

IMAGINE THAT! – A Man with a Maiden

Song of Solomon 2:8-12; Acts 16:11-24

Today's sermon concludes our three-part series titled IMAGINE THAT! based on Proverbs 30:18-19: *Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden.*

I. Imagine That! – The Mystery of Love

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies,
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.ⁱ*

Imagine that! A woman who walks in beauty, whose beauty exudes favorable expressions in every aspect of her appearance, whether eyes or hair or cheek or brow, whether thoughts or smiles or mind or heart. A woman with a remarkably integrated beauty: self-possessed without conceit, self-affirming without arrogance, self-assured without snobbery, poised but not vain, confident but not haughty.

Now imagine this! As she moves gracefully among the flowers in her garden, she has a distant look in her brooding. Silently we draw close enough in her musing to hear her say: *The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone."*ⁱⁱ

Then sure enough, bounding past us like a gazelle, her beloved appears, lifts her in his arms and carries her off, all the time whispering into her perfect ear, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone."

Imagine that! The mystery of human love! It is captivating, enthralling. It fills our fantasies, saturates our music, dominates our media, directs our lives, determines our mates, eases our loneliness, and concretizes our commitments.

When I speak of the woman who walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies, I am speaking of the woman who—like her Song of Solomon Beloved—is suited for love, the woman who is free to love without barriers. I am speaking of the woman whose aspects are enthralling but who herself is not in bondage.

II. Imagine That! – The Mystery of Exploitation

I am **not** speaking of the woman enslaved by sinister exploitation, the woman objectified by syndicated obscenity, the woman made subservient by male domination, the woman silenced by insidious supremacy.

Where we discover Paul today is in a Roman Colony name Philippi, a leading city in the district of Macedonia, the journey's end of his sailing trip from Troas to Samothrace to Neapolis and finally Philippi. Paul is **not** a prisoner at this time. These particular events (in Acts 16) occur long before his interminable imprisonment and violent shipwreck, of which we spoke last week.

Walking on solid ground along the streets of Philippi, Paul encounters *an unnamed slave girl whose owner exploits her gift of predicting the future to make money for himself. When Paul passes this woman in the streets of Philippi, she proclaims him to be a man of God. "These men are slaves (servants) of the most*

high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Her word announces the truth about Paul and Silas, but her repeated utterances annoy Paul to the point of distraction. He therefore—with compelling authority—silences her, commanding the spirit to leave her mind: “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”ⁱⁱⁱ The spirit of divination swiftly retreats, she immediately loses the clairvoyance necessary to predict the future, she subsequently falls away into uselessness, and her owner volcanically responds with unabated fury.

Imagine that! A woman enslaved in exploitation. Here is a proprietary man with a submissive maiden, but there is not a trace of the mystery of love to be found in this encounter. The owner is a man who has obviously suppressed her as a woman, has used her gifts of prophecy to build his wealth, has lorded his supremacy over her to the extent of utter human degradation. This way of a man with a maiden is too incredible for us; we cannot understand how the miseries of one human being can be exploited for the prosperity of another.

What is even **more** perplexing to us is the Apostle Paul’s treatment of the woman. *The slave girl is only a commodity to her owner; yet she is treated no better by Paul, the Apostle. He could have attempted to convert and liberate her; but instead Paul only silences the slave girl, who is then forgotten, and vanishes completely from the purview of the narrative. What becomes of her life after Paul silences her voice? Is she returned to the slave market once her economic value to her owner dissolves?*^{iv}

Imagine that! A slave girl who is **not** freed by Paul but rather silenced. I suppose we must remember here that—so far as Luke, the author of Acts, is concerned—Acts is the story of Paul, who embodies the dynamic movement of the Gospel onto the world stage of the Greco-Roman sphere of influence. It simply follows that all other characters in Acts are merely secondary to Paul the Apostle. Despite this literary device, we are forced to admit that the way of this man (the Apostle Paul) with this maiden (the slave girl) is as equally confounding to us as is the way of the owner with his human possession. The owner **exploited** her, the apostle **silenced** her.

