

August 30, 2009  
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Reading: Song of Songs 2: 8-13, Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“Wisdom From Deep Passion”

Ernesto Cardinal sings, “Paradise is love. Every lover was in paradise for fleeting moments. But whoever lives in God’s love, lives there for good. Human love, too, is a feeble glimmer of eternity. One sees eternity shine in that fleeting moment, but not with clarity.” (as quoted in Dorothee Soelle, The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance, Fortress Press, p. 113,)

Those words are the pre-quote in Dorothee Soelle’s book, The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance, in a section titled “Places of Mystical Experiences,” (this is the book our Downtown Book Group will be reading over the next month or two. We meet at Knox on Tuesdays at 12:10 starting Sept. 8).

If you will forgive a long quote, in the chapter simply entitled, “Eroticism” She begins by saying:

“What eros is to sexuality, mysticism is to religion. According to the Romantic writer, Wilhelm Schlegel, mysticism is ‘what the eye of the lover alone sees in the beloved’, the force that urges onward, the dynamic that presses toward the unification of everything that is separated. To be sure, there are atrophied forms of sexual and religious activity without eros. There are oft-repeated habits, frequently technically expert, but they have no part in ecstasy. They are to be counted in what Buber called “the commotion” of an eros free functionality that artificially and often cynically shields itself against mysticism. Those, who at any moment, know why and to what end they do this or that, have shut themselves off from the power of the rose that blooms without a why or wherefore. In the face of and for the sake of this energy that repeals rules and roles, eroticism seems to me a better name than love or sexuality for this place of mystical experience. Love is an ambiguous word and sexuality too technical a term for this place of mystical experience.

One cannot think of mystical experience and certainly not speak of it without eroticism. All religions testify to intersections of eros and religion that arise from a sacred power. . . . There are many texts where, based on the meaning of words, one cannot distinguish the mystical love for God from human eros.

Soelle then proceeds directly to the Song of Songs to illustrate the intertwining of mystical love and human eros.

The Jerusalem Bible says, "The Song of Songs, that is to say, the greatest of all songs, the loveliest song of all, consists of a series of poems celebrating the mutual love of a Lover and a Beloved, now meeting, now parting, now seeking and now finding each other." (Doubleday & Company Inc., 1985, P. 1027)

Possibly arising out of ancient myths of love between gods, the Song has been interpreted allegorically as the love between a devout seeker and God. More recent interpretations have returned to a more literal interpretation celebrating sexual attraction, love and fulfillment. This approach is in tune with a theology that celebrates the goodness of creation and createdness and sees sex and sexuality in healthy relationships as part of that grace.

Before you get the impression that I have left the theme of Wisdom, which we have been and will be following, I would point out that the Song is included in the Wisdom section of the Bible which also includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It does so primarily, but not solely, because of the traditional attribution of Solomon as the author. Given his upbringing in the royal court of David and his propensity to collect wives from every country available, this may be accurate although we cannot be certain.

On a deeper note, wisdom is based in relationships, especially those which are profoundly passionate. Can we love God and God's creation and all God's creatures, including our neighbours and ourselves, this passionately? And does this deep passion not only propel us into a closer more intimate relationship in all our relations but also create in us an increasing thirst for justice and peace?

I know my academic training and probably yours too, discouraged passion. Logical analysis is to be dispassionate in order to be objective. Passion is distorting, even dangerous. Career advancement at colleges and universities is not based on passion. A beloved Biblical Studies professor of mine once commented that he was not taken seriously by many scholars because he was too passionate in his interpretations of scripture. Yet it was his passion that made me love him and love the Old Testament more dearly.

Beyond the scholarly realm the misspent passions of our youth lead us to rein their energy in and we attempt to prevent further pain or shame. Passions can be dangerously destructive.

Fortunately for me I encountered the Hippie movement in my twenties; and sensitivity and counselling training over the next few years helped me in re-discovering emotions long repressed in my own attempt to live according to all the “should” and “oughts to” of life.

The classic book and movie, Zorba the Greek, was part of that re-connection. The story draws out the tension between Apollo and Dionysus in each of us, the classic Greek drama of visceral wisdom in tension with the wisdom of the mind. You can hear it in the dialogue between the passionate Zorba and the narrator, in the book, a young Greek intellectual and writer. In Chapter 24 Zorba is confronted about his treatment of the innkeeper, with whom he has had an intimate relationship:

“You've soon forgotten poor Bouboulina, Zorba,” I said, in a tone which was somewhat brutal for me.

Zorba was piqued and raised his voice:

"A fresh road and fresh plans!" he cried. "I've stopped thinking all the time of what's going to happen tomorrow. What's happening today, this minute, that's what I care about. I say:

"What are you doing at this moment, Zorba?"

"I'm sleeping."

