

III. "The Christian Faith and Sexual Ethics"

Psalm 139:13-18; Galatians 5:16-25

Six-Sermon Series: **The Family of God**

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Imagine the scene: A pastor's study. The pastor and two parishioners sit in an awkward silence. Then there is clearing of the throat and a balling up of a Kleenex and finally the question comes. "Does the Bible say it's wrong to live with somebody you are not married to if you might marry them sometime later?" The pastor had not expected a question like that. The pastor had been trained in pastoral counseling courses to suspend moral judgment and to allow room for people to make their own ethical decisions in an atmosphere of unconditional grace, but these people have not come for a dose of unconditional acceptance. They have come in search of something else. They have come in search of something that is missing in their lives. What is missing is an understanding of how to live in an age in which the operative ethic has become doing what you want to do, when you feel like doing it. They have come because they want to know if the church has anything to offer to people of faith who are trying to negotiate the complex landscape of romance and love and, at the same time, maintain moral authenticity.

The quest for intimacy; the search for ethical guidance: two deeply important and interrelated matters of faith. We talk a great deal in the Christian community about matters of social ethics, addressing ourselves often to issues of peace and justice, and well we should, because the God of

peace and justice would have us do no less, and yet, either because of perplexity or timidity, we seldom address the ethical aspects of our personal lives.

We addressed the subjects of marriage and divorce last Sunday. This week in our six-week series on “The Family of God”, I want to speak to concerns married and single people share. For one thing, both married and single people are sexual beings, created that way by God. For another, both married and single people need intimacy. (1) God put within every human being the desire to know and to be known, to understand and to be understood – The need for connectedness is a universal human characteristic, just as sexual desire is an inherent part of being human. They are both good gifts from God to be used responsibly and creatively. In Genesis, the story tells God made the human creature, and God said, “It is not good for that human creature to be alone.” (2) The human creature already had everything you could imagine anyone would need: food, air, water, beauty, a mind to think with, eyes to see with, ears to hear with. But God wanted us to have a heart that yearned for another heart, and so God, knowing just what we would need, gave us the ability to love. Think about it. Of all the creatures God created, from the amoeba to the antelope, the human being is the only creature God blessed with the ability to express sexuality lovingly. It is God’s unique gift to us.

As a character in Albert Camus’ “The Plague” puts it, “There comes an hour when one is weary of one’s work and devotion to duty and all one craves is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of another loving heart.”

What then shall we do? The culture says, “Do anything you want to do.” The culture says that there is no longer any connection between sexuality and intimacy. I still can’t get over the letter that was in Dear Abby a few years ago: “Dear Abby, I am a twenty-three-year old liberated woman who has been on the pill for two years. It’s getting pretty expensive, and I think my boyfriend should share half of the expense, but I don’t know him well enough to discuss money with him yet.” Hooking up is, I understand, the latest culture craze among the college set. The culture tells us everyday that no-strings-attached sex is AOK, that sex is essentially about self-gratification, and therefore we can say “yes” to sex without love, much less marriage, without blinking an eye. Probably the most insidious thing the culture tells us about sex is that it is the most important thing in the world.

As for the church, it has said different at different periods in history. In her book *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, National Book Award Winner Elaine Pagels traces the rise of traditional patterns of gender and sexual relationships during the first four hundred years after the birth of Christ and finds that many of those patterns marked a drastic departure from Jewish tradition. Often they were borrowed from other traditions, especially the Stoic. Often, too, they were a response to the sexual license that marked Greco-Roman society. Celibacy, for example, came to occupy its lofty place as the height of Christian morality, in part, because it was the ultimate rejection of “the world”, and because it enabled human beings to gain freedom from all that might control them, so that their fidelity and love could belong to God alone.(3)

For the early church, next best to celibacy was marriage, but with procreation as the good and the goal. The Catholic tradition contended that the sole purpose of sexual union was procreation. Not a new idea of course. Nomadic Jewish communities had depended on reproduction, both of their flocks and themselves for survival. (Polygamy and divorce increased opportunity for reproduction, and these were allowed in Jewish culture.) (4)

Protestant theology brought forth a fresh point of view. Based on their understanding of Scripture, Martin Luther and John Calvin particularly affirmed that not only procreation, but companionship and intimacy were legitimate parts of marriage and a part of God's original purposes.

