

Solomon and Sinatra: The Song of Songs and Romance in the Church

Robert Case

A Sunday School Class

Faith Presbyterian Church

Tacoma, Washington

2016

Part 4

We Americans set aside a day (even a month) every year for romance - Valentine's Day (or Saint Valentine's Day), which is observed on February 14.th This celebration of love began as a Christian celebration of an early Roman-Christian martyr named, Valentinus (not to be confused with the Gnostic heretic). Legend has it that Valentinus of Rome – the original wedding planner - was imprisoned for performing unsanctioned weddings for soldiers who were forbidden to marry and for ministering to Christians who were being persecuted by Emperor Claudius Gothicus (270 AD). During his imprisonment, Valentinus healed the daughter of his jailer, and before his execution Valentinus wrote her a love letter with the salutation "from your Valentinus." Or so says the legend. Incidentally, Emperor Claude the Goth died from the plague a year after killing Valentinus. The lesson seems to be: Don't mess with Cupid.

It is thought that the first literary association of Valentine's Day with romantic love came from Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Parliament of Fools* written in 1382: "For this was on Saint Valentine's Day, when every bird cometh there to choose his mate." This is poetry after all, and it was early spring in the High Middle Ages, when the tradition of courtly love flourished. By the 1700s, lovers were expressing their love for each other with flowers, candy, and greeting cards, known appropriately, as "valentines."

“My Funny Valentine”

Now, the choice for a Valentine's Day love song from the American Songbook is easy – it is the Rogers and Hart evergreen from their 1937 musical *Babes in Arms*, “My Funny Valentine.” The most famous of all Valentine Day songs in American popular music, and perhaps the most beloved of all the boys' ballads, the song is a most unconventional love song, a somewhat melancholic number sung by a woman about her man. The female sings of her “slightly dopey gent” whose looks are “laughable, unphotographable.” She says he is “dim-witted” and his “mouth a little weak when [he] opens it to speak” and his body is “less than Greek.” Still, she finds him enthralling and wants him to “stay” because “each day with him is Valentine's Day.” As often as men have sung this song, this is a woman's song and no one does it better than Broadway legend, Texas Baptist songbird Mary Martin, for whom the song was written and who first performed the song on Broadway in 1937:

“Behold the way our fine feathered friend,
His virtue doth parade Thou knowest not, my
dim-witted friend The picture thou hast made
Thy vacant brow, and thy tousled hair
Conceal thy good intent Thou noble upright truthful sincere,
And slightly dopey gent
You're my funny valentine, Sweet comic valentine,
You make me smile with my heart.

Your looks are laughable, un-photographable, Yet, you're my favorite work of art. Is your figure less than Greek? Is your mouth a little weak? When you open it to speak, are you smart? But, don't change a hair for me. Not if you care for me. Stay little valentine, stay! Each day is Valentine's Day."

("My Funny Valentine" performed by Mary Martin)(3:23) https://www.amazon.com/My-Funny-Valentine/dp/B00KHDFC80/ref=sr_1_2?s=dmusic&ie=UTF8&qid=1470430104&sr=1-2&keywords=My+Funny+Valentine+Mary+Martin

"Bill"

"Bill" is a show tune written by Jerome Kern and P.G. Wodehouse for their 1917 musical *Oh, Lady! Lady!!* for Vivienne Segal to perform. It was withdrawn because it was considered too melancholy for that show. However, when Kern and Oscar Hammerstein were at work on the more serious *Show Boat* in 1927, they decided that the song would be perfect for a nightclub scene. Hammerstein revised Wodehouse's original lyrics, and the song was given to real-life nightclub singer Helen Morgan, who portrayed the mulatto Julie in *Show Boat*. The song is sung only once in the show and is highly emotional, with the singer on the verge of tears. It is sung by the character Julie LaVerne, the former leading lady of the show boat. Julie, who is of mixed blood, has been permanently abandoned by her white husband, Steve Baker, years after the two were forced to leave the show boat because of their interracial (and therefore illegal) marriage. Despondent, Julie has taken to drink and has become an alcoholic. At the urging of the nightclub manager, Julie rehearses the song "Bill", which is a woman's confession of deep love for a less-than-perfect man named "Bill," and it is clear that the emotion that Julie puts into the song comes from the fact that she is really thinking about her husband, Steve, as she sings. "Bill" became one of Helen Morgan's signature songs, and onstage she sang it in her trademark style sitting atop a piano. Although the song is sung only once in *Show Boat* and never reprised, it has become one of the musical's most famous numbers. On film, Helen Morgan sang "Bill" both in the prologue to the 1929 part-talkie film version of *Show Boat* and in the 1936 film version. Ava Gardner, using a dubbed-in voice, sang it in the 1951 famous remake of *Show Boat*. The song was a regular part of Dorothy Lamour's repertoire and she frequently sang it on radio and in concert.