We have often walked down these streets before, these city streets of Philippi . . . or Pittsburgh or New York or Philadelphia or London or Johannesburg or Beirut or Baghdad or Tokyo or Bangkok or Bashing. And there in all of these streets we see the maiden who loses herself, who lives only for someone else’s approval; who loses her inner direction as she struggles to meet the demands of a father or a boyfriend or husband; who measures her own value by the affirmation she receives from others, torn apart in her efforts to please; who comes to realize that men have the power, who comes to believe that her only power is derived from consenting to become an adored object; who once was the subject of her own life before she became the object of others’ lives.^v

A contemporary female essayist, in a recent treatise titled *Shaken, Not Stirred: The Illusion of Strength and Independence in 1960s Bond Girls*, wrote:

one of the most well known film icons, James Bond, emerged in the 1960s during a time of rapid social upheaval in the United States. . . . Instead of independent and individualistic women, Bond films portray a beautiful but objectified woman, unable to save herself from the perilous position brought on by her relationship with Bond, yet still unable to resist the suave agent, despite his dangers. . . . The Bond movies portray both strong and weak women all falling under the same spell of James Bond’s supreme masculinity. . . . Tracy’s story is the last of the Bond films in the 1960s. . . . A Bond girl appeared on screen, [one] who seemed to be James’ match: as intelligent, as adventurous, and as attractive as he was. She even was successful in what no other woman had done: Tracy married James Bond. But because she was his equal and [because] the masculine culture and ideals could not stand for it, she died in the final Bond scene for the decade, concisely summarizing the reactions to progressive women during the 1960s.^{vi}

The implied message? If you are progressive woman, you will not survive in our culture. The piercing question for us in the 21st century is: How far have progressive women progressed in the subsequent three and a half decades?

I think of young girls today who slowly bury their childhood, who put away their independent and imperious selves and submissively enter adult existence, only to stop **being** and to start **seeming**; girls who fit their whole selves into small, crowded spaces the size of thimbles; vibrant, confident girls who become shy, doubting young women; girls who stop thinking “Who am I? And what do I want? and start thinking “What must I do to please others?” I think of cultures in which it is customary for wives to fall on their knees and serve dinner to their husbands, carrying plates of food to the men while maintaining and moving in this subservient posture. I think of cultures in which it is customary for wives to walk three feet behind their husbands out of respect for male positions of superiority. But most of all I think of our own culture in which women’s salaries are consistently lower than men’s emolument for the same work, in which girls experience social pressure to put aside their authentic selves and to display only a small portion of their gifts, gifts that may go unused and unappreciated; a culture in which geniuses who are born women may be lost to the public good; a culture that requires relentless vigilance and tireless resistance to an environment that devalues and objectifies women.^{vii} To be sure, the woman who walks freely in beauty like the night of cloudless climes stands in direct contrast to the buxom blonde scantily clad in a bunny costume on the arm of the octogenarian Hugh Hefner—a woman exploited, compliant, objectified, and silenced. How fiercely must the maiden in our own culture hold onto her right to speak in her own voice, to refuse to be silenced, to remain the subject of her own life, to resist the cultural pressure to become the object of male experience!

We men usually fall prey to the misconception that the matter is entirely up to the woman to make her way through the labyrinthine forest of disparity, as if it is only the slave girl’s responsibility to free herself and to speak consistently in her own voice. In reality, the responsibility for shaping a gender-rich egalitarian society belongs to men and women alike, even as it was Paul’s responsibility to emotionally liberate the slave girl and to carefully listen. . . with patience—devoid of annoyance—to her voice.

III. Imagine This! – The Mystery of Union

Now, imagine this! The mystery of the union of Christ with his Bride, the Church.

It is the earlier encounter the Apostle has with a woman that redeems Paul and offers the Christian paradigm for a gender-rich egalitarian society, the model for the City of God, for *Paradise Regained*.^{viii} Paul’s encounter with Lydia. He *found her in a small group of women who met on the banks of the river for prayer*. This meeting became the seedling for *Paul’s first church in Philippi, initially comprised by all women; no building to meet in; no prestige or influence in the city to count on. This young church at Philippi—in which Lydia played a central and essential leadership role—grew into one of the strongest, most generous of all the churches Paul founded. Lydia was a successful business woman, representing a firm that sold dyes. A deeply religious woman, she had been drawn into the Jewish community because there she found an oasis in the midst of the spiritual and moral desert that prevailed elsewhere among the Romans . . . Lydia’s hospitality was immeasurable. As soon as she was baptized she invited Paul and his friends to her house, insisting that they stay with her.*^{ix}

Lydia and this early church at its inception, as well as the church at its best today, model the egalitarian nature of God’s creation and God’s love. While men and women obviously are not identical, women and men are of equal worth in the mind, heart and eyes of God, whose Son loves his Church as intensely as a man loves a maiden.

