

Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio
Worship for 15 August 2010
Lectionary Year C

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Old Testament Lectionary Text: Isaiah 5:1-7

Sermon: You Don't Bring Me Flowers

Opening Prayer: Triune God...take the voice of a mere man and the desire for cohesive thought...breathe on them by your Spirit so the voice that we hear is the very voice of God through the written Word of God and that in hearing we might understand and in understanding we might obey...Amen.

There is a story told about the famous literary characters Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson created by the Scottish writer and physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. As the story goes, Holmes and Watson go on a camping trip, set up their tent, and fall asleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes his faithful friend.

"Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson replies, "I see millions of stars."

'What does that tell you?'

Watson ponders for a minute. "Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Timewise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, it's evident the Lord is all powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?"

Holmes is silent for a moment and then speaks. "Watson, you buffoon, what all of this tells me is that someone has stolen our tent."

As the old saying goes, it is so easy to miss the forest because of the trees. You can spend so much time in the devil in the details that you miss the overall and obvious picture that is right in front of you. And in concern for today's Lectionary passage, there is so much going on astronomically, theologically, and possibly even astrologically and meteorologically that it is often missed that this passage at its core is a

love song.

I fully realize the liability in such a statement is the question begging to be asked is, “How on earth is this a ‘love song’?” It might be a song of futility – the labor of love turned out to be lost. It might be a song of litigation with punitive judgment and promised desertion in mind. But a ‘love song’? Before you call your jury back in to read the final verdict, allow me to put together a framework that might just help us not make the same mistake as Dr. Watson...missing the forest because of the trees.

What needs to be mentioned first and foremost is that in the Biblical times, the understanding of the word “love” had a broader spectrum of varieties than our English vernacular. Take the Greek language for instance. There are four words in the Koine Greek (New Testament) for “love” (we would translate all of their meanings with just the one word with multiple uses). I will move through these rather quickly...

The first kind of love is “phileo” meaning “brotherly love”. It is the love between friends, mates, running buddies as I we called it in my university days. The city of Philadelphia, the “City of Brotherly Love”, is derived from the literal meaning of the city’s name in Greek - phileo (love) and adelphos (brother)...the city of brotherly love.

The second kind of love is “eros” where we derive the word “erotic”. It is that erotic love...that romantic love. “Eros” is the type of love that makes many a person do silly things. It was “eros” that drove me to ask for my wife’s hand in marriage after knowing her for two months. I remember going into my in-laws living room (this was the first time that I ever met them) and sitting in a chair adjacent from Keith. He put down his book and looked at me; I popped the question. He shuttered and this was all before breakfast! Two things do need to be stated here. I give thanks to almighty God for growing our love beyond this and I pray to that same almighty God that our kids do not do this to Christa and me! This is “eros”.

The third kind of love (“Storge”) is literally born from the first two loves previously mentioned mingling together and growing in beauty. “Storge” is an affection love. It is a familial love. It is the love of parents to their children. “Storge” is the love that has filled our house now twice over through the avenue of our children Aidan and Rylee.

The fourth and last kind of love in the Greek is “agape”. This is the highest form of love. This is the love that is the pure love of God. “Agape” is a sacrificial love. It is the love that Christ talks about when he states, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” “Agape” is the love of God through Christ that would go from the cross to a borrowed tomb to a rolled away stone and beyond as the sacrificial atonement that we might be saved by faith through grace.

Let us also quickly note the Greek equivalents in the Old Testament Hebrew as I will be using these words in tandem...

Phileo is to Raham
Eros is to Ahab
Agape is to Hesed

Now, with all that being said, the reason why this becomes of the utmost importance is because we have to be careful contextually and figure out what type of love is actually being referred to in this love song from Isaiah. If we are to simply stick with the genre of the love songs that play through our airwaves day in and day out on our radios from coast to coast, we could easily and mistakingly sum up today’s text in the context of the bitter, lonely, and hurt lovers portrayed in the 1978 duet sang by Neil Diamond and Barbara Streisand entitled *You Don’t Bring Me Flowers*.

