

Pray More Advent Retreat 2018 - Transcript

Song of Songs

Fr. Kyle Manno

Alright everyone, we are back here in this Advent retreat. I'm feeling good, I'm feeling alive, I've got my coffee, I'm good. Get yours, and let's begin with a little prayer.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord and Heavenly Father, we give You thanks and praise for this time together. We ask that You bless our conversation, bless this talk on Your love, discovering more and more how to prepare our hearts for Your coming. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And I am really excited to be here with all of you again today. Just a reminder: My name is Father Kyle Manno, I'm a priest in the Rockford diocese in good old Illinois, in DeKalb Illinois is where I'm at, home of corn, home of barbed wire - fun fact, barbed wire was invented in DeKalb Illinois, in the middle of nowhere, essentially. I've been a priest for 2 years, got ordained June 4th, 2016. I'm now assigned at the Newman Center at Northern Illinois University, as well as vocation director for the diocese. And it's essentially 2 full-time jobs, that's what I've been discovering more and more each day.

And so I'm excited to be with all of you again on this little conversation in this time journeying through Advent. And just a reminder that Advent comes from 2 Latin words: "Ad," meaning "To," and "Venire," meaning "Come." And so Advent means "To come," right. Of course, we're celebrating the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, and what a beautiful time it is to prepare our hearts for that coming through these retreat moments, when we get to step back out of our day with a coffee or hot chocolate, and just talk about the Lord and how good He is.

So today's talk is on the Song of Songs, and the real question is: Why is the Song of Songs in Advent, in the readings at mass. And to first kind of begin that, we have to know what is the Song of Songs. So, the Song of Songs is the song of all songs written by the God of the universe, and essentially it's a love song from God to His people, right. God is this divine lover who wants to seek us out. He wants to bestow so much grace, love, and mercy on us. And so it's this beautiful song, the greatest song ever written, by the God of the universe to His people, to each one of us.

And, essentially, it's this beautiful poetry. And if you read some of it, I'm going to give you a little snapshot here of what's happening in this story. It begins right in

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the Song of Songs 2, verse 8: ***Hark! my lover - here he comes springing across the mountains, leaping across the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Here he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattices. My lover speaks to me; he says, "Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come!*** So the question is: Why is this love song, why is this love language in the season of Advent? When we wear purple it's supposed to have a sense of penance, right? Recognizing that we are broken, that we need to make up for our sins, that we need to prepare our hearts because the God of the universe is about to show up in the form of a beautiful baby.

And so why put in a love story as we are called to meditate on our sins and prepare our hearts? Well, yeah, a baby is showing up, Jesus Christ, but this child entering the world is love incarnate, right. I mean, all of Advent, all of human history has been a love story, right. The God of the universe, the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, at one time, at some moment - which... it's hard to talk about a moment - but God decided to create all of us for one reason, and that was to be loved. There is no other mission that God has in this world. God has no other plan than to love you. That's it, right. One divine mission: To love you. And so you are called to be loved, and then give love.

At the moment of creation, God created Adam. He brought him into existence for that purpose - to be loved. And when you were created, we know in the Psalms it says you were knit in your mother's womb, you too were created to be loved. And so the question is: How do we receive it? How do we give it? And what I love about Song of Songs, and why the church decides to put it in here, is because they're trying to remind us that all of the story of creation, all of the story of our lives is to give and receive love. To hear our divine lover Jesus Christ, the God of the universe, leaping through the hill to find us. But the problem is why is it so hard for each one of us to receive that love?

Well, when I was praying over this idea of why is the Song of Songs in Advent, and the realization that us being loved by God is the entire goal of Christianity, what came to my mind was actually a story that happened about, now, 3 years ago. It was actually in 2015, when I was a deacon. I had a buddy of mine visiting, and I was not in priest clothes because I was still a deacon, so I was incognito, in casual. We went to this, like, Chart House, a nice fancy restaurant where they sell steak. It was me, my buddy, and his fiancé, and we're having dinner, and the waitress came over and she was very delightful, very nice, and she was serving us for about an hour. After about that hour, she brought us the bill, and she asked us if we needed anything else. We ordered desert. And I realized that I had not really asked much to the woman who was waiting our table. I wanted to ask her about who she was. Because I love people, I love talking to people.

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And so, near the end of the meal, I said “Ma’am, what’s your name?” And we’ll call her Sandy. So she says “My name is Sandy.” I said “Oh, Sandy, how are you doing?” I said “Sandy, you have an accent. Where are you from?” And she goes “I’m from Greece.” I said “Really? You’re from Greece? Okay, okay. Well, Sandy, tell me, how long have you been in America?” And she said “Well, I’ve been here now about 15 years.” I said “15 years! That’s a long time, Sandy, to be in the country.” I said “Sandy, tell me, what’s better? You left Greece. What’s better? Greece or America?” And as I asked the question, it kind of seemed like a weird question, almost a little arrogant, like “Hey, what’s better? Greece or America?”

