

Kiss me with the Kisses of Your Mouth (Song of Songs 1:1-8)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

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The Song of Songs begins with words of passionate desire: Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. It is a kiss that more than anything else makes us vividly aware of our own body and the body of another. It is a point of intimate encounter; a blending of boundaries between lovers. Do you remember your first kiss? I can't say that I do. Not my first kiss, not really. It wasn't very thrilling. Kissing is a skill after all. It takes practice. I remember keenly the kiss that didn't happen. I was kind of a late bloomer in high school. I had such a crush on Carol Black. She was a part of my group of friends but she had a boyfriend. So I was left to stew in my unrequited longing for her. That was until they broke up right before my senior prom. She called me and we went. We arrived back at her house late in the night at the very same time that her sister did with her date. And for this painfully shy awkward kid it was just too much to kiss my girl in front of another couple. I missed my chance. A year later during my freshmen year at Wake Forest my dorm suite mates, all upperclassmen purchased a kiss from a sorority kissing booth fund raiser. Those guys took a collection and purchased a whopper of a kiss. This gorgeous coed came to my room and suddenly all my suite mates were in my room with me. I tried to run away I was so shy. But there she was and they weren't going to let me go. We kissed. We kissed some more. And it was simply wonderful. I forgot all about the circumstances. That we were raising money for a good cause- who cares? That my suite mates were all there- I forgot all about them. I was transported. But what could the humble beginnings of my kissing career have to do with the Divine Kiss? Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth. The Song of Songs begins with this soul that is seeking a kiss, a heart that is longing for the romantic embrace of her lover. The theologian Phyllis Trible in her marvelous book "God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality" suggests that this opening line of the SOS invites us into the circle of intimacy, into the orbit of the woman's love and longing. The woman's unexpected voice so unlike any other feminine voice in the Bible expresses her longing so vividly so honestly and without inhibition. This voice has invited those readers of the Song to hear the sound of their own deepest longings. Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!

Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth. Just about my favorite movie of all time is Cinema Paradiso. It is set in a small town in southern Italy during and after WW2. The story revolves around a movie theater called the Cinema Paradiso. One character is the wise old man who is the projectionist in the theater and the other main character is a young boy who is his protégé, who loves the movies as much as the old man and becomes his assistant projectionist. An early scene in the movie shows us the village priest sitting in the front row of the theater previewing each film that comes into the village censoring from the movie any racy scenes that he believes are not proper to be seen. Each time a kiss appears, an erotic embrace happens, the priest rings a bell and the projectionist and his assistant take scissors and literally cut that scene from the film. The movie unfolds from there telling the story of the boy who grows into a young man and falls in love with the woman of his dreams. But somehow at a critical moment in their relationship a rendezvous that was meant to happen, does not and the lovers' lives are forever separated. The young man mourns his lost love but what truly torments him is that his mentor the old man who is the theater projectionist appears to have played a part in causing him to lose his love. The

young man leaves his village and pursues the great passion of his life for film becoming an internationally acclaimed filmmaker. He only returns to the village many, many years later. His mentor is long dead and the theater Cinema Paradiso itself has fallen into ruin and is to be demolished. He is still haunted by the loss of his first love and still lingers over the even deeper wound, wondering why he was seemingly betrayed by the old man who was his best friend and mentor. Our hero is given a case of film held for him by the widow of the old man. Eventually he returns to Rome and has the film shown in his own private theater. What unfolds before him is a collage of every single kiss that had ever been censored by the priest, every erotic embrace that had been cut out of the films seen in the theater. As each romantic scene from the golden age of cinema follows scene upon scene, the love that has been lost has been found. With tears in his eyes he understands that the old man did what he did to set him free to pursue the greater love to be found in the world of his art and the films that he must make as an artist. His long journey as a man finds ultimate resolution in an unexpected kiss.

