

Holy Fire (4): Divine Covenant Love

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Song of Songs 7:10-8:7

Revelation 21:1-5

Not one of us would be here today if it weren't for the farmers who grow our food. And it is not an easy thing to be a farmer. My friend Kasey the farmer says that farming is like counting to ten very slowly, and paying attention to each number along the way. If you skip a single step out of haste or laziness—like preparing the soil or pruning the vines—you won't make it to the harvest at 10.

It is an incredibly risky and vulnerable thing to farm. At the beginning of the season you take all the money you have, and you purchase seeds. Seeds. Little tiny seeds! They cannot be eaten, they cannot be used as currency, they are good for one thing only—to be scattered in the ground. So you bury last year's profit in the dirt, and you tend them—1, 2, 3, 4—and hope and pray that the frost doesn't come too early, or the rains don't come too heavy, or the insects don't come too hungry, or the competition doesn't come in too cheaply. 5, 6, 7...

It is not simply the workload that makes farming difficult for small farmers like Kasey. Big agriculture—agro-business as we call it—relies on harmful chemicals, cheap labor, and unsustainable practices that have little regard for God's creation. Their only aim is to produce as much food as cheaply as possible. Meanwhile, small farmers—especially those that act with justice toward land and animal and worker, have a hard time making ends meet.

And so many small farmers, especially those who are willing to practice socially just and sustainable agriculture, rely on something called a CSA—Community Supported Agriculture. A Trinity member told me about a local CSA when I first moved here a few years ago. This is how it worked: The farmer invited me and others to pay for a share of his harvest. I paid the money up front, and each week, I drove to the farm to pick up my share of whatever the harvest had yielded. ...8, 9, 10. Some weeks, I got buckets full of tomatoes, some weeks, the broccoli was looking a little thin, some weeks I was up to my neck in bitter greens wondering what in the world I was going to cook.

In signing up for the CSA, I was giving up my freedom to eat whatever I wanted that night, for a higher purpose—supporting the farmer and environmental justice practices I believe in, as a steward of God's creation. In fact, I was saying that if the rains came too heavy, or the frost came too early, or the bugs came too heavy, or the competition came in too cheaply—that I was still in it with my farmer. I had committed to throw in my lot with him financially—through thick and thin. And if a blight of locusts wiped out

the entire farm—so be it. I would share his loss, but the farmer wouldn't go bankrupt, and the next year he could start again, which is another thing we might call: grace.

It occurred to me when I was signing up, and reading this fine print on the contract, that I wasn't just signing a contract, I was actually making a covenant.

A covenant. There's that Sunday School word. A covenant. It's a type of promise, right? An agreement, a commitment to a relationship through thick and thin. Yes, but more than that. All good covenants have this purpose: to make space for the flourishing of life. To hold out space and time for the best things in life which are usually very slow, like relationships, like learning to love, like babies growing, like becoming holy, like counting to ten and paying attention to each number along the way.

When God decides to get involved with humanity, God does it by way of covenant. First through Noah, then Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and ultimately Jesus, God initiates a series of loving covenants with us: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

Now human beings are not the most reliable when it comes to matters of love—it will not be easy for us to accept or let alone reciprocate the steady loving kindness of God. But the covenant is God's vow, a promise to wait while we're working it out.¹

No one enters a marriage covenant on their wedding day because they are already perfect at love. On the contrary, the marriage covenant gives partners the freedom to make mistakes, to have a dry spell here, a drought there, to grow and change, and still trust that for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, their partner is committed.

So one of the metaphors that the Bible uses over and over again to convey this God's covenant love to us is marriage. Israel is the sometimes-faithful sometimes-unfaithful spouse of God. The church is the bride of Christ the bridegroom. I say at weddings, "you will be constant to one another, the way God is constant to us." We know that not all marriages live up to this promise, and we trust that God's grace prevails here especially. Still, marriage is intended to provide their community with window to God's steady love.

How many of you knew that there is a book of erotic love poetry in the center of the Bible, that never mentions the word God, but will make your Sunday School teacher turn beet red?

The Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) reads as a dialogue between lovers

She says: Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

For your love is better than wine;

your anointing oils are fragrant;

your name is oil poured out;

¹ I can't hardly write a sermon without a hidden Sara Groves Reference. "When It Was Over" lyrics and music by Sara Groves.

therefore virgins love you.
Draw me after you; let us run.
The king has brought me into his chambers.

