

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” That’s pretty racy stuff. We’d probably better pray.

*Lord, remind us that you are an incredibly racy God. You love us in ways that defy description, ways that are scandalous to those who have not met you yet. Love us now by opening your word to us. Reveal yourself to us, Lord, that we might fall deeply in love with you once more. Through Christ our Lord, Amen*

I think it’s actually kind of a shame that the Song of Songs isn’t used more often in the modern church. We tend to avoid it, because it tends to leave us blushing and embarrassed. After all, there’s no disguising that this book is full of raw, undisguised, unapologetic passion. It’s a book about desire, about yearning, about longing. It’s a book about “intimacy.” And what place does any of that stuff have in a good, solid straight-laced, *decent* church.

Well quite a bit, actually. Or at least it should, and historically, the Song of Songs *did* have quite a place in the history of our tradition, both Jewish and Christian. It has long been interpreted as **one of the clearest examples of the relationship between God and God’s people**, an expression of the depth of our love-life with God. It describes how we *should be* in relationship with our creator. And the history of interpretation of the Song has reflected that depth. Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph (he lived about 50 years after Jesus, and is sometimes referred to as the father of Rabbinical Judaism... in other words, he was a big-shot) wrote “For all the world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.” The Song is read every year to close the Sabbath feast during Passover. They read the story of the Exodus, then they read the Song. It seems an odd transition from the serious story of Israel’s escape from Egypt and the giving of the Law to “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine”, but there it is; every year, for about 2000 years.

The same is true in the history of the Christian tradition. From the early church fathers up until the modern age, the Song of Songs is treated as an intimate description of **God’s love for the church and of our passionate response**. It was a book worthy of honor and attention, especially in the working out of our spiritual life. Bernard of Clairvaux (a twelfth century monk who was an advisor to popes and kings) preached 86 sermons on the Song, and barely got into chapter 3. (And you thought Romans was a long series!)

The Song of Songs was especially significant to those who spent a lot of time in prayer; those men and women who made spiritual discipline a way of life. Which is why we’re looking at these passages today. I think these passages actually represent the very heart of prayer.

When we think of prayer, we tend to think of laundry lists (Aunt Edna’s hip, Joe Bob down the street who isn’t a Christian, dad’s upcoming job review, etc.), or of keeping God informed of what’s happening and of drawing on God’s power to meet our needs. We think of set prayers (the Lord’s prayer) or set times for prayer (bed-time or before we eat) or set positions (kneeling, hands clasped, eyes closed.) None of this is wrong, necessarily, but then none of it is necessarily right, either. They can be great and powerful expressions of faith, dear and holy; or they can be dry as dust and a burden, rote and empty and heartless. You see **the words and methods don’t matter if the heart is not there**. So, what is the heart of prayer?

“*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine.*” Have you ever wondered why we kiss? It seems a little bizarre that one of the most common forms of intimacy is to mash our mouth against another person. I mean there is no denying that it is intimate, and that it seems natural, some might say instinctive; that it feels right and good. But it is a strange thing. I remember watching an anthropologist on TV try to explain the origin of the kiss. Her theory was that kisses began either as a way of sharing food between mother and child (like birds, I guess) or as a way for potential mates to sniff each other to be sure the other was acceptable and pleasing (and hadn’t passed their

expiration date), and that kissing then simply became a socially accepted means of expressing affection. Is that what a kiss is? Would any of us be satisfied if that was what a kiss was? Yuck! How... empty.

A kiss from your child can make you want to dance and laugh and cry with joy. A kiss from your love can set your heart on fire, steal your breath, and make your stomach do gymnastics, all at the same time. As our verse says, it's better than wine... it's better than anything! When two people are that close, there is a meeting of souls. We have a built-in longing for it. It's visceral. Frankly, I think **we were created for it**. We were created for intimacy. In fact, we were created in intimacy. The creation of the human race in Genesis chapter 2 is a profoundly intimate act. Our history as a race began with a sort of kiss. God took a lump of red-earth (*adam*), shaped humanity and then breathed life into us. That's not a distant, far-off action. God's not blowing out candles on a birthday cake. God puts His face right down there in the dirt. That's the kind of love, the kind of intimacy that gave us life. And **a longing for that intimacy remains a part of our fundamental nature**. We kiss because we have first been kissed. A kiss is a way to share life and love and spirit and joy. A kiss is love in action, desire in motion. It is intimacy, it is connection, it is sharing.

Each one of us longs for intimacy. We need to be known, need to be embraced, need to be loved with depth and with passion, not merely because it's some socially accepted form of expressing affection, or because we pass the smell-test, but because there's a wellspring of love that spills over and must be consummated. From birth on, our whole life is spent in searching for that intimate, wonderful, passionate love, for complete acceptance and belonging. We spend our whole life searching for that fire that burns without consuming, for love in motion.

It's a good thing (sometimes.) That longing can bring us together, and, in fact, God has created us to be intimate with one another on varying levels: to be married and have children and form friendships and build community. But the ultimate intimacy can still only be found in the one who gave us our first kiss, who breathed life into us. Ultimately, **every other source of intimacy**, whether spouse or child or dearest friend, **will disappoint if we have not found intimacy with God**. As Saint Augustine puts it, “Our hearts are restless until we rest in thee.”

