

God's Plan for Sexual Intimacy

4th Weekend after the Epiphany – Color: Green – January 29/30, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Genesis 2:24-25

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

1 Corinthians 7:1-4 (from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*)

Now, getting down to the questions you asked in your letter to me. First, "Is it a good thing to have sexual relations?"

Certainly—but only within a certain context. It's good for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband. Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder. The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality—the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to "stand up for your rights." Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out.

This week, we look at the biblical understanding of human sexuality, esp. in the context of marriage.

When talking about marriage, both Jesus and Paul hearken back to Genesis and the making of a man and a woman into "one flesh." For Jesus, more important than talking about the rules of divorce is considering how one could ever divide what God has made into "one flesh" (Matthew 19:3-9). For Paul, how could a husband do anything other than cherish his wife? They are already "one flesh" and no normal man abuses his own body, so how could he not pamper and honor his own wife (Ephesians 5:25-33).

One flesh

We live in a world awash in sex and sexual images. A visiting Martian that spent any time in front of a TV, movie screen, or stereo would leave convinced that the pinnacle of human achievement and fulfillment is a great sexual experience. In our modern world, the traditional teachings of the church seem quaint, old-fashioned, and utterly meaningless. God comes off as some sort of cosmic spoilsport who wants nothing more than to interfere with our endless quest for yet another thrill. The truth is that in the last fifty years, we, the church, have been remarkably unpersuasive when it comes to sex and morality.

Nonetheless, in keeping with the Scriptural witness, the church has always, and still does, insist that marriage, the union of a man and a woman, is a gift from God. We hold that our sexuality is God's gift to

Being a Careful Reader of Paul

Last spring, I taught a class on 1 Corinthians. It is a lengthy and surprising letter. We often hear only bits and pieces of it and those are usually pretty carefully edited so as not to offend. But Paul intends to offend. At times, he is simply astounded by the actions of many of the new Christians in Corinth. In an attempt to get them back on track, Paul answers many of their questions, ranging from whether meals ought to be eaten in the pagan temples to the sexual lives of husbands and wives.

Sometimes, translators of Paul's letters can be pretty unclear. If you have an NRSV or NIV translation you might open it to 1 Corinthians 7 and compare it to Peterson's paraphrase. Paul begins by responding to a maxim offered up by the Corinthians: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." They want Paul's comments on this maxim, in which "to touch a woman" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Thus, they are asking Paul whether it is a good thing or a bad thing to have sexual relations. Some of the Corinthian Christians seem to be preaching a message of celibacy for everyone. Now, Paul understands celibacy to be a gift; he is celibate himself. But Paul is no fool. He knows that most people are not given the gift of celibacy and that the only proper place for sexual relations is in marriage. As Paul says, "It is good for a man to have a wife and for a wife to have a husband." Indeed, by "have," Paul means what we sometimes mean – the husband and wife having the sexual enjoyment of each other.

All this matters because Paul has so often been misunderstood as hating marriage, or at least seeing it as a necessary evil. And the same for sex. But, this is because he has been misread. For Paul to acknowledge his own spiritual gift of celibacy does not imply that he devalued marriage.

Regrettably, we are also often blind to Paul's surprising challenge to the social world of his day. Paul insists upon mutuality in marriage, at a time when marriages were anything but mutual. He writes that each spouse possesses the body of the other; they are to satisfy one another. There is no standing up for one's rights. After all, they are one flesh.

all persons. And we hold that sexual relations are affirmed only within the marriage bond.¹ Husband and wife are “one flesh.” This is clearly scriptural, but is it simply arbitrary? How might sexuality and its place within marriage fit into the larger picture of our humanness and our relationship with God?²

Intimacy

Humans are sexual beings, remarkably so. Our sexual drives are so powerful that they often threaten to consume us and sometimes do. Surely there is more at work here than procreation. Our sexuality need not be such a firestorm if its only purpose is to ensure the survival of the species. Our sexual practices are not like those of other species. For humans, sex is not simply an act, it is a personal encounter, it is emotional, it is intimate. To the extent that we try to separate personal intimacy from the physical act, we diminish our humanity for, of all creatures, we alone are created in the image of God.

The seemingly dry and boring doctrine of the Trinity is key here.³ We proclaim the unity of one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bound to each other in eternal relationships of love and community, each of them fully and completely God, though not all of God. We can't fully understand this glorious mystery, but we can understand that God is love, that God is inherently relational and that being made in God's image, we too are inherently relational. We are built for relationships. We are built for intimacy ~ with God and with one another. And in our sexual intimacy, we experience for a time, a unity like no other. As Philip Yancey writes, “Two independent beings open their inmost selves and experience not a loss, but a gain. In some way – a ‘profound mystery’ not even Paul dared explore – this most human act reveals something of the nature of reality, God's reality, in his relations with creation and perhaps within the Trinity itself.” Understanding sexual intimacy in this way helps us to embrace the becoming of “one flesh” as something that we need to protect. Perhaps we can understand better why God insists that sexual intimacy, this physical union, be confined only to an exclusive, covenantal relationship – to marriage.

