

Gray Has More Than 50 Shades: Let's Talk About Sacred Sexuality
Matthew 5:21-37 (*Song of Songs 2*)

It might strike you as odd
that in the midst of Jesus's sermon on the mount
we'd launch into a sermon
about sacred sexuality.
Whit and his ideas...I tell ya' what...

But actually it's verse 27-30 that got the ball rolling.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Don't commit adultery.' But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. And if your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell." (Matt. 5:27-30)

Jesus is here it seems to just shake things up. That must have been what the people thought as they heard his sermon. Especially the men. He has a way of radicalizing the rule. "You have heard it said," he starts out. "But I say to you..." Jesus is "...insisting that looking at a woman lustfully is already an expression of adultery."¹ Jesus's sermon is to a 1st century, male oriented culture. One that considers *adultery* an act of theft because by committing a sexual act with a woman you are not married to, means you are attacking another man's property.

AHEM. But Jesus, in contrast to this mindset of women or anyone being property recognizes that this 1st century world makes women objects to be possessed and declares that to even look at a woman lustfully is to rob her of her humanity.² Boom, mic drop. That should be the end of it, right?

Friends, I feel the need to point out the obvious. Nearly 2000 years later, we are still robbing each other of our collective humanity. And it isn't just lustful leering, though that is a huge part of the issue. **There seems to be a lack of language to talk about us as embodied sexual creatures within our life's work of following Jesus.** And because there isn't a real push to talk about it - at least not outside sex education for adolescents; we focus all our attention on feeding the hungry; caring for the poor; comforting the outcast. Which is exactly what we are meant to do but, but let us not do these things at the cost of neglecting the grace and humanity of each other's sacred, embodied sexuality.

Our culture has perhaps dictated to us what we should feel about our sexuality. Some more conservative Christians might describe the culture as too loose when it comes to matters of

¹ Stan Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew* Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2010 pg.39

² *Ibid* pg. 40

sexuality. Some more liberal Christians might describe the culture as too antiquated when it comes to sexuality. And others of us, raising children are just plain scared to death.

Perhaps one area of sexual perversion that is worth mentioning is pornography. The Barna Group, a respected, religious survey group, did a sweeping study of pornography in America. One result is finding that porn is less taboo than it once was. When speaking with their friends, the survey found the 89% of teens (ages 13-17) and 95% of young adults (ages 18-24) talk about porn in a neutral, accepting, or encouraging way.³ And realistically pornography is hard to define; Barna's editor-in-chief Roxanne Stone notes that, for Americans, it is a matter of both form and function. "The most common definition of pornography among Americans is any image used for sexual arousal or masturbation," she says.⁴ But there's also the recognition that the pornography industry contributes to many social ills such as the objectification of women and the exploitation of teenagers and children.⁵

Sexting comes into play as well. "66% of teens and young adults have received a sexually explicit image via text and 41% have sent one."⁶ I remember almost 8 or 9 years ago a girl in our sr. high youth group sent a partially nude picture to a guy she was interested in - he sent it to his friends, and they sent it to their friends and then somehow it made its way to the office and the principal. Can you imagine? More girls than boys have sent explicit images, (Stone notes,) which may mean that young males are often the ones pressuring their female friends to take off their clothes.⁷

In an article called, *Sex Before Kissing*, a recent study in Australia found that teenage, "Girls are expected to provide sex acts for tokens of affection, and are coached through it by porn-taught boys. A 15-year-old girl said she didn't enjoy sex at all, but that getting it out of the way quickly was the only way her boyfriend would stop pressuring her and watch a movie."⁸

Vanity Fair has called the Tinder app, the dating apocalypse. This app is designed for you to be able to access pictures of people right around you, say in a bar or social gathering. If you like the way someone looks, you swipe right, otherwise left. If two people swipe right, then the app notifies them and you can have a conversation via text. A guy named Alex told VF that he has slept with 5 girls in 8 days using the app. His friends call him the "Tinder King" because he is able 'to entice young women to his bed on the basis of a few text exchanges.' We have let sex, what should be a powerful and intimate act between two people become a booty call for strangers.⁹

³ <http://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/#.Vp5-fzb6fNU>

⁴ <http://religionnews.com/2016/01/20/christians-pornography-problem/>

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ <http://fightthenewdrug.org/sex-before-kissing-15-year-old-girls-dealing-with-boys/>

⁹ Morgan Guyton, *How Jesus Saves the World from Us: 12 Antidotes to Toxic Christianity* Westminster John Knox 2016 pg. 48

This isn't what we want for our children. It isn't what we want for each other. And perhaps it is time that we Christians said something. Perhaps it a time that we find our language to tell the world that no one's humanity is up for grabs. Perhaps it is time to reclaim the language of creation and language of being redeemed bodies capable of a joy and desire in healthy mutual ways.