"I used to dream that I would discover the perfect lover some day; I knew I'd recognise him if ever he came my way. I always used to fancy that he'd be one of the god-like kind of men, with a giant brain and a noble head, like the heroes bold in the books I've read! But along came Bill, who's not the type at all. You'd meet him on the street and never notice him. His form and face, his manly grace, is not the kind that you would find in a statue! And I can't explain, it's surely not his brain. that makes me thrill! I love him because he's wonderful, because he's just my Bill! And yet to be upon his knee, so comfy and roomy. Feels natural to me! And I can't explain."

("Bill" performed by Helen Morgan)(3:17) https://www.amazon.com/Bill-Recorded-1928/dp/B00E841IDM/ref=sr_1_1?s=dmusic&ie=UTF8&qid=1470430963&sr=1-1&keywords=bill+Helen+Morgan

Valentinus, Solomon, Rogers and Hart (Kern and Wodehouse) – all speak of chaste love between a man and a woman in passionate terms. They spoke of how a man should woo and romance a woman and speak words of affection to his beloved (cf, *Song of Songs*; Hosea 2:14-16; 3:1). And the woman is to respond with a yearning for the man in her life, even with a sense of humor.

The *Song of Songs* and the American Songbook can be huge valentines from God to us. Perhaps we conservative Protestants have been improperly denuded of our understanding of biblical romance by our 17th century British Westminster divines who condemned the now more accepted literal interpretation of the *Song of Songs* as “a hot carnal pamphlet formed by some loose Apollo or Cupid” (*Westminster Assembly, Annotations upon All the Books of the Old and New Testament*, 1657), even though earlier, the Frenchman John Calvin, thought it proper to associate passionate sex in the marriage bed with the deepest divine manifestation of love. (WE Phipps, “The Plight of the Song of Songs,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, 1972). In his commentary on 1st Corinthians 7:6, Calvin writes:

“You may sum it up like this: the intercourse of husband and wife is a pure thing, it is proper and holy; for it is the institution of God. The uncontrolled passion with which men are aflame is a vice springing from the corruption of human nature; but for believers, marriage is a veil which covers over that fault, so that God sees [the vice] no longer.”
(*Commentary, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 7:6).

Unfortunately, in matters of romance, we American Reformed evangelicals seem to have always been more affected by the English than the French. For instance, in the *Trinity Hymnal*, the most Westminster-oriented hymnal in use today, there are 600 song themes or subjects noted in the index. The closest themes of love between a Christian husband and wife are “Friendship, Christian” with 3 hymns referenced, but all dealing with general Christian friendship, and “Marriage and the Home” with 8 hymns referenced, 7 hymns deal with parenting. Only one hymn speaks of love between husband and wife, even though for centuries we have been told by the Fathers of the faith that we are to sing love songs to each other. The Church Fathers - Clement of Alexandria (*The Instructor*, 2, 4), Cyprian (*Epistle to Donatus*, 1:16), Chrysostom (commentary on Psalm 41), Augustine (commentary on Psalm 147:5) – all wrote that by singing songs of affection and devotion to each other, believers would mutually edify, exhort and encourage. Tertullian (155-240) encouraged the believing husband and wife to sing to each other of their love (*To My Wife*, 2, 8, 8-9):

“How beautiful, then, the marriage of two Christians, two who are one in hope, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, one in the religion they practice. . . .Psalms and hymns they sing to one another, striving to see which one of them will chant more beautifully the praises of their Lord. Hearing and seeing this, Christ rejoices.”