Suppose there was a king, surmised Soren Kierkegaard . . . suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. He loved her so intently that he wished to marry her and make her his beloved, though she held a common and low station in her humble life and in his vast kingdom. In point of fact, he loved her so passionately that one might even liken him to the Beloved of the Song of Solomon, who—like a gazelle—leapt upon mountains and bounded over hills, calling, “*Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.*” Clearly the King wanted only an authentic love from her in return. But herein lay the consternating dilemma: if he were to carry her away to his castle, savor a wedding ceremony with her and thereby make her his queen, he would not necessarily ensnare her genuine heart but only her admiration, awe, allegiance and obeisance. No, he wanted an **authentic** love with this humble maiden. Then a plan quite readily

occurred to him: dressed in peasant garb that covered his regal robes, he could walk into the modest corner of his kingdom and, as an apparent peasant, woo the humble maiden. But this device he soon abandoned since such an approach would be deceptive; an authentic love, he concluded, could not be built upon a lie. At last he arrived at a momentous, transforming decision: he would relinquish his kingdom altogether, become an actual peasant, and as an equal marry the humble maiden, for only then could he experience her authentic love.^x

Kierkegaard insists that this in effect is what God has done in his Son Jesus Christ. He has taken on the form of a servant to stand upon the earth, relating to the humblest of the humble by the power of his omnipotent love. In fact, in Christ God has wooed the Church and entered into union with the Church as his Bride.

Imagine that! Christ loves the church like that! Christ loves his Bride so much that he gives up everything, holds nothing back, gives himself totally to her. His servant-form is no mere outer garment but actually a state he has taken on, the human experience in which he suffers all things, endures all things, experiences everything human in this passionate love relationship with his Church, the Bride of Christ, in this profoundly passionate love relationship of a man with a maiden.

As Lydia discovered, the Bride of Christ is an integrated being, an egalitarian state of being, where *there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all are one in Christ Jesus.*^{xi}

Conclusion Christ Loves You Like That

We are the Bride of Christ! This is our safe haven.^{xii} Here we are not silenced. Here we are not exploited! Here we are not objectified! Here we are not made subservient! We are the Bride whom Christ – like a man with a maiden – so passionately loves that he has given up his kingly power to experience us.

Christ loves you like that! How he loves to watch you walk in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry sky! Listen! Your beloved is speaking to you:

*Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
for lo, the winter of your **exploitation** is past,
the rain of your **degradation** is over and gone.*

Imagine that!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**Preached by
The Reverend Calvin Coolidge Wilson
Interim Pastor/Bower Hill Community Church
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
23 August 2009**

Notes

-
- ⁱ George Gordon, Lord Byron, *She Walks in Beauty*, stanza 1
- ⁱⁱ Song of Solomon 2:8-11
- ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Gail R. O'Day's commentary on Acts 16:11-40, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Editors, p. 310
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, pp. 310-311
- ^v This paragraph relies heavily on Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, chapter 1, *Saplings in the Storm* with credit due particularly to Simone de Beauvoir.
- ^{vi} Emily Chin, *Shaken, Not Stirred: The Illusion of Strength and Independence in 1960s Bond Girls*, May 2005
- ^{vii} Again, much of this paragraph relies heavily on Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, with credit due particularly to Simone de Beauvoir, Margaret Meade, and Alice Miller.
- ^{viii} Phrase used by John Milton in his poem of the same title
- ^{ix} Adapted from Theodore P. Ferris, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9, Exposition, pp. 217-218
- ^x See Soren Kierkegaard's *The King and the Humble Maiden* in his *Philosophical Fragments, God As Teacher and Saviour: an Essay of the Imagination*.
- ^{xi} Galatians 3:28
- ^{xii} Referring to both the congregation as a people of God and to the sanctuary of the building