So we will not leave out that language today. Today we will openly talk about our sacred sexuality in a community that promises together to respect each other's humanity; a community that promises to uphold the value of people and healthy relationships; a community that is committed to raising up women and men, girls and boys who celebrate their sacred sexuality as it is informed by their Christian faith.

Because our faith does have language that we can use. Our rich tradition does have language about creation being birthed from God's love and how given the power to create is too a gift of love. Our faith does have a language for redemption that involves not just redemption of our "thought to be separate" souls, but redemption for our bodies, for our land and for our culture. When we are willing to let ourselves explore the language that is already there I think we will find a rich tapestry that celebrates our bodies just as much as our souls. Our faith teaches us that as human beings, we are by nature given a sense of belonging. From the very beginning, we are designed to be in relationship with God and with others around us. The church has traditionally down played the role of the body in our faith. Paul has often been the blame for the separation of body and spirit. As if to say, that the flesh is weak and the spirit is strong.

But that has been all error. Jesus did not sit at table with his disciples and say to them, *this bread is really a metaphor for your mind so that you can think about me and then pass on*. He said, this bread is my very body that is broken and given to you, take and eat. IS there a more fleshy, bodily example? The very table we gather around is a sign of our individual and corporate body's need to be fed not just by food but by relationships. Fed by Christ, fed by each other, fed as a whole.

But what does this have to do with sexuality? Well a heck of a lot. If we as Christians continue to separate out the body from the spirit, then we create in us a moral division that allows for misinterpretation of our gospel here at now. If there is a difference between who we are as bodies and spirits then it doesn't matter what we do with or to our bodies because all that matters is the spirit. All that matters is the intangible of what we imagine to be next in life rather than what is tangible right before us. If we are willing to continue to ignore the body, then we continue to rob each other of our sacred sexuality and our God given humanity.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury has written a beautiful article titled *The Body's Grace*. In it, he explores the sacredness of our sexuality while calling us to attend to ethics of that sexuality. This in turn should inform how we, as Christians view all kinds of bodies and the grace we all inherently hold. For Williams there is no doubt that we were designed as sexual creatures. He cites that arousal and desire are linked not to solo reactions of *the body*, they must be reactions of *bodies*. Arousal must be recognized

for anything more to happen. 'So desire, if is to be sustained and developed must be perceived by another; and it must be perceived as desirable by the other - so that my arousal and desire must become the cause of someone else's desire.'¹⁰ Williams defines sexual perversion as, "**sexual activity without risk, without the dangerous acknowledgement that my joy depends on someone else's as theirs does mine.** Distorted sexuality is the effort to bring my happiness back under my control and refuse to let my body be recreated by another person's perception - this then is in effect a way that I withdraw my body from the enterprise of human beings making sense in collaboration, [and] in community..."¹¹ "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?" What a beautiful sexual ethic! - One that heals and enlarges the life of the other!

In our sexual education for our adolescents, Kari Fisher reminded me that we tell youth to remember the acronym:

MARC - *is what I'm about to do mutual;*
is it appropriate;
is it respectful;
is it caring?

Does bringing my full humanity as a sexual creature heal and enlarge the life of my partner? An embodied sacred sexuality recognizes, "To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire; my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body."¹² Which means the story of creation, the story of incarnation, and the story of the incorporation into the body of Christ, is the grand story of God desiring us...this is the story God tells us so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God's self.¹³ **God's joy is desiring our joy.**

Remember the story of the fall in the garden - a story that became one of shame and guilt and especially shame and guilt that meant covering the body? Well Phyllis Tribble thinks that the book Song of Songs is revisited to the garden. Song of Songs is scripture of the redemption of our created bodies. It is a story of celebrating our sacred and divine designed sexuality.

Now that is language that embodies our sacred sexuality. Rev. Susan Andrews writes, "Sexual behavior that exhibits power over the other, sexual behavior that focuses 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". She continues, "I believe we 21st century Christians must proclaim unequivocally

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, The Body's Grace <http://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf>

¹¹ ibid

¹² ibid

¹³ Ibid

that prostitution, promiscuity, adultery, pedophilia, clergy sexual misconduct, patriarchal heterosexual marriage, furtive teenage sexual experimentation, “hooking up” for casual sex – all of this is wrong – **not** because it breaks some antiquated rule, but because it does not heal and enlarge the other – because it does not honor the faithfulness and fidelity of covenant - because it does not glorify God in the temple of sacred sexuality.”¹⁴ “Properly understood, sexual faithfulness is not an avoidance of risk, but the creation of a context in which grace can abound because there is a commitment not to run away from the perception of the other.” So when we bless [our sacred sexuality], we give [it] life, a realityso that our bodes full of grace may have freedom to take the time, to mature and become as profoundly nurturing as they can.¹⁵

“Grace for the Christian believer is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way; as significant, as wanted.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Susan Andrews, Eros and Ethics <http://covnetpres.org/2004/11/eros-and-ethics/>

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, The Body’s Grace <http://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf>

¹⁶ *ibid*