

## “Valentine’s Day and Last of Epiphany”

Sermon for Feb. 14th, 2010 by The Rev. Joe Summers

This year, because of the Last Sunday of Epiphany falling on Valentine’s day, I felt inspired by the theme of love songs to and from God. Today I’m going to talk first about one of my favorite new romantic songs, and then what that song says to me about God and the Jesus movement.

There has always been a pretty nasty, or at best, ambivalent relationship between romantic love poems or songs (poems about the kind of love that the Greeks called Eros) and divine love poems-poems/songs about the kind of Godly love the Greeks called Agape Love (which Martin Luther King defined as “understanding creative redemptive good will for all”). It’s been a little like the relationship between psychology and religion. Partly because the territory they cover can be so close, they tend to want to put each other down. Yet, even if they don’t want to own it, we can see how often they tend to be inspired by each other and borrow language from each other. If we can own and claim how each directly borrows from the other, it actually can help us understand what each is trying to say. This service today is filled with great love songs, songs that mainly came out of the musical renaissance that happened in Detroit, that we call Motown. I hope you can feel the divine energy flowing in them and through them, an energy that I think is about far more than simply romantic love, and let them help you hear God’s love for you or to express your love for God. However, in my reflections today, I want to draw on two other love songs:

“If the sky that we look upon  
Should tumble and fall  
And the mountains should crumble to the sea  
I won’t cry, I won’t cry, no I won’t shed a tear  
Just as long as you stand, stand by me  
And darlin’, darlin’, stand by me, oh stand by me,  
stand by me, stand by me, stand by me.”

“Stand by Me” is a great example of a wonderful romantic love song that wholeheartedly borrows from religious poetry. Where does that image of mountains crumbling to the sea come from? It’s from the psalms. What’s that image of stand by me? It’s the image of the kind of faithful love, “hesed”, that the Bible holds up as making all the difference in the world --- only here it is envisioned as coming to fruition in a relationship between two people.

Now, if we can hear how religious poetry helped inspire “Stand by Me” and helped to define what romantic love is to be about at its best, I want you to listen to this next romantic song and hear how it might help inform what our faith is about. What I especially would like you to listen for is the excitement and energy driving this song “Short Skirt, Long Jacket” by the band Cake:

“I want a girl with a mind like a diamond. I want a girl who knows what’s best  
I want a girl with shoes that cut. And eyes that burn Like cigarettes  
I want a girl with the right allocations. Who’s fast and thorough And sharp as a tack  
She’s playing with her jewelry, She’s putting up her hair  
She’s touring the facility, And picking up slack  
I want a girl with a short skirt and a lonnnng jacket.....  
I want a girl who gets up early. I want a girl who stays up late  
I want a girl with uninterrupted prosperity  
Who uses a machete to cut through red tape  
With fingernails that shine like justice  
And a voice that is dark like tinted glass  
She is fast and thorough and sharp as a tack  
She’s touring the facility and picking up slack  
I want a girl with a short skirt and a long.... long jacket  
I want a girl with a smooth liquidation. I want a girl with good dividends  
And at the city bank we will meet accidentally  
We’ll start to talk when she borrows my pen  
She wants a car with a cupholder arm rest  
She wants a car that will get her there  
She’s changing her name from Kitty to Karen  
She’s trading her MG for a white Chrysler LeBaron.”

On the surface, this is expressing something we haven’t heard much of in romantic poems from men to women in a long time. This is a man who’s looking for a woman who’s smart, decisive, strong, knows what she wants, can take care of business, including making money, and is cute to boot. It’s in total contrast to those romantic songs of the past, in which what was held up as the ideal were “girls”, “babes”, with names like Kitty, who drove cute little sports cars, were not terribly smart, and needed the protection of strong males. In other words, this is a love song for the tough economic world and times we live in, a world in which you want your partner to be as smart or smarter than you, as tough or tougher than you, and yet can still enjoy life as in that appreciation for fashion.

But as you listen, that’s not what I want you to focus on. What I hope you heard is the enthusiasm, the excitement and passion for this new kind of love. When this song is played in my house, everyone shouts out, not only the refrains, but even the lyrics.

Now, what in the heck does this have to do with divine love and our faith?

What I want to suggest today is that, from everything we know, this is the kind of infectious enthusiasm and passion people felt about Jesus and the God he helped them come to know. Last week our gospel says that crowds pressed against him, because they were so hungry to hear the Word of God, such that he had to go out into a boat a little way off the shore, so everyone could hear him. Part of what’s striking is that the Word of God they heard from Jesus wasn’t

primarily his reading from or interpreting the scriptures. Rather, Jesus told stories that helped people come to know a God within them and among them that filled their hunger and spoke to their despair, that energized them with hope and passion for new life and justice, healing and love. When they heard Jesus speak, they experienced it as if God was talking to them.

