

Sacred Sexuality

Sexual Ethics in the 21st Century

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 1 Kings 11:1-4, 9-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Do you remember having "The Talk"? You know the one, about you-know-what. Do I dare even mention it by name? Maybe if I just whisper it – sex. There, I said it.

Growing up in a fairly conservative household in the Midwest during the mid-1960's, my parents never sat me down for "The Talk." What I learned about "it" came from a brief sex-education lecture and movie at my junior high school, from a 9th grade biology class, and of course from talking with the real experts, my friends.

Being just too uncomfortable to talk about sexuality, I never heard much of anything about it from not only my parents, but also not from my church. In retrospect, that's too bad, because that is an important missed opportunity. Not having children of my own, I've never had the opportunity to have "The Talk" with any of my own kids, even though it came up from time to time when I was doing youth ministry. So I'm not really sure if it's any easier in the 21st century for parents to talk about sexuality issues with their kids or not. Somehow, I doubt it. In our current Age of Information, however, it does seem that most adolescents are finding out about these issues at an earlier age.

The Presbyterian Church has also seemed to loosen up a bit when it comes to trying to make sure it adds its voice to the mix – often rightfully choosing to err on the side of too much information instead of none at all. For that I am thankful. Over the past decade, however, it seems that the Presbyterian Church now *can't* stop talking about sex. The primary impetus for such discussions has most often come in the polarized debates about whether or not to ordain to church leadership sexually active gay men and lesbian women – who, of course, are not allowed by the church and most states to be married.

This particular sermon, though, is not about the current dialogue for or against **gay marriage**. I will briefly state, however, that I am among those that support it. For one, I do not buy into the argument that legalizing and blessing a same-gender relationship somehow damages the sanctity of heterosexual marriage (whatever that's supposed to mean in a culture with a divorce rate now over 50%). More importantly, however, I need to state that **if I truly believed it was against God's will, or sinful in and of itself, then I wouldn't support same-gender relationships. With all the capacities of my heart, mind, soul, and strength, I truly believe that God is not opposed to loving, mutual, committed relationships – regardless of the genders of the couple involved.**

Concerning the Presbyterian Church's official position of proper sexual relations, the sexual ethic voted into our Presbyterian *Book of Order* concerning the ordination of pastors, elders, and deacons is referred to as the "**fidelity and chastity**" law. As in: "fidelity between a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage, or chastity in singleness." And, by the way, this chastity element of our church law applies equally to sexually active heterosexuals outside the covenant of marriage as it does to

homosexuals – even thought that part of the equation is rarely applied or even talked about.

As most of you are aware, just earlier this year the majority of presbyteries across the country defeated a progressive attempt to amend the language of this particular sexual ethic law in our *Book of Order*. Overall, I'm glad that the church is having this debate, because the church *should* be involved with the discussion of sexual ethics.

Among the greatest points of contention, however, has to do with the role of scripture in this debate. Specifically, trying to discern how the sexual ethics in the Near Middle East and Mesopotamia two to three thousand years ago applies to us today. For you see, **the Bible does not present one clear sexual ethic throughout all its pages.**

For instance, in our Old Testament passage from 1 Kings, we learned that God became angry with King Solomon (David's son) on account of his 700 wives and his 300 concubines. The source of God's anger, however, was not because Solomon was having sexual relations with 1000 women (evidently all at the same time), but that Solomon allowed them to convince him to worship other god's besides the God of Israel.

So, it seems clear to many biblical scholars that perhaps the culture of a particular time and place does indeed play a role, to some extent, in determining appropriate sexual ethics – as opposed to one universal standard that should apply to all people in all places for all time.

When it comes to sexual ethics in the New Testament, no one has more to say about it than the Apostle Paul. Narrowly interpreted, it seems that Paul takes on a "just say no" attitude when it comes to sex. But that would be a misinterpretation.

In this decidedly complex issue, we only have time this morning to look at one of the many things Paul has to say about this issue. We must begin by remembering that Paul's words come in the form of a personal letter responding to particular questions and circumstances that arose in the congregations he founded. We are hearing, then, just one side of the conversation that was taking place. But we can infer that there were some in that church in Corinth (located in modern-day southern Greece) who were pushing Paul's gospel theme of "**freedom in Christ**" beyond its limits. In other words, some believed that freedom from the Jewish laws of the Torah (especially those found in Leviticus) meant freedom to do as they pleased.

Paul walks a fine line here. While he seems to affirm the common saying, "**all things are permissible**" for Christians, he adds a qualifier: **that not all things are necessarily beneficial or helpful.** Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the Bible, entitled *The Message*, puts it this way, "**Just because something is technically legal doesn't mean that it's spiritually appropriate.** If I went around doing whatever I thought I could get by with, I'd be a slave to my whims."

