

*Based on Song of Solomon 2:8-13*

Way back in June, I polled the folks who gather for Bible at the Bar on what should be the next topic of discussion. *What about marriage?* someone offered.

Others cringed.

Marriage is hard, even for the most perfectly matched couples, and not just because we have to deal with the reality of an actual human being beyond the fantasy of an idealized lover. Marriage is also hard because that kind of commitment also comes with that kind of loss: loss of innocence, loss of sleep, loss of sanity sometimes, and ultimately, if we make it through to the end, the loss of the life of the Beloved.

Not only that, but there have been all of the cultural debates about marriage, as well, about who is allowed to get married and who is not, about what marriage is supposed to look like and what it is not, and a ton of historical baggage about gender roles and expectations that will take generations to sort through completely, if ever.

Marriage is a fraught subject, to be sure, perhaps even more dangerous territory than the Book of Revelation, which was our Bible at the Bar topic for the Spring!

And yet ... there remains within us a longing for companionship, for love, for deep, intimate, knowing—with all that we are—that we might also be known, fully, in return. Why else would so many people still get married well into their 70s and 80s?

The cynic might say it is the propagation of the species, a mechanism for germ plasm to pass on to the next generation, that drives us into each other's arms. The Puritan might say it is sin: a desire of the flesh that dare not speak its name in polite society. The psychologist might say it is working out our unresolved family of origin issues by projecting them onto another human being. (Guilty as charged!)

But the mystic would say it is a *holy* longing, for intimate union with God and with one another, built into the very fabric of our creation.

The Song of Solomon says so, too.

On the one hand, in this book we have biblical erotica celebrating egalitarian sexual love in the tradition of Mesopotamian sacred marriage songs. On the other hand, in this book we have a mystical dance that melds us into the wholeness of the universe, where we really are already "one," even though we do not always feel like it.

It turns out, the intimacy and commitment of marriage is used throughout the Scriptures to describe the intimacy and commitment of God's relationship with us and of Christ's relationship with the Church. We are, in a very real sense, according to our Scriptures, *married* to God and to one another. Not even necessarily by choice, but rather just because we exist. An arranged marriage of sorts, we might say. As the psychologist Erving Goffman has said, *All the world, in truth, is a wedding.*

The question is, do we want to celebrate the marriage of all things or do we want to run from it? Or perhaps both?

Yes, marriage is hard. As the Facebook Group called *Worth Sharing* describes it, marriage is about seeing *the absolute worst in someone ... and it's not always pretty ... It's the farting, it's the bedhead and bad breath ... when they're mad, sad, being stubborn, when they're so unlovable they make you scream ... it's cleaning up their throw up or just rubbing their back when they're sick.*

And yet marriage is also *the random dances ... the joy ... someone having your back no matter what ... crawling into bed with your best friend ... feeling like there will never be enough time with them ... all of the ups and downs making the love deeper and more profound than you could ever imagine.*

This full-blown, truthful reality of marriage truly is, as our tradition says, *a gift from God for the well-being of the entire human family.* Not in some idealized fantasy or in some strictly prescribed expectations around child-bearing. The real gift of marriage for the entire human family is that when couples come together, in their individual commitments, they show us all how to be committed more faithfully *to one another.* Individual marriages show the entire human family how to care for one another, how to challenge one another, how to keep on getting along, even when—and especially when—we are *really* struggling to “get along”!

And yes, individual marriages can also show the entire human family how to walk away: from abuse, from shame, from becoming too small, from hiding, from simply growing apart but remaining in coordinated commitment for the children.

Human love in mutual companionship, both in romantic partnership and in spiritual community, is a “taste,” we say, of that heavenly banquet that is yet to come in the fullness of time when this marriage of all that is has been finally made complete.

That, in the end, is what this longing for companionship, for love, for wholeness, for deep intimate knowing is really all about: the steadfast, never-ending, never-failing love of *God*—finally and forever—that keeps on leaping upon the mountains and bounding over the hills for *us*, in this “Song of Most Excellent Songs.” Peeking through the lattice we build up around our hearts. Breaking through our walls. Day after day. Night after night. Calling us ever deeper into the Beloved Community that is the ultimate realm of God.