Songs like “Stand by Me” or “Short Skirt, long Jacket” remind us of how that first passion of falling in love fills one’s whole soul. It fills our hearts with light, so we literally go around beaming, which can often be kind of irritating to others. Today, in our gospel, we hear that, at a certain point, the disciples saw Jesus engulfed in a heavenly light, saw him standing with Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets. Whatever we make of that story - and it’s a story really worth wrestling with - what we know is that the light people experience in Jesus was ultimately very infectious. Though through most of his time with them, they didn’t get it. However, once Jesus marches into Jerusalem, gets arrested, and dies on a cross, something happens to his followers, such that suddenly they become infused with the same light, and they find themselves filled with the same spirit that was in Jesus. Now, those hungering for God’s word turn to them.

We see this in a lot of the earliest Christian paintings, where the heads of the apostles and other disciples heads are surrounded with a halo, a circle of light. I think it reflects how people experienced them. Its like the look of one who’s fallen in love--- only magnified.

Lately I’m really wrestling with this idea that, while it may be true that each of us has been created unique in all the universe for all eternity, it is also true that we are mimetic creatures, creatures of imitation, creatures whose very selves are formed in part through our interactions with others, not just the way we think and act, but also in the ways we feel and see ourselves and others, even in the very ways our bodies come to be shaped.

One a side note, this last point came home to me in watching a PBS show on the effects of stress. One of the things scientists have discovered is that, in both primates and people, if you are on the bottom of the social hierarchy, you experience a level of stress much greater than those on the top. This stress causes your body to accumulate weight around your middle. So while it may be true that part of our current obesity epidemic is caused by fast food and not eating well, it’s also the case that some of the most dangerous kind of weight distribution can only be addressed by creating a society in which it is less stressful to be at the bottom.

I don’t mean to distract you with that example. What I hope it illustrates is how much we come to know ourselves, envision ourselves, become who we are, in the face of the other, in relationship to others, and that there is a direct relationship between how others view us and our experience of the divine. That is, we tend to project onto God either the negative or positive views of those among whom we grew up.

If the face we encountered in the Other is one of negative judgment, we will be tempted to either live feeling cut off, or desperately striving to appease and/or win approval. Either way it

is terribly difficult to have a whole self and your own full voice.

And this brings me back to the light people experienced in Jesus and found so infectious.

We know from our gospels that Jesus' experience of God was an experience of acceptance and affirmation, of being wholly beloved. This experience of God's love, acceptance, and affirmation seems to have everything to do with Jesus' ability to be himself, to live not from a place of fear, even though there were fearful things all around him, to live not from a place of intimidation or appeasement, though he was constantly being threatened by powers and authorities. Jesus did not seem to view those with power and authority as above him, with the result that he didn't seem to need to fight them or obey them, as we can be tempted to do when we feel threatened.

Jesus seems to have been free to say what he wanted to say and feel what he felt, and the result is that he was always saying or doing the unexpected. When you read about him, it's like he's in a play, and everyone else seems to keep following the scripts that they've been given, religious scripts, political scripts, social scripts, and then you have Jesus seemingly treating those scripts as if they were, well, just scripts and often not very good scripts. This ability to both see the scripts of others, and not feel bound by them, this ability to write your own script is something Jesus says his followers will come to possess, when he tells his followers that, when they are arrested and put on trial and are given the opportunity to testify, they shouldn't try to prepare in advance, or worry about what they will say, for the words will come to them. This kind of trusting in spontaneity, even when your life is on the line, speaks to an incredible kind of trust in how the Spirit of truth can lead us, guide us, and speak through us.

Christians believe Jesus opened the door to a new way of being human. The ultimate testimony to the new kind of mimetic community that began with Jesus, is this ability for people to find the freedom to be themselves, to speak in their own voice (rather than trying to channel voices from the past). It is the infectious courage that comes to possess poor people, women, slaves, all those who were so far down at the bottom of the social hierarchy they were viewed as less than fully human, or even as chattel (things, objects), in other words, the people who were no people and yet who, in the face of this new revelation of God as they experienced it in this new community, in this new relationship to others, came to find their own voice, their own passion, their own courage and became world transformers, rather than objects of destiny.

And that's what we are about today, a new kind of community, a community that's not about getting us to conform, but is rather about helping us to discover the divine face in whose light we are able to become ourselves, to be free to be, to become able to speak and act freely, to be free to be able to embrace the past, because we are no longer controlled or determined by it, to be free to be able to use anything and everything, in the spirit of understanding, creative, redemptive, good will for all.

In the light of each others faces we can discover the freedom to become free.

I know it is difficult for them to hear or believe, but last week, seeing Claude and Elginne and Letitia speak, that light was so evident to me. In speaking to one another, we can hear what God wants to say to us and hear the word which set us free to become the seeds of God's new creation, the seeds of freedom, fire, light, love and justice.

“Oh my friends, how I yearn to see you free  
To see yourself as I see you, and not who you feel the need to be  
From the top of your heads to the tip of your toes  
May the fire of my love burn in you,  
destroying the mantle of shame that keeps you from  
seeing and being seen, touching and being touched  
and the Mind of fear that leaves you alone,  
that you may experience life  
as a feast of love. Amen.”

If we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.