

Reflection: Love Your Forever (August 30, 2009)

Most of you are probably familiar with the children's story: *Love You Forever*, by Robert Munsch. It was given to me as a Valentine's Day present from my parents in 1990. Anyone who had anything to do with children in the early 90s heard about this story. I imagine some of you even shed a few tears as you read it to the children in your life. I know several Dads and Mums who can't read it without getting choked up. I have trouble getting through it myself, so I'm not going to read it to you today. It's the story of a mother and her son - a mother who, from the time her son was in her cradle, would crawl into his room at night when he was asleep, pick him up and rock him, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, singing a little song: "I'll love you forever; I'll like you for always; as long as I'm living, my baby you'll be." This goes on even when the son has grown up and moved across town - until finally, she is old and sick, and she calls her son to come see her. She is too weak to sing the song, so her son picks her up and rocks her and sings it back to her. And when he goes home that night, he sings the song to his own baby daughter.

Even though the story is written with an element of exaggeration, it is a story that speaks strongly of the ever-lasting love between parent and child - a love that is often used in the Bible as a comparison for the love of God for us human children. It's an image we use often, and celebrate. But today's reading from the Song of Songs or Song of Solomon offers us another image of God's love: the intensity, passion and commitment of a pair of lovers, soon to be husband and wife. A lot of people are shocked to discover that there's a whole book of love poetry in the Bible - poetry that gets down-right physical in its description! It only appears in our lectionary cycle once - this Sunday. But it's a book that shouldn't be missed, for several reasons.

The first is, that when it stands on its simplest terms as a volume of romantic poetry, it reminds us that human passion and desire are created by God, and are meant to be celebrated, not hidden away in some dark corner of our lives where we think God can't see it. Human sexuality is a gift from God like any other, and should be recognized as such. As a gift from God, it is to be expressed responsibly, within the primary principle of a respectful, committed and compassionate relationship. Marriage is meant to be the primary model for relationships in Christian society: it is meant to model for us how all our relationships should be lived out.

Devotion and commitment are the basis of any lasting human relationship, whether it be a marriage of same or different-gendered people, a familial relationship such as the one described in "Love You Forever", or a lasting friendship. To receive the richness and blessing of a good marriage, family tie or friendship, requires an enjoyment of the other person, an appreciation of each others' qualities, and a willingness to go the distance together. Later on in this book of the Bible we hear the words: "*Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.*" The love of beloved for beloved is a powerful tie indeed, and should be respected by all of us. A good strong marriage is a thing worth celebrating, especially in a society which seems to treat marriage as just another commodity to be tossed out when it becomes inconvenient.

The second reason we should pay attention to this book is the reason it's in the Bible in the first place. As I said before, love between two people, and especially between husband and wife, is often used in Scripture as an image of how God relates to the people of God. Hebrew scholars who read this book talked about how it describes for us the kind of passion God has for the

children of Israel - a deep attraction, a desire to be one with them, a wonderful appreciation of their gifts and attributes. God beckons the people, seduces them even, as a groom would his bride. The early Christians read this book, and saw a similar relationship between Christ and the church. It's a wonderful call and response: desire answering desire, love answering love. The whole book is a dialogue between two who love each other passionately and tenderly.

That brings us to the third reason it is important to read this book: because it reminds us not only of the way that God loves us, but how we are to love God. There is a poem by a medieval mystic, St John of the Cross, written in 15th century Spain. Some of you may have heard these words sung by Loreena McKennit - I'm going to use her translation:

Upon a darkened night, the flame of love was burning in my breast;
And by a lantern bright, I fled my house while all in quiet rest
Shrouded by the night and by the secret stair I quickly fled
The veil concealed my eyes while all within lay quiet as the dead.

Oh night thou was my guide
Oh night more loving than the rising sun
Oh night that joined the lover to the beloved one
Transforming each of them into the other

Upon that misty night, in secrecy, beyond such mortal sight
Without a guide or light than that which burned so deeply in my breast.
That fire t'was led me on and shown more bright than of the midday sun
To where he waited still; it was a place where no one else could come.

Oh night thou was my guide
Oh night more loving than the rising sun
Oh night that joined the lover to the beloved one
Transforming each of them into the other

Within my pounding heart which kept itself entirely for him
He fell into his sleep, beneath the cedars all my love I gave
from o'er the fortress walls the wind would brush his hair against his brow
And with its smoothest hand caressed my every sense it would allow

I lost myself to him and laid my face upon my lover's breast
And care and grief grew dim as in the morning mist became the light
There they dimmed amongst the lilies there.
There they dimmed amongst the lilies there.
There they dimmed amongst the lilies there.

I bet that made you squirm, didn't it? Not what you expect to hear from the pulpit on your average Sunday! Hard to believe it was written by a cloistered monk who was longing for his God! But that is the kind of passion the Song of Solomon calls us to - to feel that kind of intensity of longing for the one who made us and loves us with a strong and passionate love. What would it mean for us to let ourselves be consumed by such desire for God's presence, such longing to be one with the Holy One? What would that mean for how we spend our days?

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We cannot all be cloistered monks like St John of the Cross: we cannot spend our entire day reading Scripture, praying and worshipping God - we have too many responsibilities for that! Or can we do something similar in our own lives? Can we make our daily work, our daily lives, a prayer of thanksgiving for God's love, an expression of longing for union with the Divine?

To go back to the image of marriage, marriage takes devotion and dedication to the well-being of the one we love and the health of the relationship. Our love and desire for each other prompts us to care for one another, to look out for each other's best interest, to treat the other with respect and to celebrate who that person is. At its best, marriage provides a strong foundation to turn outwards and welcome others into the security and warmth you have in your marriage. It is as if you stand back to back, facing out into the world, ready to face life's challenges and to reach out to others and help them stand strong as well.

Our love and desire for God prompts us not only to turn to God and celebrate God's divine attributes, to respect God's values and what God wants for the world, but to turn outward together with God and to look at the world from the secure foundation of God's love for us, and our love for God. With God at our side, with God at our back, we can do far more than we ever could alone. We can give our lives over to the purposes, the values, the intentions we share with God.

When our whole being is infused with a longing and love for God, then God's will becomes our will as well. Our love for and commitment to God becomes not a "once-in-a-while, when-it's-convenient" kind of thing, as so many relationships in this society are: it becomes a love that last forever. "I'll Love You Forever" God sings to us. Will our hearts return the song?