples and marriage is at best only hinted at in the Bible, except for the Song of Solomon. This is partly because the idea of marrying for love was uncommon prior to the Victorian Era.

In the first three centuries of Christianity, weddings were the purview of the Roman government. Couples went to civil authorities to register their marriages in order to protect property rights, claim paternity, and determine inheritance.

When Constantine declared Christianity the religion of the Roman world, he handed off some of the state's responsibilities to the church, including presiding at weddings and recording births and deaths. This move was logical in that priests were often the only other leaders in the community who were literate besides government officials, and it served to lighten the load of the Roman authorities. So, the third century C.E., not the Garden of Eden, is when and where Christianity got into the wedding business.

Given that the entire biblical cannon (e.g., the various books that make up the Bible) was written down *before* the Christian church got into the wedding business, it is tougher than most people think, and tougher than most fundamentalist pastors will admit, to find scripture passages that directly relate to or support wedding liturgies.

Today's reading is one of those few top ten scripture passages frequently read at a Christian wedding. (Some others include the following: Genesis 1:26-31; Genesis 2:4-24; Ruth 1:16-18; Song of Solomon 8:6-7; Psalm 128; Mark 10:6-9; John 2:1-11, I Corinthians 13, Ephesians 5:21-33, and 1 John 4:7-12. You can look those up yourselves.)

### III

Today's reading is from the Old Testament book known as the Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs. It is a selection from a love poem, which is nestled in the midst of a collection of love poems.

This passage reminds me a little of the scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* where Romeo climbs the trellis outside of Juliet's window, or for those with more modern tastes, it also reminds me of the lyrics to "Come Away with Me," by Nora Jones, which peaked on the pop charts last February.

The author and voice behind today's selection is a young woman who sings these lyrics,

*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.*

Her suitor replies that the whole creation is telling them that now is their time to be together and that she should come away with him, saying:

*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.*

#### IV

Perhaps, like those of us in the wedding ministry, you have heard the music and the poetry all before, and it's starting to look like wallpaper and sound like white noise, in that it is so familiar that we may no longer notice or contemplate its meaning.

If this is the case, then consider the unique and sacred role that today's passage and the entire book known as the Song of Solomon played in the history of Israel and in the biblical cannon, and I suspect you will have a new and deeper appreciation for the text and others like it. Take note of this unique and sacred role of the Song of Solomon and I suspect that you'll start reading your Bible and dog-eared some of your pages in the Old Testament!

David Winston, professor emeritus at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, provides some helpful concepts for understanding the Song of Solomon in his introduction to this book in the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible. Here Winston explains that this collection of love songs has been understood in two substantially different ways: the traditional Jewish way, and the scholarly literary critical way.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional Jewish understanding is that the Song of Solomon is a *religious allegory* that recounts God's love for Israel and the history of their relationship, like that of divine and human lovers. Christians, meanwhile, have reframed the allegory and understood it as a love story between Christ and the church.<sup>2</sup>

The literary critical argument, by contrast with the traditional Jewish view, is that the Song of Solomon is a *secular collection of love poetry*.<sup>3</sup> "In this view," Winston explains, "the poem portrays an erotic love between two young people who are not yet betrothed and whose union is not yet recognized by the girl's family, but who look forward to public acceptance of their union and to its culmination in marriage."

This latter interpretation has, for some, called into question the inclusion of the Song of Solomon in the biblical cannon.

Sadly, in my view, theologians who think we should toss the Song of Solomon out of the canon on account of the fact that God isn't mentioned in the book have totally missed a point that feminist and womanist theologians like Carter Heyward, Claudia Camp, and

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<sup>1</sup> David Winston, "The Introduction to the Song of Solomon," in the *New Revised Standard Bible*, National Council of Churches, New York, 1989, 1000.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1000. Arguments such as these are grounded in ancient Mesopotamian marriage rituals.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1000.

Renita Weems have made. All three have argued that God shows up in our most intimate and mutual loving relationships as an imminent and transcendent being.<sup>4</sup>

Professor Weems also makes the point in her work on the Song of Songs that this book is the only example of an unmediated female voice in the entire Judeo-Christian scripture.<sup>5</sup> The feminine voice and thoughts of this author or authors are not filtered through a (male) narrator or an historian's voice. They are, to the contrary, monologues, soliloquies, and love songs expressed in the words of the poet herself.<sup>6</sup>

## V

The points that Heyward, Camp, and Weems make, and that I'm echoing here, are huge. They are huge because they run contrary to several themes in the Bible that have been upheld by Judeo-Christian groups for far too long. Some of these themes include the following:

1. That women were subordinate to men in the home, faith community, and society.
2. That men are the primary actors in intimate relationships, and that loving relationships are hierarchical rather than mutual.
3. That our human bodies and sexual intimacy lead us away from God, rather than more deeply into the knowledge and experience of God.

Heyward, Camp, and Weems, *and* the Song of Solomon, turn these arcane ideas on their ear, and argue that intimate loving relationships, in which both partners have voice, take initiative, and fall into and express love for each other, are among the most divine relationships that we humans can experience this side of heaven.

These scholars' works also lead us to a much-needed corrective of the Gnostic view that permeated early Christianity and that led many early Christians to the belief that our bodies and sexual intimacy would lead us away from God, rather than into a deeper knowledge and experience of the divine.

Feminist and womanist scholars have also affirmed the ancient truths found in the Song of Solomon, and taught us that this ancient book is much more than an ancient collection of love poetry that we can be trotted out at weddings. It is a collection of life-giving, love-fulfilling poetry that affirms mutuality and equality in human relationships. Song of Solomon affirms the goodness of our bodies and the appropriateness of human intimacy. And most of all, the Song of Solomon affirms that one of the most blessed ways we can know God is through the love we experience in our most intimate relationships. Friends, this is the good news of the gospel. Believe it. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> C.f., Carter Heyward's *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power*, Claudia V. Camp's *Wise, Strange, and Holy*, and Renita Weems' *What Matters Most: Ten Lessons in Living Passionately from the Song of Solomon*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.