You don't bring me flowers
You don't sing me love songs
You hardly talk to me anymore
When you come thru the door
At the end of the day

I remember when
You couldn't wait to love me
Used to hate to leave me
Now after lovin' me late at night
When it's good for you
And you're feelin' alright
Well you just roll over
And turn out the light
And you don't bring me flowers anymore

Can you see the comparisons with our Lectionary text for today? “Let me sing for my beloved, my love song concerning his vineyard...what more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" And you don't bring me flowers anymore.

Again we must hold on to one of the golden rules of life though. A text without a context becomes a pretext. The context of the love of God (the owner and proprietor of the vineyard in the passage) is not phileo/raham, eros/ahab, or storge for that matter. The context of the love of God to God's people (the vineyard...for the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel) is agape/hesed; the pure and sacrificial love.

Allow me for a brief moment to take you to another garden where out of agape love God whirled all there is into being. To look over the Genesis chapter one text, we find in verses 9, 12, 18, 21, and 25 that God is surveying everything that He has done and called it good. Preceding this was the boardroom meeting of the Trinity discussing the creative reality of the fine tuning of the universe and all the life within it: "the calories within the avocado, the color of the rainbow, the gestation period of the duck-billed platypus, and with humor, the extension of the neck of the giraffe and the size of the ears on the elephant." (adapted from Arun Andrews) These were creative moments of joy!

And this lasts until Genesis 2:18 when God fashioned Adam. It was then that God said for the first time that it was not good. It was not good for Adam to be alone. So, as the story goes, God puts Adam to sleep to fashion Eve. Have you ever pondered why God put Adam to sleep? Was it for some sort of anesthetic experience? I doubt it. God, who had just created human life from dust, could have easily called forth a rib and turned it into Eve...but God puts Adam to sleep. No, there is a deeper reason. In the same fashion that God breathed life into Adam and Adam opened his eyes to so that the first interaction of his sight was to behold the face of his Creator God, this woman who was bone of Adam's bone and flesh of Adam's flesh, would in the same way, open her eyes for the first time in order to behold the face of her Creator God as well. And from this photograph from Eden, we find the critical foundation for the marriage between God and God's chosen and sanctified people: the experience of man and woman looking to their God first who created them with an agape love and called them good in order that they could travel the journey of faith with a posture of appreciation love.

But as the story goes the question was asked, “Did God really say, ‘You can’t eat of any tree in the garden,?’” And in the same effect as when one domino hits another we not are in another garden where we find God lamenting over the spiritual decline of His chosen people that has been going on for over a thousand years. The questions that the vineyard owner/divine gardener keeps asking are, “Why? What more could I have done?” In the words of the Reverend Paul Simpson-Duke, “Everything God did for the vineyard (metaphor for bride and metaphor for Israel) – every hole dug, every rock removed, every selection made, every planting done, every protection established (wall, hedge, tower) and every watchful expectation held – was love’s eager work. And when it all ended in acres of stinking fruit, the rage that followed was loves other voice. Anger is the fluid love bleeds when you cut it.” What follows from here is the sad outworking of agape love. God knows how it will end but grants them the autonomy that they have desired from the very beginning.

When God led the Israelite people out of Egypt, He gave to them three great ideas to sustain them as a chosen and sanctified people. God gave them redemption (I have brought you out of bondage and set your feet on the land flowing with milk and honey), righteousness (the moral law), and finally rights and spiritual worship. This becomes the sequence that God expects not only from a particular community but from a person as well: redemption, righteousness, worship (and this is a sequence that you cannot change!). “If you are not redeemed, you cannot be righteous. If you are not redeemed and righteous, you cannot worship. For who shall ascend upon the hill of the Lord but he that hath clean hands and a pure heart.” (Ravi Zacharias)

