

Let's Talk About It: Sacred Sexuality
Song of Solomon 2, 1 Corinthians 6:12-23, Matthew 5:27-32
First Presbyterian Church
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Our Old Testament lesson comes from the Song of Solomon. Now, if you haven't spent much time with the Song of Solomon, you may be excused since for centuries the church has been very suspicious, if not downright hostile to this book. You see, this book is love poem. It's an extended celebration of human love that is graceful and sensuous... and if the truth be told, downright erotic in places. Truly... if you're not careful, some of this stuff will make you blush – and it's right here in the middle of the Old Testament.

Well, in chapter 2 we get to listen in on a dialogue between a man and woman who are very much in love... and very much attracted to one another. And because this is a dialogue between a man and woman in love, rather me reading it in one voice or worse, me reading it with John, I asked Dale and Kathleen Menard if they would honor us by reading Song of Solomon, chapter 2. They graciously agreed and I am grateful.

Song of Solomon 2

2I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. ²As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens.

³As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. ⁴He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love. ⁵Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am faint with love. ⁶O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me! ⁷I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the wild does: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!

⁸The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. ⁹My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. ¹⁰My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; ¹¹for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. ¹²The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. ¹³The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

¹⁴O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. ¹⁵Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards— for our vineyards are in blossom." ¹⁶My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies. ¹⁷Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

¹²“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. ¹³“Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,” and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. ¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, “The two shall be one flesh.” ¹⁷But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. ¹⁸Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. ¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? ²⁰For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Matthew 6:27-30

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Sermon

When earlier in the week we shared that today’s sermon is about “sacred sexuality”, I wonder what your reaction was? “Yay!”? “Oh, no!”? “Uh-oh!”? I can tell you my reaction (along about Wednesday afternoon) – “What in the world were you thinking? C’mon, Malone... the lectionary readings are rich with possibilities this week. You could have done a perfectly fine sermon on any number of other topics.” Like many of you, I grew up in a home where folks just didn’t talk about sex... not in public or polite conversation and absolutely never in church. Some of you might prefer to keep it that way... and if so, I completely understand. Yet, for a number of reasons, Heather and I thought it important enough to step a little farther out on the homiletical limb and speak this morning about sacred sexuality. We do this because if we didn’t... if we never talked about sex in church... then people who come to church might make one of two false assumptions.¹ The first false assumption is that we don’t care. We talk about things we care about... that’s part of being human. And if we don’t talk about sex in church then someone might assume that we don’t care about something that is so important to people’s lives. Or even worse, that God doesn’t care. Our silence might be interpreted as lack of concern for our young people who are developing and learning who they are as sexual beings. It might be heard as dismissing all of the pain and frustration that people experience with sex. And it might be interpreted that God doesn’t care what we do with our bodies and minds and spirits. The clear

¹ Thanks to Bob Thompson and his sermon “Holy Ground” preached August 21, 2016 at Corinth Reformed Church, Hickory, NC.

message of our world is that our sex lives are off the table for moral discussion. We don't believe that... and in no way do we want to reinforce that message by our silence.

The second false assumption is sort of the flip side – that we care TOO MUCH... that to us and to God sex is the most important thing. There are churches and preachers for whom the so-called “sexual sins” seem to be the ONLY sins. Well, not to pick on them, but this at least one reason why fewer and fewer people come to church – the perception that we're so hung up on who is sleeping with whom that we completely ignore a whole host of issues that are also important to Jesus. So even if I am a little more nervous today than most Sundays, I feel like the church should be a place we talk about what's truly going on in our lives... about what's really going on around us in our world... because if we can't, why even bother?

First, we have our Old Testament lesson that Dale and Kathleen read from the Song of Solomon. The setting for this dialogue between lovers is out of doors in a beautiful garden – a fact that has led Bible scholar, Phyllis Trible, to suggest that what we have here is the recreation of the Garden of Eden BEFORE the fall... and that this grace-filled, uninhibited, and erotic love describes what could have been... and what can be again.² Trible compares the Garden of Eden with this re-created Garden of Eros. In the Garden of Eden we find sexuality entangled with guilt and judgment and shameful nudity. But in the Song of Solomon we find love that is woven together with play and imagination and delight... the body is good... nudity is good. Nudity is good and there is no guilt anywhere. In Genesis we find pain in childbirth, unequal power between the lovers, and a suggestion that adult love demands leaving ones father and one mother. But in the Garden of Eros, childbirth is eagerly anticipated, the Rose of Sharon invites her beloved into her mother's chamber for the consummation of their love, and their relationship is one of mutuality and passion. Though God is never named in the Song of Solomon, God's delight and creativity saturates every verse... it is embedded in each sensuous word. It is describing God's love story NOT gone awry - a story of the sacred goodness and joy and delight and pleasure that God has implanted in our bodies... a wonderful and precious gift to be lived out responsibly and joyfully to the glory of God.³ This is the message of the Song of Solomon... next we turn to the Apostle Paul.

