

“Love Like That”

A Sermon on Song of Solomon 3:1-5, 8:6-7

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This summer, my Book Club will celebrate our 20th anniversary. When we started reading books in 1995, my eight friends and I were young women, unfettered by much except our jobs and our apartments. When we meet this summer to celebrate having read over 200 books, we will be middle-aged women, a little lined, a little grey, and happily fettered to jobs, houses, partners and children. One of our favorite books was a novel by Nicole Krauss, called *The History of Love*.

At the center of the story is an 80-year old Jewish man named Leo Gursky, who still loves a woman he met as a teenager in war-torn Poland, a woman who unwittingly carried his unborn child to America when she was sent there for safety. Although he finds her and his child in America after the war, she refuses him, an event which touches off what becomes 60 years --six long decades -- of constant longing for her and his child. So intense is Leo Gursky's longing that as he prepares for his death, he imagines his epitaph will read: "He fell in love. It was his life."

When my Book Club pondered this sad story, one woman, looking down at her nursing child, a bouncing baby boy who joined an older brother, asked: "Now that I've been married five years and have two children, I wonder if love like *that* exists?"

And for a moment, we all stopped talking. Does Love Like *That* Exist?

It certainly seems to, doesn't it? We hear stories of lost love and longing every day. Some have happy endings, like the widow or widower who goes to a 50th reunion, makes contact with an old friend, and quickly remarries, saying that despite lengthy marriages to other people, they always wondered where the other one was and if they too regretted having lost touch.

Other stories don't end as happily. My friend Michelle found a photo of a handsome young man in her mother's papers after she died at 85. The man was definitely not her father. Michelle speculated that he must have been "the one that got away". "Funny, though," she told me, "my mother had three strokes before we moved her to a convalescent home. How in the world did a woman who couldn't speak and could barely lift her arms, manage to find and bring that photo with her?" How indeed?

I think if the truth be known, many of us know lost love or longing. It comes in so many varieties. Like Michelle's mother, there is the One that got away in our youth. And there is the One who we loved but who loved another or worse yet, never even noticed us. Then there is the One who loved us, but left us, through desertion, divorce, or, most sadly,

death. And finally, there is the One we never found at all, the perfect One, the one we would be with, had they ever, actually, shown up in our life.

My One was a golden-haired boy who I met in math class when I was only fourteen.

Do we love these people, these missing Ones? The ones who went AWOL? The No-Shows? How could we? That would be silly, wouldn't it? To love someone who either never was, or who has ceased to be, a meaningful part of our life? Unfortunately for many of us, try as we might to analyze or dismiss our feelings toward these ghostly lovers, they remain firmly entrenched in our hearts, making forays into our consciousness in the strangest ways. When we least expect them, they sing on the radio, pass in a car, or star in the movies that make us cry at the end. It's times like these, when lost love, real or imagined, comes back, making us hold our psyches tight and wonder, not if love like *that* exists, but why love like *that* exists?

II

Reading today's scripture from the Song of Solomon, which is often called the Song of Songs, is like tuning into a soap opera. Here is a young person, barely a teenager, lying in bed in the middle of the night, restless with thoughts of a lover. She calls to him in her heart, hoping he will hear and come. But he doesn't. So she gets up and goes out to look for him. She searches and searches. She even runs into the police and asks if they have seen him. Finally she finds him and takes him back to her house, into her room.

I was in eighth grade when I first encountered the Song of Songs in Sunday School. Thumbing idly through the Old Testament, my adolescent eye was arrested by the text that read: "Upon my bed at night, I sought him whom my soul loves."

Wow! I was dumbfounded for a moment. Later I asked, blushing and stammering, why the Song was in the Bible. As the teacher elaborated, I pretended to listen while I scanned all eight chapters. I was a spiritual kid, filled with natural awe and a strong belief in a loving God. But "Let HIM kiss me with the kisses of his mouth?"ⁱ That God would call me or anybody a "Delectable Maiden"?ⁱⁱ At fourteen, the storyline seemed as fraught with love and drama as a Harlequin romance. I found myself wondering: What is love like *that* doing in the Bible?

Scholars speculate the Song of Songs was written sometime in the third century BCE and that by the first century CE, it was not only considered part of the Biblical canon, but was seen by some to be the holiest of the holy writings. Some scholars theorize it was included because it was initially believed to be either written by or about King Solomon. Others postulate it was included because the Song was enormously popular with the people, who liked to recite it on the Sabbath, especially at Passover, and at wedding feasts.

Regardless of why, included it was and there it has remained for over 20 centuries, leaving scholars, clergy, and people like us to puzzle over how love like *that* got in the Bible. If you read the Song from beginning to end, you'll find lovers leaping like gazelles; roses and lilies to smell; apples and honeycombs to eat; wine and milk to drink; and saffron and cinnamon to anoint yourself. But oddly, there is no mention of God.

Despite that or maybe because of that, the Song was almost universally taught as a religious allegory until late in the 18th Century. As my Sunday School teacher tried to tell me in 1976, the traditional Christian interpretation of the Song is that it is an extended metaphor for the great love between God and his people. It has also been read as the great love between Jesus and his church or between Jesus and the individual soul.

In history, one of the most astounding stories of an attempt to explain the Song of Solomon and its relationship to the Bible belongs to a 50-year old Spanish woman named Teresa living in the 16th century at the time of the Inquisition. At that time, reading the Bible in the common language was forbidden, personal interpretation of the Scripture, especially by women, was strongly discouraged, and private "mental" prayer was seen as unnecessary. And the Inquisition was there to enforce these restrictions with imprisonment and death.

