



Sermon preached by Tara Qu on 1st September 2024

Readings: *Song of Songs 2.1-13 and Mark 7.1-8, 14f, 21-23*

Trinity XIV

The Sharing Together Time

When I was a little girl, my favourite movies were cartoons, and my second favourite movie type was Kungfu movie. Has anyone watched Kungfu Panda? In this movie the good guys and the bad guys are very different from each other, you can easily tell them apart. At that time, I thought the world is like the movie, there are good guys and there are bad guys, and good people do good things and bad people do bad things. That was one of the first life lessons that I have learned — a very important lesson. However, as I grow older, the stories I learned became more complicated. Sometimes it is not so easy to tell the good people from the bad people, and it is even harder to tell whether the things they do are good or bad. Have any of you heard about the Romance of Three Kingdoms? It is a historical fiction written in the 14th century in China. It is a long story about how China in the 2nd to 3rd century AD divided into three kingdoms, and how they fought each other to gain independence FROM, OR dominance over, each other. I remember when I watched that TV series about the Three Kingdoms, I asked my dad several times, who is the good guy and who is the bad guy? When I asked that question, my dad hesitated, and said, “well, it is not that simple. They are fighting each other for land and power. They are doing clever things to trick each other in battles. No one is absolutely evil, and no one is absolutely good.” To my little brain at the age of 8, I couldn’t understand what my dad said. And it left me with a very difficult question: whose side am I going to take, if I cannot be sure who is good or bad? Let me ask you a question. Is stealing a bad behaviour? What if the person steals to feed a hungry little child and an old lady? You see the question becomes a bit difficult here. And that’s what happened to Jean Valjean in Hugo’s famous novel *Les Misérables*. Here in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is facing a difficult moral, theological issue, too. He sees the Pharisees who were obeying many rules, but he tells them, it is not the rules that they obey that matter fundamentally, it is the people’s heart that matters more to God. Jesus explains that the question about piety, and who is the true follower of God is not that simple. Loving God is not about obeying a few rules like you do when you play a game, it is about what comes out of your heart. In other words, the true love for God, and the wisdom of how to achieve it, is more than just rules. It requires our discernment. Sometimes, it takes good sense to tell the right from the wrong, and it also takes wisdom to behave and act in the way that God pleases.

The Sermon

Wisdom, Love and Creation

The Two Ronnies Classic:

A man walks into a pet shop and says, 'I'd like to buy a wasp, please.'

The shopkeeper says, 'We don't sell wasps.'

The man replies, 'But you've got one in the window!'

I was told this is another English classic joke by the internet. Like always, it took me a while to comprehend the humour in it.

Lesson: The joke highlights the difference between taking things literally versus understanding them in context. The man sees a wasp in the window and assumes it’s for sale, missing the broader context that a wasp in the window is likely just an insect that flew in, not an item for sale. Sometimes, people just fail to see the bigger picture because they are interpreting words and images literally. Our perception of reality can differ from the actual state of affairs, more often than we would like to think. This man’s reality, where the wasp is an item for sale, is different from the shopkeeper’s, where the wasp is just an uninvited insect. Our perspectives shape our understanding of what is important. With biblical interpretations, this observation also applies.

What we just read is a passage from the book of the Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon. In the exegetical history of the Song, romantic love has not been easily accepted as the main topic of the book among many Jewish and Christian commentators, because it is often accompanied by erotic images, and religious leaders are often embarrassed about talking about this subject. In the early centuries of the common era, Jews and then Christians, reread the Song as a song of love between God and God's people. These are called the allegorical interpretations, which assume that the text had meaning other than a literal one. The allegories vary but generally stayed close to scenes of intimacy, which is interpreted as divine love, instead of human love. The lovers' professions of love being likened to proof of God's goodness. For example, the Medieval Jewish scholar Rashi positions the book on one level as reminiscences of a "woman bound in living widowhood." For him the allegory is Israel in diaspora, and the Shulammitte woman's pining for her lover is Israel remembering different times in its relationship with God. Another medieval Rabbi Rashbam says: King Solomon established [this book] by the holy spirit, for he saw that in the future Israel would complain in their exile about the Holy One. Blessed is He, that he distanced himself from them like a groom who is separated from his beloved.¹ In these interpretations, a woman's love for man is somehow undesirable, as it is a people in suffering desperate for God's help. The allegorical approach to the Song dominated for many centuries, during which those who read the Song as a song of love between humans were brutally persecuted. Only in recent years was the Song liberated from these exegetical shackles. Scholars uncovered the focus of the Song on human love and unmasked repressive interpretations of the past.

Here rises an important question; is there no room for God's love if we read the Song of Solomon as depicting human love? Is a human's romantic, and sometimes erotic love, in the Song, in conflict with God's love? These are questions for you to answer. What we can say without doubt from the passage is that it is a beautiful picture of the human world which is part of the creation. There is a natural landscape in the love story. The text guides us visually traveling among the mountains, catching the sight of a gazelle or a young man who moves agilely through the valleys and hills. Then he comes close, looking at us eagerly, and calls on us, *'Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away!'* His voice is full of tenderness and enthusiasm, and urges us *"the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear, the time of singing comes, and the voice of the turtledove is heard. The fig ripens, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance."* So, 'arise, my love,' come with me". The beloved is AS IF trying to allure us with the natural beauty of the world that God has created. The flowers on the earth and the singing of birds are natural sources of beauty, while the fig tree and the vine are plants created by God but usually well-tended by human hands. These are very revealing images, as if the Song is telling us, love is from God, it is nurtured in the world that God has created, but it needs human attention, too. Such vivid imagery enriches the love story, conveying deep emotion that reflects the intimacy between the lovers and creation.

Love itself is an important part of human life, and knowing love is an important lesson which no doubt would form part of the wisdom from God. What is particularly interesting about the reading today is that it is part of the dialogues between women in the Song of Songs as private female discourse, but through the canonization of the Song this private discourse becomes "public". The private realm and the public realm blurs in this story. The innermost matter of love and desire becomes an aspect of life that must be recognized publicly.

God thoroughly loves the world. He created the world, not only for us to live in, but also for us to enjoy. Romantic love, like many things in creation, is an important channel for us to experience and learn about God's love. The Creation is unconditionally given to us, so is God's love. It is not a coincidence that the love between the young lovers in the Song is expressed through the beauty of the natural world.

The natural world is a canvas on which God paints the wonders of His love. Just as the gazelle and the young stag move with grace and energy, so does the love of God move with power and purpose in our lives. The flowers that appear, the singing of birds, and the ripening of figs all point to a world that is

¹ Anna E. Marsh, "Women's Voices and the Cost of Going Public : The Song of Songs, Canonization and Safe Spaces" , in *Reading the Song of Songs in a MeToo Era*.

alive, vibrant, and full of promises. God's love is not static; it is dynamic, constantly moving and growing, just as nature changes and flourishes with the seasons.

In Song of Songs 2:8-13, we see a beautiful portrayal of love, of times and seasons, and the natural world. The passage invites us to reflect on the ways God's love is revealed in creation.

As we end this sermon today, may we be attuned to the beauty of God's creation around us, recognizing it as a reflection of His love. May we trust in His perfect timing, knowing that each season has its purpose. And when He calls us to arise and come along, may we do so with hearts full of faith, ready to embrace the new season that he has prepared for us. Amen.

Tara Qu

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