

From Within the Heart

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13; James 1: 17-27; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

There's such a thing as romance on the rebound. A person has had a sweetheart, and had let down his or her guard emotionally to be part of all this affection and attention and hope and excitement, and the romance has ended. The couple has broken up, and the person who had come to live on loving and being loved has this big hole inside that's no longer filled up with that other person, and the solution for that becomes some other person. Someone else shows up willing or happy to be the boyfriend or girlfriend, and takes over the role. The notion of "rebound" captures the truth that there is energy going into this new connection which is coming from another direction altogether.

Sometimes the rebound romance is not with some other person. Sometimes it is with God. I have a couple of examples you may or may not have heard of, but before mentioning them I want to admit that this strikes us as odd. We are accustomed, from stories told in our culture and events in the lives of people whose expectations are formed by stories in our culture, to rebound romances involving new boyfriends or girlfriends. We are not so accustomed to the idea that people can love God wholeheartedly, and have that devotion to God define what they do and who they become. This may be because Protestantism dominates American Christianity, and it has no equivalent to monasteries or convents. It may also result from living in a twenty-first century in which spirituality has been divorced, in many people's thinking, from religion. Now even when people recognize that there is something profound in people which is described as their spirit, there's no immediate assumption that it is, or might be, connected to the spirit of God.

Thomas Merton became a famous writer about monastic life and Christian prayer. In his autobiography he relates having had an intoxicating shipboard romance as a young man, and having found himself in that state of blissful subjugation we call being "head over heels." That didn't last, but it revealed depths in his soul that he hadn't suspected, which he eventually determined required religious direction. Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish thinker and writer who made a great deal of a youthful idealization of a pretty young girl whom he'd once planned to marry. That romance failing, he poured himself into arguing for a new seriousness about Christianity. These men wrote about their experience--the world has many more people in it whose passions for intimacy and personal fulfillment have taken a religious turn.

I am talking about this because we hardly ever read from the book Song of Solomon, which generally is described as a book of love poetry, and which therefore often strikes people as an odd inclusion in the scriptures. The poem's all about human desire and the delights of physical intimacy, and lots of people's reaction-- and the perspective of some varieties of Christian thinking--is that there's no connection between that and God. In fact, most of the Christian scholars who write about the book point out how Medieval Christian spirituality,

which was so much the province of men and women who observed vows of chastity, employed the book's language and images as a metaphor of close spiritual communion with God or with Christ. How did it end up within the writings the Jews regarded as specifically religious if there weren't some similar instinct present there?

We are children of Freud, culturally speaking, because there's a whole industry which has assumed the burden of describing and prescribing to human spiritual matters which presumes that human beings can be explained not by the intentions of God, but by the imperatives of nature. Individual instincts for survival, and species' instincts for reproducing themselves, become the determining forces influencing behaviors. Sexual drives, especially, are regarded as dominant shapers of personal experience. A twentieth-century person might therefore say that the look of ecstasy on paintings of saints shows that their sexual natures were diverted into spiritually-approved paths, and that their religious feeling was a sublimation of a forbidden aspect of their true selves. In that view, being emotionally and psychically consumed by the object of one's affection really belongs to the province of physical love, but shows up in religious life when it has no other outlet.

The argument has been made the other way around. Denis de Rougemont suggested, in a book called Love in the Western World, that profound personal self-definition through intimacy with another began in Western culture not with what we'd call romantic love, but in Christian devotional life. In his view, mystical self-abandonment to the other originally was part of a variety of Christian enthusiasm in which the spiritual ecstasies of a small part of the cloistered community were popularized among lay Christians, resulting in what was almost a Pentecostal movement in southwestern France in the Middle Ages. Like today's charismatic Christianities, it delighted in profound personal experiences of what was conceived as intimacy with God. Unlike modern movements like this which have found a place within Roman Catholicism, this Medieval grassroots variety of enthusiastic religion was regarded as a threat to the established church, and branded a heresy, and stamped out. De Rougemont's thesis is that pouring one's soul entirely into another having been forbidden by the Church as a way of knowing God, the instinct to do that transformed itself into the tradition of courtly, or chivalrous love. That's the sort of thing in which knights would ride into danger for the favor of a lady, wearing some token of hopeful approval, like a handkerchief, next to the heart. Stories like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, bearing these kinds of expectations for love between the sexes, continue to locate true human fulfillment and contentment in finding and being found by an ideal mate.

To go back to Kierkegaard and Merton, the two men whose failed romances became part of their pilgrimage to religious intensity, they understood their heart's longing as having been misplaced when it sought fulfillment in another human being. Kierkegaard called it having attached an ultimate importance to a finite object--he felt like he was trying to give a soul, properly destined for God, to someone who was merely a fellow mortal. But my point in thinking about these perspectives is not to argue about whether love has its origins in our biological life or in our spiritual life--it's just to notice the complexity and interconnectedness of

all these things.

The two New Testament readings agree that the human heart is the seat of what is meaningful in our lives and what is meaningful about us. Romantic love is not the variety in question; it is love of God and love of others which come up in the gospel and in the Book of James. The Bible assumes that people can sincerely love God, and have their delight in God and devotion to God influence what they choose to do and how they are. Just like a boyfriend can't help but want to treat his girlfriend well, a lover of God wants to treat others well.

For the Bible tradition, including Jesus, loving God and loving people are so close to the same thing that it's hard to separate them. Jesus loves the people who are criticized for not following the teaching of the Pharisees. He knows that though the Pharisees are claiming that these people don't love God because they don't observe the rituals of religion, that those rituals have nothing to do with it. They are just obstacles to people focusing on what really counts. Worse, those rules make people who fail at them them judge themselves.

Jesus thinks outer things are much less important than inner things. He feels it's fine for Pharisees to observe them, once they've made sure they're right in their hearts. Making a big deal, however, of ritual cleanliness or scrupling about permitted or forbidden foods is a mistake. The thing to make a big deal about is the condition of the individual heart. What really offends God by undermining love among persons--evil intentions, pride, folly, envy, all those sins listed at the end of the passage--come from within. A person who has a good heart will be led by that good heart to helpful attitudes and actions.

You may say, what about the road to Hell being paved with good intentions? That means that sincere good will doesn't always guarantee good outcomes, and that's true, but that concern, that calculation, which is "is this well-meant effort of mine really going to have the good result I intend?" is part of having a really good heart. Adults learn to be careful with good intentions, because we know they can go wrong. But that's a quibble.

Bad intentions make wrong. Deceit, theft, murder, all that stuff which Jesus identifies as coming from an evil heart, don't compare to the kinds of misunderstandings and miscues which misguided kindness sometimes brings. It is foolish to worry about going wrong with the wishes of a good heart if the result is that we neither share our intention to do good or get anything good done at all. Think things through, by all means, and certainly ask the person you hope to show love if your intended means of showing love is a good idea. Do everything you can to guarantee that your good heart achieves a good object. Don't, however, let the difficulty of guaranteeing a good outcome stifle a good heart's hopes.

James says the same thing. Loving God, trusting God, should have given you a certain kind of heart. The way to know that you have the right kind of heart is by the corresponding life it makes you live with other people. Are you thoughtful in what you say, are you compassionately active in the lives of those who have known loss or who have little? God has given you the heart to be kind, considerate, and constructive. Look at the effect you have on the lives of the people around you, and see what it is that the desires of your heart make you do.