It might feel strange thinking of God as an “intimate,” but all through scripture God refers to Himself as “husband,” “bridegroom,” even “lover.” Who are we do think any different?

But it isn't just as simple as naming God as intimate. **Intimacy is built by spending time with another**. I can't imagine what kind of a marriage I would have if I only spent 5 minutes a day and one hour on Sundays with my wife. You can't even get to know another person in that amount of time, let alone develop any kind of intimate relationship. Yet that's what we expect out of our spiritual lives. Every other intimacy, every other relationship is somehow dependent upon our relationship with God, but God barely gets a moment of our time. And then we wonder why we are restless and unfulfilled, why faith seems so distant.

I don't want to lay a load of guilt on you (or on me for that matter). I know it's hard. There's a lot going on in our lives each and every day. I'd blame it on the modern world, but as I've read through all these famous Christians from the modern era back to the ancient, I find the same complaint over and over again. It is hard to pray, whether in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century or in the 1st! We meet an almost active resistance as we try to meet God in prayer. We are created to be in an intimate relationship with God, but we are also broken and hampered in our efforts. Our minds rebel, our bodies fail, our hearts wander.

So what can we do? Well, we go to God anyway! **Relationships are hard work**, so what's new? As exciting as a first kiss is, it takes work to build a relationship. It takes years of building trust, of learning to listen, of developing rapport, of learning the landscape of the other's heart. But the work of building a relationship doesn't have to be much of a hardship when it is still fired by the passion that brought you together in the first place. When I first met Julie, I never had to be convinced to seek her out. I'd come up with excuses to drop by pretty much every day, even if it was just to slip a note under her door. I

wanted to be with her so I could get to know her and the more I got to know her the more I wanted to be with her. It's how love works.

So why should it be any different with our God? When you think about the nature of God, about God's goodness and mercy and love, when you call to mind all that God has done for you in Jesus Christ, in sending the Holy Spirit, in claiming you from death and giving you new life, don't you feel the least bit inspired to stop by and spend some time with Him? Just knowing God should lead us to seek out the presence of God, and the more we are in the presence of God, the more we'll know Him. Our heart opens to His, and is changed in the encounter.

*Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you! Take me away with you- let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers.*

When we go to God in prayer, what is our desire: Is it to be with God, for God's own sake, or is it to have our requests granted? There is a huge difference between desiring a result and desiring an interchange with our loving Father. There is a huge difference between going to God and saying “God, do this!” and going to God saying, “I love you. I wanted to spend time with you. Also, this is important to me, and I wanted to share it with you.” Demands leave us cold; shared concerns draw us in.

Praying for your illness to be healed, or your trip to be safe, or your friend to be happy or whatever... those are all Good Things. But they are not, no matter how big, how significant, how critical, how dear to your heart... they are not the best thing. **The best thing is God Himself**, and when we have God, we have all the rest. Listen again to Paul's words to the Ephesians:

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*

It's important to remember where the source is... God is the source of all that is, was or shall be. God is the foundation of all that is good. God is the root of our very identity and being. He is the holy God, the living water that can finally quench your thirst so that you may never thirst again. He is the bread of life, filling your hunger so that you may never want again. He is the true word. He gives meaning to existence, motion to striving, strength for weakness, calm in the storm, a foundation to build on and glory to reach for. He is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, the source of all there is and the destination. He is the way, the truth and the life, and he, himself, will present you pure and spotless, redeemed and alive. God is the source. All we need do is call upon him with all our heart. Paul goes on:

*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

See that progression? Strength in our inner being... Christ in our hearts... rooted in love... that we might know the extent of God's love SO THAT “*we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*”

The things we can request in prayer might be pretty good, but there's not a one that can measure up to the full measure of all the fullness of God. No thing can measure up to the source of all things. It is only as we encounter God, as we speak our love to God, as we humble ourselves before God and enter into an intimate relationship with God that we find the deep, soul satisfying love that only God can offer. We don't claim a thing, we don't earn a thing, we don't deserve a thing. Our prayer becomes a partnership, and the things we ask become important to God because WE are important to God, because we are God's beloved. **The heart of prayer is seeking God for who God is, in and of Himself.**

And so we join the Song of Songs as the beloved community of God:

*We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine. How right they are to adore you!*

Ultimately, prayer isn't about the words we say, it isn't about what we ask for, it isn't about the formula we use or the position we're in. Ultimately, **prayer is about whether we have entered into a relationship with the living God.** It's about whether we seek His face. It's about whether we have given him our hearts, again and again and again, through time. It's about whether we have invited him in to our lives. It's about whether we truly love God for God's own sake, rather than just what we can get out of Him. It's about whether we are willing to let him sweep us away and even change who we are, or if we are trying to force God into our mold. It's about whether we adore God and are adored, whether we love God and are beloved, and about whether we speak our love and nurture our intimacy, or simply dust it off when it is convenient or we are desperate. **The heart of prayer is found simply in laying our hearts before the God** who would continue to show His love as he has throughout the history of the world, from its beginning, until now, and to its ending. It is found in keeping first things first, in seeking God first because He is God and is worthy of being sought.

God can and will do amazing things through his people when they pray. He delights in pouring out His love, He excels in giving His blessing, He longs to ignite our passion and fill the desires of our heart. God is God, and God will love us... will love you, right now, today, because God is God and you are beloved.