

IN NOMINE JESU

Prayer Upon Entering Church: Lord of all power and might, Author and Giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of Your Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Text

In my 33 years of being licensed to preach in the Lutheran Church, I have never had the privilege or challenge of preaching on the Song of Solomon. This year, for the first time, a text from the Song appears as the First Reading for this Sunday in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). I now share that text with you:

Song 2:1-17

SHE

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

²HE

As a lily among brambles,
so is my love among the young women.

³SHE

As an apple tree among the trees of the forest,
so is my beloved among the young men.

With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste,

⁴He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his banner over me was love.

⁵Sustain me with raisins;
refresh me with apples,
for I am sick with love.

⁶His left hand is under my head,
and his right hand embraces me!

⁷I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the does of the field,
that you not stir up or awaken love
until it pleases.

⁸The voice of my beloved!
Behold, he comes,
leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

⁹My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Behold, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
looking through the lattice.
¹⁰My beloved speaks and says to me:
"Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away,
¹¹for behold, the winter is past;
the rain is over and gone.
¹²The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
¹³The fig tree ripens its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away.
¹⁴O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the crannies of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.
¹⁵Catch the foxes for us,
the little foxes
that spoil the vineyards,
for our vineyards are in blossom."
¹⁶My beloved is mine, and I am his;
he grazes among the lilies.
¹⁷Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle
or a young stag on cleft mountains.

Song 3:1

On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves.

The Sermon

When I first saw her, she was old and ravaged, to the point that it shocked me. Her famous face, untouched by plastic surgery, spoke with greater power than a hundred face lifts.

Mike Wallace himself said in a knowing way: “Part of what makes this woman fascinating is that she’s been as passionate about her life **off** the screen as **on**.” He said: “There’s a feeling in America that passion in a woman of a certain age is unseemly.”

And after a long pause, Jeanne Moreau, arguably the greatest French film star ever, said calmly: “They’re right.” Mr. Wallace, dumbfounded, could not formulate a response. He repeated himself incredulously: “Passion is unseemly?!” “Oh, come on,” said the star. “Passion! When you get sixty, you know about love. Love is not passion.”

Wallace now wore a picture of disappointment. You could almost see him thinking in dismay: “This is a **French** woman?” But, as though she were a wise grandmother talking to an adolescent boy, Moreau explained: “I have passion for **life**, but I know about **love**. Love and passion don’t always go together. Passion is destructive. Passion is demanding. Passion is jealous. Passion goes up and down. Love is constant.”

The great star said: “Compassion. That’s what love is about. You give even more than you receive. I would hate to be still victim of passion. And I would think: “God, I’ve lived all these years and I’ve learned nothing?””

What I saw in that interview on cable TV was a classic confrontation: *eros* versus *agape*. Mike Wallace was talking about *eros* – sexual love – the love that drives for possession of the other. The *femme fatale*, though she probably did not know it, was talking about the Greek word: *agape*. And *agape* is what you need to understand the Song of Solomon and our text.

“Passion is demanding. Passion is jealous. Passion goes up and down. Love is constant.” That’s what King Solomon would tell us in this inspired Word of God in our text. Love is not a feeling, it is being for others. Love is not an emotion, it is service. Love is not passive, it is active.

Love seeks the good of the other. It forgets itself. It always believes and hopes for the other, and even spends itself for the sake of the other. You give even more than you receive. And it does not act like this from weakness. It acts like this from strength. The early Christians called it: *agape*. *Agape* is victorious over all the forces arrayed against it. Passion comes and goes, but *agape* never ends.

Now, having said that to you, I must also tell you: The truth is: Human beings may act this way briefly and on occasion. But it is not within our power to act like this on a consistent basis. Rather than gazing benevolently on a man and woman as such love is spoken of at their wedding, we should be on our knees begging the Lord and Master and Savior to give them that which by nature they cannot have. Because in and of ourselves, we do not have the disposition to act lovingly in a constant way.

This text is not a story about nice relationships and human successes in marriage. This is not a description of typical married life. This is not a snapshot of church life either. We will recognize in this text the story of the Lord Himself and His Bride, the

Church. The meaning of the text will become clear if we substitute the name “Jesus” for the Bridegroom, and the “Church” for the Bride.

See, love does not lead to God. God, in Jesus Christ, leads us to love. Love does not arise out of the unaided human heart. God puts it there. Love is not an ideal for me to aim at. Love is already at work in me from beyond myself. Or as St. John puts it: “*We love because God loved us first.*” (I Jn 4:19)

Love is therefore the first thing and the last thing. First, because the love of God brought us into being. And last, because love is that which remains when all else has passed away in the Resurrection of the dead. The person who loves is always there. This person thinks about what you need before you think of it yourself. This person is there to support and understand you. When there are trials to undergo, this person is there with you to give you strength.

This person hears your cries in the night and wipes away your tears and soothes all your hurt places and feeds you something warm when you are a child and, when you are at the end of your life’s journey, this person will visit you, help you to the bathroom and change your sheets and help you with infinite patience and without reproach, with care and tenderness and utmost respect.

See, love must have a face. I could not preach about love had I not been loved by human beings with faces like Lu Ann. Well, God’s love too must have a face. Love that exists only as an abstraction somewhere off in the heavens does not have any meaning for us.

God’s love for us therefore has a face – and it is the face of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth sets His face toward Jerusalem. We, in our sinfulness and rebellion and failure, are not deserving of this sacrifice. Yet God has deemed us infinitely worthy of His love, bearing it out even to the edge of doom - and beyond.

For on the hill of Calvary, the Son of God, in His last extremity, showed how much we are worth to Him. In the **Divine Comedy**, Dante only **visited** hell. Jesus Christ **entered** it in all its annihilating power – for our sake – and then emerged victorious. So love alone counts. Love alone conquers. Love alone endures. And Love rose from the dead on Easter morning. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds + in Christ Jesus. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA!