

“Why Do We Sing What We Sing?” Sermon Series
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Sunday, July 10, 2022

I might sound a bit like your own kids when I say this, but I am not particularly good at housework or household chores.

My generational cohort, the Millennials, are, in general, slower to move out and get their own places. For a whole host of factors, I'd say our generation has a greater sense of suspense about whether home ownership will be possible for us in the first place. So, we're often considered bad housekeepers, compared to folks of older generations.

But I grew up in a good mixed Southern-Midwestern family of Irish-German stock. And on a Saturday morning, there was always some backyard brush to be cleared, or a car to be washed, or rugs to be aired out (though I'm still not sure why).

My parents had one simple rule. There was to be no payment for chores, no bribery to get us out of bed. In fact, I tried proposing that one time and was met with no small amount of laughter.

We already had everything we needed. And when it came time to do, they wouldn't even ask us to join in.

No, to my parents, the children of the house were expected to just stay alert ... to join in getting done what needed to get done. There would be no scolding if we didn't, but maybe just a small measure of disappointment when I spent the morning playing my Nintendo Gamecube instead of picking up the weed-eater while my father mowed the lawn and my mother trimmed the shrubbery.

Truth be told, I hated that there was always something new or different to be done without warning. Working the house was unpredictable and arduous and seemed to defeat the point of having a house in the first place. I never felt like I knew what I was doing, and you couldn't feel comfortable! One moment you're having a lazy afternoon and the next you're sweating, chopping firewood in the backyard.

And my dad would say, there's no way around it. You just have to learn by doing, by watching, and being patient, and figuring it out, often by failure. That's how I did it with my mother and father, on the family farm. Just show up.

So, I admit, they were a bit nervous and I was a bit nervous when we drove out here last June to move into the church manse right next door, going straight from dorms and apartments to a four-bedroom house with what feels like a massive yard.

I certainly didn't know the first thing about gardening. That first day, Carol Helsel from the property committee gave me the run around of the manse after months of faithful preparation, somewhat apologetic about the state of the yard. It seemed perfectly fine to me.

Then over the next weeks, groups were deputized to weed and to plant, and I felt obliged to join them as the one who would get to wake up and smell those roses ... though I'm not a morning person, so that was even a bit of a reach. But I tried to take my dad's instructions to heart.

When Abby told me about how the hostas out front were coming along, I just unconvincingly smiled and nodded like I knew what those were in the first place.

It's no wonder gardening and housekeeping are often used as one of those metaphors for life, or struggle, or family, or friendship, or God. It has to do with all those things in the first place.

Nowhere in the Bible is this more clear than in the Song of Songs. In fact, this old Song is a little loosey-goosey with the metaphors. In just eight chapters, God is a vineyard, a satchel of perfume, a cluster of henna blossoms, an apple tree, a gazelle or young stag, a king in a carriage surrounded by warriors, the wind, a gardener, and so much more, all without ever by getting called by the name God. Instead, God is known as the illusive Bridegroom, and we are his maiden, chasing after our beloved, always with him close by but not quite present.

That's not how I work or how I get motivated to start working. I don't learn by doing. I don't like it when my desire to know more is left unfulfilled. I need to google, to shop prices online. I'm the type to go to the library, check out a few books, watch a few YouTube videos. There's no shortage of practical information out there, to give a comprehensive view of any and every task. Why would you do spring cleaning without first picking up Marie Kondo's book on tidying up, and then watch the same Netflix series, and then read op-eds analyzing the cultural and spiritual differences between her approach and others?

Learning by doing and being? Well, that just seems embarrassing, stressful. I'll look silly getting out there not knowing what I'm doing. And how to even get started? I'd prefer to set a schedule with clear deadlines, to mark it up in my handy bullet journal.

By my way, you find yourself spending a good chunk of time planning and learning, a tepid version of what my parents wanted all along, even if the information is largely unhelpful.