What could the kiss mean in the SOS for us as people of faith? We talk a great deal in the church about the centrality of the Incarnation, our core Christian belief that in Christ the word is made flesh. The Divine Word has entered space and time in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Could the Incarnation itself be understood as the kiss of God? Is this not the kiss that we long to experience more deeply in which we know the Incarnation not just as a universal truth but in our own heart- the Word made flesh in us? That God has come into my life. God knows me. God loves me. God cherishes me. God is within me. Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth of God. The desire for a kiss is a longing for intimacy with God. It. Of word made flesh. The kiss of God is the pressing of divinity into human flesh. A Kiss that dissolves the boundary between heaven and earth. Do we desire this kiss? Maybe our desire for God is buried under a general dissatisfaction with religion. Is this all there is to it we wonder? It may no longer be enough for us to be generally a part of the church or anonymously one of God's people; we have reached a point where we want to know God in a more personal way, we want to realize more deeply that God knows me and sees me, that yes, God desires me. Can it be that God finds me beautiful? That God is also madly in love with me? Kiss me God with the kisses of your mouth. Indeed God's love is better than wine. In Verse 3 the Beloved says to her Lover "Draw me after you, let us make haste" the SOS declares. Draw me after you. God respects us and does not want to impose upon us. So we must show the first initiative. How long have we been a Christian? How long have we been faithfully religious before the Holy Spirit Herself is able to awaken in us a desire to seek after God? But once we do it is the alluring power of our Divine Lover, the beauty of God that draws us forward. Even our most fervent desire for God does not have strength sufficient to find God. Rather it is the beauty of the Divine that draws us forward. God's drawing power is behind our pursuing power. If we have once glimpsed the beauty of our divine Lover it will be easy for us to pursue God. Draw me after you. Let us make haste.

Have you ever wondered what it means to call God the Alpha and Omega? The beginning and end. God is the Alpha- the source from which we spring into life and God is the Omega the destiny that draws us forward. The church's understanding of Christ as the Alpha and the Omega has been forever transformed by one person who died in 1953 a poor forgotten priest in a small ramshackle apartment in NYC. His name was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Born in France in 1881, Pierre grew up in a large Catholic family and went on to be a Jesuit priest, a philosopher and a paleontologist. His writings on the universe and evolution were so radical that the Catholic

Church banned him and sent him into exile off to the Mongolian desert of China to look for dinosaur bones. While there he was a member of a team that discovered the skeleton of one of the oldest human beings yet to be found. As a paleontologist, Pierre speculated about the oldest origins of humankind the very beginnings of human evolution. But as a theologian and a person of faith he tried to imagine and articulate a vision of where evolution was taking us and the universe in the cosmic future. It would be impossible to even summarize his theories here but the one who died banned, ignored, abandoned is now being heralded as theological genius in the ranks of the church's greatest theologians of all time. Teilhard believed that Christ is the Omega Point, the ultimate destination of humanity, in deed the entire physical universe is evolving moment by moment, eon by eon toward Christ. Christ is the Omega Point which allures us, draws us and the entire unfolding universe forward to that moment of cosmic transformation where all matter becomes Spirit. Or as St. Paul says in the Resurrection Chapter 1 Cor. 15, when God becomes all in all. Loving union with the Divine is the destiny of the entire universe. Draw me after you O God, let us make haste.

The Song of Songs continues in verse 3: The king has brought me into his chambers. What is this chamber of our Divine Lover? It is the secret place of intimacy inside the human heart. We will find similar images throughout the Song of Songs for this place where we meet God. Not just the chamber/ the bedroom of the Divine Lover. But other beautiful images in the Songs of Songs describe the human heart- the dwelling place of God within us: the green pastures, the blooming garden, the wild mountain top, the lush vineyard. All of these are beautiful images for the heart. Your heart , the place of the in-dwelling presence of God in the deepest center of your life, much deeper than the mind you are always accustomed to, your mind that is busy dividing reality into subject and object, the mind that is constantly making decisions about this or that, always reacting to stimuli of its fears and desires. There is a deeper you in you that you may have yet to discover, may only be dimly aware. You may even doubt that this exists in you but it does. It is your heart and its own way of knowing and being known. The science of human biology now declares that the human heart is a kind of brain; composed at least by half of neurons which like the brain are the ways our body communicates. Actually more communication occurs in the heart than in the brain. The heart is the physical and spiritual center of the human person. The heart is where God seeks to know us and embrace us in the chambers of divine love.

