

“THE ROMANCE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH”

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Maybe it's best to begin with a case study. Because when you preach on intimacy and faithfulness, on passion and promises, nothing is as interesting as real life. Katherine Willis Pershey is a UCC minister in Western Springs, Illinois. Last year she dared such insightful honesty as this in her article for the Christian Century.

“When I realized I had feelings for this man, I was shocked. I dearly love my husband, to whom I have been married—most happily, and decidedly faithfully—for more than a decade. I almost didn't recognize the crush for what it was, it had been such a long time since I'd had one. It was disorienting, terrifying, the slightest bit exhilarating--like being on a roller-coaster but knowing full well that upon hitting the last loop-de-loop, your car will derail and you will plunge to your death. My internal alarms tripped at once and clanged an overwhelming and pervasive warning. *Danger, danger.*

Danger, even though it wasn't primarily a physical attraction. If he'd been an Adonis with a middling personality, I would have joked with my husband about my exceedingly hot new friend, just as he's been known to wink at me as he volunteers to take our kids to their gorgeous pediatrician. Rather, this man was brilliant and kind and well, (never mind). The point is I wanted to be friends with him. I didn't want to turn around and run the other way. I wanted to practice impeccable fidelity to my husband and to do this without opting out of what seemed a lovely potential friendship.

I did the only thing I could fathom: I told my husband everything. Even though there wasn't much to tell—oh, how profoundly glad I was to go to him with a clean conscience—the conversation was risky. Would it wound Benjamin to know that his wife, though delivered from temptation, had experienced it? Yes, it did. But it was a hurt he could sustain, because he understood that at the root of what I was telling him was that I was trustworthy. My message was that I had been tested and was faithful to him.”

This isn't a sermon about the seventh commandment, the one carved in stone against adultery, although God knows those sermons need to be preached also. This is a sermon about the preciousness of the gifts that come back to faithful wives and husbands, and how a near-death experience clarifies our perceptions.

Pershey reflects, “I rediscovered the intrigue of my *delightfully unbounded relationship with the man to whom I am bound*. There is yet more for us to know of each other physically, spiritually, emotionally. As husband and wife we have incredible freedom to explore each other without hesitation or shame. There is nothing to stop us from growing ever more intimate. Don't believe anyone who says otherwise. Fidelity can be very sexy!” Not a bad message for Valentine's Sunday.

But let's explore more deeply Pershey's takeaway lesson from this near-disaster. Who was it we let persuade us the opposite is true? That marriage must mean the death of passion, or at least its waning and our drying up? Of course, no few marriages evidence this trend, where intimacy becomes neglected and forgotten. My suspicion is that in those marriages passion isn't the only thing falling by the wayside. So I'm with Katherine in making the case against the inevitability of that.

Did you hear how she articulated the barely understood and captivating mystery of freedom in marriage: being unbounded with the man to whom she is bound? That takes us to the heart of the matter. Common sense and worldly wisdom imply that by getting married we narrow our options and forsake variety in intimacy. That by "forsaking all others," as the wedding service names it, and devoting ourselves to one partner we gain some good, but mostly sacrifice incredible passion.

Some call it the Coolidge Effect based on an anecdote about taciturn Vermonter Calvin Coolidge, who was not exactly Mr. Bodaciously Sexy, and his wife, Grace. The President and his wife received separate tours of a model government farm. When Mrs. Coolidge first toured the chicken yard she stopped to admire a rooster busily mating with one hen after another. The First Lady asked the guide how many times per day the rooster fulfilled his, ahem, conjugal duties. "Dozens of times," replied the guide. "Oh," said Mrs. Coolidge, visibly impressed. "Would you mind telling that to the President when he happens by this stage of the tour?"

When the President's entourage later viewed the same chicken yard, the guide dutifully drew his attention to the rooster's virility, as the First Lady requested. The President took it all in for a second, and calculatedly inquired, "Does the rooster mate with the same hen repeatedly or with different hens?" The guide said, "Why, with different hens, of course." The President smiled, "Kindly convey that to Mrs. Coolidge, please." It's more than an amusing little story. For as husbands and wives, it is like we are on separate tours of life, talking through third parties, only seeing the surface of things and blinded to what's way down deep essential.

Why's that? Obsessed with producing and consuming, our society is all about externals. Advertising and celebrity define our sexuality. That's why so many ladies never believe they are attractive, even as they are; and guys are mostly clueless, looking for love in all of the wrong places, as the song has it. Emphasizing outwardness, we neglect inwardness, whether it is about each other or about God; whether it is a couples' spark of romance or God's romance of heaven and earth. God's romance of heaven and earth is his loving determination to win us all back.

We miss the heart of what intimacy truly is. Paul the Apostle wrote to the licentious church in Corinth, "We look not to the things seen, but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Cor 2.18) So whatever could that mean this Valentine's Sunday? Madeleine L'Engle, author and speaker, once said, "As Christians, we are meant to explore each other's hearts and minds, our souls and spirits before we explore

each other's bodies." She means, as Christians, God wants us *to love each other from the inside out, not from the outside in*. If you take nothing else away from Valentine's Day, take that with you. Apply it to your relationship with your partner.

Loving each other from the inside out, rather than outside in, we have an infinite opportunity to create playful, tender, caring, and sexy variety in shared discovery. And even as our externals change over the years, or even with surgeries, what is inside of us remains constant. That is why we all feel like we are 28 on the inside. With non-judgmental, eager-to-discover-and-know-the-other-for-who-we-are variety on the inside, needing a variety of lovers to keep embers aglow seems dumb.

That's what Pershey meant by lifting up the mystery of her pleasingly unbounded relationship with the man to whom she's bound as the epicenter of romantic love. Truly it takes a whole lifetime of ups and downs, triumph and failure to be known. And all of the striving and yearning to love is meant to be kept with sex, not apart. Sex isn't just the transmission of pleasure, but the liturgy and sacrament of love. Our Christian way insists that this lofty love is essential and not incidental to sex.

We can look anywhere to see what selfish love looks like. We look to Jesus to see selfless love. Ephesians counsels couples to love each other as Christ loved his church. As we learn the love of Christ, putting the happiness of our beloved before ourselves, everything changes. For self-emptying love creates safe space. It makes the dome of a secure sanctuary, within which we can risk real passion.

I know selling fidelity as the sexiest life ever is a steep public relations climb, like selling Ted Cruz as a sweet guy or Hillary Clinton as virtuous above all. But what Eugene Peterson calls *long obedience in the same direction* has its appeal. Our parents taught us not to be quitters, to stick with it as we find something good--if we want lives to be proud of, if we seek greatness. It is also true of love and sex.

Yes, I know, long obedience in the same direction has stretches of boredom and toil. But extended commitment also yields mountaintop vistas we otherwise never glimpse. How so? Last Sunday as we became caught up in celebratory worship, singing gospel hymns in a raucous Dixieland jazz style, we closed with "When All the Saints Go Marchin In." Our line of music and dancing wriggled into the aisles.

I stood there, taking it all in and blessing you toward our Mardi Gras supper. Who approached but Georgie Brown, arms swinging blissfully, swirling and smiling, timeless and magical. All I saw was a girl as free as any college freshman. It was striking and beautiful. I took her hand to twirl and sashay her. And I said to Don, "You better get up here, brother or you might lose your lady." She made the point of my sermon more eloquently than I ever could, about heaven and earth kissing, about holy moments that say, "Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time?" This is how life and love are meant to be. It is the romance of heaven and earth. Amen.