

God's Game of Thrones: *Romance in the Bible* Song of Solomon 2:8-13

I am very glad we are ending God's Game of Thrones series on particular scripture from Song of Solomon. Often in the Christian Church we have avoided Song of Solomon all together. Thankfully, one little morsel snuck through in the lectionary listing. And I say it that way purposefully. You see as Christians we have inherited a tradition that is a bit suspect about romance because it can lead to sex and we are very suspect about sex. This is not, however because Jesus or Peter or John or James were suspect of it. As Jews they followed the Jewish tradition that saw sex as a gift of God and deemed the married state as more spiritual than celibacy. At no time in Judaism is there a religious call for a permanent state of celibacy for Priests or anyone. There are not even specific religious vows for it. There is a vow for not cutting your hair, or drinking wine – the Nazarite vow at it is named (which may have been the reason Samson lost his strength when his hair was cut), but the Nazarite vow is time limited; as are the few specific times in life when Jewish law asks couples to refrain from sex for ritual purity purposes. But these commands are always temporary. So how did the Jewish celebration of God's gift of sexuality and romance turn into a puritan distrust of it?

Many suggest that Christianity's issues with sexuality begin with the Apostle Paul, whose suggestion about celibacy for church leaders (note it is not a command, but a suggestion) is the basis for so much of our tradition. But Paul never walked with Jesus or even heard Jesus preach. And yet Paul is quite revered by the early church and writes a great deal of the Christian Scriptures. And It is clear from his writings, that Paul was influenced by classical Greek thought, particularly its dualism; the idea that the flesh or the real world is bad and the spirit or the world of the spirit is good. This dualism is in sharp contrast to Jewish belief in all of God's creation, including the body, being good. And it leads to extremes that become the norm for the Christian faith, but it took a long time to get to where we are today.

The issue of celibacy for church leaders is where the intellectual battle first forms. But this now sacrosanct part of the Roman Catholic tradition was not always

in place. The idea of clerical celibacy was contested in canon courts, in theology, and in religious practices for centuries. Celibacy for Roman Catholic priests was not mandated under canon law for the whole church until 1139. Over 1000 years after Jesus and Paul. The first recorded call for clerical celibacy was in the 300s.

Sexuality is probably the most clear example of the church moving away from our Jewish roots and being influenced by the wider culture. And it is not just in the Roman Catholic tradition. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was troubled when he realized that scripture never specifically condemns pre-marital sex. But that did not stop him from making it into a doctrine and preaching against certain Christian cultures who had traditions of courtship that often celebrated a pregnant bride on her wedding day.

Drinking wine and alcohol is probably the second clear example for some churches. Again, It is Paul who says, “be not drunk with wine.” in the Letter to the Ephesians. In fact, some think Paul may not have even written that particular letter. But whatever the case, an old joke points out that some Christians aversion to alcohol is not based in the teachings of Jesus. A Baptist Grandmother complained when her visiting Grandson brought wine to have with dinner. “Grandma,” the young man said, “Jesus first miracle was turning water into wine.” The Grandmother looked the young man in the eye and said, “I never liked that about him. Either.”

Now lest I be misunderstood, please don't leave here and tell your neighbor the preacher said to “get drunk and go have sex.” Like all wonderful gifts of God these pleasurable gifts are to be used and received in loving and ethical ways. If one is addicted to alcohol, of course, one should refrain, and thankfully the church supports AA, NA and other 12 step programs for that reason. And sex can be misused and become a source of dehumanization and sins of power and letting desires overcome the clear Biblical morality of love and respect. But why does the church seem to focus so much on these gifts that they almost make them immoral in and of themselves.

One reason for this is these gifts - sexuality and even alcohol are able -to be abused and misused in secret. Many clergy over the years of all stripes and religions have fallen prey to sexual temptation - some of it caused by all the emphasis on purity and unrealistic expectations. Others are consumed by alcohol or drug abuse. And the ability to hide such actions also easily leads to the sins of hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

The second reason for their popularity as sins of focus is the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus spend a lot more time and emphasis on the sins of injustice, oppression of the poor and outcast and foreigner. So if you are going to avoid having to deal with these hard issues (and these sins are much harder to hide) you have to enlarge the sins that you can hide. And speaking as a religious leader I can say that it is much easier to tell with people “Don’t smoke, drink or chew or go with girls who do” or other such moralistic spiritual platitudes than it is to get your hands dirty in feeding the poor, or helping the sick or trying to advocate for all oppressed people with entrenched political or economic, or even religious powers.

This dynamic of wanting to tell others what to do is evident in a current political battle about Planned Parenthood. 97% of Planned Parenthood’s services are family planning and health screenings- primarily for low-income women. And yet a group of men (and they are mostly men) in one political movement wants to defund Planned Parenthood because 3% of their services are offer women safe pregnancy termination for which Planned Parenthood receives no federal tax money. This is a perfect example of judgmental moralism because these men don’t worry about family planning or how many children they have in their family because their partners have taken care of it, much of the time without their oblivious husbands even being aware of it. And I wonder what their families would do if their source for family planning supplies was threatened with being shut down. A similar dynamic is found in the Roman Catholic’s ban on the use of birth control, another rule imposed by men who don’t even have families. A huge percentage of American Catholics are ignoring this rule because they don’t think it is the church’s job to get between

families and God about these decisions. But the attention given these examples shows how easy and acceptable it is to tell other people what they must do to be good in God's eyes. I am not advocating for any political position, but I am speaking against shallow, judgmental moralism created or enforced by people who do not have to follow it. A real, honest and Biblically sound sexual ethic is much more complicated and calls all people into account for the use of God's good gifts.

Sorry for that tangent, but it is rooted in the same anti – body, anti-romance, anti-sex sentiments the church allowed to creep in during the first 1000 years. And so today let us instead take a lesson from the wisest man in all of scripture, King Solomon. Let us celebrate with him romance, love, sex, affection of all types. Let us celebrate the loves of our life, whether they are here with us, or far away, or if they have departed this life. Let us revel in God's good gifts and seek to bring Good News to a world overburdened with shallow moralism which is often blamed on our body-making, wine to gladden the heart of human making God. AMEN

Song of Solomon 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.