So she thinks for a second, and she says “You know, America’s better.” And I said “Really? Tell me why. Why is America better than Greece?” And she thinks, and she thinks, and she thinks. She says “Well, the reason that America is better than Greece is because, in America, people aren’t judgmental.” And all of a sudden I was like “Hmm? What did you say?” She said “People in America aren’t judgmental.” I said “Oh. Well, I’m intrigued. Tell me more.” She said “Well, in Greece, if I wear my bracelets on my wrists and on my ankles, if I wear my jewelry, if I wear like my belly belt.” I don’t know if you remember this, but there was like a fashion thing like in the 90s, early 2000s, that sometimes women or girls would wear, like, a belt that was, like, steel or something. I don’t know women’s fashion. But it wasn’t a belt, it just went around their waist.

She said “If I wear those outfits, people will call me names.” She said “Specifically, if I dress a certain way, people will call me a prostitute.” And I was like “What?” She goes “Yeah. In fact, what they’ll call me is names so bad as...” I don’t like to say this, but this is what she said. She said “People will call me a whore.” And all of a sudden I was like “Oh. Umm, okay.” And then she walked away from the table, and as she’s walking away I’m like “Okay, that was strange.” She comes back a few minutes later and she says “So yeah, people are less judgmental. They won’t call me those names here.” I said “Okay.”

And then she says “But, there is a problem with America.” And I said “Sure, what’s the problem? Tell me.” She said “People in America don’t learn anything anymore. They don’t learn things.” I said “What do you mean?” She said “Well, in America, people are too busy on their tablets, on their phones, their iPhones, their Androids, you know, they’re too busy on their screens that they don’t learn anything anymore.” All of a sudden, for some reason, I said “Ma’am, I learn things.” And she goes “What? What are you talking about?” I said “Ma’am, I learn things.” I said “In fact, I just graduated with a Master’s degree.” And she looks at me and she goes “Pfft, and what are you going to do with it?”

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And I was like “Okay, excuse me. I don’t even know you, ma’am.” I said “Well, actually, I’m going to be a priest.” And she looks at me and she goes “No you’re not.” And I looked at her and I was like “Yeah, really, actually I am going to be a priest.” And again she looks at me and she goes “No you’re not.” And then she walked away. And I was like “What?” And she comes back over and she goes “You’re just messing with me. You’re not going to be a priest.” So I pulled my phone, right, and I go through my Facebook, and I pull up a picture of me holding a diploma with a cap and gown and wearing my priest collar. I said “Look, that’s me in a collar, cap, gown, Master’s degree in hand. I’m going to be a priest, alright.” And she goes “Oh, you are going to be a priest.” I said “Yeah, I’m going to be a priest.”

Then she looked very serious, and she said “Can I ask you a question?” And I said “Yeah, whatever. Go ahead. You can ask anything you want, I’m not afraid.” And she said “Are you going to be one of those priests, one of those...?” And I said “You can ask whatever you want.” And she says “Are you going to be one of those priests who, if somebody does something wrong, you’re going to tell them to leave the church?” And I said “No. No, no, no, no. Actually, I would never do that. The opposite. If somebody does something wrong, I would tell them to come back to the church so we can give them confessions, so that Jesus can love them in whatever wrong they did.”

And she goes “Okay, okay. I guess it’s just kind of hard for me.” And I said “What’s hard?” She said “I’ve just been away for a long time, and people usually tell me that I have this thing about me, this, like, aura, like I just walk around sort of joyful, and people tell me I have this thing, and I just... I don’t have that anymore. I just... I don’t feel alive. I haven’t... I haven’t cried in years.” And all of a sudden I said “Well, that’s really sad.” I said “In fact, you know, I’m going to be a priest in just, like, 8 weeks.” I said “Why don’t you come visit me and we can just cry together. Maybe you just need to cry if you haven’t cried in a long time. That’s sad.”

And she goes “I know but, like, people just tell me there was this thing about me,” and I said “Well, you know God loves you.” She goes “I know He loves me. I know He’s with me everywhere I go. In the car, and at work, everywhere.” And I looked at her and I said “No ma’am. Like, God loves you so much.” I said “Like, rollercoaster love, where like you’re strapped in and, like, you’re going up, and you’re like ‘I’m scared, I don’t know what to do,’ and then all of a sudden you’re looking down and you’re like ‘I’m afraid!’” And I said “But it’s this beautiful, like, rush of love, that God wants to these highs and these lows and love you in every single moment, from the good to the bad to the great to the suffering.” I said “That type of love God wants to give you.”

