

“PASSION FUSES BODY AND SOUL”

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I begin by quoting Thomas Troeger of Yale Divinity School from our final hymn:

“Holy and good is the gift of desire.
God made our bodies for passion and fire,
Intending that love would draw from the flame
Lives that would shine with God’s image and name.”

If I only had 33 words to summarize Verlee’s and my new book, *Sex and the Spirit: the Romance of Heaven and Earth*, it would be that stanza of today’s last hymn.

As we sing the entire hymn, notice it celebrates our Christian faith as a passion. Passion is the best word to describe what it means to follow Jesus Christ. Not enforcing rules on others, not mastering mysterious doctrines, not chasing peace and justice causes, not converting legions of sinners. Passion is what it is about.

Our faith in God is best described as a passion because God’s resolve to win us back from rejecting God is nothing less than passionate. Holy Week told of how much God would sacrifice for us out of love. So this is not a trivial passion, like a celebrity posturing as a passion bundle to sell tickets. Faith is a lofty passion, like the ennobling, burning passion for learning, for beauty, for truth-telling, or justice.

As we become passionate for God’s way over our ways and that passion takes the shape of the life of Jesus Christ, that what makes us Christian. For example, the only way to explain the life of my childhood friend recently shot in Kabul, Dr. Jerry Umanos, is to see his passion for Christ as the way, the truth, and the life.

So if passion is at the heart of our faith, you’d imagine the church would be fluent and at ease with earthier passions like romance, intimacy, and sexuality. But that is not the wider impression of the church. How goes the song? “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints.” The church is generally perceived as against sex, and also against enjoyment and pleasure, even joy. Real historical reasons exist for this. We can’t just waive off that accusation. But Verlee and I have taken all of this on because we don’t believe that view merits the final word.

So where does one start in reformulating this? Generally, the Bible is best place. And so our new book looks toward the Old Testament book Song of Solomon as our touchstone. Every time we got lost or confused about our purpose in writing we turned back to Song of Solomon. Why that book? It fulfils the promise of Genesis, where God creates humankind, male and female, and then declared it good. Song of Solomon lifts up human sexuality as God’s good gift worth celebrating.

That wistful, hopeful voice differs from tiresome culture wars around sex—men’s rights vs. women’s rights—or endless grinding debates on sexual ethics—what’s

right vs. what's wrong. Yes, such debates are essential. For a lofty gift like sex is prone to abuse and people get hurt. But these arguments don't help the typical couple together for decades, struggling through life and love and constant forces testing their union. Verlee and I have written our book—based on 24 everyday questions—to equip couples in their shared intimacies with what we hope is good news: people need not segregate the living streams of spirituality and sexuality. We write about the heterosexual side of living because that is all we know about.

Have you read Song of Solomon lately—or ever? If you haven't you are in for a surprise. It is about a young couple ardently yearning for one another. It is fully unabashed romantic and erotic love poetry. It draws from sensual imagery of garden and nature with its analogies. It doesn't mention the name of God once. But that is not for a lack of faith, but because of its laser focus upon budding love. Hey, that's how falling in love is. Everything else seems to nearly cease to exist.

Less about governing our sexuality, more about freeing up our God-fashioned sexual selves, it says, "think again, life is full of surprises. There is a deep end in this swimming pool you haven't discovered yet!" It doesn't blink initiating us into the steamy, earthy attractions of man and woman. The lesson we heard today is modest compared to other descriptions. Yet the Song of Songs freshens and renews this energy without the tarnish of tawdriness, as though for the first time. For through eight chapters, the couple's burning desire for one another never consummates. It deftly combines unabashed sensuality and first-time innocence.

That Song of Solomon made the cut into this somber-looking book is shocking. As Verlee puts it, "I hope that our readers have dusted off that Bible they received 25 years ago at Confirmation and finally opened the thing. It will no doubt be shocking to many that our God is a sexy God and our Bible is a sexy Bible."

The woman who composed Song of Solomon approached her erotic poetry like Cecil B. DeMille did film-making. "I like to start with an earthquake," he said, "and then build up to a climax." From the get-go we note she is unafraid. She is feisty. She is unashamed of fierce passion. Rather than apologize for it, she ramps it up toward culmination, then tamps it down to cool things off and collect it anew, before building slowly again in an upward arc. It is exquisite and undulating desire.

The purpose is not to idly toy with oneself or one's beloved. The purpose is to cultivate deep yearning as we actually take time to be trained to desire rightly. That sounds like Christianity, educating our passion till we want what God wants. Compare that with our society of instant gratification where sex is a personal right.

I once had dinner with the writer and lifelong Episcopal layperson, Madeleine L'Engle. She said, "As Christians we believe we are to carefully explore each other's hearts and minds, souls and spirits before we explore each other's bodies." In today's worldlier views of sex, the union of hearts and minds, souls and spirits is sadly underrepresented over against the mechanics and techniques of bodies.

The authors believe Christians can no longer afford to be absent in this dialogue. The world prattles endlessly about sex, but contributes little to authentic intimacy. At the same time, the church talks little about sex, caving into to some misplaced sense of decency. In today's spiritually barren landscape, expanding technology puts sex "out there" in ways that alter our understanding of what we once called romance and courtship. The world reduces sex to some video game with special effects to be played with manic intensity. Devoid of soul, such thin and flat renderings of human sexuality reduce us from creatures fearfully, wonderfully, and mysteriously made to mere mechanical cogs in the transmission of pleasure.

Treating the orgasm as our one shot at self-transcendence, sex gets transacted in ways as rote as they are shallow. Despair is the upshot. People become deadened to sex, to self, and to God. As long as Christians remain silent about God's alternatives, rooted in our divine origins and destiny, how can we find our way to passionate and faithful sexuality? Our thesis is holy sex happens in the context of lifelong commitment. And, oh, by the way, holy sex is the hottest sex.

Having sex is easy, but sustaining sexual intimacy in the context of lifetime faithfulness is difficult. The mystical union of body and soul requires a courageous and vulnerable conversation. We wrote this thinking the Church can do more to support and sustain fully intimate sexual relationships that remain faithful to God. We know what Romans or Luke or Genesis have to say about being Christian. But the church talks little about what it means to be a Song of Solomon Christian.

In this vein of Song of Solomon Christianity, we two affirm that wholesome and passionate sexuality is God's gift to us. God created us such that our spirituality and sensuality naturally connect. What God has joined together, we have sadly torn asunder, and this brokenness is writ large against the backdrop of our living.

To close, let me say that on a typical Sunday preaching is a vulnerable act in that I'm putting out there what is most personal, precious and intimate to me: my faith. This book and this sermon take this vulnerability to an entirely new level of trust. Verlee and I believe in what we do but have no idea how our churches will react.

But with Amazon already taking preorders of this book, I also noticed one church splashed it over the front of their web page 2 weeks ago, *without reading it*. Talk about trust and affirmation. Faith Congregational Church is the oldest African-American church in Hartford. I phoned both pastors, thanking them. They smiled.

Congregationalism has always focused on real struggles and joys of real people, being ahead of the curve to bring change. I hope this is such a book. It reflects well on us as we bring our faith to bear on vital issues. I bless you for listening and considering all of this. I'm glad it is published now when you know me rather than two years ago when I was new. As with any sermon or any book I write, agree or disagree, I remain glad to be in dialogue with this beloved congregation. Amen.