

Proper 17 Year B

His Banner Over Me is Love

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Long ago, in what feels like another lifetime, I worked for several years in a performing arts ministry. We offered programs throughout Northeastern Ohio, and nationally on occasion. We used storytelling, original music and drama among other things to craft retreats and worship services. We performed at lots of church suppers and potlucks.

One of the characters I would do was a free-spirited woman who lived on the social margins. Her name was Annie. Annie Wim – which was a play on the Hebrew word *Anawim*, the lowly ones. In the scriptures these particularly vulnerable people receive God's special favor. One of the oldest measures of biblical ethics is how well society treated the *anawim* – *the widows, orphans, strangers*. In Hebrew the word literally means [those who are bowed down](#).

But Annie Wim wasn't bowed down at all. She stood up straight. She wore a blue floppy hat with a veil and a long white nightgown from the Goodwill. And she sang.

*I'm my beloved's and he is mine, his banner over me is love.*

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I had nearly forgotten about Annie until I read today's lesson from the Song of Solomon. That's where that little refrain comes from. In fact today's passage from the Song of Solomon was one of Annie's favorites. It's where she got the idea that she was God's beloved, God's intended, that she was going to marry God.

*Oh, let me tell you about my beloved, she would say. He's so handsome. He's like a young stag. He moves like a gazelle. Oh look, here he comes now, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. Woo hoo look at him go! (He used to run track in high school), she would explain.*

*There he is now. Hiding behind the wall. Gazing in at the window. Peering through the lattice! Hey! No peeking! It's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.*

And she would proceed to describe who she had invited to the Wedding of Annie Wim and the Most High God. It was an impressive list for the mid-1990's. Though not everyone had RSVP'd. Madeline Albright, for example, failed to respond. Annie was still waiting to hear from Mother Theresa. She was expecting personal friends – a single mother with all her kids; a friend who said she'd come after her AZT treatment.

*You don't have to dress fancy, Annie would make that clear. Come as you are. That's my motto.*

I think Annie would have loved all the readings we have today. Because she liked to play with people's expectations about who God is, who God cherishes, what it means to be that beloved of God. If you read the Song of Solomon, you will find yourself in the middle of the Bible's most erotic love poem. That's why there's only a little bit of it in the lectionary. This is Sunday morning after all.

But Annie wasn't afraid of embarrassing people, of making them a little uncomfortable in the presence of God. She shared that tendency with her fiancé. One Pentecost, our performing arts ministry was invited to offer creative worship at a large Presbyterian Church, and Annie was preparing to make her entrance down the aisle. An usher, thrown by her floppy blue hat and the white nightgown, was ready to escort her out. Until someone explained that she was with the performers.

So I think Annie would have been at home with Jesus' followers in Mark's Gospel today – not so concerned with religious conventions like ritual hand washing, given all the other duties that following Jesus entailed. My guess is that Jesus' followers, like many of the poor, probably were just happy to get a meal when it came their way. Five loaves and two fishes (Mark 6:30-44) probably didn't go that far most of the time. Sometimes all that was available to them was grain they plucked from a field – and they'd get in trouble for that too, if they did it on the Sabbath. (Mark 2:23)

This passage from Mark brings us to a crossroads that challenges our churches today – one where the right practice of ritual or the correct understanding of tradition conflicts with the freedom of following Jesus. The thing that tends to keep us from Christian unity is not whether we're ready to accept being wildly beloved of the Christ. Rather it has always rested on things like how and when baptism is administered, what prayers are said and left out, whether a trinitarian formula is used, what direction the celebrant faces, what we say when we break bread...

This at least is what we talk about in seminary.

Next to the Song of Songs, next to *"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone,"* that can sound a bit like: "I'm sorry you may not enter the kingdom of God until you've washed your hands. And while you're at it put on a clean shirt and comb your hair..."

James in his epistle has a similar concern. If religious practice stops at hearing and does not proceed to living out the Word of God, it's useless.

And so James says *"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. (James 1:22-24)*

For James, to recognize the Word that God has placed in you, is to recognize yourself in relationship with God. To do the Word that has been placed in you, is to live in relationship with God.

Our liturgy is one way that we Do the Word. Just consider what we express here about our love relationship with God -- in poetry, in proclamation, in shared meal, in touch and blessing. But as rich and lovely as it is, it is not designed simply to be heard and enjoyed. It is not idol worship.

Because God does not want our idolization. God wants our dedication – like a jealous lover, like a cherished spouse. God desires to be our beloved. That's the Word we are asked to do. And because this kind of love can only be fully lived out in the great web of relationships that God weaves, it requires love for all God's creation, all people.

That's why James says that if religion does not lead to relationship with the *Anawim* – the widow and orphan -- it is dead.

And so we're back to Annie Wim. Annie is a doer of the Word. She recognizes herself in God, her beloved, and she sees God, her beloved, in herself.

Jesus and James and Annie would all agree – no matter how often we fall prey to the malice, the pettiness, judgment and jealousy that originates within us and that separates us from God and one another– God has placed an open and transformative invitation within us as well.

*The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.*

It is up to us to decide if we'll respond:

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Amen.