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Sex and Salvation: Reclaiming the Story of the Beloved

LAURA BUFFINGTON

We all know the moment is coming. We cover our kids' eyes. We lean a little closer to the date or the spouse beside us. The volume of the music rises, the lights go down, the characters are moving closer and talking slower. They embrace. The screen fades to black (eventually). Redemption is here. We watch characters in relational conflict, in emotional turmoil, in battle with mortal enemies. But the story, along with the characters, is not complete without the fade-to-black moment. We know, in most movies, that what happens in the dark is nothing short of restoration, validation and salvation.

Sex is the moment in films when people are saved from their flaws; characters overcome commitment fears or trust issues. They escape from the extreme stress of trying to save the world. They escape the boredom of their mundane existence. Sex can be a moment of defiance or rebellion, when a character becomes more fully herself or himself by breaking convention. Sex provides motivation for the action hero, hope for the lonely romantic, and ultimately, satisfaction for the people watching at the afternoon matinee or on their Friday night date.

Whether it's a Hollywood blockbuster, a primetime television show or a song on the Top 40, we find a culture where sex does more than sell: sex saves.

Like most of what we see on the screen or hear on the radio, the idea of sex as a form of salvation is rooted in real-life human experience. While we might not go as far as the "You complete me" line from *Jerry Maguire*, there is a temptation to settle for the affirmation and redemption received from other people. Romance, marriage and sex can provide a type of salvation. Sex may provide, but cannot guarantee, salvation from loneliness. Sex can save us by providing a place to practice commitment, kindness, passion and grace. Sex can provide moments of transcendence, when we understand that life is bigger than our own tiny individualized universes.

In the film *Garden State*, the characters come to the conclusion that in one another, they have found a "home." After searching for meaning and a place to belong everywhere else, they find rest and meaning in the presence of each other. Sex, in the right context, is the height of intimacy. It may satisfy our desire to be known and loved. In a relationship, it may create a place where we feel sheltered from the rest of the world or a place where we feel empowered to take on the world. In the moment, we give to another and are saved from ourselves. We are, in some ways, saved by the love of other people. But is this love, particularly as it is expressed in sexual relationships, really the moment that the whole story of our lives and our world should be built around? Are we "saved" in the fullest possible sense of the word by what happens when the lights fade? When two people surrender themselves to each other, offering full affection and acceptance, there is more going on than the power of the moment. Sex serves as a sign and symbol of the most intimate and precious relationship of all, the connection between God and humanity.

The fade-to-black moments, whether found in art or in life, are occasions for us to absorb and proclaim the overarching storyline, the grand theme, of God's love for humanity. Filmmakers are not going to give up using sex as a pivotal storytelling device. Musicians are not going to stop singing about the pursuit and the pain of romantic love. Television executives are probably not going to return to the days of separate beds

and censored swiveling hips. Our culture's collective obsession with sex is more than just a growing trend; it is a manifestation of the deepest cries and concerns of the human heart. With sex playing such a prominent role in the art and life of our culture, the church would be wise to reclaim the metaphor of sex as salvation. Making the whole story of our lives about the salvation found in physical intimacy is to miss the grander picture of intimate salvation promised to Beloved Humanity by God the Lover.

Hollywood did not invent the concept of mixing sex and salvation, and was not the first to hijack the metaphor. Ancient fertility cults and Eastern religions have been mixing sex and salvation for a very long time. But the metaphor begins in the earthy, sin-stained trenches of the Old Testament. From the very first scenes in the Garden of Eden and from the first notes of the Ten Commandments, it is clear that Yahweh values fidelity. The importance of a pure, untainted relationship between Israel and Yahweh is communicated through the metaphor of an intimate relationship. Anything less than complete devotion and surrender to Yahweh is considered adultery and Israel, after slipping into the beds of the other gods, is denounced as a whore. But it is the desire of Yahweh that Israel would be a faithful bride: "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isa 62.5).

The Song of Solomon, a detailed love poem, paves the way for minstrels, balladeers and rock stars to set their love to music for centuries to come. The poem both honors the love between a man and a woman and mirrors the love between people and God. The Song expresses detailed appreciation for the physical beauty and satisfaction that each finds in the other. It has all the elements of a great love song—ecstasy, longing, all the ways that love can be both fulfilling and frustrating at the same time. Its inclusion in the canon shows that the metaphor of God as Lover and humanity as the Beloved has captured the attention and imagination of generations of God's people.

