

The Language of Love (Song of Songs 4:1-5:1)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

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In the poetic language of love the male voice in the Song of Songs looks closely at his Beloved in awestruck admiration. And we gaze along with him. How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful! The Lover gathers up imagery from the created world around him to try and describe the beauty of his beloved. Her eyes, her hair, her lips and teeth; her breasts and thighs can only be named and praised by using the beautiful imagery of the created world around them. The images the man uses to describe her body are highly evocative and though they are taken from a time and place faraway, we understand that he chants them in admiration. One by one he lifts up a part of her body to the light of his imagination and clothes it with beautiful images that both reveal the beauty of the Beloved and at the same time preserves her mysterious otherness. You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you. If you read the Song from beginning to end and I hope you will you might notice that the woman tells stories in order to make her beloved present. It is his absence that troubles her. She is heart sick with longing and love. But for the man, it is not her absence that troubles him but her very presence. The Divine Lover cries out: “Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me!” His beloved so overwhelms him that it seems he must organize her into body parts in order to cope with her presence. If he can take her bit by bit perhaps he will not be undone by her. Don’t we do the same with God? On Sunday mornings we hear sermons on the divine attributes like God’s loving-kindness, mystery, justice, grace one by one in order to make the overwhelming beauty of God approachable. Like the Lover in the Song of Songs, the language of love is always stretched beyond its capacity to praise the beauty of the Beloved. What do we make of the language of love as we find it this morning in our reading from the Song of Song? Could we also find ourselves so lost in wonder, love and praise?

What first jumps out to me about the Lover’s admiring speech is this fundamental affirmation of the goodness of the human body. How far we have strayed from the faith of the Hebrew people and their earthy appreciation of the human body. When you look at the OT what pervades it is a theology or spirituality rooted in the body. Every part of the body has some deep associations with the life of the spirit. Breath and blood, eyes, ears mouth, body and limbs, hands and feet, heart and memory, bowels and kidney. Even and especially our sexuality if we listen well to the Song of Songs. Every part of the body has a spiritual dimension. Somehow the church has lost its roots in Hebrew earthiness. We have come to the place where we have lost the connection to the body. We have forgotten that body and soul are a living unity. Even with the NT affirmation of the incarnation of the Word becoming flesh. Of God being incarnate in a human body, in spite of that something seemed to go awry in western Christianity. This anti-body trend got even worse within the church of the middle ages and has continued until today when the body has been so scorned and vilified that it seemed to be a cause for shame to even have one. But in the Divine Lovers description of his Beloved in the Song of Songs we are encouraged to reaffirm the goodness of our bodies. As Stephanie Paulson a Harvard Divinity school theologian writes in her commentary on the Song of Songs: “Christian faith is rooted in convictions about the body: God created embodied human beings and pronounced them good; God lived an incarnate life among us, sharing in the needs and pleasures and vulnerabilities of embodied life; and, after his death, Jesus of Nazareth rose

again, his body wounded yet alive. If the Christian story tells us anything, it tells us this: bodies matter to God. Indeed, the body is one of our most important sources of knowledge about God. Like the “master hand” of the artist invoked by the man in the Song of Songs as he gazes in admiration at his lover’s body, we see traces of God’s own creating hand in our bodies and the bodies of others. We are, all of us, as the Psalmist declares “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). “

What else might we learn from the language of love that we find here in the Song of Songs? I wondered about the language of love that we actually speak to one another in our marriages, in our families, in our close and intimate relationships. Have you heard of the book entitled the Five Languages of Love? The thesis of the book the Five Languages of Love is simple: each of us has a certain language of love that is intelligible to us. If you are trying to tell me that you love me it will be most meaningful to me if you use the language of love that I understand. What the five languages are of love that most people use to communicate love? The first language of love is found in words of affirmation. Many of us need to be affirmed for what we do or what we are to know we are appreciated and loved. Getting positive feedback you might say is really important to us if we speak this first language of love. For others compliments don’t mean a whole lot. We don’t value words as much as we value deeds. The language of love for us is found in acts of service. A willingness to help. The most obvious example: A dad who praises his wife for her fantastic parenting. But all she wants is for him to do his fair share. The third language of love revolves around giving and receiving gifts. If gift giving is important to you, if receiving a gift lets you know that you are loved, then your partner has to be very careful to figure out the when, the where and the “what” of gift giving. For someone else though the most important language by which love is expressed is found in quality time together. The only gift this person really cares about is the gift of having time together to reconnect. And finally the last language of love so many value and can never get enough of is physical touch. A hug, an embrace a kiss is the only love language that many understand. Now why is all this important for partners? Well you may be expressing love to your partner in a language that she does not understand, a language that he doesn’t appreciate. Speak to your beloved in the language he or she understands. And maybe God also has a language of love. What is the language of love that God understands? Maybe the language of love that God understands and appreciates is not orderliness of our worship services, or the eloquence of our prayers or the rectitude of our morality, or the correctness of our beliefs. Jesus told us that the primary language of love that God understands is found in the great commandment: you shall love the lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might, and your neighbor as yourself.