And so the Song of Song goes on, this time the man speaks:

I compare you, my love,
to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots.
Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments,
your neck with strings of jewels.

He's referring to an incident when Pharaoh was at war with the prince of Qadesh, and the enemy sent a mare-in-heat into the middle of Pharaoh's stallions. And you can guess what happened.

Or in other words: "You drive strong men wild!"²

There was considerable debate in 1st century Judaism about whether or not to include the Song of Songs in the canon of scripture, but Rabbi Akiba won his case for he wrote: "all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."³

And just when you thought I was nuts for preaching five sermons on sex, the great Christian preacher, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote 86 sermons on the Song of Songs, and never got past chapter 3 verse 1.⁴

I took a group of teenage women on a camping retreat once to discuss body image, beauty culture, and the challenges of sexuality facing youth today. When we were hanging out around the campfire when I had them read from some of the juicier parts of the Song of Songs.

They were mortified.

I asked what they thought this book was doing in our Bible?

They were baffled.

I explained that for the first 1500 years, at least, Christian interpreters have understood the Song as metaphor for the faithful, passionate, sensuous love of God for God's people. That this is the way Christ loves the church, and more importantly, this is the way God loves your soul. Then, I asked how they felt about sex poetry as a window into God's love for us.

They were grossed out.

² Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God*. (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 70.

³ Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God*. (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 65.

⁴ Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God*. (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 66.

Until one of the teenagers said “I wonder if we find this so gross, because our understanding of sexuality is so distorted.” Bingo.

We live in a world where sex in popular culture has nothing to do with covenant—with the promise to wait while we’re working it out. At best, sex signifies some kind of amorphous feeling called “love,” and at worst, it’s a form of recreation or entertainment. A cheap thrill that doesn’t truly care about the other person. If that’s what sexuality is—graceless sex—or f’ing—as we talked about last Sunday then we *should* shudder at the thought that God loves us like this.

God’s love is so much more than that. It is the steady, relentless, patient, slow to anger, kind. It is—in the words of the Song of Songs: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved’s is mine.”

So here’s the question as it’s usually phrased to me: what do Christians believe about sex outside of marriage? Christians want everything we do to point back to God, so here’s my question for you: what do you want your sex life to mean? What do you want it to say about God?

Relationships that use, abuse, coerce, or manipulate, are lesser windows to the character of God’s love. Relationships that care, commit, forgive, and wait patiently are better windows to the love of God.

Sex becomes the best window into God’s passionate love for the world, when it occurs in the context of a covenant commitment to be faithful, forever. In this context, sex becomes something like a sacrament—like the bread and wine, like water from the fount, “an outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual grace.”

Sex is always a risk—emotional, physical, spiritual. We put our feeble, broken, vulnerable bodies into the hands of another. Just like farming is always a risk—placing those precious seeds in the ground. But within a covenant relationship, there is a vow, a promise made before you and before God to be there in the morning, and the next morning, and the next morning.

In our world today, we frequently hear people call for a return to “biblical marriage,” and in some ways I cannot agree more. I would like to see more people enter into covenant relationships that aspire to be the best windows of God’s passionate, gracious and committed love for the world. But often one who calls for a return to “biblical marriage,” is suggesting that some people are not invited into that covenant, and that the only faithful marriage arrangement is that between a heterosexual couple. While I will address this topic more cohesively next Sunday, I want to raise a simple complication:

The truth is that it is hard to find a single idea of “Biblical marriage” practiced as such in the pages of people within scripture. Marriage practices are culturally determined

and we see a wide variety of practices in the world of scripture, many of which we would not and should not wish to continue in the 21st century.

For example, many of the biblical patriarchs practiced polygamy. King David and King Solomon had harems of women. Jacob fathered the 12 tribes of Israel by sleeping with four different women, two wives and two handmaids. In some troubling passages in Genesis we learn about the custom of handing over virgin daughters as an act of hospitality to some demanding men, which if you ask me, is the real problem in Sodom and Gomorrah. And this is not merely Old Testament stuff. In the New Testament, we see Joseph a man most acknowledge to be 20 or 30 years older than Mary take a teenager as his wife. And we see Jesus address the practice of Levirate marriage, wherein if your brother dies without heir, you must marry his wife to produce one.