What does the Bible say? It depends on where you turn. If you turn, for example, to the sensual Song of Solomon, you find an unself-conscious celebration of sensuality. But if you turn to Deuteronomy, you have a whole different kettle of fish. If you messed around before your marriage, according to the 22nd chapter of Deuteronomy, you stood the very likely possibility of being stoned to death before you got the thank-you notes for your wedding presents written.

When we come to the New Testament, the new covenant is in effect. The law was in your heart, not because you were going to get caught if you messed up, but because through the redeeming grace of God, you can choose what is good for you.

Jim Wall, who writes for *The Christian Century*, remembers his mother's telling him that he should act on a date as if Jesus were riding on the front

seat beside him. He said that at the time, he wasn't very thrilled with the thought of thinking about Jesus riding on the front seat of the car. He says that now that he is grown, he thinks his mother might have been on to something. (5) Ethical decisions need to be made with a conscience informed by, shaped by, something outside ourselves. That is how the law gets written in our hearts.

What does Jesus say about sex and intimacy? Not much. It is helpful to remember that Jesus operated inside an understanding of reality in which it was "necessary to prepare for the end of the world and to free oneself for the age to come." (6) It is clear though, that throughout his ministry, Jesus was concerned more with redemption than with rules. He did not berate people about their pasts so much as he invited them to step into a new way of living.

Paul was more explicit, even though Paul believed the Second Coming was just around the corner and only those with weak constitutions would give sex a thought. It was almost in spite of himself that Paul wrote the splendid treatise on sexual ethics in his letter to the Galatians that was our New Testament Lesson. We have been freed, he says, from the old law, but not so that we can wreak havoc with one another with impunity, but so that we can love one another without harming one another. In other words, we are not free from responsibility but we are free to be responsible to one another. Paul does not say that the flesh is bad. He says that flesh alone is bad and that when we treat another human being without respect, when sexuality is expressed without mutuality, then there is sin, and the works of the flesh occur.

The works of the flesh can occur in any relationship. They can occur in a marriage relationship, as well as in a relationship between single people whenever one partner is treated as an object by another. Whenever there is emotional coercion or physical coercion, then the Spirit of the living God is not served. (7)

In a like manner, the fruits of the Spirit can be found in all sorts of human relationships. Whenever there is mutuality present, love and joy and peace and patience and faithfulness, and humility and self-control, the fruits of the Spirit are present.

How then, should we live in an age of casual sex, when neither the threat of hell nor the fear of pregnancy causes many people to tremble anymore? One of the great paradoxes of our time is that it is only the fear of AIDS that seems to have slowed down the sexual revolution a bit. I would offer that the fear of disease is hardly a foundation sturdy enough for people to build their personal ethic on.

I want to suggest three principles for sexual behavior that grow out of Biblical faith. As Christian ethicist James Nelson, among others, suggests: First, a single not a double standard should apply. There should not be one standard for men and another for women, one standard for married people and another for single people, one standard for people who are able-bodied and another for those with a disability. Anything else is unjust and as God is just, so must our sexual standards be. (8)

Secondly, the level of physical intimacy, according to Biblical faith, needs to be appropriate to the level of commitment. In other words, the stronger the covenant, the deeper the level of intimacy. Would that young people had role models that told them not only to practice safe sex, but that casual sex is not a morally neutral activity. (9)

The third guideline that emerges from Biblical faith (this is very counter to the culture?) is that sexual expression should be motivated by love - love for the partner, but also love for oneself and celebration of one's love for God, who gave us the mysterious and powerful gift of communion with the other.

I close with one final bit of wisdom from our tradition. Genesis, and, in fact all through the Scripture, when the writer wants to say that a man and a woman had sexual relations, the Hebrew phrase that is used is "to know": "Adam knew Eve and she conceived and bore Cain." What wisdom there is in that word! When people are physically involved, there is always more than biology going on. (10) May the God who gave sexuality as a gift give us the wisdom to use it joyfully and responsibly for the mutual enrichment of one another and to serve God's good purposes. Amen.

(1) Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *Sexuality*, The Westminster Press, 1984, p. 14.

(2) Genesis 2:18.

(3) Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, Random House, New York, 1988.

(4) Ibid.

(5) *The Christian Century*, June 1, 1988.

(6) Pagels.

(7) Jon Walton, in a sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware, July 24, 1988.

(8) James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*, Augsburg, 1978.

(9) James M. Wall, *The Christian Century*, "Moral Wisdom and Sexual Conduct," December 4, 1991, p. 1124.