Nowhere is the metaphor more graphically portrayed than in the ministry of the prophet Hosea. Hosea is the definitive *Pygmalion*, *Cinderella*, *Pretty Woman* story. At God's request, the prophet is called to go to his town's red light district and propose marriage to a prostitute. Hosea's words to Gomer are meant to echo God's proposal to Israel: "And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord" (Hos 2.19). As the story progresses, Gomer finds Hosea's love difficult to return and cannot escape the pull of her old way of life. Her infidelity yields a brood of illegitimate children and it seems that Hosea must not only endure the shame of an unfaithful spouse, but he must return to the dark house on the corner to buy back the woman that is already his by law.

The real meaning of what God has asked of Hosea comes through in Hosea's preaching. Israel, like Gomer, has been seduced by other lovers. She has crawled into bed with Baals and settled for money left on the dresser, rather than the pure, faithful love of Yahweh. At times, it seems that this betrayal has been quite literal as Israel is accused of "exchanging glory for shame," forsaking the sexual boundaries provided by the law, along with lying, stealing, murdering and seeking the advice of diviners. The whoredom of Gomer/Israel/us is contrasted with the relentless passion of Hosea/Yahweh. This prophetic story and its divine parallel meaning openly acknowledges the complexity of the human struggle to be faithful and to accept the love of the one who is in radical pursuit of us. If we could only grasp the ridiculous love that God continues to have for us, the kind of love that chases us down even as we sell ourselves to other lovers, we might never again settle for the kind of intimacy that leaves us empty the next morning.

The New Testament picks up the metaphor of sex and salvation where the Old Testament leaves off, adding elements of the traditional Jewish wedding and implying the same kind of intimacy. Jesus employs the language of a wedding feast in answering accusations about why his disciples are not fasting: "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matt 9.15). In Matthew 25.1–13, Jesus tells the parable of bridesmaids who are waiting for the groom to come. The groom will come to rescue

the woman from her childhood home and lead her through the night to her brand new place. To light the way, the bridesmaids will need to be ready with enough oil to make the trip. Jesus is naming himself as the groom, his followers as his bride, and the wedding night as the beginning of an eternal union.

John the Baptist confirms Jesus' identity by employing the same imagery, perhaps because Israel is accustomed to Yahweh in the role of the groom: "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled" (John 3.30). John is the best man, letting the crowd know that Jesus is the one who was to come for their hand in metaphorical marriage.

The apostle Paul carries out this imagery in his understanding of his role in preparing the church for the wedding night, or the return of Christ: "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor 11.2). Israel is no longer the exclusive bride as the metaphor now encompasses the church, Gentile converts and all. As a servant of the church and a minister of the gospel, Paul's role in the relationship between God and people is to protect the purity and fidelity of the bride. Paul is so eager to present the bride that he experiences jealousy when the church is tempted by other suitors. Certainly in Corinth, a city known for syncretism and prone to divine bed-hopping, the chastity of the church is almost always in danger.

As inheritors of Paul's role, today's servants of the church are called to continue the preparation and protection of the bride. The threats to her fidelity are both literal and metaphorical. The temptations are as diverse and as rampant as they were in the raw state of the first century church. Paul had to address issues of idol worship, homosexuality, gender roles, "unequally yoked" marriages and even a man who was sleeping with his stepmother. To this list of questions and struggles, our culture has only added more. We are Gomer and she is us. Desperate to escape the pure love of God, we have continued humanity's pattern of the runaway bride, selling ourselves out to gods that whisper promises to us in the night only to abandon us in the morning.

Like Paul, we experience a divine jealousy—a longing for the people of God to turn around and run back into the arms of the faithful Lover. Like the prophets before us, it is now on us to join in the pursuit of the Beloved. We must learn to navigate the trenches of an adulterous world to redeem and reclaim what rightfully belongs to God. We must take back the story of the Lover and the Beloved. Sex and salvation should not be left in the hands of the moviemakers, the songwriters and the television producers. Far too much is at stake in this divine romantic metaphor.