I wanted to cut down a tree or bush or shrub out back, pleased as a Presbyterian that part of the work started by seeking a committee's approval, and ... did you know ... there is a major debate in botanist circles over what a tree actually is? We might agree trees share some common characteristics: bark, and wood, and roots and leaves. But there are shrub-like trees and tree-like shrubs. Evolutionarily, different tree species come from many different plants and might have more in common genetically with a shrub than another tree.

An Atlantic article offered that with that uncertainty, instead "maybe it's time to start thinking of *tree* as a verb, rather than a noun — tree-ing, or tree-ifying. It's a strategy, a way of being, like swimming or flying, even though to our eyes it's happening in very slow motion. Tree-ing with no finish in sight — until an ax, or a pest, or a bolt of Thanksgiving lightning strikes it down."

This is an age-old distinction in knowledge. In our ways of knowing. Maybe we know this best as the difference between the head and the heart.

The two historical movements in theology in focus today capture this difference in how we can know God. The scholastic theologies of the early universities: they tried to approach God with reason, from “faith seeking understanding,” with the head. Through proofs and discussions, we can figure out God’s power —omnipotence, or where God is — omnipresence, or what God knows —omniscience, or whether God changes — immutability, or whether God can suffer — impassibility. Scholastic theology is about knowing *what* God is.

But mystical theology, emerging in the shadow of scholastic theology, cares a lot more about *who* God is. It talked about God in relationship to us, and who we are in relationship to God. It’s less precise than scholastic theology, it’s loosey-goosey with the metaphors, because it cares a lot more about our experience of God on the ground. The verb of God.

But our passage from the Song tells where this experience of God often leaves us: in suspense. Because it’s hard to trust a verb. Who knows what it will do? So, the beloved hears a knock on her door in the night, and is roused from sleep though her heart is awake and ready. Behind the door, the bridegroom’s head is wet with dew. He hasn’t shown up with any preparation, while the beloved is dripping with myrrh, excited and ready. And when she opens the door. Nothing. No one. She searches the streets and night watchmen beat her. They make a mockery of her preparations, removing her mantle, reducing her to humiliation.

And then the choir is conveniently there to ask the maiden, as if to taunt her foolishness, *what* is this beloved? What makes *him* more than any other?

That’s often the experiences of those who yearn for God. Who make preparation to receive God. Who leave everything else behind to search for God. Scripture doesn’t lie to us about that. Maybe the details are slightly different, or less extreme. But if we look closely enough, all of our lives are filled with drama of spiritual import, if not tragedy and farce in the mundane and spectacular.

A misplaced set of keys can make us say “Oh God.” But a family member in the hospital might leave us without words, only a sense of God’s absence.

We might reach a point in which the what God is doesn’t matter and the who God is leaves us unsure of the point.

Our hearts leave us in suspense. Foolish suspense. To the point that we might just prefer to opt to us our heads. If we really want to hold on, we might prefer to use our heads, to intellectualize God, to find some hidden meaning before we can do anything.

And truth be told, there’s never a famine of meaning. After every disaster and tragedy, there’s no shortage of sources editorializing the root causes and necessary solutions. You’ll find analysis from anyone and everyone in miniature form on your twitter timeline. You’ll find poems and prayers on your Instagram

feed, personal memoir in on your Facebook feed. You can scroll news sites and op-eds or long email chains for incisive commentary. There's a wellspring of sources to be told how to feel and how to be consoled. And still we're left in suspense.

Maybe, instead, it's a famine of trust. Who and what can we trust when there are so many ways of making meaning? How can we trust a loving God with our heads or our hearts when too often we're left in suspense? What's the point of gathering in the church that speaks of *what* God is when we'd rather not acknowledge *who* God is, whose presence makes us feel uncomfortable if not just abandoned?

Our heads leave us cynical and our hearts, heartbroken—and really, what's the difference?