In other words (and we looked at this a couple of weeks ago on the 4th of July weekend), **freedom in Christ isn't the same thing as a free license to do as one pleases.** Or to put in another way, **freedom in Christ does not mean that we are free from God.**

Paul goes on to apply this philosophy to sexual ethics. I want to briefly pause, however, to emphasize the importance of this teaching and expand it a bit. Again, **just because something isn't against the law doesn't mean that it's a healthy or beneficial behavior.**

Presbyterians, in particular, are known for a wonderful guiding principle: "Do all things in moderation." This guideline applies to most all behaviors, including: drinking, eating, gambling, watching TV, spending too much time on the computer instead of

with a loved one or family, even over-working. **Finding a proper balance in life seems to be the best guide to living a healthy and beneficial life – for you, for your loved ones, and for the community.**

But enough about that, let's get back to sex. Because **when it comes to certain sexual activities, the Apostle Paul is not advocating “all things in moderation.”** To help me explain this I want to turn to some wise words spoken at the 2004 Covenant Network of Presbyterians Conference – a progressive organization within our denomination that's kind of like More Light light. At that conference, a sermon was preached by the Rev. Susan Andrews, the former Moderator of the 2003 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the now former pastor at Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland.

In that sermon, she reveals Paul's theological position on the matter of sexual ethics with these words:

Paul proclaims that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit - that sexuality is a sacred gift to be used to glorify and enjoy God. And, Paul makes clear that erotic love becomes destructive if it is not shaped by moral and spiritual love.

The apostle is directly confronting the dualism of his day - the thinking that the body and the soul are somehow separate and that therefore, what one does with one's body simply doesn't matter when it comes to the sanctity of the soul.

The question the Corinthians were asking Paul was: In the surrounding Greek culture, where promiscuity and temple prostitution and pedophilia is socially acceptable, how is a Christian to understand the holy demands of sexual behavior?

Let me share this. **Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury in England**, has written what one commentator has called, “the best ten pages written about sexuality in the twentieth century.” Entitled “The Body's Grace,” **Williams affirms the sacred space of erotic love. But he also underscores an ethical imperative. And he does this by grounding his ideas in covenant theology.**

Let me explain. Because we are created in the image of God, Williams suggests we are called to embody the creative ethic of God. Or to use Williams own words, “to desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire...it is to ask the moral question: ‘How much do we want our sexual activity to heal and enlarge the life of others?’” (Eugene Rogers, editor, *Theology and Sexuality*, Blackwell Publishers, p. 313).

I think that is a powerful statement - **a sexual ethic that heals and enlarges the life of the other person.”**

What such a reciprocal and mutual covenant ethic suggests is that asymmetrical - unbalanced - sexual relationships are simply not part of God's vision. Sexual behavior that exhibits power over the other [person], sexual behavior that focuses just selfishly on me instead of thee, sexual behavior that hides in the shadows of shame instead of unfolding in the sunshine of God's delight - such behavior does not “heal and enlarge the life of the other [person]”. But even in that statement there is a lot to unpack, like the word *shame*. **Is shame something that comes directly from God in scripture, or is it something that society imposes on us?**

In Susan Andrew's sermon, which she entitles “Eros and Ethics,” she states:

Using Williams' critique of asymmetrical relationships, I believe we 21st century Christians must proclaim unequivocally that prostitution, promiscuity, adultery, pedophilia, clergy sexual misconduct, patriarchal heterosexual marriage, furtive [secretive] teenage sexual experimentation, "hooking up" just for casual sex - all of this is wrong - not because it breaks some antiquated rule, but because it does not heal and enlarge the life of the other [person] - because it does not honor the faithfulness and fidelity of covenant - because it does not glorify God in the temple of sacred sexuality. So, I hope we can affirm that sexuality grounded in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ does not invite open license. But neither can it be codified with narrow prohibitions.

I think I can personally concur with Andrews when she admits, "The context of real people's real sexual lives has led me to a place where **I am not always sure about what God forbids. But I know in my body and in my soul what God celebrates.**

- Sacred sexuality is about glorifying and enjoying God with the full worship of our bodies.
- Sacred sexuality is about reflecting the image of God in us by desiring the joy of the one we desire.
- Sacred sexuality is about shaping erotic love with agape love - healing and enlarging the life of the other person - even at the cost of sacrificing our own needs.
- Sacred sexuality is about sharing our bodies in the context of covenant - a faithful and monogamous and enduring relationship that reflects the dependable fidelity of our utterly faithful God.
- And sacred sexuality becomes - in the wide grace of God's redemptive plan - a way to be beneficial - a way to edify and build up the larger community of God's people.

In closing, let me reiterate. **There is no dualism in Paul's theology. There is no separation of mind from body, or soul from sensation.** As spiritual people, as sexual people, as ethical people, as beloved people - let us come to a deeper understanding that **even though Christ has set us free, not all things are beneficial for us; not all things enrich the lives of others.**

So let us strive to live as the scriptures ask of you and me, "glorify God in your body," which serves as a "temple of the Holy Spirit within you."

Amen.

Susan Andrews was Moderator of the 215th General Assembly, the first woman in parish ministry elected to the post. She is pastor of Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. In her 30 years of ministry, she has also served churches in East Hanover, New Jersey, and Allentown, Pennsylvania. She is a graduate of Wellesley College and Harvard Divinity School; she received her D.Min. from McCormick. She was named Preacher of the Year in 2000 by *Lectionary Homiletics*. Susan was a member of the Covenant Network Board from its founding in 1997 until her election as Moderator.