

**SLD08.17.08 20<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Song of Songs 1:1-4, 4:1a, 3-7**  
**Matthew 22:34-40**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Ecstatic Love – The Life of Jalal ad-Din Rumi**

Join me in remembering for a moment, will you, a time when you felt “in love.” Have you ever fallen in love? Of course, you have. Well, I guess not everybody has. But most of us have fallen at least in lust if not in love. You know, when your heart races and your cheeks flush and you can’t seem to get that special somebody out of your mind? Can’t stop thinking about them, can’t wait to see them, can’t stand to let them to go? Ever been in love like that?

It’s a nutty kind of experience, especially if you’re Presbyterian, because, you know, it feeds this terrible tension between sense and nonsense. We tend to behave very foolishly when we’re in love, we humans. And we scions of the reformed church, well, we’re just not big fans of foolish.

Still, it can be kind of fun, don’t you think? Falling in love?

I mean, it’s certainly not the only, or even the best, kind of love there is – thank goodness, or even *less* than 50% of marriages would last.

But when you’re not depressed or miserable because of the absence of your Beloved, or dying to know where she is or what she’s thinking...or frantic with wondering when next he’ll appear, why, falling in love can actually be quite...well...life-giving, if breath-taking. That weak-kneed, sense-smitten, carried away kind of love that once in a while knocks us off our sensible shoes, it kind of goofy but it’s sweet, too, wouldn’t you say? While it lasts anyway. Don’t you think?

Even if only for a little while, fresh love sweetens life, makes hearts more generous, problems more manageable, colors more vibrant. Time itself expands and even just a moment feels like forever. And enough. You see, think, feel things differently. More amuses you. Less gets under your skin.

Have you experienced this condition? The sort of sweet and fleeting, maybe hormonal, high that comes with falling in love?

Usually we associate the condition with initial, if not immature, love between humans; certainly humanity has been falling in and out of love with one another since long before Noah. The text that Brent read from the Song of Songs, for example, is a good biblical example from about 3,000 years ago of dewey-eyed pillow talk betwixt a lover and her beloved.

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love is more delightful than wine!” she says.

“Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your temples like halves of a pomegranate, your breasts like twin fawns of a gazelle,” he replies.

You start talking body parts, you *know* you’ve fallen off the cliff of goofy adoration.

Now I’m aware we’re not accustomed to hearing that sort of thing from the lectern, or the pulpit. But that doesn’t mean it’s foreign to our personal experience. Just to our *religious* experience.

Though it’s not foreign to ALL religious experience, just OUR religious experience. Or *most* of ours, anyway.

Still, either some renegade rabbi slipped the Song of Solomon into the canon while the rest of the minyan wasn't looking, or centuries, millennia, of holy Hebrews and Church fathers conscientiously determined to include in sacred scripture the explicit description of passionate, ecstatic love between two people.

And why, do you suppose? Well, I'm no scholar of wisdom literature but my guess is that the sweet ecstatic poetry of fleshly lovers reminded somebody somewhere of what it's like to fall and feel in love, not just with another person, but with God.

Fall in love with God? Get that weak-kneed, sense-smitten, carried away kind of goofy about the Creator of the Universe? Can you feature it?

Well, frankly, not many of us can. And even if we could, we wouldn't place much stock in it, we Presbyterian people of the mind.

But it happens. It's always happened. Over the history of human religiosity, there have always been certain people in just about every tradition who have fallen unequivocally, irrevocably and irrepressibly in love with...God.

After all, what did Jesus remind the attorney who asked him which was the greatest commandment? "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Mt. 22:37) According to Jesus, the greatest commandment is to love God with everything you have and everything you are.

And if you can't imagine what *that* would be like, just remember what it was like when you yourself fell in love. Or, if you've never fallen in love, how you'd imagine it would be. How every thought, every dream, every nerve ending, became wrapped up in your Beloved. Loving God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, why, it would be a lot like *that*.

The “saint” whom I chose for today, well, *he* loved God like that, which is why I chose him. That, and because he’s important to me, and so are you, so I’d like y’all to meet. Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi-Rumi, or just Rumi, loved God with all his heart and all his soul and all his mind. And when he spoke, his words came out like poetry.

Rumi was a 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim scholar and spiritual teacher born in Afghanistan in 1207. When he was still a child, the entire family was exiled from Afghanistan by the approach of the armies of Genghis Khan. After some years of traveling, they settled in Konya, Turkey, where Rumi’s dargah, or burial place, is still a place of pilgrimage.<sup>1</sup> A place I hope to go one day.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Konya was the western terminus of the Silk Road. The Silk Road, as you may recall, was a vast network of trade routes that, during the first millennium B.C.E. through the middle of the second millennium C.E. – that’s 3,000 years - linked the people and traditions of Asia with those of Europe. The historic routes of the Silk Road served as a major conduit for the transport of knowledge, information and material goods between East and West and resulted in the first global exchange of scientific and cultural traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore Rumi’s hometown of Konya became a melding place of many cultures – Islamic, Judeo-Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist – all of which impacted Rumi’s own spiritual development. Rumi’s father became the head of a Sufi (Muslim mystic) learning community, and Rumi succeeded him in the position. He married, he and his wife had two sons, he lost his first wife, married again, and had two more children by his second wife.

