



Come Away With Me

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
September 2, 2018; Song of Songs 2:8-15*

Dr. Seuss said, You know you're in love when you can't sleep because reality is finally better than your dreams. In the classic novel *Wuthering Heights* Catherine Earnshaw says of her beloved Heathcliff, "He's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same." Poet Maya Angelou wrote that "Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope." Oprah Winfrey says this about love: "Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down." Do you remember the movie *When Harry Met Sally?* Here's what Harry says about love: "When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible." And finally, here's what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King says about love: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."¹

So our popular culture is full of love stories and talk about love. We can't get enough of them. Some of us, if we're lucky, can remember the power of being in love. We can remember the feeling that you've met someone who is mesmerizing or stunning or who just otherwise takes your breath away, and without whom the rest of life pales into monochrome. Falling in love is the feeling of having every sense in your body turned in one direction in total

¹ These quotes were collected in Tara Rice, "21 Best Love Quotes of All Time," in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, December 11, 2017.

delight and wonder and desire. So yes, we talk about it. And who knew, but this experience of being in love and falling in love is in our scriptures. There is a whole book dedicated to the experience, the book Song of Solomon that our reading was from this morning. In that entire book, the word God is not mentioned even one time. It's a book spoken mostly from the perspective of the woman, about her desire for her beloved. It contains some language that really is the ancient equivalent of erotica. So it might be surprising that we find this book in the Bible, and perhaps even more strange that I'm preaching about it. But it shouldn't be surprising. Why not?

Christians do talk a lot about love, but I suspect romantic love is not at all what you think of when you hear the word love in the context of church. You probably think, "love your neighbor as yourself," and then you go into a lot of internal "shoulds." I ought to be more loving than I am. I should work harder on being patient and gracious to that neighbor whose creeping Charlie keeps overflowing into my lawn. I should work harder on being more loving to my spouse when he or she fails to put the toilet seat down or is not interested in listening to what I have to say. I should work harder at figuring out how to love the neighbors I am concerned about, those who are really different from me, but whom my normal life doesn't put me in any contact with. But even if all these things are true, that we ought to be more patient and loving than we are, the power of love doesn't come from a lot of judgmental self-talk. It starts somewhere else entirely. It starts with the experience of being and becoming the Beloved. Listen to the reading from this morning.

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.

[Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.”]

Have you ever received an invitation like that?

From across the millennia, theologians and mystics and teachers from the Christian and Jewish traditions have understood something essential about the human condition, which is that our souls are made for union with God, we are made to love and be loved, and the Song of Solomon where this reading comes from is both about human love and about the love between the soul and God. Now this may seem like a stretch. My brother and I were talking about this and he said to me, “Frankly, I just can’t relate to the idea of God as a lover.” And I get it. But Henri Nouwen, who is considered one of the great spiritual writers of the 20th century, says this: “Becoming the Beloved is the great spiritual journey we have to make.”²

We are called, not just to intellectually understand that we are Beloved of God, but to experience ourselves as Beloved of God. We are called to respond with love and delight in God and in God’s beautiful world and its people. Like the Lover in today’s scripture reading, God invites us to a journey with God. It’s the invitation Abraham heard when God called him and Sarah to leave everything they knew and go to a land God would show them. It’s the invitation Jesus gave to his disciples and to us, to follow him. This journey is simply a way of life, the way of love, that may begin with a fire like romance, but that deepens into the commitment of choosing, over and over again, to stay with your Beloved.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preached about the power of love at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Here’s what he said about the way of love:

² Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992) at 43.

Imagine this tired old world where love is the way.

When love is the way – unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive.

When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again.

When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook.

When love is the way, poverty will become history.

When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.

When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more.

When love is the way, there's plenty good room for all of God's children.

When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all, and we are brothers and sisters, children of God.

My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family.³

The way of love to which God invites us involves practices that help us stay grounded in it. Because as most of us know, even the fire of the strongest romance can diminish over time. Love is a way of life, and to maintain it involves practice. In fact, Bishop Curry's staff has recently named seven practices of the way of love. There is information about them on the Episcopal Church website, and in my sermon that will be posted on the website I'll include the website information.⁴ These seven practices outline

³ The Most Rev. Michael Curry, "The Power of Love," Sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, May 19, 2018, accessed at <https://goo.gl/nbYNT4>, September 2, 2018.

⁴ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love>

how we can continue to accept God's invitation to us to journey in the way of love. They are: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest. I encourage you to go look at them individually and also to learn about them together as a community.

Today is my last Sunday with you all in my capacity as Assistant Rector at St. Stephen's. Most of you know that as of October 1 I will become the Rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Linden Hills, a few miles northeast of here. As I thought about what I wanted to say to all of you today, I realized that the scripture from today captures it, and in fact I've been saying it all along. I think I've probably said the word Beloved to all of you about 2500 times. You are Beloved of God. We don't have to make this true. It is true. The delight that lovers have for one another is a pale temporary reflection of the abiding eternal passion and concern and delight God has for God's people, for us as a whole and for each of us, individually, exactly as we are. This love is not meant to stay within us. It is meant to fill us and overflow out of us. It is meant to do what Bishop Curry described in his sermon to the royal wedding couple in the words I just read to you. It is meant to be practiced.

And we've been learning about this together. We have learned about the Beloved Community. You have shown me so much of yourselves – your stories, and your gifts, and your hurts. You have shared your lives, and some of you have shared your births, and your weddings, and even your deaths with me. There have been times you have taken my breath away. And although I am following God's Spirit to a new call, God remains with us, intimately, inviting us to transformation and healing and a way of life that is intended for the restoration of the world God so loves. The truth is that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and in that love, and in practicing that love, we are and always will be together.