

Shortly after I started as Chaplain at St. Paul's School in Oakland, a group of African-American Evangelical mothers came to my office with a request. Could I do a presentation to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade about what the Bible really says about same sex relationships? They were in a quandry. The school affirmed these relationships, many of their children's friends had either two dads or two moms, while their churches condemned them. They wanted a straight answer, and they had decided that they could get it from me. I told them I would do as they asked and sat down to think about love, both human and divine. I wish I could tell you that the Bible gives a straight answer, but the Bible rarely gives a straight answer about anything.

God knows us fully, but we cannot know God fully.

God is love, and because God is love, we will never know love fully either. But here's what we can know. We are asked to see the image of God in everyone we meet, which means we are asked to love everyone. In addition, we are given a special beloved, with whom, to use the Biblical language, "to know and to be known." At its best, human love teaches us about the self-emptying that is God's love. At its worst, abusive love drives us far away from God. One of the more common images in the Old Testament is God as bridegroom and Israel as bride. In all four gospels, Jesus calls himself the bridegroom. Like many other subtle hints in scripture, this image suggests that God holds very different ideas of gender than we do.

At the last supper Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

Laying down one's life for another is not about death; in God's kingdom nothing dies; it's about a radically wonderful way of living.

True love takes many forms. Two of the great love stories in the Bible are those between David and Jonathan and Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Since the Jesus story is deeply connected with the David story, the two may even be related.

The Bible tells us little about the relationship between Jonathan and David, except that it was intense. Jonathan may have been David's disciple, his best friend, his lover, or all of the above. Same with Mary Magdalene and Jesus. But we'll never know. The Bible never says explicitly. The verbs are all chaste. Almost as if to tell us that who we love, and in what way, is nobody's business but ours, our beloved's, and God's. Love may very well be that which, like prayer, is with God in secret.

As I pondered and read, I saw very clearly that in the Bible, it's not who we love that matters, it's how and why we love. If love is the practice of giving, one cannot go wrong. If it's about self-gratification, or dominating, it will never be right.

King David was considered the greatest of the kings of Israel. His story appears in both the Bible and the Quran. Jesus is addressed as "Son of David," and his messianic lineage was traced through David's house. Jesus and David are both kings. I would like to suggest that God so loved David that he sent his son Jesus to heal all the damage that David did, for there are eerie parallels in the two stories.

Which is to say, the story of David is not an easy story to read. David himself is radiant, but his life is filled with violence, madness, and betrayal. Although David begins as the perfect innocent, a shepherd who composed psalms to the God he loved, whose songs, like St. Francis, caused the birds to gather, a man whose faith was stronger than any fear, a man who could bring down the most monstrous problem with a single, well aimed stone, he does not stay that way.

But the story of David is also a story of many loves: Jonathan, Jonathan's sister Michal, Abigail, Bathsheba, Abishag. Some of these loves are true, others lead to terrible consequences. This reminds us that love, while perhaps the greatest of all things, is also among the most dangerous. It heats the blood. It is not far removed from its evil twin of violence, and love rejected can lead to violence. "Hell hath no fury like that of a woman scorned," says the old aphorism. If freely given, love is a source of joy. If forced, or used, like the peculiar boasting of trophy wives, what goes by the name of love can mess up more than minds. Despite the hopes of the 1960's, love is never to be confused with license. Nor, if it is freely given, is it ever fully free, for true love binds us to God. Or as the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Ibn Arabi said so well, "Follow not that which you love, but follow that which God loves."<sup>1</sup> (Think about that one. It's good.)

Returning to David and Jonathan, after David killed Goliath, the mythical giant who had sent all Israel into a mighty panic, the soul of King Saul's son Jonathan was bound to the soul of David. Jonathan saw something in this boy with a slingshot that no one else saw. There can be no greater metaphor for love than the bonding of souls: our souls are our deepest selves, and when souls bond, two lives become one life, and Jonathan "stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt." Our robes, armor, swords, bows, and belts are all outward attributes, the cloaks of ego, the image we present to the world. Jonathan gave all that to David, leaving himself "just as he was."

This moment is so rich in Biblical resonance, for it is over a robe, that Joseph was sold into slavery by his angry brothers; and in today's gospel, Jesus got into the boat "just as he was," without any trappings of office or power. He falls asleep and a great storm arises at sea.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Study Quran*, p. 1107, note 26

A great storm arises in King Saul as well when he sees how much David is loved. And he rages and raves while David plays his lyre and Saul seeks to pin him to the wall with his spear, letting the young man hang there in agony. But twice David eludes him, and Saul sends him instead into battle, where he triumphs and is not killed.

It is said that an Enlightened person can walk through a forest of hungry tigers and emerge unscathed.

And Jesus says to the storm, “‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’”

God is true love. Storms and wrath are disordered loves. Follow that which God loves.

We think that somehow human emotions are separate from nature.

But they are not. For we are nature.

We experienced fire weather last week.

Love can speak “Peace!” to a storm at sea and it will grow calm. Love can pray in a fire, as St. Aidan did when the Saxons were attacking Bamburgh with fire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and the winds changed, turning back upon the attackers.

Perfect love casts out fear.

It does not matter at all who you love. It matters mightily how you love.

So I gave my talk to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and read examples from the Bible about the goodness of love and the awfulness of enslavement and rape and envy and rage, and I spoke of the soul friendship between David and Jonathan, which was good, because the two made a covenant and

opened themselves completely one to the other, and that was the last thing that needed to be said.

The mothers were content and life went on.

As this love story will continue next Sunday. In Jesus' name. Amen.