Speaking of the language of love: Have any of you seen the wonderful little movie “Italian for Beginners”? This movie set in Denmark focuses on six lonely souls searching for happiness. The central character is a young pastor fresh out of seminary that has been assigned to a church that is all but dead. We later learn that the pastor is grieving for his dead wife who took her own life. Among the pastor’s new flock are two sisters who have lost their abusive parents to recent death. Also in the mix is a nervous hotel receptionist who is impotent, an angry restaurant manager who is soon unemployed because of his rudeness, a waitress who entreats the Virgin Mary to bring her the man she loves. All of the characters are very ordinary people somehow endearing in their human awkwardness. In short they have all suffered losses and are just plain lonely. But what they have in common is that they are all taking a language class in beginning

Italian. Through this Italian language class, these melancholy Danes begin to learn the vocabulary and expressiveness of that sunny warm passionate open hearted people to the south. The simplest expressions of Italian somehow generate in them a different outlook and perspective on the world. It is the slow awkward process of learning a different tongue that will lead each of them out of their loneliness. Finally the group decides to go on an outing together to Venice and there surrounded by the language and culture and architecture of that beautiful city, they each in their own way find themselves uplifted in love. In a closing scene as one couple takes a leisurely cruise in a gondola down the Grand Canal, I caught sight of the villa where I spent a semester abroad my senior year at Wake, studying Italian. Now I have never been a distinguished student of languages. I was no better at Italian than I was at Latin in middle school or Spanish in high school or Hebrew and Greek at seminary. Nevertheless, I learned enough to know that any new language, especially Italian, can allow precious moments where you can think thoughts, or feel feelings that are only available to you through that language. If only it is the joy of sitting in a café on the plaza of St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice and being able to order your wine and pasta in a way that your waiter can comprehend.

The premise of Italian for Beginners, of a group of lonely people learning the language of love, is very much in keeping with what the science of linguistics can teach us: Language forms consciousness. Words shape identity. In the context of spiritual life, what that means is that it is not so much that we have a spiritual experience and then we look for words to express it. No it is the reverse. Rather it is that language forms those experiences in us, shapes who we are. So it is very important to consider what language we speak. Your working vocabulary will form the basis of your identity. When a child is baptized we will often hear these words that are said at baptism: "see what love God has for us that we should be called the children of God for that is what we are". To be a member of this congregation is to participate in a particular culture rich with words, stories and traditions, rituals, habits and practices that move us from the world we would normally inhabit into another, distinctly different view of the world and of ourselves. In this way of thinking the ongoing process of conversion into faith is not to discover something new within us, but rather it is to find ourselves taking up a new language that changes what is within us. The language we use shapes our intentions; we are enculturated into an understanding of signs and symbols, habits and practices, which form who we are. Think of the working vocabulary of our worship service: The Lord be with you and also with you. Christ have mercy. We are forgiven. The peace of Christ be with you. God's name be praised. Thanks be to God. This is Christ's table. The bread of life given for you. The words we have said to each other over countless Sunday's contain enough meaning that no further words were really needed. And this language of love, these very words send us back into the world: Go out into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Return to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak. Help the suffering. Consider how over time these words, this language of love through repetition seeps into the soul and forms our being, forms us into people who love.

In closing: St. Augustine the great theologian of the church from the 5th century wrote this about contemplating God's glory. "What is it that I love about you O God? Not bodily beauty. Not the clear shining light. Not the sweet melodies of many songs, not the gift of flowers and ointments and perfumes, not manna and honey, not limbs for the body's embrace: Yet I do love when I love you O my God a certain light, a certain voice, a certain odor, a certain food, a certain embrace".

Desire for God is the longing that moves us step by step along the path of our pilgrimage on this earth. If seeking God is not our purpose then why in the world are we here? The Song of Songs reminds us that praising the Beauty of our Divine Lover is the highest purpose of the human heart. And so St. Augustine reminds us: “To fall in love with God is the greatest romance. To see God is the greatest adventure. To find God is the greatest human achievement”