

Human Sexuality: Reclaiming God's Good Gift

Genesis 1:27, 2:23-25; Song of Solomon 4:1-7;

1st Corinthians 6:12-20

CWZepp, BWCOB, October 18, 2009

A few weeks ago, at our weekly meeting of the Brethren Student Movement, I experienced something I had never experienced before. I heard a public reading of the Song of Solomon from start to finish. I have read the book silently myself, and I have heard selected verses read out loud, such as Lori did for us a few moments ago. But that was the first time I had heard it read from beginning to end out loud. It leaves an impression.

I was tempted to try it this morning, just to share that experience. Because we don't read much from the Song of Solomon, especially on Sunday mornings. I suspect that many of us couldn't care less that it is in the Bible. And I would not be surprised if some of you right now are flipping through your pew Bible just to confirm with your own eyes that the words Lori read are indeed contained within that volume labeled "Holy."

We don't talk much in the church about sex. At least not in a plain and direct way. We might make jokes about sex. We may lament the lack of sexual morality in the world these days. But very seldom do we speak plainly and candidly about our sexuality, especially in a way that honors it as the integral part of human life that it is. When we do speak of sex and sexuality, it is often in the form of a simplistic morality with an overwhelmingly negative tone that becomes little more than a litany of "Thou Shalt Nots." So skewed is the sexual witness of the church that I have had a 7th grader in Youth Inquirers class who wasn't sure he was ready to join the church because he honestly thought that one of the Ten Commandments was "Thou shalt not have sex." Perhaps we ought to teach and speak more often and more clearly about sex.

Ironically, we live in a culture that is at once both obsessed with sex, and yet unable to speak plainly and openly about it. The church is very much a part of this culture. We could, and I believe we should, be a leading voice in helping our culture sort through the changing attitudes, norms, and practices that characterize sexual issues in our society today. But sadly, the church has too often done only one of two things in regards to matters of human sexuality. Either we have remained silent on them, holding sex as a private matter that has little relevance to the spiritual matters with which the church deals, or we have loudly proclaimed a simplistic, judgmental, and controlling morality that fails to address the complexities of our real lives and generally paints human sexuality in a negative light.

The result is that the church has largely surrendered its ability to speak on the subject of sexuality in a meaningful way in our culture, and even in the lives of many Christians. In our overwhelming silence concerning most matters of sexuality, we have left individuals and young people pretty much on their own in expressing and understanding their sexuality. In our overwhelming negativity and judgmentalism when we do speak about sex, we have rendered the church – and by association, the Christian faith – practically irrelevant in sexual decision making for the majority of people whose feelings and life experiences do not confirm a negative attitude toward sex.

But I believe that our faith **is** relevant to the expression of our sexuality, and that that relevance extends well beyond a laundry list of sexual sins to be avoided. I believe that sex is a precious and beautiful part of our human nature, a gift of God woven into the very fabric of creation. Furthermore, I believe that sex is more than a private matter, and that contrary to much popular rhetoric that would suggest that what we do between the sheets is nobody's business, sexual expression and ethics is a legitimate community affair – indeed I believe sex is everyone's business.

It was with these beliefs and background that I first proposed to my faculty advisor at Bethany seminary a design for a reading course on human sexuality that would culminate in the delivery of two sermons dealing with the subject. These sermons were originally delivered in the fall of 2006 at the Mountville Church of the Brethren, and with a few updates, I am bringing them to you this week and next.

One of the most difficult tasks that I faced in this project was the need to focus and limit its scope. So much could be said, and should be said, related to our sexuality and the wide variety of ethical issues related to it. I needed to continually remind myself that only so much can be said effectively in the context of one sermon. (Perhaps some of you will conclude this morning that I should have reminded myself of this more!) But I also needed to remind myself that my goal for these sermons was not to close the book on sex; in fact it is just the opposite. My primary goal was and is to bring a much neglected and sorely needed discussion into the public consciousness of the church. My hope is that it will lead to more intentional, thoughtful, sensitive, and ongoing discussions of sexual issues in the church, in a manner that honors both the integrity of our faith and the complexities of our sexual selves.