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<sup>1</sup> Rumi: *These Branching Moments*, translated by John Moyne and Coleman Barks, Copper Beach Press, Providence, Rhode Island, 1988. Introduction, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chinahighlights.com/map/ancient-china-map/ancient-silk-road-map.htm>

Rumi's life changed completely, however, when he met his spiritual friend and teacher, Shams of Tabriz, with whom he shared and amplified his great love for God. It is difficult in today's terms, at least for me, to capture and express the importance of the triad of love that developed among Rumi, Shams, and God. Suffice it to say that out of that great and profound relationship issued an extraordinary fount of 42,000 lines of ecstatic poetry that express and celebrate a love for God that is no less infatuated, no less smitten, no less passionate or lost or foolish or completely absorbed than two transported 18 year-olds discovering love for the first time.

Throughout the centuries, Rumi's poetry seemed to speak to people of every tradition, perhaps because he did not see separate streams of different religions but rather the oceans into which they all were pouring. Rumi said, "I go into the Christian church, and the Jewish synagogue, and the Muslim mosque, and I see only one altar."

Today a Christian church in Shiraz, Iran, has lines from Rumi carved in stone around the door, which read,

"Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather.  
We are a door that is never locked.  
If you are suffering any kind of pain,  
Stay near this door. Open it."<sup>3</sup>

For over eight centuries, Rumi has been as well known in Middle Eastern and Arab countries as Shakespeare is to us. And in recent decades, thanks to sensitive and skillful translations by poets and mystics in their own right, Rumi has become extraordinarily well-known and popular in the western world as well.

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<sup>3</sup> These Branching Moments, Introduction, p. 3.

Still, popular as Rumi poetry has become these days, translator Coleman Barks remarks that it's actually dangerous stuff, meant less to collude with lovers than to obliterate them.

"Rumi wants us to surrender," says Coleman. "This is not Norman Vincent Peale urging cheerfulness, conventional morality, or soft-focus, white-light-feel-good, nor is it New Age tantric energy exchange. This is giving your life to the one within that you know as *Lord*.... No one except you can judge how that is going," Coleman says. "But if you're *not* doing it, says Rumi, you're wasting your time here (on earth, that is)...for annihilation is the point."<sup>4</sup>

And who wants to hear poetry about annihilation?

Well, apparently millions and millions of the faithful of every tradition all over the world. Listen now, and see if you can hear anything *you* recognize as truth.

**(Brent reads [slowly])**

Everyone has eaten and fallen asleep. The house is empty.  
We walk out to the garden to let the apple meet the peach,  
to carry messages between rose and jasmine.

Spring is Christ,  
raising martyred plants from their shrouds.  
Their mouths open in gratitude, wanting to be kissed.  
The glow of the rose and the tulip means a lamp  
is inside. A leaf trembles. I tremble  
in the wind-beauty like silk from Turkestan.  
The censor fans into flame.

This wind is from the Holy Spirit.  
The trees are Mary.  
Watch how husband and wife play subtle games with their hands.  
Cloudy pearls from Aden are thrown across the lovers,  
As is the marriage custom.

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<sup>4</sup> Rumi: The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing, Translations and Commentary by Coleman Barks, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005. p. xv.

The scent of Joseph's shirt comes to Jacob.  
A red carnelian of Yemeni laughter is heard  
by Muhammed in Mecca.

We talk about this and that. There's no rest  
except on these branching moments.<sup>5</sup>

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Wake up with the morning breeze  
and ask for a change. Open and fill yourself  
with the wine that is your life.  
Pass it around. Pass it to me first!  
Revive me with our waking.  
Listen to the harp-sound and sing.  
Dawn-music is your joy.  
Give me your excitement, but let it ground me,  
so I don't wander. Watch the ripples  
on the surface. Then launch me  
like a ship Once I was only a piece of wood.  
Then Moses threw me down,  
And now I'm a powerful dragon. I was dead.  
Jesus raised me. Muhammed spoke,  
and this tree shimmered.

Say the word again, Shams,  
so we can feel you, your light  
within everything.<sup>6</sup>

Inside this new love, die.  
Your way begins on the other side.  
Become the sky.  
Take an axe to the prison wall.  
Escape.  
Walk out like someone suddenly born into color.  
Do it now.  
You're covered with thick cloud.  
Slide out the side. Die,  
and be quiet. Quietness is the surest sign  
that you've died.  
Your old life was a frantic running  
from silence.  
The speechless full moon  
comes out now.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. #1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. #3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. #23.