Instead of living though into the three great and sustaining ideas though, there grew amongst the Israelites the yearn to be like other nations. God even met them upon the mountain to speak to them (Sinai) and they wanted nothing to do with it. Instead they built an idol! God wanted to lead and guide them; they wanted to be like other nations. As time went by, they demanded that God even give them a king – an escape from the responsibility from being set apart. God gave them Saul. And as the glory of other nations became more important to the Israelites and to their kings, even the prophetic voice of God through the prophets became void and manipulated. In the beginning, it was the prophets that would tell

the kings what to do (opposed to other nations whose kings told the prophets what to do). Saul had Samuel. His successor had Nathan. The successor of David though was Solomon and it was Solomon that had no prophet that he consulted. He used his own wisdom for his own self worship, the temple became grand, his house even grander, the voice of the Lord left the people and the nation of Israel was plunged into bankruptcy. The next king was Jeroboam. Where Samuel was void of the prophetic voice, Jeroboam started to manipulate and appoint prophets and priests that would further his own agenda (1 Kings 13). The Israelites have moved from the being led by God to have the prophetic voice of God in relationship to the king, to the void of the prophetic voice, to the final manipulation of the prophetic voice. Thus are the pages of history for the Israelite nation that led the Divine Gardener to lament in an agape/hesed love turned to anger, "And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns; I will commend the clouds that they rain no rain upon it."

And as we catch our breath and possibly take cover ourselves at such fluid bleed because love has been cut, let us look upon our own context. There are many times that I look around and I am more worried about the culture that I see inside the church than what I see outside the church. It would be easy for me to remind us of the culture changes that we have seen within our own walls from the Camelot days of the 1950's and 1960's until today. Within my own life though, I have seen so much happen in the life of Christianity in America. There was a time that we started to build bigger and bigger churches with more money coming in than ever. Preachers were on television 24 hours a day. Time Magazine was claiming one year to be, "The Year of the Evangelical" and the question that seemed to be looming just under the surface was, "Can the church outlive its own popularity?" It was Woodrow Wilson, arriving in Paris to an overwhelming amount of pomp and circumstance at the end of the first World War for peace talks, who looked at his Chief of Propaganda and stated, "Have you built me a safety net strong enough to catch me if I fall?" We, in my opinion, are a church in a culture that at many levels is testing that safety net. Richard Dortch, formally with the PTL Empire, might have been on to something when he stated, "We

were caught up in God's work but we forgot about God...it took a kick in the teeth to bring us to our senses."

It took a kick in the teeth to bring us to our senses! What a statement that is so true even for us today. In so many ways, we do need to be brought to our senses (whether it takes a kick in the teeth or not) because it is only at that point that any amount of real hope in the living Christ is going to lead us as a covenant community to bear the fruit that the Divine Gardener is trying to grow. And with so much hanging in the balance, what are we to do?

It was the Oxford Professor and author C. S. Lewis that struggled greatly with how to properly respond to God's agape love. Lewis finally came to the conclusion, after much contemplation on the sacrificial nature of the love of God that that what he must pray for is that God would grant him an appreciation love that would allow him a posture in life that forever lives with gratitude. Lewis discovered that need for love can be selfish, the need for pleasure can be momentary, the gift of love can be given and moved away from, and the appreciation of pleasure alone can be fleeting. It is only appreciation love, a thankful love, a responsive love, that can be a posture for life and this can only be found in worship for when you have no one to thank for all in life, there is no worship, and if there is no worship, there is a vacuum in the human heart.

As I bring this to a close I want you to notice that Lewis, whether he realized this or not, was following the three great ideas that God gave the Israelite people so long ago: redemption, righteousness worship. In the same fashion, the challenge for us, the kick in the teeth to bring us to our senses, is the mere fact that we must at all times take inventory of our own sense of spirituality. Do we ponder another garden, the Garden of Gethsemane, that God through Christ sweated blood within the night that would lead to a cross that we might have redemption? Do we open our lives to the Pentecostal flames of God's Holy Spirit that breathes holy living into us allowing us to live a life of righteousness? Finally, do we fall to our knees engulfed in total awe at all that God has done overwhelmed by appreciation love through worship?

In the name of the Triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