Three primary voices can be heard in what follows: the voice of scripture, the voice of our denominational paper *Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective* which was passed by the 1983 Annual Conference, and the voice of our contemporary context. To help provide direction and focus, I have chosen the three primary scriptures read for us a few moments ago, alongside which I hope to make the following points: 1) Sexuality encompasses much more than the physical dimension of our being; 2) Our bodies are good, and bodily sexual expression is good in and of itself; and 3) Discipline, restraint, and commitment in sexual exploration and expression are necessary for human beings to realize fully the blessing of their sexuality.

We begin, appropriately, in the beginning – the very beginning. The creation stories in the book of Genesis testify to the fact that our sexuality is at the core of our very being. The fact that the earliest account of human creation in Genesis 1:27 identifies that God created human beings male and female is telling; other characteristics such as race, intelligence, and stature are not mentioned. The implication is that that which distinguishes us as male and female beings – in short, our sexuality – is elemental to our very being, is an intentional part of God's creation, and indeed is even a part of what it means to be created in the image of God.

Furthermore, the Genesis creation accounts affirm that God created men and women to come together as "one flesh." Indeed, Genesis 2:18 quotes God as saying, "It is not good that the man should be alone." As a remedy for aloneness, God created from the body of the man (which according to many interpretations was prior to this event a sexually undifferentiated human being) a sexual partner. In the original Hebrew the transformation is even more explicit, as a rib is taken out of the non-gender specific *adam*, resulting in two new complimentary gendered beings – *ish* and *ishah*, best translated as man and woman. The story affirms that these two, having begun as

one flesh, realize that unity again in the sexual embrace – “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his woman, and they become one flesh.”

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to interpret these passages, or any others dealing with sexuality in the Bible, as referring to only the physical aspect of the sexual relationship. As our denominational paper affirms, “physical attributes, including genitals, are an integral part of our sexual identity; however, sexuality is not just physical. It includes all thinking, feeling, acting, and interacting that is derived from our maleness and femaleness.” In other words, our sexuality encompasses not only our desire for physical intimacy – to be “one flesh” with another – but also our desire for emotional and relational intimacy as well. Again the language used in the Bible is instructive. A common euphemism for sexual intercourse in the Bible is the Hebrew verb *yada*, meaning “to know.” For instance, Genesis 4 tells us that Adam “knew” his wife Eve, and she conceived. The use is hardly accidental, for our sexual natures instill in us a drive to know another person in all the depths and facets and on every level of their being – emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical.

This understanding of our sexual natures – that it is foundational to our being and encompasses much more than physicality – is one of the things that makes contemporary discussions of homosexual orientation so difficult. For if our sexuality were only physical, then the issue would be relevant only to behavior. But if we are to take the Bible seriously, not to mention our own personal experience and a host of modern scientific research, we must come to terms with the fact that our elemental and given sexual natures reach far beyond our physical expressions of that nature. We will return to this question to consider its implications more fully in next week’s sermon, but for now, we can conclude simply that sexuality is a far more comprehensive matter – broader, richer, and more fundamental to our human existence than the joining of genitals.

But before I jump too quickly to affirm that our sexuality is more than physical, I must retreat momentarily to insist on the goodness of the body and of the bodily expression of our sexuality. Because one of the unfortunate legacies of the Christian tradition is that the early church adopted wholesale much of the platonic philosophical tradition – a dualistic tradition that sharply divides the world into the spiritual and the physical, the heavenly and the earthly, with one much preferred to the other. The ramifications of this adoption were many: the body became seen as a burden to the spirit rather than a gift of creation; women were equated with a more earthly nature and regarded as inferior to men who were understood to have a more spiritual and heavenly nature; the flesh was understood to be the particular locus of sin, and most relevant for our discussion today, sex and sexuality – being a significantly bodily drive for two persons to come together in one flesh – became burdened with the stigma of sinfulness.

Foremost among those responsible for recasting our sexual natures as inherently sinful was the great theologian Augustine, who for all his celebrated contributions to our theology, allowed his own past and personal struggles with sexual sin to overshadow the inherent goodness of the human body and its sexual nature. Augustine’s attitude toward sex has had lasting and regrettable consequences in the Christian tradition. The goodness of sexual relationships was reduced to their ability to produce offspring. The biblical witness that the sexes were originally created, “because it is not good for humans to be alone” was lost. Sex became merely a regrettable means to an end – the end being children and the perpetuation of the human race. Any pleasure to be had from a physical sexual relationship was, at best, a secondary benefit to the potential for procreation.

