

## **Homily – The Theology of Desire**

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The theology of desire...

Are y'all ready for this?

Are you sure?

Well then, I'm going to start with scripture.

(Song of Solomon 7:6-9)

How fair and pleasant you are,  
O loved one, delectable maiden!  
You are stately as a palm tree,  
and your breasts are like its clusters.  
I say I will climb the palm tree  
and lay hold of its branches.  
O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,  
and the scent of your breath like apples,  
and your kisses the best wine  
that goes down smoothly,  
gliding over lips and teeth.

Hoo!

It's in the bible y'all. Climbing the palm tree. Kisses like wine.

What you've just heard is a passage from the Song of Songs, also called the Song of Solomon – in the Hebrew Bible. It's a glorious love song, beautiful and sensual and earthy, which the ancient Jews read as a love story between humans and God,

which contemporary scholars read as an erotic encounter between two people,

and which I'd like to read as both, because how can we separate our experience of the holy from our experience of one another and this world: this world that caresses our skin through wind and water and earth and other skin?

...

Do you remember your first big crush? That first time of *wanting*, even though you were not sure what, exactly, it was that you wanted?

I remember in 9<sup>th</sup> grade sitting in front of a Very Cute Boy in my history class, and I had memorized every plane of his face, and the way that he slouched in his desk, so that I could just *feel* him sitting behind me.

The back of my neck was hyper aware of his presence. The room felt bright, the world exciting, and my blood felt close to my skin. It was that alive, giddy longing, before longing got complicated.

I was crushin' hard.

Incedentally, he did not feel the same way. But it almost didn't matter, (almost), because wanting him made me feel so very alive and in love with the world.

Do you remember that feeling? Newly awakened by desire and so totally alive.

It's a powerful feeling. Though sometimes scary. And often made scarier by our culture's conflicting messages and hang-ups.

But no matter who you are and whom or what you've wanted and how – I hope you have felt that moment of unadulterated longing, lighting up your soul and your skin.

As I began to prepare last week for a month of worshipping Love, I was reflecting upon how often I have said already this year that what the world needs is simply us, come alive.

And as I read Sufi poems last week and remembered that first unrequited love, I realized something more about what "coming alive" means... that the world needs us crushin' hard. The world needs us wanting, longing – living with our blood close to our skin.

And further more, the world doesn't need us only crushing on holy, worthy, sacred things – because the whole world is worthy of our desire. God is worthy of our desire, and so is the Very Cute Boy in history class by virtue of the spark of God that lives in him. The sacrament of really good dark chocolate is worthy of desire, and so are you. Yes, you, who are young or old; gay, straight, bi, trans, clear or confused, happy or hurting.

The holy is hungry for us and *through* us. And when we embody love in the world it is with our minds and souls *and our bodies that hunger*.

And when we live love, it is not just by feeding the poor or healing the sick – it is also by *wanting* and *longing*, it is by finding pleasure and taking delight in the world.

Our religious lives call us into awareness of our desire.

It has always been so for some – particularly for the mystics – those ecstatic lovers of God of every faith – like the poets we have heard this morning.

But of course, it has often been otherwise, as well. The denial of desire in mainstream Christian theology has also been passed down along the ages and has caused much heartache, injustice, and despair.

The early Christians were heavily influenced by Greek philosophic traditions, which separated the material body from the ideal spirit – labeling matters of the spirit holy and matters of the body debased. Further, the Greek Stoic traditions advocated *apatheia*, the careful and rational separation from one's passions.

The Greeks distinguished between three kinds of love: agape – unconditional, selfless love; philia – devoted familial love; and eros – passionate, earthy love. These loves were ranked in exactly that order.

Indeed, communities of faith often point us, as I have many times done myself, to agape love as the highest ideal – that love we give freely, asking nothing in return.

But in truth, if we are to embody love fully, its forms will be intertwined. Our giving freely of ourselves will ring hollow if it is not fuelled by our desire, even as our desire unchecked by true concern for others will be a force of harm.

Postmodern philosopher Paul Ricoeur points out that eros love without agape can be a brutal chaotic force, but that agape love without eros can be overly cerebral and moralistic.

And Feminist and Queer theologians have been working for years now to reclaim eros as a core part of our beings and our religious lives.

As Hebrew Bible Scholar David Carr writes in his book *The Erotic Word*, with the help of these movements in theology, we can now speak of “an eros that encompasses the myriad of ways people live out their deepest selves.”

He points out: “One part of the past repression of sex has been restriction of it to a small part of life – closeted, heterosexual, exclusive.”

“In contrast,” he continues “some thinkers are urging a wider concept of eros that would embrace not only sexual passion, but work, play, deep friendship, art, and many other sorts of profound pleasure.

Such an eros would include the passion of lovers' desire, and also the sensual joy of a shared meal or an abiding thirst for justice."

Reclaiming eros in this way is a powerful countercultural message, and a declaration of our faith in human good.

Given the message in popular culture that your desire is a casual commodity to be bought and sold. And given the message in many religious communities that your desire is shameful or wrong.

It feels all the more important for me to say this, here, in this pulpit, just as we teach in our Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education class:

Your body is a very good gift, and made to delight in the world.  
Your sexuality, that kernel of desire in your soul, is a very good gift, a gift of connection, creativity, and pleasure.

Anyone, including yourself, who irresponsibly violates that truth, whether physically or spiritually, has wandered far, far away from the divine source of love that hungers in and through us. Anyone who harms that kernel of desire does violence too, against the heart of God, who desires us as we are.

I want you to hear that sexuality is a good great gift and a part of our spiritual being AND that it is not only about attraction or some particular physical act. A healthy sexuality exists in our core as a driving life force of passion.

Womanist thinker Audre Lorde defines "the erotic" as "those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings."

She writes: "We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalizing sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way. And when I say living I mean it as that force which moves us toward what will accomplish real positive change."

Our Unitarian Universalist theology of desire proclaims that we are created Good, and we are created wanting and longing for Good. Our theology of desire calls us to live out that which is deepest, and strongest, and richest within us. It calls us to fall in lust with the world, in love with the holy.

I'd like to close as I began, with scripture, from the Song of Songs Chapter 8, verses 6 and 7.

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.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a raging flame.  
Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.  
If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house,  
it would be utterly scorned.

May your life be one of love stronger than death, and passion fierce as the grave.  
And in it may you rejoice and be glad.