

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC

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Traditional Doers

Song of Songs 2:8-13, James 1:19, 22, 26-27, Mark 7:1-2, 5- 8, 14-15, 20, 21a

Please pray with me.

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.

The Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon, gets even more romantic and even erotic in language. One commentary on this book started with, “What in the world is this doing in the Bible?”! Indeed it is a rather salacious love song, love note, or love story. But before we start to censor the Bible, perhaps we should start with the question, what is the Bible?

Some people say that it is the Word of God. For these folks the Bible was dictated by God and transcribed by humans. It is the literal, inerrant, and infallible, Word of God. Some people say it was written by humans, but inspired by God. Some people say it is the history and stories of God’s relationship and faithfulness to human beings.

I have been reading a really interesting book by Marcus Borg titled, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. The subtitle of the book is *Taking the Bible*

Seriously but not Literally. A deeply spiritual scholar, Borg writes that he sees the Bible as a human product. As a human response to God, the Bible tells us how the human writers saw things, not how God sees things.

Borg also believes it is up to us to determine how to read and interpret, how to hear and value, the various writings of ancient people of faith in the Bible.¹ We then must discern how to apply them to our daily lives. This is consistent with the Preamble to the UCC constitution, which states that, [we] “... affirm the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make [the faith of our tradition our] own in reality of worship, in honesty of expression, and in purity of heart before God.”²

Let us for a moment consider that the Bible is a human response to God. What would you or I write if we wrote it as our response to experiencing God? Some of us might write a list of rules like Deuteronomy. Some might write a narrative myth like Genesis or a story like one of the Gospels. Some might write letters like James. Some of us might write poetry or a song like the psalms. And then, some of us just might write a love note; intimate, romantic, deeply personal, and even potentially erotic.

That might seem like a stretch, but we have stories of saints, ancient mothers and fathers of the Church whose experience of God was so transformative, it

¹ Borg, Marcus. *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally.* New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, (see his excellent discussion pages 3-36, including the footnotes!)

² <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/constitution-of-the-ucc.html>

involved everything that they were. The love they experienced wrapped around their mind and intellect, heart and emotion, spirit and even physical, sensual, sexual being. So completely in love with God, their whole being was consumed in the flames of ecstasy and passion. Whew!

This then is the Song of Solomon. If the Bible is a human response to God, then the Song of Songs is an expression of a human experience of God. The love story here is attributed to Solomon, but it is not clear, perhaps it was written for Solomon and a bride? But the Song has been seen as an allegory for the love and relationship between God and God's people, or between Christ and his bride the church, or even God or Christ and an individual believer.

As I talked with our adult study groups I had to think about how our lectionary texts connected to each other: a song of love, Jesus' teaching about hand washing and tradition, and James' letter admonishing the church to be doers of the word. I was reminded of an experience I had with an interfaith group on a trip to Israel.

One of the leaders of the trip was a Rabbi. As Friday, the Shabbat or Sabbath approached, Bernie and his wife Barbara invited our group to join them in celebrating Shabbat with them. Please understand that Shabbat dinner in the Jewish tradition, is a very special, intimate, family time. To be invited to celebrate with a family is no casual invitation, indeed it is an honor and a privilege. Shabbat

dinner can be full of traditions, and includes ancient rituals performed by specific family members as they come of age.

We began with prayers over the lighting of the candles, usually lead by the mother or female head of the family, in this case Barbara, the Rabbi's wife. Then, an elaborate hand washing ritual for everyone in attendance was carried out. Helping each other prepare for our meal in this way, seemed to evoke a sense of caring for each other that drew us closer. All the while prayers of thanksgiving were said for the day, the week, the bread, the wine, the other food, and the company, and for the presence of God in our midst. The food and the conversation are all richer for the preparation and the prayers. All throughout the evening there was an atmosphere of celebration of God's blessings.

And then came the pinnacle of the evening, something very special. Bernie explained that he and Barbara had a special ritual that they carried out on Shabbat that they wanted to share with us. It was a tradition they had kept every Friday night for 35 years. Amidst this group of strangers they had welcomed as friends, they carried out an ancient, intimate, and sacred ritual.

Barbara and Bernie humbly gave thanks to God for the gift of each other, and then renewed their wedding vows. It was one of the most touching, loving, romantic, intimate, and sacred, moments I have ever been privileged to witness. Watching them carry out the sacred tradition and ritual that they had created as a

couple, evoked the feelings of what the Song of Songs sings, not only between two people deeply in love with each other, but also, and most gratefully, in love with God.

Tradition. It can evoke the most sacred of memories, the deepest intimacy, the most loving feelings, when it is used and followed in ways that honor the spirit of the tradition, as Bernie and Barbara did. Tradition and ritual, when done correctly are celebration of what live out every day. In the case of Bernie and Barbara, I had seen how they cared for each other all throughout the trip. The ritual of repeating their vows was a celebration of the love for each other they lived out each day. It was also a renewal of the sacred commitment they had made before God, as well as thanksgiving and asking for God's blessings to keep their commitment strong.

Jesus would have been pleased at how they followed the traditions of their faith, as well as the tradition they had created. They honored the blessings and love of God, and their love for each other. But in our Gospel story today, Jesus was not pleased with the Pharisees and their lack of love and abuse of the tradition!

The Pharisees complain that Jesus' disciples are not honoring the traditions of hand washing. In his usual style, Jesus answers a challenge with a challenge. Jesus says, how dare you complain about someone else not following the

traditions! You not only don't follow them, you do even worse. You twist them for your own purposes, and use them to abuse the people.

Jesus calls them on their hypocrisy and for their lack of love for God and the people. Using the example of hand washing, he tells the disciples, if you do not have a clean heart, if it is filled with anger, lack of forgiveness, jealousy, and bitterness, it does not matter what you do to make yourself clean on the outside! No amount of scrubbing your hands, eating the right foods, going to worship, or paying your tithe will work if your heart is dirty, if your heart is not filled with love for God and others!

And then we have very similar advice from our loving brother James. He says, let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. Listening and patience are good advice for relationships of all kinds.

But James also admonishes us not to deceive ourselves that hearing the word is good enough. He says we must also be doers of the word. And keeping the traditions and going through the rituals is not enough. Reading the Bible, espousing Christian values, coming to worship, giving our tithe is not enough. If we think we are religious, but do not listen, speak and act in love, our religion, and all our traditions and rituals are worthless.

I think that is where we come back to our Song of Songs, to our human response to God. Instead of writing a Bible, what would you or I do if we were to

actually respond with our lives in response to experiencing God? What if we responded to the blessings of God we experience every day- experiences that are so transformative, that give us life each morning, breath all through the day, water and food, family and friends, meaningful life, soulful companionship, with action? The love we experience from God that wraps around our minds, hearts, spirits and even bodies. Whew! Perhaps instead of keeping traditions and rituals, or writing a love story, we need to let our lives be a love story. And James would say caring for others is one way to do that. Amen.

Then he gives his prescription for religion that is acceptable to God: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. I guess this would be a good time to ask ourselves: Who are the orphans and widows in distress in our world and in our community? Are we individually and together doing enough to care for them? And keeping ourselves unstained by the world- what does that mean today

Jesus gives them the example of the teachings of the tradition to honor, to take care of their father and mother. Apparently the leaders of the temple had told them it was more important to give money to God than to use their money to take care of their aged parents. The truth was they wanted people to put money in the coffers of the temple so that the leaders could use it!

is what we need in these days. There is so much political strife over health care, the economy has affected employment of many and the retirement of all, and we are all trying to

balance so many competing priorities in our church, homes, and communities. Listening and patience is good advice for relationships of all kinds.