Not one of these biblical practices of marriage would we find morally acceptable today—and yet they come from the pages of scripture. We don't need a "return to biblical marriage" so much as we need to interpret what scripture says about sex, love, relationships, and marriage for the 21st century. This is what the church has always done. From the early followers of Jesus who had to figure out what to do with all these Gentiles who weren't keeping the kosher laws but wanted into the covenant, to the question of marriage equality today, the church must carefully listen to the Spirit, use her experience and wisdom and tradition to guide her biblical interpretation for today.

So, in further response to the question of "what do Christians believe about sex outside of marriage? I want to offer a Christian ethic for 21st that comes from deep work of Christian ethicist Margaret Farley. She offers us seven criteria—these are minimum standards, bottom-line requirements—for when sex is appropriate for Christians. I'll go through each of them briefly:⁵

1. Do no unjust harm—sex is a fire, a holy fire, but also a fire that can burn things down. Sex that causes harm—physical, psychological, or emotional cannot be a good.
2. Free Consent—at last our society is coming to appreciate the importance of consent—both people willingly, freely, choosing the encounter. We affirm this as Christians so as not to violate the free-will God has given us; the love of God is never coercive, we are free to choose or reject it. Consent is essential, but alone it is not enough, there are five more criteria.
3. Mutuality speaks to the unitive purpose of sex, bringing two people together "a relationship wherein two liberties meet, to bodies meet, and two hearts come together."⁶

⁵ This entire section is drawn from Chapter 6 "Framework for a Sexual Ethic." Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum International 2006), 207-240.

⁶ Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum International 2006), 220-222.

4. Equality, and it refers to equality of power. A student and a teacher may claim to both be consenting, but when there is inequality of power, it becomes an exchanged by marked by domination and subordination—then it is not truly free.
5. Commitment – we have touched on this already this morning. This is so central to a Christian understanding of sex—as a sign of constancy, commitment or covenant, that models the commitment of God’s love for us.
6. Fruitfulness- No matter how much birth control is available to us, the connection between sex and reproduction is here to stay. And any sexual relationship must be open to the gift of children and the responsible care of children. But there are other kinds of fruitfulness as well, ways that a partnership can be fruitful, especially within the church where we are all committed to care for each other as family.
7. Social justice. So often, Americans tend to think of sex as an entirely private matter that affects no one. But “No love, or at least no great love, is just for “the two of us.”⁷ “At the very least, a form of social justice requires that “sexual partners take responsibility for the consequences of their love and their sexual activity...pregnancy and children, violation of others...public health concerns and so forth. Sex should not be used in ways that exploit objectify, or dominate, but rather honor cherish and create.

Geez, this is a lot of criteria that must be met... when will we ever be able to check all those boxes!?! Song of Songs says: I urge you...do not stir up love until it is ready. Kasey the farmer is right when she said that farming is like counting to 10 slowly and paying attention to each number along the way. If you skip even one step, the harvest will be lesser for it. We could say the same for the building of a relationship.

All this talk about marriage, I want to close by saying that marriage is not the only option in church life. The church has always had a very high regard for single people.

Some people are in periods of singleness by circumstance. And others who are called to the vocation of celibacy, may choose singleness either for a period of time, or a life time. Whether by circumstance or choice, you are perhaps you are no more aware of your singleness, than at a wedding. Especially at a wedding you attend with your mother, which is how Jesus goes to the wedding at Cana. Stag. And with his mom.

Our United Methodist wedding liturgy puts it this way: “With his presence and power, Jesus graced a wedding at Cana, and in his sacrificial love gave us the example for the love of husband and wife.”

Isn’t it interesting, that the One who gives us the example for the love of married couple was himself, single?

⁷ Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum International 2006), 229.

Single people, including widows and widowers, those no longer married, are often able to give more of their time, more of their gifts for the up building of the church. Singles are a gift to the church.

What I've tried to say in this sermon, is that in marriage, the marriage itself is not the ultimate thing, just as sex isn't the ultimate thing. The ultimate thing is the faithful, passionate, committed love of God for the world. And Rowan Williams suggests that in order to keep that perspective clear, "the community needs some who are called beyond or aside from the ordinary patterns of sexual relation to put their identities directly into the hands of God in the single life...Celibate people decide to try to find themselves, their bodily selves, in a life dependent simply upon trust in the generous delight of God." And therefore, the greatest gift that celibates give to the community, is they remind us what marriage is really, ultimately about: the steady, faithful, covenant love of God. Amen.