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Or this, from Rumi's "*Rambunctious Teaching Stories*"<sup>8</sup>

This is how a human being can change:

There's a worm addicted to eating grape leaves.

Suddenly, he wakes up,  
call it Grace, whatever, something  
wakes him, and he's no longer  
a worm.

He's the entire vineyard,  
and the orchard, too, the fruit, the trunks,  
a growing wisdom and joy  
that doesn't need to devour. (p. 129)

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A chickpea leaps almost over the rim of the pot  
where it's being boiled.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

The cook knocks him down with the ladle.

"Don't you try to jump out.  
You think I'm torturing you.  
I'm giving you flavor,  
So you can mix with spices and rice  
and be the lovely vitality of a human being.

Remember when you drank rain in the garden.  
That was for this."

Grace first. Sexual pleasure,  
Then a boiling new life begins,  
And the Friend has something good to eat.

Eventually the chickpea  
will say to the cook,  
"Boil me some more.  
Hit me with skimming spoon.  
I can't do this by myself.  
I'm like an elephant that dreams of gardens

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<sup>8</sup> Delicious Laughter, Rambunctious Teaching Stories from the Mathnawi, versions by Coleman Barks, Maypop Books, Athens, Ga. 1990.

back in Hindustan and doesn't pay attention  
to his driver. You're my Cook, my Driver,  
my Way into Existence. I love your cooking."

The Cook says,  
    "I was once like you,  
fresh from the ground. Then I boiled in Time,  
and boiled in the Body, two fierce boilings.

My animal-soul grew powerful.  
I controlled it with practices,  
and boiled some more, and boiled  
once beyond that,  
    and became your Teacher.<sup>9</sup>

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Or this from another Rumi book called We Are Three<sup>10</sup>

A mouse and a frog meet every morning  
    on the riverbank.  
They sit in a nook of the ground a talk.

Each morning, the second they see each other,  
they open easily, telling stories and dreams and secrets,  
emply of any fear or suspicious holding-back.

To watch and listen to these two  
is to understand how, as it's written,  
sometimes when two beings come together,  
Christ becomes visible.

The mouse starts laughing out a story he hasn't thought of  
in five years, and the telling might take five years!  
There's no blocking the speechflow-river-running-  
all-carrying momentum  
that true intimacy is.

Bitterness doesn't have a chance  
with those two.

The God-Messenger, Khidr, touches a roasted fish.  
It leaps off the grill  
back into the water.  
Friend sits by Friend, and the tablets appear.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Rumi: We Are Three, translated by Coleman Barks. Maypop Books, Athens, Ga., 1987, pp 4-5.

They read the mysteries  
off each other's foreheads.

But one day the mouse complains, "There are times  
When I was *sohbet* (spiritual communion), and you're out in the water,  
jumping around where you can't hear me.  
We meet at this appointed time  
but the text says, Lovers pray constantly.  
Once a day, once a week, five times an hour,  
is not enough. Fish like we are  
need the ocean around us!"

Do camel-bells say, *Let's meet back here*  
*Thursday night?*  
Ridiculous. They jingle  
together continuously,  
talking while the camel walks.

Do you pay regular visits to *yourself*?!  
Don't argue or answer rationally.

Let us die, (says the mouse)  
and dying, reply.

**(End of reading)** \_\_\_\_\_

Make any sense to you?

Yes? Fine. No? Fine. It doesn't matter. It's just the ramblings of one nutty,  
divinity-drunk 13<sup>th</sup> century Turkish God-lover.

Still, I cherish the opportunity to share Rumi with you. To me, one of the  
blessings of this church is your tolerance and openness to hearing, during our "saint  
series," different ways of knowing, experiencing, and loving God, as well as acting out of  
that love.

For however goofy falling in love may make us, the 28<sup>th</sup> Superior of the Society of  
Jesus, or Jesuits, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, is quoted as saying that "nothing is more practical  
than falling love with God in a quite absolute, final way. (For) what you are in love with,

what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.

“Fall in love,” says Arrupe. “Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”<sup>11</sup>

And *I* say, fall afresh in love with God. For when you do, life becomes sweet, and full, and precious. Time itself expands and a moment feels like forever. And enough. Hearts become more generous; problems, more manageable; colors, more vibrant. You become more easily amused. Less gets under your skin. You see, think, feel, things differently.

And maybe you *do* find yourself doing goofy things – like staring aimlessly into the horizon. Or writing oblique poetry that nobody understands. Or walking out on an unsatisfying meal...or career...or marriage.

Maybe you even find yourself nailed to a cross so that you can die and rise again.

There’s just no telling where God-love will lead you.

I’m just saying...it happens. And it’s not a bad thing. After all, is not the greatest commandment that we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind? Didn’t Jesus say that on this commandment, plus the one about loving each other, hangs nothing short of...well...everything?

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Framed plaque at Green Bough at Joseph’s house.