

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Savior and our Lord, Jesus Christ, amen.

I've been dreading this sermon for some time now. Ever since I saw that Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs was on the Lectionary, I've wanted to avoid this particular sermon and this particular Book of the Bible. Then when I read the actual verses that have been appointed for today I was a little relieved, but still apprehensive about how to approach this book of Scripture. In case you've never closely read Song of Solomon it's a bit steamy and quite erotic. There are verses in this short book of 6 love poems that can make even this old man blush. I, along with many others have wondered why in the world the early Church Fathers decided this material belongs in the canon of Holy Scripture... Then I really started to study the book and what some of the commentators had to say.

What I discovered is that in the early years of Christianity there were more books written and sermons preached on the Song of Solomon than any other book of the Bible including all of the Gospels! Why all the interest? Why were all those early theologians obsessed with this book? Well, the answer is quite simple. Sex sells, even 2000 years ago... To be fair, the Church Fathers, all those years ago, recognized the vivid descriptions of the love between the two people in these love poems and they turned the entire book into an allegory where God was one of the lovers and the Hebrew people and then later the Christian Church was the other.

They set up elaborate relationships describing how God was the man and the people of God were the woman in this relationship. I will admit when you think through all the attempts to describe the relationship between God and humankind in the Bible, the image of marriage, of a bride and groom, is used quite often. The origin of these 6 love poems that comprise the Song of Solomon is shrouded in mystery. Most scholars believe they may have been sung at wedding feasts since nearly 1000 years before Jesus, generation to generation, as oral folk songs before they were ever written down. Perhaps the erotic nature of the poems helped the wedding couple understand that within the bonds of marriage, intimacy is not only a pleasurable event, but also a beautiful and miraculous gift from our creator God.

When we fast forward to the modern era we can see little or no correlation between the love expressed in this book of poetry to what passes for love today. Our modern society has put sex on every street corner and in every living room in America. From toothpaste to automobiles, almost every television commercial uses sex to sell their products, not to even mention the prime time ads for ED and PD. If you don't know what those are, ask your mom... My personal assessment is that today's modern culture has pornified sex and turned this wonderful gift from God into a sin that has broken up more relationships than anyone can count. Seeing human sexuality from this perspective leads us to see the other person as not much

more than an object. There's not much room for give and take in the relationship, only take and take... That's why I call it the pornification of human sexuality...

Now, you'd think the Church would be a safe place where God's people could learn to understand God's point of view regarding our sexuality.

Unfortunately, the Church, has been much more concerned about setting itself up as the arbitrator of what is considered normal versus abnormal when it comes to human sexuality. The Church is in the business of legalism and telling us what we can and can't do. Mostly what we can't do... All the while so many Church leaders violate every taboo and norm known to exist. The Church has turned human sexuality into a dirty thing that we don't talk about in civilized company... I call the way the Church has treated human sexuality over the many centuries as the Prud-ification of sex.

So, if society pornifies sex and the Church prudifies it, what does God actually say about human sexuality? I highly encourage you all to read the entire book of the Song of Solomon to find out for yourself. Our short text for today gives us a hint of what the entire book is like. It's full of images of longing for the absent lover to return. Packed with vivid descriptions of the total giving of every ounce of yourself to the one you love. Just a couple of verses beyond what we read this morning it says, "My beloved is mine and I am his..." There's no holding back. Love is intended by God to be a 100 percent commitment. Love isn't some

50/50 proposition. It's a full-time commitment. When the lovers are together they hold each other and never want to let go. When they're apart, they urgently long for that closeness.

We can see why so many of the Church Fathers early on found the connection between God and God's people in the way the relationship between these two lovers is described. The vast majority of the verses of all 6 of these love poems is from the voice of the woman in the relationship who seeks after her lover who is not around. The Bible tells us plainly the Church is the bride of Christ. Given the description of how these two lovers long for one another, shouldn't we be at least as vigilant in seeking Jesus and longing for His return as this woman who desires her lover to hurry home as a gazelle gallops across the plain. Given the vivid descriptions and the urgent longings and the absolute beauty ascribed to this intimate relationship between these lovers, my assessment of the viewpoint God has of human sexuality is one of purification. It is pure and Holy when God is in the center of any human endeavor, but especially including our intimate relationships. I mean, just listen once again to God's ideal of what human love can and should be... "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave." Human love without Christ at its center is like a flash in the pan, but grounded in the love of Jesus Christ it lasts and lasts all the way to the grave... Here, we can also begin to understand how the

Church Fathers found the comparison to the love God in Jesus Christ has for humankind. It's a love so strong it can even outlast the grave. The love God has for you is the same love that held Jesus to the cross on Good Friday. The love God has for you was the power that raised Jesus on that first Easter morning. The love God has for you is the same love that brought forth every living and non-living thing in all of creation. The love God has for you is the driving force that still raises up leaders and preachers and prophets to continue to reveal, to you, God's desire for you to love him as much as God loves you!

When I read the Song of Solomon, I'm transported back to the days of my youth when springtime and the promise of the beauty of the flowers and the smell of newness in the air made me feel joyful and ready to take on anything the world might throw my way. There's good reason springtime brings spring fever. God created the seasons to reflect the ebb and flow of life. Human sexuality is a part of that cycle too. This summer series on Wisdom Literature in the Bible ends with the Song of Solomon. It's appropriate because it is here, finally, in the Song of Songs as it has been called for a thousand years before Christianity began, that we see what makes for the good life. I mean, we see the good life consists of right relationships—between man and woman, between humanity and the earth, and between humanity and God. In the love described in this Song, we see a reflection of the love that first called the world into being, that continues to sustain it season

Pornified-Prudified-Purified

by season, and that will bring it to new life beyond death itself. Such love is worth preaching about and I'm so happy God brought me through my fear of talking about human sexuality and allowed me to bring you this good news today!

May the joy of the Lord be your strength today and every day. May you seek out the love of your Savior Jesus Christ as ardently and as persistently as a woman seeking after her distant lover. May your joy overflow because of the love God has for you. Amen!