

The Song and the Garden

Donna Dannels

It often seems that the Church would like us to avoid sexuality all together—except, of course, when we are conceiving children. Celibacy is held up as an ideal, and when sex is mentioned at all, it is usually described as dangerous, sinful, or evil. But the *Song of Songs* puts sexuality and sexual desire squarely before us and celebrates it not as a means of conception but as a gift in its own right. Even if one believes that *The Song* is strictly an allegory, the use of sexuality as its central metaphor implicitly acknowledges the beauty and goodness of the body, and the potential holiness of sexual desire and sexual union. That view of the body and of sex is so different from what the Church has often taught that it made me reexamine the story of the Fall in Genesis, which has often been used to support the more prevalent views of the Church.

I have never accepted the traditional interpretation of the Fall because I have never believed that our bodies are evil, and I have never believed that an unconditionally loving God would punish His or Her creation in a way that was irrevocable and that seemed unusually harsh, given the offense. So I have wrestled with the story and arrived at different interpretations at different stages of my life. After reading the *Song of Songs*, I went back to Genesis because I wanted to see if this story of creation could be reconciled with the view of the body and of sex that fills *The Song*. And this time, I heard the story differently. It began, before I even opened the text, with God's question ringing through my mind: "Who told you you were naked?" I used to think that line meant, "Now you're in trouble because if you know you are naked, you must have disobeyed me." But this time I heard it very differently: this time I heard a loving parent who upon seeing what has happened to his or her child exclaims: "Who told you that?" God was angry, yes, but not so much at Adam and Eve. At least, that is what I suspected. To be sure of it, I had to reexamine other parts of the story.

I began with the word, "naked." It obviously was *not* a problem that Adam and Eve had not been wearing clothes. That is the way God created them—and God called it "very good"—and they had been living that way without any problems until they ate from the forbidden tree. So, if being nude was not the problem, I had to ask myself, what *was*, and that took me back to the tree itself.

In earlier years, I had somehow shortened the name of the forbidden tree to the Tree of Knowledge. It never made sense to me that God would want us to be ignorant—especially when it was God who created our gifts of intellect and curiosity, so I decided that something about that part of the story was simply wrong. But I realize now that shortening the name made it very misleading. The forbidden tree was not the Tree of Knowledge: it was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. At first, I asked myself, why God would not want us to know about good and evil. Didn't God want us to know the difference between right and wrong? Didn't God give us commandments so that we would know that difference and know how to act? As I thought about "good" and "evil" I realized that they are not the same as "right" and "wrong." What is right is not always good, and what is wrong is not always evil. And, perhaps more importantly, right and

wrong usually apply to choices and actions, to something we do or say: they are critical terms. Good and evil are sometimes critical terms, but are more often ontological terms: they describe the nature of our being. If something is wrong, we can work to change it or fix it. If something is evil, we tend to think it will never change and try to banish or destroy it. Therein lies the danger. I am not sure it is ever a problem to call something “good,” but when we call something or someone “evil,” we stop looking at that thing or person as part of God’s creation, and we do our best to destroy it. And because we, by definition, work with limited and subjective knowledge, we too often jump to conclusions that are wrong. “Evil” may be useful as a concept, but it is very dangerous as a label.

I also looked at what happened when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree, and I saw that what changed was that they felt ashamed of their bodies and became afraid of God. They lost their trust in God’s love and their intimacy with God. They believed themselves (or part of themselves) to be evil and felt unworthy to be in God’s presence. That caused them untold pain, and it effectively took them away from the “person” who loved them most and who could do the most to help them. No wonder God told them not to eat from that tree.

I think God knew that judging themselves and other parts of creation as good or evil was the one thing that was most likely to separate them from God. If they believed they were evil, they would avoid God and fear God. They would not be able to open themselves to God’s healing love and protection. And if they believed others were evil, they would close their hearts to them and to the possibility of their redemption, thus separating themselves from the energy of God’s love. In either case, they would endanger their souls. When God told Adam and Eve that if they ate from the forbidden tree they would surely die, God had no intention of killing them—and God, in fact, did not kill them once they ate the forbidden fruit. I think the death God spoke of was more figurative than literal and more about the psyche than the body. God’s admonition was a warning: I believe it was God’s way of saying, “Don’t eat from that tree. Avoid it at all costs because if you eat from it, terrible things will happen, and I won’t be able to protect you from them.” And terrible things did happen: Once Adam and Eve became afraid of God and stopped trusting God’s love, they could not stay in the Garden—not because God was punishing them, but because the Garden was the place of intimacy with God and creation and their choice to judge themselves and others separated them from that. It was their own actions and choices that made them leave, and I have to imagine that it broke God’s heart.

What really strikes me is that we have continued to believe the serpent all along. It was the serpent that said the knowledge of Good and Evil was a good thing—that it would make us more like God. And we have never questioned that! We continue to judge and to try to destroy what we consider evil. And tragically, we have continued to believe that parts of ourselves are evil and that, as a consequence, we can never have the intimacy with God that God desires. We have shut the door on that intimacy because we are ashamed and fearful. And God waits patiently, longing for our return. The Sufi poet, Hafiz, says it well:

“There is a Beautiful Creature
Living in a hole you have dug.

So at night
I set fruit and grains
And little pots of wine and milk
Beside your soft earthen mounds,

And I often sing.

But still, my dear,
You do not come out.

I have fallen in love with Someone
Who hides inside you.

We should talk about this problem---

Otherwise,
I will never leave you alone.”

■ Hafiz in *I Heard God Laughing*, by Daniel Ladinsky

The Song calls us back to the intimacy with God, and with ourselves. Like the creation story, that would hide our essence and deepest desires and longings and good. It invites us to trust our desires and celebrates our intimacy and connection. It asks bodies as well as our souls and God longs for us to be free to divine and human love in all its. Perhaps that is why the *Song of the Biblical canon*: it calls us to the serpent and begin our journey



David Jones (The Garden Enclosed)

Garden—back to nature, and with it removes all looks at our says we are ourselves and longing for us to trust our assures us that experience fullness. *Songs* is a part of stop listening to home.