

Just An Old Fashioned Love Song

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 16, 1998. Scripture lesson: Isaiah 5:1-7.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

When you're involved in a relationship with someone you love deeply - you've invested blood, sweat and tears into making the relationship work, if it fails, what do you do? Do you give up? Do you try again? Why? Let's talk about it.

Listen to the story of Mary and John. They met in college, fell in love, and got married after their sophomore year. Mary, at great sacrifice to herself, dropped out of college, got a job, and put John through his junior and senior years. Her sacrifices seemed like nothing because she loved John. After John graduated they'd planned for Mary to go back to college but she got pregnant. She decided she wanted the baby more than college. The baby came and John said, "Stay home with the baby. He needs a full time mother." Mary wanted to stand by her man so she, once more, put her college and career plans on hold. She wasn't bitter. She never regretted a minute she spent with her baby. She did everything she could to make him successful. "Mary, I invited two prospective clients to dinner tomorrow night. Do you mind?" Mary didn't mind. The clients enjoyed their evening in John and Mary's home. "Your house looks so beautiful and the meal was wonderful. What a wonderful wife you have, John." When Mary, this wonderful wife, turned forty years old, with two teenage children, John dumped her for a girl 20 years younger, a real beauty. Their relationship lasted only about a year and, since then, John has bounced from one relationship ^{to another}. Mary still loves John as strange as it may seem and she's asking, "What did I do wrong?"

If Mary were to sing a love song, I imagine it'd be the old Hank William's song, "I Can't Help It (If I'm still In Love With You)." Linda Ronstadt sang it on a 1974 album.

Today I passed you on the street,
and my heart fell at your feet.
I can't help it if I'm still
in love with you.
Somebody else stood by your side,
and she looked so satisfied.
I can't help it if I'm still
in love with you.

Now Isaiah the prophet writes, "Let me sing for my beloved *my* love-song." It's a strange love song about a vineyard. "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill, an ideal location. At great effort he cleared the area of stones. He built a wall around the vineyard to keep out robbers and a watchtower where he could spot danger from miles away. At great effort, with hammer and chisel, he hewed a winepress out of solid rock. At great personal expense he bought the finest vines. He did everything right. He spared no expense. Then he sat back and waited for his vineyard to produce grapes. But the vineyard produced wild grapes. Isaiah's love song is a parable. ^{ABOUT THE LORD & HIS PEOPLE.} The Lord loved his people Israel. He pledged to them his undying love. ^{GOD DID EVERYTHING TO MAKE ISRAEL A BLESSING TO THE WORLD, A LIGHT.} God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. He led them through the Red Sea on dry land. He destroyed their enemies. He led them in the wilderness with a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. He fed them with bread from heaven. He gave them water to drink from a rock. He gave them good laws. He brought them into their own land. He gave them good King David to unite them. He brought them great wealth and wisdom and power and riches and glory under King Solomon. The Lord spared no expense. The Lord exerted great pains so that Israel would produce good fruit. The Lord looked for justice but he saw only great injustice; the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. The powerful oppressed the weak. He looked for a righteous society but he heard only cries of suffering people.

And so the Lord asked the same question Mary asked. "Where did I go wrong? What could I have done any different? Why has this happened?" God blames himself for Israel's unfaithfulness. God takes upon himself the blame. Israel left their Lord, just like John left Mary. Israel left the One who loved her and turned from one abusive lover to another. God's people left the Lord and removed themselves from God's embrace and protective hand. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonian empire in 586 BC. The walls of Jerusalem were leveled; the Temple destroyed. Judah was laid waste. The people of Judah were forcibly marched 700 miles through the desert to a Babylonian exile on the Euphrates River. ^{YET THE LORD DID NOT AND HAS NOT GIVEN UP ON HIS PEOPLE. EVENTUALLY ISRAEL PRODUCED FRUIT - JESUS.}

I can identify with the history of love recounted in Isaiah's love song. God wants us to bear good fruit. The expectation of farmers who labor over a crop is that it will bear good fruit. The expectation of parents who've poured out themselves for their children is that the children will grow up to be good, loving Christ, and contributing to the welfare of the community. And we children of God, despite God's care for us so often turn out self-centered. When we place ourselves into the arms of abusive lovers we suffer the consequences. We don't live in a fail safe world. If we don't care for the poorest in our society we'll pay for it. If we have justice for the middle class and injustice for the poor we'll all suffer the consequences. If we lust for violent images we shouldn't be surprised if our society grows more violent. If we put self and our own personal happiness above the well being of our family and community we'll suffer the results of self-centeredness.

Listen again to verse 7 of the love song Isaiah sang. "The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" What are some of the fruits people use today to evaluate how spiritual a person is? How do these compare with what God looks for in our church? How would you assess the fruit in your life: ^{IN OUR CHURCH?} Is the fruit just budding? Is it premature? Is the fruit developing on schedule? Is it ripe for enjoyment? Or is the fruit diseased?

God is a lover. God is not simply the unmoved mover of Aristotle's philosophy. God is not simply The Supreme Being. God is not simply That Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived of the ontological argument. God, above all, is a lover. God is a singer. The God we trust is a God who sings love songs. If God were to sing a love song in the modern idiom I imagine he might sound like Garth Brooks ^{SINGING} a great love song written by Bob Dylan.

When the rain is blowing in your face
And the whole world is on your case
I could offer you a warm embrace
To make you feel my love.

When evening shadows and the stars appear
And there is no one there to dry your tears
I could hold you for a million years
To make you feel my love.

I know you haven't made your mind up yet
But I would never do you wrong
I've known it from the moment that we met.
No doubt in my mind where you belong.

I'd go hungry, I'd go black and blue.
I'd go crawling down the avenue.
No, there's nothing that I wouldn't do
To make you feel my love.

The storms are raging on the rollin' sea
And on the highway of regret
The winds of change are blowing wild and free
You ain't seen nothing like me yet.

I could make you happy, make your dreams come true.
Nothing that I wouldn't do.
Go to the ends of the earth for you
To make you feel my love.

Christians are people who believe there's nothing that God wouldn't do to make the entire world feel his love- there's nothing God in Christ has not already done to make the world and you and me feel his love. If you haven't made your mind up yet, trust him. Obey him. Follow him in sickness and in health. There's no doubt in my mind where you belong.

Let us pray: