

The Ideal of Romantic Love Versus the Reality

Mark 3:19c-21; 31-35

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When it comes to life, we all understand that there is both an ideal we dream of, and the reality we muddle through. Take sex, for example.

The sexual ideal is beautifully described in the Bible's *Song of Songs*, a selection of which Kimberley just sang. Here the lover—much like Romeo under Juliette's balcony—the lover is pictured standing outside a bedroom, peering in through the lattice work. He whispers, "*Come away with me. Flowers are blooming, turtle doves are cooing, juicy figs are growing—*" and he means, "*let's do the same, let's ride this wave, let's enjoy the fruit of our own vineyards.*" Nothing is said or sung here, in the *Song of Songs*, about life-long vows, nothing is said to exclude the love of a man for a man or a woman for a woman, nothing much is said here, in the *Song of Songs*, except, "*God, I adore you, let's make love.*"

The *Song of Songs* celebrates a sexual ideal. "*I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley. My lover browses among the lilies, he is like a young stag on my gentle hills.*" You can see it. "*Dark am I, yet lovely.*" You can savor it. "*Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.*" You can smell it. "*My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts.*" And you can touch it. "*I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh.*"

No wonder that, over 100 years ago, an old Calvinist theologian named Cornelis Vanderwaal wrote of the *Song of Songs* that it is about how "the beginning of eternal joy can already be tasted in one's sexual life." Ideally, of course.

Unfortunately, no matter how sweet our own first introductions to love were—if in fact, they were sweet; no matter if our lover is as beautiful as Helen of Troy or handsome as Ryan Gosling, the reality of a lifetime of sexual love rarely lives up to *The Song of Song's* poetic climax.

As we grow older, our hormones ebb and the intensity of our passions subside. Our children stay up later and their busy activities leave us exhausted. We have headaches or want to watch *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Perhaps our partner snores or has hot flashes so we move to twin beds or maybe even another room. When we stand before the mirror, we realize, one day, as hard as it is to believe, that we are not as impressively sculpted as we surely once were. So the nature of our intimacy evolves. We discover that instead of "falling" into each other's arms, in bed, we're making appointments; instead of acrobatics we are cuddling; and instead of "making it," we're making tea or spreading jam on biscuits for each other.

Life is like that. We all dream of experiencing the perfect ideal. Some of us may even have a few days or months where such dreams come true. But then life goes on . . . and we discover that it's not so bad.

Our family lives are like that too—a mix of the mundane and the ideal. We live, even now, in the shadow of the fifties ideal—mom and dad, son and daughter. Dad has a good job and mom looks after things at home. Eldest son goes off to college to study engineering and young daughter snags a boyfriend who has a great future in plastics.

In some ways, this notion of being able to have an ideal family hasn't changed much over the years. You see, the notion of an ideal family has always been and still is, imaginary. The truth is we all have children who struggle in school, marriages that are in need of frequent repair, and finances that are challenging. We all have family members who struggle with depression or addiction or debt. All of us belong to real, rather than ideal families.

It was much the same for Jesus. There is the imaginary ideal, seen in a million paintings from the past two thousand years, a pretty Mother Mary with a beautiful haloed baby Jesus on her lap, Madonna and child, blessed forever. What an incredible family!

But if the gospels are to be believed, that ideal is imaginary. The truth is, Jesus was born in a stinky stable because Joseph didn't properly plan ahead. When Jesus starts doing miracles, his brothers refuse to believe in him, says Matthew. When Jesus starts preaching and drawing a crowd, his mother and brothers, according to today's scripture, try to whisk him away from there, because they think Jesus is crazy. Jesus' family, in short, doesn't believe Jesus is special, they think he really ought to keep his mouth shut, and would have institutionalized him in a minute if that was possible.

So is that all there is to life? A flash in the pan—that fleeting moment when you have it all? A moment or two of sublime satisfaction in bed and then a long decline? Is that all there is, a family occasionally firing on all cylinders, and always putting on a good show? But mostly a family that just muddles along from one minor catastrophe to the next? Is that all there is? One perfect day each year, Mother's Day! But every other day a rat race, a struggle?

I hope not. In fact, I don't believe it for a minute.

Look, the ideal, when it comes to the *Song of Songs*, is lovely. But its vision of romantic love is especially lovely as one gem in a string of pearls, each pearl of human experience lovely in its own way. There is that sexual high that many of us remember and treasure in our hearts, and still experience from time to time—but everything else that goes with romance is lovely too, and gives romance the structure and allows it a beauty that does not have to fade. From holding hands, to knowing ahead of time what the other will say, to being a safe place for your lover to reveal what is on his or her heart, to raising children real romance, including the pleasures of sex, as one facet of committed, enduring love—romance is just one of a string of experiences that bind two people together and sustain them for life.

It is much the same when it comes to family life. We all like to portray ourselves as belonging to ideal families, and once in a while all of us are, in fact, supremely happy with our family life. But the truth is that our families are always as flawed as we are personally. Kids and parents argue. Husbands and wives can't agree on discipline. Daughters act out. Sons choose not

to go to dad's *alma mater*. We all juggle diaper rash and spilled milk and financial setbacks and boyfriends that scare us and illnesses that put the fear of God in us. That's family life.

But family life is also a large part of the only life we have, a large pendant hanging from our string of pearls. We ought to seize that life, those moments and days, and embrace them, because it is the only life we have.

Living merely for the mythical ideal is a trap. When it comes to family life, we don't need a red carpet and exploding flashbulbs to enjoy the company of the one on our arm. We don't need to earn a million dollars and finally buy that Maserati to be loved by our children. No, each moment we live together, even when it is a moment of deep struggle, is a prerequisite to every other moment in the chain of being, including those occasional Hallmark moments. But all moments should be embraced as a gift.

Of course, when the ideal falls into your lap, momentarily, or even by design, it is a special moment; the lovers of the *Song of Songs* are living the dream. Dedicate your life to such dreams, however, live only for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and you will be mostly, bitterly, disappointed.

Today is Mother's Day. We all have mothers, some of us are mothers—whether because we've had biological children or because we've adopted, legally or spiritually, children and disciples and crowds of people who listen to us. And what all our mothers have taught us is that along with all the other beautiful and ideal things mothers may do—break glass ceilings or be the life of the party or become famous like Margaret Atwood or Sophie Gregoire—along with all the other beautiful and ideal things mothers may do they all confess that there is nothing quite as wonderful as falling exhausted into bed at the end of the day, knowing that you have done your best to love a partner, clean a child's nose, and make you home a safe place for all who enter.

This living in the moment, living for those you are with, living with those you love, muddling through when things are not ideal, but muddling through none-the-less, this is doing the will of God that Jesus mentions in our text.

And the Spirit of God suggests, whether this is an ideal moment or a muddling moment, the Spirit of God suggests enjoy it, and give thanks. For all of life, the ideal and the mundane, is a divine gift.