Now it may seem quite a stretch to connect the intense prose of the Apostle Paul to the vivid poetry of the Song of Solomon, but a careful reading reveals that Paul reaffirms the Song of Solomon's main point: that the human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit... and that sexuality is a sacred gift to be enjoyed and used to glorify God. It is from this conclusion that Paul makes his case that erotic love is beautiful and very good... but like all the other gifts of God, it becomes destructive if not shaped by moral and spiritual love.

The city of Corinth was an example of what can happen. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city filled with international business travelers. With a population of about 250,000, it had a reputation a bit like Las Vegas does today - “What happens in Corinth stays in Corinth.” The temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love) was one of 26 temples in the city, but Aphrodite's temple was the most famous and was essentially an ancient red-light district. One first century

² Phyllis Trible in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, (Fortress Press-1978)

³ Thanks to Susan Andrews for this summary of Trible's work. Her sermon is “Eros and Ethics.” It was preached on November 5, 2004 at the gathering of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.

writer says that a thousand sex slaves lived in Corinth and were available to the business travelers who engaged in illicit sex under the cover of religion.⁴ So in this Greek culture... where promiscuity and temple prostitutes and even pedophilia was socially acceptable... followers of Jesus had good reason to ask Paul what they were to do... how were they to understand the holy demands of sexual behavior?

The mantra in first-century Corinth was “Everything is permissible.” Knowing this... Paul cleverly mimics this mantra and plays the devil’s advocate. “All things are lawful,” he says... but not all things are beneficial – all things may be allowed, but not all things empower and honor others – not all things feed the soul... not all things build up the Body of Christ. And so, when it comes to the freedom of sexuality created by God, the question for Paul is this: how can our sexual behavior glorify God and truly bless the one we love?

Now, the particular behavior Paul was addressing in Corinth was temple prostitution – something that thankfully is not widely practiced today. But the question is as relevant now as it was then: how can our sexual behavior glorify God and truly bless the one we love? I’d like us to ask this question in the context of one of the most prevalent sexual behaviors being practiced today – the use of pornography. Because if Paul were writing to us today, I have no doubt that he would address the prevalence of porn in our society as a whole and especially among Christians.

About a year ago, the respected Barna Group reported on a sweeping study of the usage and attitudes toward pornography in our country. Here are some of the findings:

Young Americans do not think pornography is a negative thing. When they speak about pornography with friends, 90 percent of teens and 96 percent of young adults say they do so in a neutral, accepting, or encouraging way. Young people say “not recycling” is more of a sin (is more immoral) than viewing pornography.

Most teens are “sexting.” The study revealed that 66 percent of teens and young adults have received a sexually explicit image via text message... and 41 percent have sent one. More girls than boys send images... which may mean that young males are often pressuring their female friends to take off their clothes, take pictures, and send them.

Porn is not just for boys and men anymore. While men still consume porn at a much higher rate than women, it appears that females (particularly young females) are starting to catch up. Thirty-three percent of women (one-third of women ages 13 to 24) seek out porn at least once per month.

Most Americans believe porn is “bad for society,” but among younger generations those attitudes are shifting toward neutrality or “good for society.” Teens and young adults who use porn talk about it and they report having “encouraging” or “accepting” conversations toward porn.

Pornography has gone almost completely digital. 71% of adults and 85% of teens and young adults who have viewed pornography did so using online videos. And not only is porn more

⁴ Thompson again.

accessible online to those looking for it... the appearance of unsolicited porn has increased substantially as well. Nearly 75% of young adults and 50% of teens say they encounter porn at least once a month—even when they aren't seeking it out.