Looking for other clues in our hymnal, we turn to the *Song of Songs* and note that there are only two references to the *Song* in the *Trinity* index:

*SS 1:3 (“Your name is like perfume poured out”) which is used for hymn #647 but completely allegorizes the verse to justify the wonderful hymn, “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” <http://www.hymnary.org/hymn/TH1990/647>

*SS 2:13 (“Arise, come my darling; my beautiful one, come with me”) which is the used for hymn #723, the same hymn as the one out of eight under “Marriage and Home.” So we get the truly romantic hymn, “Come Away to the Skies,” and the editors of the *Trinity Hymnal* get it right. But it is the only hymn in the entire hymnal that speaks of romantic love between husband and wife. <http://www.hymnary.org/hymn/TH1990/723>

One hymn in the midst of 742 hymns!

“Come Away to the Skies”

The Southern Harmony Hymnal of 1835 gave us the wonderful Charles Wesley hymn “Come Away to the Skies” (#723). We note that this beautiful hymn, written by Wesley to his wife, Sally, on her 29th birthday (which he charmingly calls a “festival”) was published in 1767 (*Hymns for Families*), 12 years after Wesley wrote it. The hymn is now sung largely by women or a mixed choir or congregation, but it ought to be sung by us men, because it is a man’s song of love sung to his Christian wife. Here are Wesley’s inspired and romantic words sung to Sally:

“Come away to the skies, my beloved, arise and rejoice in the day thou wast born; On this festival day, come exulting away, and with singing to Zion return. We have laid up our love and our treasure above, though our bodies continue below. The redeemed of the Lord will remember His Word, and with singing to paradise go. Now with singing and praise let us spend all the days by our heavenly Father bestowed, while His grace we receive from His bounty, and live to the honor and glory of God! For the glory we were first created to share, both the nature and kingdom divine, now created again that our lives may remain throughout time and eternity Thine. We with thanks do approve the design of that love that hath joined us to Jesus' name; Now united in heart, let us never more part, ‘till we meet at the feast of the Lamb. There, oh! there at His feet, we shall all likewise meet, and be parted in body no more; We shall sing to our lyres, with the heavenly choirs, and our Savior in glory, adore. Hallelujah! we sing to our Father and King, and His rapturous praises repeat: To the Lamb that was slain, Hallelujah, again! Sing all Heaven and fall at His feet!”

(“Come Away to the Skies” performed by the great Robert Shaw Festival Singers)(2:12)
https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Ddigital-music&field-keywords=Come+Away+to+the+Skies+Robert+Shaw+Festival+Singers

Song of Songs

But, the Old Testament Church, she knew of proper romantic passion and eroticism in the life of her members, enter the most famous and wonderful secular love song ever written by human

hands - Jewish or otherwise (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) - the *Song of Songs*. One Old Testament scholar wrote,

“While the *Song of Songs* is not designed to elaborate theological doctrine or to teach ethics, its unapologetic depiction of rapturous, reciprocal love between a man and a woman does model an important dimension of human existence, as an aspect of life that the ancient [Church] understood to be divinely instituted and sanctioned’ (Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 1990).

And another Old Testament scholar termed the *Song* “a symphony of eroticism” (Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 1978).

For the cause of romance, it is very significant that in biblical revelation the first recorded words from created man was:

“Oh, yeah! At last! Boy meets girl. Hallelujah!” in Genesis 2:23, and this was before the Fall and sin, so we can assume that “uncorrupted” anticipation of sexual intimacy, as Calvin would say, was on Adam’s mind. And this was also before Adam knew Eve’s personality.

“At Last”

"At Last" is a 1941 song written by Mack Gordon and the very underappreciated Harry Warren for the film *Orchestra Wives (Sun Valley Serenade)* performed and recorded for the movie by Glenn Miller, with vocals by Ray Eberle. In 1960, Etta James recorded it and made it her own, and all subsequent renditions reflect the female version of the song, but it was written for a man to sing to his sweetheart. The song reached #9 on the Billboard pop charts in war-torn 1942 and later became a standard in the American Songbook.

“At last my love has come along My lonely days are over and life is like a song At Last the skies above are blue My heart was wrapped up in clovers the night I looked at you I found a dream that I can speak to A dream that I can call my own I found a thrill to press my cheek to A thrill I've never known You smiled and then the spell was cast And here we are in Heaven For you are mine at last.”

