

January 31, 2016
The National Presbyterian Church
Probing Questions: What's So Sacred About Sex?
1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Song of Solomon 3:2-5
David A. Renwick

In our sermons at the beginning of this new year, we've been looking at various issues that have been prominent in public life in the past year and which are not going to be going away anytime soon.

These issues have to do with **race**, and **violence**, and **religion**, and **sex**, and **the environment**
(tho' what I need to say is that because of the environment this past weekend – our snow(!)— we need to postpone the sermon on the environment until the Spring!!)

But still -- we're looking at these issues *of race and violence, environment, religion and sex* and we're doing so

- **Not so much** to provide us with clear-cut, all-encompassing answers to these issues,
- **But** to provide us instead with principles from Scripture: from God, from Jesus himself,
- that are to
 - inform minds
 - and shape our hearts,

and which are to lie behind

ALL OUR PRAYING THINKING AND DOING as Christians
even if, in the end, we don't always agree
with other Christians -- about exactly how
we're supposed to implement or act-on those principles
in the various spheres or realms of life

And there are many of these spheres and realms

each with their own circumstances and constituencies and rules:

So, for example,

*there's the **individual personal** realm, and the **family** realm,
the **professional** realm (each with its own set of professional ethics/standards)
there's the **community**, the **city**, the **nation**, and the **world** –*

**and what we have to ask ourselves is -- “how we insert those principles
into these realms (which don't necessarily accept our premises) as best we can”?**

It's one thing, for example, to believe

that *when Jesus says to us clearly -- “do not resist one who is evil”*
that Jesus is speaking to **me**: calls me **not to** defend myself

But It's quite another to

say that Jesus' principle means that I have no obligation to defend someone else as I move into other realms

-- the realm of my **family** or **my neighbor** or **my nation**,

In these various spheres and realms

*the practical application of Christian principles isn't always clear or straightforward
And Christians of goodwill can genuinely disagree as to what exactly we're to do; and
how to act.*

And the temptation is to say – “well, that’s no good, I need answers not principles!”

But the temptation needs to be resisted – and resisted strongly

Because the principles are critical as building blocks for our prayers, our wills, and our thinking Christianly:

In fact, **Alexis de Tocqueville** in the 1830's probably put it best, when he said
that in America, while religion took no part in government,
religion nevertheless, was '*the first of our political institutions*,'
because it provided the moral basis (foundation) of civic society,
-- what he called the '*habits of the heart*.' . . underlying, undergirding

And that's our approach in this series:

We're looking at Christian 'habits of the heart,'

Foundational Christ-centered **principles** from Scripture that lie behind *the way we pray and think
and act* as Christians and that we bring to bear in every sphere of life whether we're

- Republican or Democrat
- black or white
- American, European, African or Asian

Principles that influence the way we think about and respond to the issues of our day, like

Race, and violence, and religion, and the environment

and today, the issue is -- SEX!!

Clearly, the presenting issue in our society *this past year* dominating the headlines, was the issue of **same-sex marriage**.

In the past couple of years, in fact, I've talked about same-sex marriage a fair bit so you can find my opinion online. Go To: www.nationalpres.org . Use the search box in the upper right corner Search 1. 'Faithful marriage' Search 2. 'sexuality' -- Or read Debra Hirsch, Real Sex).

Today, though, it's not this particular issue I want to address,

but rather to think **of sex and sexuality in a far more general way**

By noting right from the outset that the sheer volume of *all kinds of issues* relating to sex, sexuality, and increasingly gender is simply enormous and continues to grow

So, for example –

- While on the one hand whole group of people -- are trying to get into-marriage, -- by redefining and broadening it
- On the other hand just as many if not more -- are trying to get out!! or to avoid marriage all together:. **unhappy marriages abound**
- **Adultery** affects at least 20% of marriages and possibly many more;
- **Divorce**: affects 40% of 1st marriages, 60% of 2nd ;and 73% of 3rd;
- **Cohabitation**: rose from 450,000 people in the U.S. in 1960 to 7½ million in 2011.

And then there's the matter of the relationship of sex to singleness and marriage:

A 2002 study indicated that

just over 75% of the population had extra-marital sex by age 20,
and by age 44 that number had risen to 95%.

- As one parent told me here a couple of years ago
– sexual experimentation in our high schools is absolutely rampant

And then, too, obviously, *sex produces babies*, wanted or not wanted:

In the US -- there are about one million abortions a year,

- which horrendous as it is, happens to be about the lowest rate in 40 years. Half are within marriages; and about half are outside of marriage.

And then there's the darkness of

- **Rape**: (estimated 89,000/year) and
- **Child Abuse** (sometimes in the church)
- **Domestic Violence**, much of which is sexual: 25% of women in their lifetime (CDC, 2000);and
- **Human Trafficking** -- much of which also is sexual: FBI estimates about 300k American youths at risk;

And all of this before we move on to the media and the web:

- **Where Pornography** is a multi-billion dollar business
 - So you conduct a search for just about anything on the web and it's almost inescapable: up it comes!!
 - And with all of that there has come a huge shift in public opinion NOT against, but for! Which means that increasingly large numbers of people see pornography as normal and natural along with pretty much every other kind of sexual activity that is consensual

And that's what I want to speak about in the time remaining.

