

I cannot remember how I first heard about it, but lately I have become absolutely consumed by a book published in 2020 with an unforgettable title: *The Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket*. Author Benjamin Lorr spent five years exploring every aspect of the apparently highly secretive grocery industry. With various chapters that focus on the history of Trader Joe's and how its founder, Joe Columbe, found a way to sell you "you," or on what has become the miserable world of trucking transportation (which Lorr describes as modern sharecropping), or on how supermarket architects design retail spaces that create what they call "physical bliss points" with "sensory cues that switch you into a certain kind of joy," it might seem that *The Secret Life of Groceries* is a modern equivalent of Upton Sinclair's muckraking *Concrete Jungle*, which in 1904 exposed the appalling and unsanitary conditions in the meat-packing industry. But the book has a more subtle and more personal agenda. It explores how our economy turns our desires into commodities; it also meditates on how our desires themselves shape, warp, and consume our economy and our culture. At the center of it all, Lorr finds something he calls "the Maw," like the jaws or the throat of a ravenous animal. He calls the Maw "that voracious devouring hole we feed three to thirty times a day, swallowing and salivating and stuffing, ceaseless in its demands right up to the point we lie in a hospital bed and it gets temporarily assisted by a polyurethane tube." He says that it is "more than just a mouth [...] anchored in need;" it is the hard-wired, baked-in, brain-deep hunger to acquire, possess, and consume. And he suggests that "each of our unique pie holes" are "mere tributaries to some more tremendous vortex right at the heart of the human project."

Lorr is dead center locked into the heart of how Christians understand human nature. We may have heard about the Seven Deadly Sins: Pride, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Greed, Envy, Sloth. In the Christian West, we have been taught to believe that the fundamental sin from which the others blossom is Pride. In our understanding, the reason that Adam and Eve ate

the Forbidden Fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was due to Pride: they wanted to be, as the Serpent promised, “like gods.” But in the Christian East, in the world of the Greek, Russian, Middle Eastern, and African Orthodox churches, the fundamental sin is Gluttony. When Adam and Eve saw that fruit and all that is represented—which was everything in the world—they wanted to possess, consume, eat, and digest it all. You may have heard of what is called “cute aggression” or “playful aggression,” which is what happens when someone—without the desire to cause harm—suffers the urge to squeeze, nibble, bite, or crush someone or something they find simply adorable. When you were a child—an infant, even—I promise you that some aunt or grandmother looked at you and, overwhelmed by irresistible positive emotions, said something like, “Oh, I could just eat you up with a spoon!” Adam and Eve, seeing in the fruit before them the entire cosmos that God created for them to rule and to serve, actually did it. In the Eastern Church, every other expression of self-absorption is an extension of that impulse. It was for this reason St. Antony and the other Desert Fathers withdrew from society and fasted severely—sometimes living on only a few lentils each day: they used their bodies to cultivate their souls like a garden in which they tamed our acquisitive, possessive nature and worked to mortify and sanctify the human heart which, with each beat, seems to cry out “Me! Mine! Me! Mine!”

This is the level from which Jesus addresses the Pharisees in today’s Gospel reading. In the Hebrew culture of 1st century Palestine, before sitting down to eat, observant Jews underwent a ritualized washing of their hands, their eyes, and their mouth. They did this not because they were afraid of germs (which nobody would know about for another 1700 years) but because they saw themselves as living in a demon-infested world; they could be infected by the spiritual contagion of another person simply by walking through their shadow in the streets. Before taking into themselves something from outside of themselves, they were instructed to cleanse themselves and thus remain pure. As we just heard, one day the

Pharisees—the teachers and exemplars of moral rigor in 1st century Palestine—notice that Jesus’ twelve Apostles do not perform this ritual; they ask Jesus why He allows them to disregard that cultural tradition. Jesus tells them and the surrounding crowd that the greatest threat to human sanctity comes not from outside influences but from internal impulses. He says, “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...(Mark 7:15-16a).” Much of American culture sees the world the way those Pharisees did. We might fear or blame personal or social failures on external forces like the media, the economy, the internet, people who think differently than we do, or even our families of origin. And there is no denying that these things can strongly influence us. But at the end of the day, our fundamental corruption comes from not from outside forces or other people but from our chronic and terminal cases of self-absorption. If we are left to ourselves to deal with that cosmic, fatal problem on our own, there is no hope. And as CBS Evening News Anchor Walter Cronkite used to say at the end of every broadcast, “And that’s the way it is.”

