

Love in the Time of COVID, 3: Romantic or Erotic Love

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Song of Songs 4:1-7

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The Theological Declaration of Barmen, written in 1934, one of the greatest confessions in the history of our Reformed Church, is a theological and political document. But one of its articles bears on a much broader principle. It tells us that we as Christians reject the false teaching that there are parts of our lives which are not under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, but belong to other lords.

I'm bringing up this confessional point to make a larger one. When it comes to romantic or erotic love, a subject which (let's face it) makes up a large part of human life, our faith tends largely to be silent, giving the impression that, beyond a bunch of prohibitions, Christianity has nothing much to say and nothing much to do with the erotic. The implication of this silence is that this aspect of human affection and behavior is somehow outside the bounds of faith.

It's true that the romantic (or erotic and sexual) impulses of humanity make up a surging river of almost unbelievable power. It is potentially truly destructive, and has wrecked more lives than can be counted. There have been many voices in church history that felt, in the face of such a potential danger, that the only faithful thing possible was to dam the flow and condemn the spillway.

It may surprise you, then, to hear that the biblical book chosen for commentary by medieval theologians and monks most often was "The Song of Songs." It will not surprise you to discover that these commentators so allegorized the book that, when they were done, there's not a whiff of humanity or appearance of human flesh left in "The Song." It becomes a mystical book about loving God.

That's fine, except for one huge problem. That's not what The Song of Songs is about at all. This biblical book is a frank and glorious expression of the physical and emotional attraction and love of two people.

Almost no great Church father spoke on the subject of erotic love, except for Saint Augustine of Hippo, who prayed, "Lord, make me chaste. But not yet." Not much guidance there.

On the other hand, it was also St. Augustine who taught that every sin is a wrong use of a virtue. Every wrong is a twisted and destructive use of a good gift from God. And, so, this saint with a thoroughly carnal background provides the fundamental Christian principle for channeling, as opposed to damming up, the river of the romantic.

I've found it encouraging that, in the last century, Karl Barth's unique contribution to trinitarian theology included the idea that the love between a human couple is a reflection of

the life of the Trinity. The romantic, the erotic, even the sexual expression of love is grounded in God's eternal being. That's worth pondering in something longer than a ten minute sermon. God has not gifted humanity, in other words, with sexual desire only for procreation. Such love is itself a good gift from God.

One of my favorite films is "The Long Hot Summer," a William Faulkner screenplay, starring Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward. Newman and Woodward had met a few years earlier in New York City and became friends, but it was while filming that movie in our neck of the woods that they fell in love. The story goes that whenever they weren't filming they were in our fair city of New Orleans visiting intimately with one another. That romantic relationship culminated in a marriage that lasted over half a century.

On their fiftieth anniversary, each took the opportunity to explain the secret of their long marriage. Woodward said, well he's handsome and sexy, of course, but all that goes out the window, because he makes me laugh. He sure has kept me laughing. Newman said that if there is a secret, it's some combination of lust, respect and patience.

Both answers are good, but I think I remember hearing sermons on virtually all of the qualities they mentioned, even at least one sermon on the subject of "holy laughter," but for the life of me, I can't remember ever hearing a single sermon on the subject of "holy lust."

Marriage is, I believe, a sacrament. It is the joining together of two people who love one another, and promise to keep doing that against all odds. Like other sacraments, it has the ability to communicate to us the grace of God, God's kindness and mercy, generosity and forgiveness. It has the potential to save us. And there's just no more important aspect of this sacramental work than that most intimate aspect of human love, when two become one flesh.

When my son asked me, not long before he and Caroline were engaged, what I thought were the most important things to have in a good marriage, I told him there are three things (and I don't know why there are always three, unless it's some sort of *vestigia trinitatis*): Trust, Respect, and (although it will made him cringe for his dad to say it about his mom), Lust.

Having now read Woodward's statement, I would add laughter. And these days, while I still encourage people in weddings to love one another, I tell them at the very least to be kind.

You can't build a successful relationship on the erotic alone, but without it, this marvelous life God gave us would be a lot more boring for sure. Like John Calvin said, if God just wanted us to stay hydrated, water would have sufficed, but God gave us wine also.

It is well to remember the confessional truth with which we began today's sermon. There is no aspect of human life that is ruled by some other lord, be it Eros, or Ares, or Aphrodite. In all of life, we belong to God. And the purpose of life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. It's the enjoy part we're apt to forget when we get to feeling religious.

Amen.