Though opinions are clearly changing, Americans still agree that certain types of porn are negative. Overwhelming majorities of across generations believe that it is “always wrong” to depict children under the age of 12 and sex acts that are non-consensual.

And then, regarding the use of porn specifically among Christians:

The number of Christians using porn virtually mirrors the national average.

Though practicing Christians are twice as likely as others to feel guilty for using porn, only a small minority of adults report any “guilt” at all. Christian teens are the most likely age segment to experience feelings of guilt, although it's still a minority of teenagers.

Most pastors (57%) and youth pastors (64%) admit they have struggled with porn, either currently or in the past. And at any given time, roughly 20% of pastors and youth leaders admit to using porn.⁵

These findings are clearly sobering... and this is perhaps the best time for me to say again that the issues around the use of pornography are complex. There are doctors and therapists who use material that some might find pornographic to treat and heal those who come to them for help. And again, I certainly do not believe that sexual sin is the only sin, or even the most important sin. But that being said, these findings are sobering and they clearly reflect a moral landscape that is changing quickly around us. And this is why respected journalist, Jonathan Merritt, was moved to write:

The American Church cannot be silent as pornography becomes ever more prevalent. We cannot ignore the way the industry contributes to the notion that women are little more than sex objects to be dominated by men. We cannot ignore how the industry has often preyed on children and exploited teenagers for financial gain. And we cannot ignore the way pornography usage among curious kids has often sexualized them in their most innocent years.⁶ Friends, we cannot put our heads in the sand... we cannot remain silent. But what can we do?

First, we can be willing to talk about it. I know that is easier said than done. But we can be willing to talk about it: parents with our children... grandparents with our children and our grandchildren... young people with our parents or youth leaders or other trusted adults. adults with our pastors or counselors or friends. One thing is clear: Parents, we have to begin conversations about healthy sexuality earlier and earlier with our children... because the images and ideas are becoming available earlier and earlier. And if you are struggling with some form of sexual sin, please come to me or to Heather... or let us help you find someone else to talk to. There is help! So, the first thing we can do is talk about it.

⁵ Jonathan Merritt in “Pornography: A Christian Crisis or Overblown Issue?” Religious News Service and “The Porn Phenomenon” at <https://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/>

⁶ Merritt again.

The second thing is that we can all remember well. The Gospel story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery... Caught in sexual sin.⁷ Quickly, the religious authorities are trying to trap Jesus to make him look bad... so they bring before him a woman who they had drug right out of bed with a man that was not her husband. “The law of Moses tells us to stone this woman,” they remind Jesus, “What do you say we do?” And what I want you to hear is that Jesus showed grace toward everyone there. He showed grace toward the accusers by allowing them time to consider their own hypocrisy and especially, he showed grace to the woman who he refused to condemn and who he sent away with another chance to live the life God blessed her to live. So, let those of us for whom pornography is not our issue never cast the first stone... and let those of us for whom it is an issue, know that with our Lord there is always the grace of forgiveness and the hope of a new life.

Third, we can do whatever we can to support those who are the victims of sexual sin. Friends, our nation’s prisons and Salvation Armys and Safe Harbors and rehab centers and psychiatric hospitals are filled with women and men who are victims of sexual sin by those they were supposed to be able to trust. Perhaps we can volunteer AT... or at least give TO ministries that reach out to victims of child sexual abuse or human trafficking.

And finally, we as the church and we as pastors can try to articulate (to the best of our ability) a vision for what Phillis Tribble terms “a love story NOT gone awry.” We can teach and preach and otherwise share a vision for human sexuality in which no one (male or female) is objectified... in which there is no one partner who exerts abusive power and control over another, in which there is no guilt or embarrassment or judgment... but where there is only joy and delight and passion... a mutuality of giving and receiving of affection and pleasure. We can offer a vision for sexuality in which God is glorified... in which each person is blessed beyond measure... and all are thankful to God for this precious gift. One writer calls this “sacred sexuality” – sexuality that desires the joy of the one we desire and love... that heals and enriches the life of the other... that is faithful and honest and dependable – just like God is. May it be so, Lord. May it be so.

⁷ My thanks to Todd Byrd for suggesting this story in this context. Todd’s ministry is called “Rebuilding Bridges. He provides resources for people recovering from sexual addiction and can be reached at tbyrd_65@hotmail.com.