There is a strand in the church that leads us in reclaiming the story of God as the ultimate Lover and us as God's Beloved. Christian mysticism has a long history of referring to God as the source, origin and prime example of love. In describing the practices of the Cistercian and Beguine nuns of northern Europe, Borchert writes: "the love between a man and woman in all its aspects (ecstasy of love, devotion, longing, forlornness, companionship and union) was for a long time the most important symbol in which mystical life was expressed."¹

St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote extensively on the love of God, primarily inspired by the Song of Solomon. He wrote: "To love him as he loves himself, to love him as he truly loves us, and by the gift of that very love with which he loves himself and loves us—that truly . . . is to have God in us."² In Bernard's teachings, humanity and God exist as separate entities, but find incomparable union through the bond of love.

St. John of the Cross described the mystical love that exists between people and God: "I abandoned and forgot myself, laying my face on my Beloved; all things ceased; I went out from myself, leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies." St. John prays to God: "How lovingly you wake in my heart, where in secret you dwell alone; and in your sweet breathing, filled with good and glory, how tenderly you swell my heart with

1. Bruno Borchert, *Mysticism* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1994), 208.

2. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, trans. A. Downes (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1990), 149.

love.”³ The language is reminiscent of the kind of ravishing, consuming love that is sung about by many a guy with a guitar about many a girl sitting in the front row.

In female mysticism, there is even more of a romantic emphasis as the goal is to achieve a divine union with God, a union that is so powerful, it leaves them with a tremendous sense of loss when it is withdrawn. St. Catherine of Siena believed that Christ joined her in a mystical marriage and went on to influence the return of the papacy to Rome in 1370. St. Teresa of Avila experienced an angel of Christ penetrating her with a dart and being filled with the love of God: “The loving exchange that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg him in his goodness to give a taste to anyone who thinks I am lying.”⁴ St. Teresa apparently understood that the claims of divine union would be hard for everyone to believe and rightly so. But what we find in the mystics is a reminder to us of just how literally we are to take the metaphor of God as the Lover of the Beloved Humanity.

We do not have to experience mystical visions to glean meaning from the sex as salvation metaphor. We simply need to grasp that the longing, the passion, and the surrender that we feel towards a lover should enhance and deepen our understanding of God’s love for us. As consuming and as transforming as romantic love can be in and of itself, it is not the end of the story. Both in culture and in life, we are tempted to settle for the metaphor, to lose ourselves in the pursuit of sex and romance. We may think we are rescued when we find love or sex or both. All the while, God the Lover is sitting at the candle-lit table in the corner with the engagement ring held out, just hoping that Beloved Humanity will say yes. Christ the bridegroom has prepared a new home for his new bride and is anxiously walking ahead of her, hoping that she will follow. God offers the kind of salvation that lasts forever. It is the kind of salvation that makes us whole. It is the kind of salvation that is still there in the morning.

The church should pay attention to what happens on-screen at the movies and on television. The church should listen to what makes singers sing. The spiritual realities and the spiritual potential of our culture are revealed in our stories and songs. “Consider the lilies of the field,” Jesus says to the crowd as they pass a stretch of highway—there is truth about life in the field. To a crowd full of parents and wanderers, he tells the story of the prodigal son. After all, they probably already know what it feels like to leave home, to fail your parents or to have a child return. In these stories, he captures what they intuitively know and care about and reveals greater truths.

The church must become gifted at passing fields and telling stories that capture what people already know to be true and powerful. “Consider the moment when the screen fades to black”—there is truth about life on the screen. To a culture that is longing for intimacy, a culture that pleases with every breath for someone to make them feel desired, known and loved, the church must proclaim God as the Lover and all people as the Beloved. What other Lover would surround the Beloved with the change of seasons, the covering of the skies? What other Lover would break into the realm of earth from heaven, surrendering his very life for the sake of an undeserving, oblivious Beloved? God is Creator, Parent, Savior, Lover. God is the one running through the airport in the final scenes. God is the one waiting for the last dance. God is the one standing outside the window playing our favorite song. God is the one who wants to whisper to us at night the truth about who we really are. Fade to black. Redemption is here.

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3. St. John of the Cross, *On a Dark Night*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington Province of the Discalced Carmelites, 1991).

4. St. Theresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington Province of the Discalced Carmelites, 1976).