Let's go one step further in this with Paul. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is so obviously distressed by their sexual abuses that he tries to shock them into reality. He writes, “Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, ‘The two shall become one flesh.’ But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee immorality!” (1 Cor 6:16-17).⁴ Contemplate that for a minute. As Richard Hays writes, Paul's argument “presupposes that sexual intercourse cannot be understood merely as a momentary act that satisfies a transient natural urge. Instead, it creates a mysterious but real and enduring union between man and woman.” And this union is to be only the union of marriage; it is a foretaste of our union with Christ.

Fidelity

Let's look at where we've been in this series. Love is a choice. It is about what we do. True love is self-giving rather than self-seeking. Marriage is the loving union of one man and one woman. Through God's gift of sexual intimacy, husband and wife bond as “one flesh,” a bond so profound that it is a sign to their union with Christ, a bond so intimate that it is to be shared with no other person. God values marriage so highly that God is willing to use marriage as a metaphor for his own relationship with us. In a striking image, so far as God is concerned when we chase after false idols we are committing adultery.

The biblical perspective on love, marriage, and sex is that these gifts are all far more valuable than many of us want to acknowledge. These gifts from God are to be guarded and cherished, hence the teachings on sexual fidelity. As husbands and wives, our sexual energies – body, mind, and spirit – are to be poured into our marriage, toward our spouse.⁵ Jesus taught that adultery is more than the physical act (Matthew 5:27); when our sexual energies are directed outside the marriage, our marriage is diminished. God calls us to lives of faithfulness in all things, and utter faithfulness to our spouse.

¹This is language from the UMC Book of Discipline and is consistent with the teachings of most Christians for the last 2,000 years including all the major branches and denominations of Christendom today.

²Philip Yancey is a thoughtful, honest Christian and an excellent writer. I very much recommend his chapter, “Designer Sex,” in his book, *Rumors of Another World*. It was a big help to me in preparing this study.

³Christian theology often seems awfully disconnected from the real world lives we lead, but this is only because we forget that beliefs and ideas have consequences. In truth, we are all theologians whether we acknowledge it or not.

⁴When Paul says “flee immorality,” his Greek is clear; the “immorality” is sexual relations outside marriage.

⁵This is why pornography poses such danger to marriages – it diverts our sexual energies outside our marriage and away from our spouse.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on human sexuality, in marriage and out)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Leviticus 18 Holiness in sexual behavior. This is a long list of sexual taboos. God's people are to be different from the people around them. ("Uncovering nakedness" in the NRSV is a euphemism for sexual relations).</p>	<p>Day 2 2 Samuel 11:1 - 12:23 The story of David's adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of her husband, and the death of their child.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Corinthians 5 Paul is presented with a shocking case of sexual immorality. Paul's primary focus is on protecting of the Christian community, even if that means asking someone to leave the community.</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 Glorifying God in body and spirit.</p>
<p>Day 5 Colossians 3:1-17 For Paul, this new life in Christ underlies all of his instruction and advice.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Some recommended books on marriage

Rev. Doug Meyer has compiled a list of seven books on marriage that you might find helpful:

- *Creating a Good Relationship*, William J. Lederer
- *Bringing Home the Joy*, Dr. Kevin Lehman
- *As for me and my House*, Walter Wangerin, Jr.
- *Recreating Marriage with the same old Spouse*, Sandra G. Bender
- *Hidden Keys of a Loving, Lasting Marriage*, Gary Smalley
- *Love is a Decision*, Gary Smalley & John Trent
- *Do it Yourself Marriage Enrichment*, Warren Ebinger

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

When it comes to discussions of sex and sexual behavior, the church's teachings often devolve into rules-making. *Why not have sex before marriage? Because God says so!!* For many people, that is a pretty unpersuasive approach. If a young person came to you and asked you *why* the Bible teaches sexual abstinence outside marriage, what would you say? What would you say if the young person says that abstinence is just not realistic? What practical guidance might you offer? How might the church begin to recover the importance of its teachings about sexuality and marriage? How can we be persuasive?

English translations of Paul's letter to the Corinthians makes a difficult subject that much more confusing. But if we assume, as we should, that Paul values the marriage covenant as a gift from God, then you might discuss Paul's teachings about mutuality in marriage. Paul is very bold in telling a Greco-Roman husband that his wife has as much right to his body as he does to hers. What picture of an ideal sexual relationship for a husband and wife emerges from Paul's writings? What can we learn here about marriage?

Adultery, having sexual relations with anyone other than one's spouse, is one of the oldest taboos in the Bible. It even made the top ten list, alongside murder and theft. Why do you think this is so? What does the absolute prohibition against adultery teach us about marriage? Even if both spouses wanted to have some sort of "open" marriage (I think that is still the term!), the biblical answer would still be no. Why? Jesus goes further than Paul. If we think that we have avoided adultery by not engaging in the physical act, Jesus reminds us that it is our hearts that really matter. Energies, attention, and fantasies directed to someone other than our spouse diminishes our marriage. Do you agree? How might we go about ensuring that all our sexual energies are directed to our spouse?