

Love as God's Gift and Our Response

The Rev. Karen Swanson

What does the Bible have to say about human sexuality? This morning's reading from Song of Solomon is an excellent place to begin. An unknown woman expresses her delight and excitement about her beloved in an exquisite poem. She watches him approach, running as gracefully as a young gazelle. She hears him call out to her in his desire, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." It is a lovely spring day, full of beauty and new life. The woman's beloved beckons to her to join him in nature, and she cherishes him and his invitation.

Sometimes we forget that God created us as sexual beings, and that sexual pleasure is one of God's good gifts to us. The presence of this love poem in the Bible reminds us that God intends our sexuality to be a gift. I remember how pleased I was when someone first fell in love with my son. My heart was full for him because I know, as you do, that at its core romantic love, including its physical component, is a gift with wonderful potential, as well as an opportunity to mature, to learn to respect oneself and another in love. Perhaps in the same way God celebrates the possibilities when you and I fall in love, whether it is for the first time or once again.

One of my favorite love stories is one between two elderly persons, who had been active in one of my former churches. Unfortunately, the wife developed dementia. As time went on, it became clear to the husband that he could no longer give her the care she needed. And so, with a heavy heart, he brought her to a memory care facility to live. She was mad at her husband for this, and for a time bitterly complained about him to her visitors.

However, over time, her mood lifted. A man she thought quite handsome, kind and attentive was visiting her quite regularly at the nursing home. She lighted up when she saw him. She giggled at his jokes. She held his hand, and he held hers. Finally, one day she admitted her deep affection to the man. "I love you" she whispered. "But please" she added in a secretive tone, "don't tell my husband." The man smiled and gently kissed her. He said nothing. After all, what could he say? This woman falling passionately in love with him was none other than his wife of some fifty years. She was choosing him, all over again.

Our relationship with God begins and ends in love too. God is Love and expresses Himself/Herself in the love of the Creator, the Christ and the Spirit for each other. This love overflows and God creates a world to love, including human beings made in God's own image. Our ancestor's efforts to love God back and to love one

another fall short, just as our own do. How does God respond? With love. The loving Christ comes down to earth willing and able to give his life in love for all of us, who fall far short in our efforts to love. "Come back," he calls. "I forgive you." 70 times seven times. Innumerable times. Infinite times. We are loved. From the beginning, in the middle, to the end, in spite of our personal failures.

This is God's greatest gift. We can count on it. We can count on it when the stock market drops 1,000 points. We can count on it when we are sick, and are unable to actively care for others. We can count on it when, in spite of our better intentions, we hurt those we love.

Let us celebrate God's love because there is nothing we can do to stop it, and nothing we can do to earn it. Let us rejoice because it is a gift, and one we need in order to live with hope and peace. And let us respond to God's awesome love with gratitude and joy.

The Christian life begins with God's love toward us. It moves forward with our thankful response to this love. The excellent advice in James about how to best live as Christians is part of this second process of response to God's love, sometimes called sanctification. We do not have to listen well, bridle our tongue, and

care for widows, orphans or other vulnerable people in order to **get** God's love. We already **have** God's love. **Because God loves us**, we aim to listen well, bridle our tongue and care for vulnerable people. We are thankful, and want to love others the way we have been loved. We want to become more like this God who has loved us so profoundly.

We can get off track in our response to God's love. Performing religious ritual well can be comforting to us, just as the ceremonial washing of hands comforted the Pharisees and scribes, who wanted to please God in the way they carried out every daily task. In today's gospel, however, Jesus re-directs the Pharisees and scribes to focus on inner transformation rather than external ceremonies.

As 20th century Episcopalians, we might say, for example, that it is more important to reflect on how we treat one another, than on when and how often we ring the sanctus bell, much as we love it. The Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey quotes Mother Teresa to remind us of the importance of focusing on our attitude toward others. Mother Teresa says, "Keep in mind that our community is not composed of those who are already saints, but of those trying to become saints. Therefore let us be extremely patient with each other's faults and failures."

And so we are called to love one another, patiently and profoundly, and with the help of our loving God.

In the name of our God of Love: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.
Amen