In counterpoint to these distortions of the Christian understanding of our bodies and our sexual natures, I chose to highlight this morning a passage from the Song of Solomon. I was only half-joking in some of my opening comments about this often unnoticed and unvalued book of the Bible. We **don't** read much from this book, and many Christians would indeed be very happy if we never did. Furthermore, when we do read from it, the interpretation generally given is that it is a religious allegory using romantic love to depict God's love for the church. While I do not wish to reject this interpretation (for I think it has much value) I must insist that we look first to the Song itself. As the introductory notes to the NRSV study bible attest, and as our denominational paper likewise affirms, there are no signs within the text itself to indicate that the author intended to depict anything other than human, sexual love.

And depict that sexual love, the Song of Solomon certainly does, as we heard in the passage read this morning. I will never forget the practical joke played on us by the leader of one of our college fellowship groups when we were playing a game to see who could be the first to locate and begin to read random Bible passages that were shouted out by the leader. One day, our leader shouted out "Song of Solomon 4:5", and my friend, much to the enjoyment of everyone in the room, flipped very quickly through his Bible, stood up, and began to loudly read, "Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies."

Our Bible does indeed contain this wonderful little love song that speaks so plainly and so beautifully about sexual love. The voice of each lover is heard distinctly, and in neither is there any hint of shame in their fascination and their appreciation for the body of the other. Indeed, there are echoes of the original intentions of creation, when two were naked and were not ashamed. If we take this book of the Bible seriously and at face value, how can we draw any conclusion other than that the sexual attraction that draws men and women together in physical intimacy is a good and beautiful thing? How can we disparage the body when the two lovers in this scripture find so much delight in one another's flesh? Even if we take it as spiritual allegory, would the negative attitude towards sexual relationships that Augustine and so many others in the Christian tradition have shown be appropriate, when one of our sacred texts uses just such a relationship to depict the love of God for Israel and the church?

I believe that the only reasonable conclusion we can draw from the inclusion of a book like the Song of Solomon in our canon of sacred scripture, regardless of the choice of interpretation, is that our bodies are good, and that the sexual energy that draws bodies together is likewise good, in and of itself. There is nothing in this book to suggest that such a sexual relationship is good only because it can produce children, or that such a relationship is anything less than good, and pure, and holy. It is only the unfortunate legacy of a distorted tradition that we have come to accept otherwise.

However – and this is a very big however – we cannot give free reign to our sex drives and allow ourselves to be, in the words of one commentator, led around by the genitals. Our bodies are good and our bodies are holy – and it is because of this that we need to exercise discipline and restraint in all that we do to and with our bodies. Every good thing, in excess or improperly used, can bring harm. Even such a thing as water, consumed excessively, can be quite literally deadly. Sex is no different. As noted Brethren author Vernard Eller states in his playful but serious book *The Sex Manual for Puritans*, "although sex is the source of some of the greatest pleasure people can know, it is also the source of some of [hu]mankind's greatest unhappiness, tragedy, and heartbreak."

One needs only to look around at our society to see the adverse affects of sexual appetites allowed to run free without discipline, restraint, or commitment. Promiscuous and casual sex have contributed to the spread of a host of sexually transmitted diseases, with HIV / AIDS being only the most recent and debilitating variety. Gratuitous use of sexuality in advertising and media have cheapened its beauty and robbed it of its mystery. Pornography, prostitution, and strip clubs turn men and women into sexual objects, robbing sex of all but its physical expressions, and often leading to slavish addiction and disruptions in relationships. Lack of commitment and maturity in sexual relationships leads to unwanted and unexpected pregnancies, abortion as a form of birth control, and mothers of all ages left to raise children alone.

