

Handling Our Sexuality - 2-05-12 - Beech Mennonite Church

Scriptures: Psalm 8 I Corinthians 6:12-20

I looked through all my sermons over the last 2 years to see if I had told the following story, but couldn't find it. Decided if it was further back than that, it wouldn't matter repeating it anyway. Once upon a time, not so long ago, little Tony came home from kindergarten one afternoon and asked his father this question: "*Daddy, where did I come from?*" "*Oh no,*" thought Dad. "*I knew I'd have to do the 'birds and bees' talk sometime, but not already in kindergarten!*" Saying a quick prayer he took his son to the backyard swing, set him in his lap, and proceeded to give him the complete scoop. When he was finished, little Tony, quite nonchalantly responded, "*Oh. Well, I just wanted to know. My friend Bobby said he came from California.*"

One might ask, "*Why this topic? What does sexuality have to do with spiritual growth?*" Those who ask that question unknowingly illustrate the faulty perspective of our Western mindset. We try to separate "physical" reality from "spiritual" reality, thinking there is little relationship between the two. In contrast to this dualistic way of thinking, Eastern cultures see a more unified, holistic view of human life...all aspects of our humanity are intricately connected. In this model (which I would assert is more biblical) my sexuality has a lot to say about my spiritual wellness. If I have major struggles with the sexual part of my life, it is going to inhibit my growth in other areas.

Like the other four matters we are considering as the "meat" of our spiritual growth, today's topic deserves much more than a 20 min sermon. So I have provided in our Sermon Notes a few practical suggestions, a short reading list, and an outline from my NIV Study Bible for any of you who want to dig a little deeper. We might want to offer a Wed eve series on this topic in the fall – an idea for our Congregational Life Commission to consider.

The best place to start in this brief study of sexuality is the Creation account in Genesis. We read that when God created Adam and Eve they were ..a) created in God's image, and b) declared to be "*very good.*" Our sexuality, then, as God designed it, is good. And since we as humans are complex creatures with interrelated systems, there is much more that happens in sexual intimacy than just the physical. The verse we heard saying "*...the two shall become one flesh*" indicates an intricate union of body, soul, mind, and spirit between husband and wife. As in every other aspect of life, however, our Enemy has taken God's precious gift of sexuality and has distorted it into all kinds of unhealthy expressions.

Let me touch briefly on four areas where many of us struggle with our sexuality: virginity, marriage, celibacy, and homosexuality.

Virginity - Throughout the centuries, it has been the general understanding that God's plan is for sexual abstinence until marriage. But we have seen a seismic shift on this issue in the last 20-30 years. So much so that a great majority, I suspect, will place you in the "*dinosaur*" category if you try to promote abstinence. Doing a little Googling, I found that

statistics vary greatly on the percentage of men and women who remain virgins until marriage. But we don't need statistics to know that the percentage is much lower than a few decades ago. It is much more culturally acceptable now to live together before marriage.

In addition to biblical teachings, there are many common sense reasons for waiting. And there are many good books out there that do a good job at this. But I'll name just a few advantages: No concern over an unexpected pregnancy. Almost 0% chance of contracting AIDS or some other STD if both have waited. Greater respect and trust in the relationship. If our sexuality is seen as a gift, it is a positive experience when a couple can come to the marriage altar each giving to the other this precious gift. I have never yet had anyone tell me that they were sorry they kept their virginity until marriage. But I am certain you can find many who would tell you the opposite. So much confusion and heartache. So much baggage to carry with them from one relationship to the next.

There is an interesting verse in Song of Solomon. It's actually found twice. "*Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.*" (S of S 2:7; 3:5) Puberty, with its hormonal changes, is the natural time for an awakening of one's sexuality. But these days, children much younger are faced with a great deal of information far too early for their own good. Furthermore, our culture faces this conundrum: the physical onset of puberty is happening at a much earlier age, while at the same time couples are delaying marriage until later. We look back at earlier times when these two rites of passage were much closer together, maybe just a few years apart. A much shorter time period for youth to struggle with the challenge of waiting. Perhaps we need to take another look at the present trend to delay marriage.

Marriage. Getting married doesn't solve all of a person's struggles with sexuality. There are challenges of self-centeredness, control, even abuse. And if one's sexual experience in marriage is less than satisfying, there is the temptation of pornography or of unfaithfulness. Staying faithful to one's spouse is a big challenge for many couples today, given the cultural climate we live in. In Thursday's *Repository*, Necole Sims, a single woman now 39, writes of both marriage and singleness. First, she speaks admiringly of her parents' 48 years together. Then she asks this question: *Why is it so hard for single women to find decent men to date?* She tells about this guy in the grocery aisle who asked her out. When she noticed his wedding ring and called him on it, he took offense: "*Who are you to ask about my personal life?*" (1) Paul gives some practical advice to married couples in the next chapter – I Cor. 7. I encourage you to read it. In that chapter, however, he also holds up a life of celibacy as an equally valid calling, with particular advantages over marriage.