And chapter 1 of the Songs of Songs continues with these words that have puzzled interpreters for centuries: I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me. Commentators have thrown up their hands in frustration not sure what this means. This puzzling line could literally be a reference to the famous legend about King Solomon's marriage to the Queen of Sheba who came to him from Africa. Translators have danced around I am black and beautiful. The KJ translators show their hand by saying I am black but beautiful. But it is clearly black and beautiful. In mulling over this verse I thought first of the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle who is part African American. And presiding over their wedding in Westminster Abbey was a black preacher Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry. And an African American Gospel choir participated in the service. And then I was watching the news and I saw a story about a young African American girl who has very dark skin. She was being bullied at school and disrespected because of the deep dark color of her skin. Her mother found her one evening still in the bathtub. What are you still doing here? I am soaking my skin hoping it will

lighten up. Mother and daughter had a heart to heart talk about being black and beautiful. And the mother posted something on Facebook celebrating her daughter's black beauty. It went viral. Hundreds of thousands of people affirmed this young girl's discovery of her black beauty. And now she has become a much sought after spokeswoman for owning your beauty. She is even making plans to launch her own fashion line. She is black and she is beautiful. Does she have something to teach us, she who is black and beautiful? Let us simply say that human love and most assuredly Divine Love is always leaping over physical and cultural and racial differences, leaping over our own self-doubt; whatever it is that makes us feel less than beautiful. Our Divine Lover knows us to be beautiful beyond compare. Our differences, even our flaws and failings are unseen by God, or perhaps they are seen for what they really are: a part of our beauty.

Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock? The song changes the image of the Divine Lover from a King to a Shepherd. Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock? Can we keep up with the flow of this poem? Where the mind stumbles the heart understands. Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock? Where you make it lie down at noon; where do I find you? I long to be with you. And the answer? If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow the tracks of the flock and pasture your kids beside the shepherds' tents. Whose tracks will we follow? We will follow in the footsteps of the saints, of monks and mystics, of theologians Jewish and Christian, the tracks of extraordinary poets and ordinary spiritual seekers who have gone before us, we will follow in the footsteps of the lovers of God; people who discovered in their own hearts the fiery passionate love of God. In their own experience they read the song and followed it as a path across the distance that separates them from God. We too might read the Song this way as a path across the distance between ourselves and God, between ourselves and others, between ourselves and the world. It is a pathway followed by an ever more passionate love. We will follow the tracks of even one of my ancestors a 17th century Puritan pastor and a poet devoted to the Song of Songs. Edward Taylor was pastor to a small congregation on the westernmost frontier of the Massachusetts Bay colony. As a fervent Christian believer with a mystical appreciation for Holy Communion, Edward Taylor wrote poems, which he called Preparatory meditations as a way preparing himself spiritually to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. As preparatory meditations he wrote 67 poems based on the Song of Songs. If in the heart of an old austere puritan in the 1600's, was the eternal flame of the SOS then maybe there is hope for a bunch of Presbyterians in 2018. Maybe there is a flame in your heart that is about to burst forth. Maybe there is a desire to be kissed by your Divine Lover. Let us then follow the tracks to the pastures of your heart. This sermon is my own preparatory meditation for the communion of love we are about to experience in the Eucharist. And I ask you to consider this sermon God's invitation to draw you into the infinite embrace of love. Kiss us with the Kisses of your mouth, O God.