That’s where, surprisingly, our Old Testament reading comes in. The Song of Solomon, otherwise known as the Song of Songs, is a part of the Hebrew Scriptures that is not the Law or the Prophets but of poetry that expresses deep divine wisdom. Like the Book of Job or the Psalms, it tells truths about God that are not limited to history. At its most basic level, it is a love song: at its most literal level, it is the song of a woman who sees her beloved and rejoices because he has broken through every obstacle to come to her, to claim her, to rescue her, and to lead her outside of the walls in which she finds herself confined. “The voice of my beloved!” she says. “Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills...Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice (Songs 2:8,9).” When we read the poem, there can be no denial of the passionate and even erotic power of the dialogue between the speaker and her beloved: when you read it,

you will find it to be downright spicy. This makes it even more arresting when we realize that both the Hebrews and the earliest Christians understood this poem as an image of the love that God has for His people. In the Old Testament, God often described His relationship with Israel as like one between a husband and wife. But in the New Testament, we learn that God Himself entered His creation as the Bridegroom to shape, claim, redeem, and embrace His Bride, which is His Church, which is all of us. In John's Gospel, John the Baptizer proclaims that Jesus is the Bridegroom (John 3:29). In Mark's Gospel, Christ claims that title for Himself (Mark 2:18-20). In many of His parables, Christ describes the Kingdom of God as being like a wedding feast that a king gives for his son. God's love for us, as fallen as we are, is so great that He emptied Himself of His heavenly glory, He entered His own Creation as one of us in the Bethlehem manger, and He died for us on the Cross so that after He rose from the dead on the third day He might raise us to share His life with Him and each other forever. In the Song of Songs, therefore, we see that God's intense, passionate, yearning and burning love for us practically compels Him to break through every barrier to bring us to Himself—even those barriers we build to keep Him out. God knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows that, because we are Fallen, we are fundamentally, inextricably consumers. And in His love, power, and grace, He does not seem to care. If we seek to eat the entire world to make it our own, He comes to us and says, "I am the Bread from heaven. Whoever eats of this Bread will live for ever; and the Bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh (John 6:51)." God tells us that if we must devour something, then we should devour Him; and that in devouring we find not solipsistic solitude but grace, love, and eternal life.

In 1964, Shel Silverstein published *The Giving Tree*, a love story between a boy and a tree in his yard. The plot is simple. The boy comes to the tree five times in his life. First, as a young boy, he simply comes to play, which the tree makes possible by sharing her limbs, her

apples, and her shade. And the tree is happy. Later, as an adolescent, the boy comes needing money, which the tree makes possible by giving him her apples to sell. And the tree is happy. Then, as a young man, the boy comes needing a house for a family, which the tree makes possible by giving her limbs for planks. And the tree is happy. Then, as a middle-aged man, the boy comes for a boat to take him far away, which the tree makes possible by giving her trunk. And the tree is happy. Finally, as a weary old man, the boy comes simply wishing for a place to sit and rest. “Well,” said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, ‘well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest.’ And the boy did.” And the story ends with, “And the tree was happy.” *The Giving Tree* has recently been called one of the most divisive books in children’s literature, seeing it either positively—the tree gives the boy selfless love—or negatively—the boy and the tree have a one-way, even abusive relationship. The truth is that it is both, because it is about God and us. No matter how selfish have been, are, or ever will be, God loves us just the same and, in Christ, gives Himself to us fully and completely. The true Giving Tree is the Cross, on which God’s love poured out of his spear-pierced side to claim, defeat, redeem, and transfigure all fallen human desire and to finally set us free.

And one day, we will see Him, our divine beloved. As He stands before us on the Day of our Resurrection, He will say to us, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”