"Well, sleep well."

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"What are you doing at this moment, Zorba?"

"I'm working."

"Well, work well."

"What are you doing at this moment, Zorba?" "I'm kissing a woman."

"Well, kiss her well, Zorba! And forget all the rest while you're doing it; there's nothing else on earth, only you and her! Get on with it!"

Then, in Chapter 26, it is Zorba's turn to confront:

"No, you're not free," he said. "The string you're tied to is perhaps longer than other people's. That's all. You're on a long piece of string, boss; you come and go, and you think you're free, but you never cut the string in two. And when people don't cut that string..."

"I'll cut it some day!" I said defiantly, because Zorba's words had touched an open wound in me and it hurt.

"It's difficult, boss, very difficult. You need a touch of folly to do that; folly d'you see? You have to risk everything! But you've got such a strong head, it'll always get the better of you. A man's head is like a grocer; it keeps accounts: I've paid so much and earned so much and that means a profit of this much or a loss of that much! The head's a careful little shopkeeper; it never risks all it has, always keeps something in reserve. It never breaks the string. Ah no! It hangs on tight to it, the bastard! If the string slips out of its grasp, the head, poor devil, is lost, finished! But if a man doesn't break the string, tell me, what flavor is left in life? The flavor of chamomile, weak chamomile tea! Nothing like rum – that makes you see life inside out!"

Can we be truly wise without being passionate or does passion interfere with wisdom?  
Can we be truly wise without being reasonable or does reason imprison our wisdom?

At the end of *Zorba the Greek* the narrator is not fully converted to Zorba's outlook and ways. He returns to the mainland to continue his career as a writer but with a more balanced outlook and zest for life.

Our passage from the *Song of Songs* relates a scene in springtime when the lover appears and hope springs eternal. Spring is a season of resurrection, new birth, life abundant and, therefore, hope. Spring is a season of lust. Hope is born in a lusty, disruptive, chaotic passion. Without disruption and chaos life becomes stultifying, oppressive, brutal . . . or dull. I don't think life was meant to be dull. Occasionally, perhaps, we all need some peace and quiet, but, hopefully, not always.

The question the Song of Songs raises is simply this. Can healthy sexuality and passion lead us into a healthy relationship with God? Or is it, like some Christians, both ancient and modern believe, an evil that leads us into hell? More personally we may ask, does our own expression of our sexuality lead us into or away from a more intimate relationship with God and with others?

One of the distinguishing marks between eroticism and pornography is that eroticism arises in a relationship of mutual desire and respect. In pornography relationship is irrelevant, sensuality is a waste of time and there is no personhood to respect. It is object using object. Where eroticism is engaging, pornography, like prostitution, is detached.

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So we need to ask, is our relationship with God and God's creation one of engagement or one of detachment? Do we look at creation as a collection of distant objects ready to be exploited, or as a gift of love ready for right relation?

I find it impossible to speak of passion and wisdom this day without making reference to Senator Ted Kennedy – a publically flawed and vulnerable man whose life, illustrated in dramatic, highly visible events and small, quiet actions, that wisdom is a journey not a destination, that passion and reason held in tension and illuminated by the light of deep faith lead not only toward redemption, but also into a tender and compassionate engagement with others and with life.

President Obama's Eulogy for Ted Kennedy, speaking of the many tragedies and struggles in his life, illustrates how wisdom works with us as we journey passionately through the darkest times in life with each other and with God:

“It is a string of events that would have broken a lesser man. And it would have been easy for Teddy to let himself become bitter and hardened; to surrender to self-pity and regret; to retreat from public life and live out his years in peaceful quiet. No one would have blamed him for that.

But that was not Ted Kennedy. As he told us, ‘(I)ndividual faults and frailties are no excuse to give in – and no exemption from the common obligation to give of ourselves.’ Indeed, Ted was the “Happy Warrior” that the poet William Wordsworth spoke of when he wrote: ‘As tempted more; more able to endure; as more exposed to suffering and distress; thence, also, more alive to tenderness.’

Through his own suffering, Ted Kennedy became more alive to the plight and suffering of others . . . Ted Kennedy's life's work was not to champion those with wealth or power or special connections. It was to give a voice to those who were not heard; to add a rung to the ladder of opportunity; to make real the dream of our founding. He was given the gift of time that his brothers were not, and he used that gift to touch as many lives and right as many wrongs as the years would allow.”

To this I would add that not the least of Ted Kennedy's gifts to us is in the way he illustrated the spiritual reality that in God's wisdom perfection is not required to be an agent of God's compassion or an instrument of God's will. If God had to wait for our perfection before using us, this world would be in a much sorrier state. Instead God beckons, beckons through

every person and every aspect of creation, beckons each of us into passionate engagement with the way of wisdom.

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;

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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.

Amen