

Broken Love Songs

Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Rev. Elliott Munn

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Some of my earliest memories are set to the soundtrack of my parents' music. I helped pick up around the house while my mother played the singer-songwriters of the 60s and 70s, mainly Jim Croce and Jackson Browne. Riding to the ski mountain, my father blasted the outlaw country of the 70s and 80s, notably Hank Williams Jr. These artists hardly could have been more different, and yet one thing they shared was an abundance of love songs in their repertoires. They taught me the love song genre was complicated. Love could be a "fountain of sorrow," an operator that can't connect a call, or the faded memory of a honkytonk kindled romance. A love song does not always recount a joyous fairytale love story. In fact, these songs often reflected the angst of broken love.

Isaiah 5 begins with these words: "Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard." I am sure you deduced from our reading that this passage falls into the broken love song genre. As we interpret this love song, let's make sure we are all on the same page. How many characters do we have? We have the first character, the singer who is the beloved friend of our second character, the farmer, who tends our third character, the vineyard.

As the singer recites this song, you gain sympathy for the farmer. He cared and provided for his vines as a dedicated wine grape farmer should. The farmer heeds all the proper precautions and diligently adheres to the trades best practices, and yet the vines yield sour grapes. What a frustrating result of careful work!

Despite the farmer's best intentions, the pride of his hands produces wild fruit unbecoming the care of its planter. In a fit of disgust, he destroys the vineyard. The vines are upended; the stones of the walls tumble in disarray.

Perhaps after a negative gardening experience or two, you identify with his anger and you are looking for some stones to kick then the news drops: God is the farmer and Israel (meaning US) is the vineyard. While at times Israel references the Holy Land, it is also used throughout the Hebrew Bible to describe God's people. In the New Testament and Christian theology it is interpreted to describe the Christian Church. Here the prophet confronts Israel and therefore us with their transgressions. We are wonderfully and beautifully made for justice and righteousness, and yet we bear the bitter fruit of violence and despair. We were rooting for the brooding, disillusioned lover, and it turns out we are the one who broke his heart.

This broken love song names the part of us that comes up short. Surely, it shows the limitations of the author, who articulates his sentiment in abusive terms. This image is what the prophet

feels to be true as he projects one of the most elemental human emotions onto God. I will spare you the details of the particular event to which the scholars presume Isaiah spoke. The short of the situation is that Isaiah, like other biblical prophets, was mad about the perceived lack of attention to social injustice, primarily the widespread plight of the poor. The story he presents is a broken love song. It's angry, vindictive, and full of despair.

Nevertheless, in the midst all of this hurt, I believe the Spirit still speaks to us though this text in two ways. Firstly, it compels us to look inward. The author's subjective reality offers a mirror for us to take a long look at ourselves. How do we respond to God's love and devotion as a community? Are we using God's bountiful gifts to promote justice and righteousness? Have we taken the time to prayerfully discern what that means for us here in the Greater Hartford area? Surely we have to a certain degree. One great example is the work of our refugee resettlement group, who saw a need in the world and acted, donating money, goods, and countless hours of their time to help a young family flee danger and make our community their new home.

The second way the Spirit speaks to us is in its challenge to listen for her voice in anger. The tone of our text from this morning confronts us: have we listened for the movement of the Spirit in angry voices, hearing the love that underlies their frustration?

To tune out these impassioned metaphorical love songs is easy. They have a way of making us uncomfortable, and they aren't difficult to criticize. This past week, I listened to a podcast ridiculing college students for their intemperate protests on university campuses last fall. While the reporter did agree that there was an abundance of institutional racism on a particular campus, he rebuked the students for not wrapping their critiques in a frankly saccharine love of the institution. Rather than camping out in the President's office, he suggested they mask their anger, walk off campus, and refuse to return until their beloved university changed its ways.

Perhaps that might have worked, but his scheme is predicated upon students with little making a risky sacrifice to change the hearts and minds of privileged administrators and alumni. Although it is surely pragmatic, it places no responsibility upon the powerful to parse the words of broken love songs. It is asking the victims of institutional violence to sacrifice some more in order to stroke the egos of the powerful.

Listening to recordings of these students in the podcast, I heard genuine pain in their quivering voices. Their passion to transform the institution was raw and prophetic. The reporter failed to acknowledge the very act of composing a love song, even a paean to broken, unreciprocated love, is by its very nature a hopeful one. These songs do not originate from love's absence but rather the lover's wounds. The author of such a song is an underappreciated lover venting and overflowing with anger. To use the words of C.S. Lewis, "Anger is the fluid love bleeds when it is

cut.” This anger runs so hot because a strike shatters her perceptions of love. The broken shards are the seeds from which a deeper and more meaningful love sprouts.

The angry God of Isaiah 5 is paradoxically also Israel’s great hope: the God who frees people to hammer swords into plowshares, lions to lie with lambs, and a servant with everything to give herself for the good of the least. Although this development is not linear, we see how natural anger can be for the hopeful heart in these texts, just as we find in the composers of love songs. Even the angriest of singers can belt out joyous major chords from time to time.

While we catch a glimpse of God’s frustrated love in our text from Isaiah, we hear the hope that flows from the overwhelming persistence of God’s love in our selection from Hebrews. It offers us a glimpse of the God who steadfastly supports her people through the trials of faithfulness.

Through faith in God’s persistent love, God shaped imperfect and at times angry people, e.g. the Israelites in the desert, David, Esther. In this remarkable list of saints, Hebrews bears witness to those remarkable saints who accomplished amazing things and suffered terrible consequences when the world rejected the love they had to share. That rejection however was not the whole story. They were part of something much larger than themselves, just as our shared pioneer Jesus. They continued on through struggle and now, as a cloud of witnesses, support us along the justice journey to make known God’s persistent love for the world.

The stories of the faith are a collection of love songs. When we hear the broken love songs, may God give us ears to hear the frustrated love beneath their anger. May God give us courage to listen, offer support, and to share in their sacrifice for justice and righteousness.

After all, these broken love songs echo the greatest love song. The love song of Jesus, the pioneer, the perfecter of our faith, who lives, dies, and rises again, continuously with us, pioneering a way to create an earth as it is in Heaven.

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First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107