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And she says “No, I know He loves me. I just... I don’t know.” And she says “I just... I haven’t cried in so long, and I haven’t... I don’t know my heart. I don’t feel anymore. I just don’t feel things.” She said “My heart is like... it’s... it’s... it’s...” And I looked at her and I said “Is your heart... It’s numb, isn’t it?” She goes “Yeah. My heart’s numb. I don’t feel at all.” And all of a sudden I had this moment from the Holy Spirit where I just had this sense of kind of where she was at, and I said “Ma’am, I think what happened is maybe a lot of people loved you, a lot of men specifically have loved you, but then they hurt you. And so you associate love to pain, and you received a lot of bad, bad love. You made your heart vulnerable, but then after you were loved, you were hurt. You’ve received a lot of bad love, and now you don’t want to get anymore.”

And I said “But you know what? Sandy, there’s this guy out there named Jesus Christ, and He just wants to give you good love. He wants to get rid of that bad love. He wants to give you good, good love, and He’s never going to hurt you. He’s going to love you and never betray you. In fact, there’s this passage in the scripture that says that God wants to take out your stony heart and He wants to breathe new life into you, and give you a new heart.” I said “That’s all that God wants to do. You’ve received a lot of bad love, but there’s a man named Jesus who wants to give you good love.”

I said “And in fact, Sandy,” I said, “I’m going to be a priest in 8 weeks.” I said “You, you have to come to my first mass.” I said “I’m getting ordained June 4th, I’ve go to first mass on June 5th at 1:30 PM at Saint Thomas the Apostle.” I said “It’s only about 45 minutes from here. You have to drive on June 5th and come to my first mass. And I don’t even know what I’m going to say, but I know the Holy Spirit is going to speak through me and speak through my words, and He’s going to speak directly to your heart.”

And I said “At that moment, at that first mass, He’s going to take out your stony heart and give you a new heart, and give you good, good love. Do not be afraid.” And then she looks at me, and she thinks, and she thinks, and she says “Yeah. Yeah, I’ll go. I’ll come to your first mass. I’ll go.” I said “Awesome. Great.” So we exchanged information, I wrote down all the information, gave her. We connected through Facebook, all of that, and we kept talking a little bit. On the way out, before I left the restaurant, I walked up to her again after I paid the bill and everything, and I said “Do you mind if I pray over you right now?” She goes “Yeah, that’d be okay.” And so right there, in the middle of the restaurant, I prayed over her, asked God to transform her, and I blessed her.

Walked out. Fast forward 2 months. I got ordained, I was at my first mass. I came in, I was really nervous. I did all the readings, and as I’m sitting there during the

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readings, I'm looking around for her. I'm like "Where is she at? Where is she at?" I didn't see her. I preached, didn't see her. And I was wondering where she was. I consecrated the Eucharist and I'm giving out communion, and the last person to come up was this lady in a beautiful dress. She received communion, and I didn't hear from her for a long time. We tried to make connection, but I never heard from her. I had kind of forgotten what happened, and about 4 months later I was back at that restaurant as a priest.

I forgot that she kind of worked there, and all of a sudden I see her and I'm like "There's that lady from the restaurant, from here, from my mass." And she quickly runs up to me and she says "Father, you're a priest!" I said "I am." She said "Something happened to me at that mass." She said "God did give me a new heart, He did breathe new life into me." And she said "There has not been a day that hasn't gone by when I've thought about what you said about that good, good love that God wants for me. I think about it every day, and I'm different." I said "Praise God!" and I gave her a blessing.

I share that story with you because we're all like her, right. We're afraid of this Song of Songs so often, because so many of us have received bad love, and now we're afraid. And the reality is that every relationship in our life, from someone who is either a parent or a sibling or a spouse or just a friend, they're broken like we are, and so at times they will love us, and then they will betray us. It's just part of being human, that we're not perfect, so we're going to be hurt. And if we're hurt too much, we get afraid. But we need to hear that there is this divine lover who is seeking us out. That yes, here comes my lover, He's seeking me out. He's speaks to me and says "Arise My beloved, My beautiful one, and come."

What God desires for you throughout this Advent and throughout this retreat is for you to spend some time in prayer today, and through all of Advent, asking God "Where is it that I've received bad love?" And wherever that part of your heart is, ask God to show up. To reclaim that moment and breathe new life into the place where you're hurt most. Because that's the only remedy to the bad love, is good love. The only remedy to where you've been hurt is where we need to now be saved. So every day ask Jesus "Remove this stony heart. Give me a new heart. Let me see where I've been hurt most. And once those places of hurt are identified, I need You, Jesus Christ, to ravish that part. Breathe new life into me, and give me good, good love." Do that today. Ask God where you hurt most, and then ask Him to enter in and be your divine lover.

In the name the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord and Heavenly Father, bless this, Your child. Identify with them the broken parts of their heart,

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and let them receive Your life and Your love. My Almighty God, bless You, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. God is good.