Hearing (and speaking) such a list might easily lead one to conclude that sex is indeed a great evil. But such a conclusion is not only unbiblical, but also potentially just as dangerous. There is no shortage of scandals in our world today to drive home this reality for us. The repression or disregard of our sexual natures, and the condemnation of the body and its appetites, is neither helpful nor faithful. Instead, we must learn to discipline our sexual natures because they are good and to develop mature restraints that allow us to discover the fullness of the blessing our sexuality has to offer us. The Bible and the church affirm that loving and committed relationships are the best place in which to discover and enjoy this blessing.

Some other guidelines for restraint and discipline are fairly clear. Any sex that is exploitive or dangerous is sinful and to be avoided. Sex that is casual and promiscuous – one night stands, visits with prostitutes, etc – is likewise corrupt and ultimately unfruitful. And sexual activity that violates covenants and commitments made by oneself or another is without question sin.

Yet there are other sexual issues that call for guidance and discipline, but are far less clear. Changing social patterns and institutions have muddied the waters when considering committed sexual relationships before or without marriage. Biblical condemnations against divorce and remarriage seem both clear and also very obsolete. Economic, family, and lifestyle factors couple with an ever increasing life expectancy to present specific sexual conundrums for older persons. Scientific evidence confirming the givenness of homosexual orientation for a fairly stable percentage of the population raises serious questions for Christians who would be both faithful and compassionate when considering sexual ethics. And as our denominational paper asserts, “the church continues to study and search for the mind of Christ in dealing with the complexities of responsible sexuality.”

We will return to one of these issues in much more depth next week. But what I want to leave us with today is the high view of sex that comes through in the scripture we read this morning from 1st Corinthians. By asserting that our bodies are members of Christ, Paul maintains that our sexual activities unite us in the flesh not only with another person, but also with the divine. This is why he finds relations with prostitutes and other sexual sins so detestable. In the end, perhaps the greatest sexual sin we can commit, according to this scripture, is to have a low view of sex – to say that it matters little what we do in the privacy of our own homes, and that what we do with our bodies is of little consequence for our spiritual life.

Because as our denominational paper concludes, and as human experience throughout history has confirmed, sexuality is indeed “God’s good gift”, and “remains for us...God’s antidote for human loneliness and the answer to the human need to have a counterpart, to be one with someone, and to be in love.” With the proper discipline, maturity, and commitment, that gift can enrich our lives, bless our days on this earth, and even give us glimpses of the Holy. And if we

accept this gift with open arms, joyful hearts, and responsible stewardship, then in the words of John Shelby Spong, “the beauty of holiness would be seen in an arena where so often nothing has been allowed save the voices of control and judgment.”

May we so embrace God's good gift of sexuality.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, for the beauty and goodness of your creation, we give you praise. For the joy and wonder of human love, we give you thanks. For the mystery and enjoyment of our sexuality, we stand in gratitude.

But Lord, we confess that we often abuse and neglect to care for this precious gift. We often fail to control our appetites and we cheapen the goodness of our sexuality. We sometimes abuse others in the process. We seek to satisfy ourselves alone, and fail to realize your purpose of mutuality in sexual relationships. We glorify sex to its own detriment, and rob it of its mystery and spiritual dimensions. And we also fail to speak plainly and openly about sex, repressing its power, and dismissing it to the shadows of our lives. We neglect to be open enough with one another and with our children about our sexuality and all its ramifications in our lives.

And so Lord, we pray for your help in all these areas, and we ask your guidance and your will in our lives. We pray especially for those trapped in the grips of sexual sins, those who struggle with sexual addictions, those who struggle with repressed sexual appetites that seek to be fulfilled. We pray for those trapped in abusive sexual relationships, for the victims, as well as for the abusers. We pray for those who struggle under the weight of the consequences of their sexual activity – with unwanted or unplanned pregnancies, with diseases, with AIDS. We pray for those who struggle in all ways with their sexuality – with their orientation, with unfulfilled yearnings, with dysfunction or lack of normal sexual drive.

O God, we know how great a gift our sexuality is. And yet we also know the pain and suffering for which it is so often responsible. So help us Lord, to use this gift wisely and responsibly. Help us to acknowledge our own temptations and struggles. Forgive us for our sinfulness. And help us to receive this gift in the Spirit in which it is given, that it might beautify and deepen all our relationships. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.