

**CALL OF THE WILD**  
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August 30, 2009  
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Song of Solomon 2.8-13**

*"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."*

The lesson appointed for this Sunday is, on one level, an erotic love poem. It's about three thousand years old. Obviously some things never go out of fashion. The Song of Solomon (also known as the Songs of Songs) barely made it into the Bible. I could tell you why but I'm sure you can guess why.

WARNING: This steamy little love poem may stoke your passion for love and intimacy. Please remain calm in your pews. And let me say right now before it's too late: *there's more to intimacy than body heat*. Of course if you're 15 or 16 years old and your body is on fire, bustin' out like springtime every hour of the day and night, you can hardly contemplate any other form of love. So remember: the Beatle's popular anthem isn't all you need is *sex*; it's all you need is *love*. There is a distinction but at certain times in life it's easy to get the two confused.

Anyway before I say something I shouldn't I'll shut up and let the poem speak for itself.

*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.*

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When I was just a boy my best chum in the whole world was Billy Kenney. He lived in the house behind my back yard in Youngstown, Ohio. Billy and I spent hours upon hours building forts, digging trenches, climbing trees, capturing bugs, worms and frogs, playing cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, and playing baseball and football until the sun went down. We'd sometimes lie on the ground and make up fabulous stories about the clouds in the day sky or the stars in the night sky. Billy was my best pal.

Billy was Catholic. I was Protestant. It was the 1950s and for adults such distinctions were important and often divisive. But not for Billy and me. We were in love with each other although we'd never ever say it like that—*no way!* When his family moved away I nearly died from grief. I've never had a better buddy than Billy.

One of the happiest sounds in my childhood was his voice calling out my name. He'd stand in my backyard and call and call until my mother came to a window or the back door. What do you want, Billy?

*Can Randy come out to play?*

It's a bit strange now that I think about it, but that's what all the kids in my neighborhood did. We stood outside and called out our friend's name and if that didn't work we'd knock on the door. *Hi, Mrs. Kenney. Can Billy come out to play?* You know, out of the stinkin' house, that suffocating box and into the wild outdoors to play with me! Although we'd never say that part out loud.

*My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."*

We were kids. We knew nothing about sex. All we knew at that age was: *it wasn't much fun to be alone*. We had a longing for companionship even though we'd never heard the word "companionship."

*My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."*

Once upon a time, according to the Great Ancestors, the Human One was all alone in a beautiful garden. The Human One, made of *humus*, which is to say soil, was neither male nor female. Just "the earthling." The Creator saw that the Human One was sad. *That's not good*, said the Creator.

So the Creator made every conceivable animal in the world and asked the Human One to check them out, name them out, and claim one for a mate. The human one named all the animals but none was found to satisfy the longing in its heart.

Several million species later the baffled Creator said, *this is serious*. So the Creator lulled the Human One into a deep sleep. And while it slept the Creator slit its side open, removed a rib from next to its heart and fashioned a mate—not from a head bone as though it would be superior to the other; not from a foot bone as though inferior to the other. It was a rib bone as if to say, you are meant to walk side by side. Mates. Companions.

The Great Ancestors sensed something about human beings that many cultures, including their own, suppress and pervert. It's true: men and women may differ in form and function but they are of equal worth and status in the eyes of the Creator. Anything less is sin.

This rib story from Genesis 2 is a folktale, a myth, which means *it never was but always is*. That is to say, the search for companionship, for a true mate is a primal and universal longing, an aching in the human heart that nothing but true love can relieve. The Great Ancestors knew something else about human beings and love: love is not painless; it costs us dearly. It often leaves a scar next to the heart.

Many have taken this folktale as a divine law, or natural law defining and confining marriage exclusively between a man and woman and consequently denying marriage to same sex couples. And that's a shame.

Marriage laws and customs vary from place to place, from time to time, from situation to situation and have a lot to do with economic conditions, property rights, the need for offspring, as well as the social and political status of women. Marriage arrangements change. But what doesn't change and hasn't changed is the deep and abiding longing for intimacy with a mate.

Presbyterian theologian Doug Ottati made an interesting discovery while studying Puritan pastors, on the subject of marriage and sexuality. One of Puritan theologians (I think it may have been Richard Baxter) unwittingly lent support to marital covenants between same sex persons by declaring marriage to be not primarily for the procreation of children—as most religious traditions had declared—but rather marriage primarily for *companionship*. I, along with a growing number of other Christian pastors, have come to believe that all committed couples should enjoy the full benefits, protections, blessing and frustrations (!) of a marital covenant. It's both good and right.

*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.*

Yes, this poem is about love. But let's not forget it is also about sex. In case you've never heard this in church I want to be sure you hear it here and now: Sex is a good thing. In

fact it's great and fabulous, a marvelous gift from our Creator. It's absolutely wonderful but beware it's also dangerous like nitroglycerine.

We can be glad and grateful that erotic, full-bodied love is celebrated right in the heart of our religious tradition. After all, it's a big part of who we are.

But there's a more to this poem than love and sex between two people. In this poem the gazelle, the stag, the turtle dove, the mountains, hills, flowers and fragrance may be metaphors for sensual, bounding, footloose, fancy free erotic love but they are also *particular things* in the awe-inspiring natural world. Yes, sex is great but just in case you've been in bed too long, or in your head or in a stupor too long, you might want to wake up and smell the roses or fig trees in bloom outside your narrow walls. There is a big and wonderful world out there to know and love, to praise and embrace.

*Arise, my love. Come away into this fabulous world that I have made for you.* The Creator calls us through the natural world into the wild, to revel and delight, to be fed and intoxicated within the family of things.

There's one other thing the Great Ancestors heard in this love poem and that's pretty much why it was included in the Bible. If you listen closely you can hear the call of the divine, that wild god of the wilderness. You can hear the voice of Christ, the Beloved: come out of your suffocating religious boxes, out of your stifling moralities. I'm not asking you to be good in that way. I'm calling you to life, inviting you to love others and this world with all your heart.

I love you, I *love* you, I love *you*. And I'm hoping you'll love me in turn with all your heart, mind, body and soul. And when you do you will see that to love me is to love the whole world, to love my sick, hungry, weary and broken down brothers and sisters. For I am you as you are me as we are all together in this one ecology of love, this one community of love, this wondrous family of things.

### Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

Mary Oliver