Still we find ourselves there, in suspense. Because God continues to make Godself known to us in all of the many ways we know. And that's a knowing in suspense, with both our heads and our hearts. It's a suspense we find ourselves trapped in. It's a question we can't get away from.

Because the suspense between our different ways of knowing, in our heads and our hearts, is one that goes to the core of God's self.

Once the Protestant Reformation came around, they pulled from the best of this scholastic theology and these mystical theologies. The great insight that Reformer John Calvin knew is that the fight of our life is looking at God's great mercy in our hearts and also God's great justice in our heads.

That we have to look at God's mercy and God's justice and somehow see the same one God in each and in both, to see them as one and the same and both powerful to save, even in an unjust world with a famine of mercy and justice, a famine of trust.

An art/cultural historian, Nicholas Fox Weber describes a hierarchy he observes. He would see people in art museums and they would be distracted. They're checking their cellphones, not engaging the art with any emotional connection.

But then he imagined he might see the same people in department stores buying clothing, sifting through pieces of fabric and they were 100% engaged in how they would use that clothing in their lives, if it's something they want, how it would look, and so on.

His dream was that people in museums might engage with 100% of the passion they have when selecting objects that will be part of their lives. That, and I quote, people would feel entitled to a level of pleasure when they look at works of art, and they would realize the works of art are there to change their lives as they look at them.

Common elements of art and design connect the department store and art museum. But character, courage, trust brings them together. Trust lets us use both ways of knowing to see how God is changing our lives.

Our reading Ephesians tells us that that this is the suspense we must find ourselves at. This is the suspense that is proper to God's very life. We might be able to begin to see who God is in the tattered fabrics of our

lives. But when we tell these stories together in this church to know just what God is, when we remind ourselves that God is a God who is perfectly merciful and just with the total power to save, that's when we can begin to see how God is changing our lives and the life of creation.

Because Paul reminds us, God does not just make Herself known *to* us in the ways we know. God is known *through* us, through our lives, through the many ways in which we are known, first fruits of a creation in suspense.

We were once darkness, but now we are light in the Lord, so we can live our life as children of light. Maybe that's why Paul writes that we are to "speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; to sing and make music to the Lord in our hearts."

Music has distinctions that are more fluid than that of visual art. We might distinguish the pieces of art we can see and the crafted things we can use. But music is distinguished by *genre*. Because all of sound is somewhat impractical, by comparison. Or maybe its practicality comes especially from how it works on our hearts. It evokes our experiences and brings them into new light. It's impractical, music is, and fleeting ... and it's also the stuff of the soul. Sound is not matter, but it's a resonance, reverberating and transforming that matter. The sound we make here is the dinner bell for the heavenly feast.

And that should give us courage, it should give us trust, even in suspense, to claim God as our own. To be entitled to the pleasure and great joy when we see *what* God is and realize God is one *who* is changing our lives, justice and mercy one and the same. Because this God will be known to us in all our ways of knowing in our heads and our hearts, this God will also be known *through* us, to everyone else beyond this door, by our lives.

We might feel awkward in this suspense. After all, we are children of God in God's house. As children, we might feel awkward even lifting up our experiences and knowing that we have a God who is there. And we don't know what divine housework we'll be asked to do or how long it will take until completion. Maybe it feels impractical to us, or destined to fail.

Now more than ever, we're reticent to invest our time and attention in things that seem impractical. We might prefer to be our own housekeepers, deciding for ourselves what jobs are worthy of attention. We'd rather control our own destinies: Yeah, I can know who God is better when I get promoted from my crummy job. I can know who God is when I get that ideal vacation week in Cabo. I can know who God is when I get that new house.

But then we miss the forest for the trees, or shrubs. We miss seeing the God who is here right now, and we miss seeing just what that God is capable of. Because God will be known in suspense.

So, we are to chase after God, our bridegroom, knowing that God will be made known to you however we know. We are to imitate God, as beloved children, because God is changing this world, and you.

That's the work of our lives. That's housework worth living for. Thanks be to God.