Teresa, who was fragile, often ill, but amazingly persistent nun, traveled around Spain, one step ahead of the Inquisition, to establish convent after convent of nuns dedicated to teaching women how to achieve a passionate, ecstatic relationship with God through private prayer.ⁱⁱⁱ

In her 59-page interpretation of the Song of Songs, Teresa writes when the soul is approached by God, it feels "as though the sweetest ointment – powerfully fragrant – is poured into the marrow of its bones" and that the soul feels an overwhelming happiness -- a "divine intoxication" -- at being so close to its beloved; a feeling that deepens as God unites the soul with Godself.^{iv}

Hmm, you see, Teresa had a love like *that* for God and it gave her great pleasure to be united with God through prayer and meditation. When the priest who served as her confessor read her text, stunned more by her audacity to interpret Scripture than by her description of love like *that*, he feared for their lives and ordered Teresa to burn it immediately, which she did. Today, we know of Teresa's interpretation of the Song only because one of her convents, believing her to be a saint, hid a draft for safekeeping

Four centuries later, St. Teresa of Avila would probably be shocked by the 20th Century interpretation that the Song is not about God but about human love and sex. In 1995, two Jewish scholars published a new English translation of the Song of Songs from early Hebrew texts. According to the Ariel and Chana Bloch, the Song is a poem about the romantic and sexual awakening of a young woman and her lover in the fantasy setting of a rich and luscious Palestine in the spring. Like the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of

Eden, the Blochs believe the Song speaks of the journey from innocence to experience. In their translation, the journey ends as the young woman declares in a clear and ringing voice of the flame that is romantic and sexual love: "*Great seas cannot extinguish love; no river can sweep it away.*"^v

In other words, as many of us know, love like *that*, is awfully hard to get rid of.

III

Today, as we listen to this beautiful scripture, to this soap opera of love and longing, to this blush-inducing story of young love, and I wonder if these interpretations of the Song of Songs can answer any of the questions we have about love like *that*.

For St. Teresa, finding love like that in the Song provided a 16th century woman, living in a time of repressive attitudes toward women, an opportunity to stretch her intellect and assert her ability to read the Bible and interpret the text in ways that served her goal of achieving a more personal, more soulful connection to God. *Love like that was both bad and good.*

For Leo Gursky, the man in the novel my Book Club read, love like *that* was also both bad and good. Yes, Leo's obsessive longing for his lost love became a barrier between him and real life. But, it also helped Leo – who had lost his entire family, all his friends, his vocation, his hometown, his country, his language, and his culture to the atrocities of the Nazis and the Holocaust – survive enormous pain. In many way, love like *that* was Leo's life raft in the storm of life.

For my Book Club, it turned out love like *that* wasn't something we needed to talk about too much. When our friend, with her new baby on her lap, asked: Does love like *that* exist? We looked at each other in silence for a moment. I thought of my own experience of longing for the boy I met at fourteen and how he crops up in my dreams from time to time and I wondered if anyone else could or would speak of their own longings, of the Ones that got away. But no one did.

So I spoke tentatively: "Well, if Leo Gursky had never lost this woman and she had loved him in the same way and they had married and had two children in five years of marriage, then, I think, they would feel a lot like you do now." And funny, every slightly-lined, slightly-grey head in the room nodded up and down in agreement.

As Ariel and Chana Bloch said of the Song of Songs, love *is* a journey from innocence to experience. And it is experience that has taught me that love like *that*, and the periodic recurrence of it in my life, is an event, not unlike how Chapter 3 of the Song of Songs is an event in the cycle of love between the two young people. It occurs, it passes, and life goes on. In some respect, it isn't really love at all, but the memory of a love, so powerful,

so intense that it crashes over us like gazelles running down a mountain, leaping streams to enter a garden of roses and lilies. At the moment it occurs, it almost certainly, as the Song says, sets a seal upon our heart and puts a sign upon our arm. Love like *that* is like being branded; we will forever carry the mark of its occurrence, real or imagined, in our hearts.

And that's not a bad thing. For if we do not remember love like *that*, how can we ever begin to understand the enormity of the love which flows between ourselves and God? How can we love the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our soul without remembering the moments of our lives when we loved, for whatever reason, and perhaps against all reason, with all our heart and all our soul? How can we even begin to envision how much God might possibly love us without the recurrent memory of love like *that*?

Love like *that* is a touchstone. Touch it and it will remind you of your awesome capacity to love with heart and soul. Touch it and it will remind you that love is an event *and* a memory and that between the two is a journey from innocence to experience. The Song of Songs is also a touchstone, a touch song if you will. Touch it and it will remind you that for 2000 years, love like *that* was taught, interpreted, and understood as an allegory of God's love. Touch it and it will remind you of St. Teresa, watching her 59-page meditation on the Song of Songs go up in flames, thinking perhaps, "*all I really wanted was to be closer to the One I love*".

Touch it and you start to think: Maybe my Sunday School teacher was right. Maybe the Song of Songs *is* about the love between God and his people and I just couldn't hear that because I was only 14. Maybe I needed to journey from innocence to experience to understand what she was saying. Maybe at fourteen, about the time I was meeting that boy for the first time, the seal upon my heart and the sign upon my arm was already set.

Maybe God's love is a love like *that*.

Amen

ⁱ Song of Songs, 1:1, NRSV

ⁱⁱ Song of Songs, 7:6, NRSV

ⁱⁱⁱ The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Translated by Kiernan Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodrigo, Institute for Carmelite Studies, 1980

^{iv} Medwick, Cathleen, *Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1999

^v Bloch, Ariel and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*, Random House, Inc., 1995