Celibacy - In his book *Common Prayer*, Shane Claiborne says that "*Protestants have nearly forgotten the gift that singleness is.*" (2) I agree. Do you know that there is a ceremony in my *Minister's Manual* for those who sense God's call to celibacy, either for a particular period of time or for life? (3) Regretfully, I've never used it, yet. But why not have this kind of recognition for singles in our church family who desire it, with just as much celebration and affirmation as a wedding?

Homosexuality. I am very aware of the volatility of this issue and would wish to ignore it.

But as a shepherd of God's people, I cannot. It is the most controversial issue facing the church today, with strong convictions and emotions on both sides. First, let me recommend a book for those who might want to study further: simply called *Homosexuality* by Willard Swartley. Just one quote: "*What does the church do in this dilemma? Show compassion? Or speak prophetic judgment toward homosexual practice? Biblically (he concludes) there is precedent for both and thus we are called also to do both.*" (4) Like Swartley, I support our denomination's long-standing position, based on our understanding of scripture, that homosexual activity is sin. But at the same time, I would, like Swartley, also call for compassion. I would ask these questions of anyone who is quick to point a judgmental finger: *Have you ever sat and listened, as I have, to persons of same-sex orientation, as they pour out their hearts to you in tears? Have you tried to enter their deep pain as they say, "I have prayed over and over for years now, asking God to change me, and nothing happens."*

I would also ask the question of balance: *Have we blown this particular issue out of proportion?* Go back a few verses from our text – I Cor. 6:9,10 - and you'll find a list of sins. Among them is "homosexual offenders". But do we pay attention to any of the others? "*thieves, drunkards, swindlers, slanderers (AKA "gossipers") and greedy.*" Do those voices who call for the church to "*get tough*" on the first one I mentioned ask for the same approach to all the other offenses?

I would ask one more question. *Can we become a place that warmly welcomes and loves those of same-sex orientation to such a degree that they could find the grace and strength to choose a celibate lifestyle?*

I want to be like Tony Campolo. He accepted an invitation last year to speak at the Gay Christian Network's Conference. Although he made his position clear – that gay relationships are sinful – he received a standing ovation when he finished his speech. Why? The Executive Director of that organization explained it this way, "*They applauded him because he was one of the very few Christians who would dare to reach out to them in love and say, 'Even though I don't agree with you, I love you. I hear your stories of pain, and I want to count you as my friends.'*" The director concludes, "*That message was powerful. It changed lives.*" (5)

But even more than Tony Campolo, I want to be like Jesus. The one who said to the adulterous woman, "*Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*" That is the message we must proclaim to all who are struggling with issues of sexuality. It is a life-giving message for all of us who are trying to deal with any issue: "*Neither do we condemn you. Go and sin no more.*" Actually, let's revise that last part. Not "*Go*" but "*Come.*" We extend open arms of love to all, affirming that God's own image resides in each human being. Come and find here, among other sinners, the love, grace, and forgiveness you long for. Find here the support and courage you need to leave behind sinful and self-defeating patterns of living for something much better. Find here the life-giving presence of Jesus.

There is not a person here who doesn't need the grace of Jesus. He is ready to forgive all of our past and to set us on a new path of healing and growth. Before we sing about this

Marvelous Grace of Our Lord, I'd like to issue this invitation – to acknowledge your need of forgiveness and healing in some area of your sexuality. With all eyes closed. As you raise your hand, Jesus will see your request for his help. And I will be able to pray more specifically for you in the days ahead. I'd also be happy to meet with anyone who has questions or wants additional prayer. Just see me after the service or come to my office this week. (pause)

Let's pray: *Loving God. First, we want to thank you for creating us in your image. We thank you for the gift of our sexuality. And we acknowledge our failures to handle our sexuality in ways that honor our bodies as temples of your Holy Spirit. Forgive us, Jesus. Show us how to walk more faithfully in your ways. Thank you for your marvelous grace.*

Sources:

- (1) "Is love out of the question...?" - Necole Sims - Canton Repository – 02/02/2012
- (2) *Common Prayer – A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* – Claiborne, et al - pp166-167
- (3) *Minister's Manual* – Herald Press – pp. 129-132
- (4) *Homosexuality* – Willard Swartley – pp 114
- (5) <http://www.gaychristian.net/conference/openletter.php>