(“At Last” performed by Ray Eberle/Glenn Miller)(3:08) https://www.amazon.com/At-Last/dp/B000QYR1DO/ref=sr_1_4?s=dmusic&ie=UTF8&qid=1470432072&sr=1-4&keywords=At+Last+Ray+Eberle+Glenn+Miller

“My Shining Hour”

"My Shining Hour" is a 1943 World War 2 song composed by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer for the Fred Astaire film *The Sky's the Limit*, where it was introduced by the character played by Joan Leslie - backed by Freddie Slack and his orchestra. It was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Song. The song became a hit in early 1944 (the film was released in September 1943). The song's title and opening line: "This will be my shining hour," is a clever reference to

Winston Churchill's famous rallying call to British citizens during the war: "if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, this was their finest hour." The song expresses the universal wish to be with an absent loved one.

This moment, this minute and each second in it will leave a glow upon the sky and as time goes by it will never die. This will be my shining hour. Calm and happy and bright and in my dreams, your face will flower through the darkness of the night. Like the lights of home, before me or an angel, who's watching o'er me. This will be my shining hour 'til I'm with you again.

("My Shining Hour" performed by Joan Leslie from "The Sky's the Limit", Fred Astaire)
https://www.amazon.com/My-Shining-Hour-Skys-Limit/dp/B00AMVW6SQ/ref=sr_1_1?s=dmusic&ie=UTF8&qid=1470432641&sr=1-1&keywords=my+shining+hour+the+sky%27s+the+limit

Ecclesiastes 9:8-9

In Ecclesiastes 9:8-9 we have a really interesting passage. The writer tells the man to put on his best clothes and aftershave in order to celebrate with his woman:

"Let your clothes be white at all times and do not spare oil on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your meaningless life, that is, all the meaningless days he has given you under the sun, for it is your reward in life and for the toil that you do under the sun."

The context of this passage makes it clear that joy is the reason for dressing in "white." The author is telling his male reader to enjoy life in the company of one's wife. In a meaningless life, the enjoyment of your wife's companionship and intimacy is one's reward, whether a faithful follower of Yahweh or not. That is a powerful statement for the value of marriage. The author is stating that life is meaningless but in the midst of this vacuous, vanity-filled, purposeless existence, your relationship with your wife will bring some comfort and enjoyment – God's common grace. That is how valuable a good marriage can be for everyone. The Hebrew term for "woman" (*issa*) is a bit unclear but the context and the tone of Old Testament ethics concludes that the "woman" is one's wife. It could be read the "woman" you love but "wife" is better (cf, Genesis 21:21, etc.). The Jewish *Midrash* comments on this verse: "A man who has no wife lives without good, help, joy, blessing and atonement." Again, marriage as a low-grade sacrament and a gift from a gracious God to all humankind.

"There is Nothing Like Marriage for People"

In 1946, 10 years after George Gershwin's death, brother Ira Gershwin and Arthur Schwartz presented the musical, *Park Avenue*. Ira Gershwin was convinced that the play would succeed because it was a novelty show poking fun at the divorces and marriages of New York's smart set. It was his last Broadway show and it flopped. Mr. Gershwin opines that it failed perhaps because it dealt with divorce which was still not a funny subject in the 1940s. One of the songs to come

out of the play was a duet called “There is Nothing like Marriage for People.” The song was never recorded but we do have the clever Gershwin lyrics. Mr. Gershwin apparently wrote out of his own experience for he was married to the same woman (Lenore) for 57 years until his death in 1983.

“(She) Imagine living with someone who's longing to live with you! (He) Imagine signing a lease together; and hanging a Matisse together! (She) Oh, what felicity in domesticity! (He) Let no one disparage marriage! (She) Being alone and breaking bread together— Reading *The New Yorker* in bed together (He) Starting a family tree together — voting for the G.O.P. together (Both) There's nothing like marriage for people — It means you're living at last.”

At no time since the *Song of Songs* was given to us has the interpersonal relationship between a man and a woman, husband and wife, been as threatened, yet more important and fundamental to the welfare of human society, as it is right now. Western culture is on a precipitous moral descent that is truly astonishing and breath-taking and becoming dangerous to those of us holding values and virtues given to us by a perfect and infallible God. And the *Song of Songs*, correctly understood, can help us confront the tide against us and preserve our marriages, our families, our church and our culture.