- The fact that in the public sphere/realm – society as a whole --
The primary secular principles
that guide pretty much all we hear-about with respect to sexual activity,
-- whether heterosexual, or homosexual;

-- marital or extra-marital--

The Primary Secular Principles declare boldly

- that sex is **normal** and **natural** and **not sacred at all!**
- That with birth control, sex is now divorced from procreation
- In fact it's an essential ingredient in what it means to be modern.
and is often seen as a necessary part of self-expression and fulfillment
- So that, if any adults
consent to do *whatever they want* with their bodies, then there's nothing wrong with it,
especially if the emotional moment feels right and good
(best author on this is Divine Sex, by Jonathan Grant)

In fact studies in Europe indicate that for the vast majority of younger people **the issue of sexual activity is morally neutral or irrelevant**

(<http://www.statista.com/statistics/297288/global-views-on-premarital-sex/>)

And what we know is that this is increasingly true

not only in our own country as a whole **but also among young people born and bred even in the church.**

Which is to say that, the message of our culture,

has so dominated and conquered the message of the Scripture,

both outside the church and inside

and is so powerful and pervasive, in the media

in Shows and Ads and in Movies and Magazines, and on the Web
that ***it's hard even to say anything else, or give a different view.***

- ***without sounding out of date***
- ***or like a sore loser who's just whining or being judgmental***

Listen to the mantra again:

Sex is **normal** and **natural** and **not sacred at all!**

- With birth control, sex is now divorced from procreation
- In fact- it's an essential ingredient in what it means to be modern,
and is a necessary part of self-expression and self-fulfillment
- So that, if any adults consent to do *whatever they want* with their bodies, **then** there's
nothing wrong with it, *especially* if the emotional moment feels right and good.

Nothing can be said without sounding old-fashioned or judgmental

Isn't that the air we breathe? And the air our children breathe? Everywhere we turn?

So what are we to do as Christians?

What principles need to be re-spoken and re-affirmed in our day and age?

What are we to say?

1. Well, **THE FIRST THING** to say is that

not all is bad in this!

- a. *The dominant principle of “consent”* is actually a vital reflection of the *Christian principle* of “love for our neighbor”

Lose the issue of ‘consent’ and the door opens even wider to all kinds of horrible abuse
private, public

SO ‘*consent*’ *may not be all we want to say, but it’s not bad!*

- b. and beyond that, *even the appeal to emotion is not all bad either*

- The Song of Solomon, right in the middle of the Old Testament, is a rapturous poem celebrating sexual and emotional love
- and all too often in the church, especially the Presbyterian Church. We’ve buried the emotions beneath the mind

So maybe society has discovered something we’ve lost and need to find again?!

So in this mantra, some things are good. But not all is good, in fact.

2. THE SECOND THING to say is that

the idea that our society/age or era -- is modern in a way that no one else has been -- is simply and completely false

It may be true that birth control – has a sophistication that is new or modern (and, of course there are many modern inventions never seen before!) -- But the big “lie” that pervades the present mantra is that *we’re the first* to live in an age of sexual freedom! And everyone needs to change with the times and move boldly into this “Brave New World”!!

My own area of doctoral research had to do with the impact of Greece and Rome (what we call the Hellenistic era) on ancient Judaism after the time of Alexander the Great until the time of Jesus

(so, from about 350BC through the first century AD).

-- *and what is patently clear, if you go back to those days*

Is that there’s nothing new under the sun:

- The Greeks and Romans thought that they were modern
- They thought they exemplified human progress,
-- So that they were ‘progressive’ sexually and in every other way; (see the pornography at Pompeii)

In fact – it was this way thinking that pervaded the lives of the Christians in the city of Corinth in Greece, which Paul had to address in his letter (1 Cor. 6:12-20 – the best version is The message, by Eugene Peterson) that we read earlier.

- and in all of this they looked down on the Jews and their ethics, as *old, and out-of-date -- relics of the past that needed to change with the times*

But JESUS DIDN’T THINK SO!!

In fact – **against the tide, against the prevailing ethos**

it was precisely the old and fuddy-duddy ways that he embraced and taught!

So – it's just not true –

The pervasive idea that we're modern as no one else has been.

In fact -- in our present day – much of what we're doing sexually is simply returning to patterns of behavior that society has tried and abandoned -- many times before!

So

1st of all: **not all is bad**, and we need to recognize that (not get too hot!!)

2nd And **not all is new**, in fact, nothing is new under the sun – so we mustn't be deceived, or feel left behind, or out of date, by the cries of 'modern' and 'progress.'

AND THEN THE 3RD THING to say:

What we need to keep in mind, hold on to, pray about

Are Four foundational Christian Principles, habits of the heart,

That are to infiltrate and undergird all our choices; sexual and otherwise:

1. Creation, 2. Responsibility, 3. Crucifixion, and 4. Resurrection.

Creation and Responsibility

God made us not just as disembodied spirits, but as persons

With bodies that are good

With bodies that are male and female

So that sexuality is the idea and the **creation** of God.

-- SO YES! The mantra is right!! Sex is good and natural and normal, **But so too** is the idea of **responsibility and self control and discipline.**

And we see this from the very first story in Scripture:

It's no accident that in the garden of Eden (Genesis 1-3)

the very 1st sin has to do with an appetite of the body that is good, but out of control.

Adam and Eve wanted to eat. There's nothing wrong with eating.

God created our mouths and stomachs for food!

But God also said that *what was good in itself* needed to be controlled and disciplined --

I give you all the fruit in the garden, -- eating is good! says God,

but for this one tree, it's not good:

- *if you forget your responsibility and self-discipline,*
- *if delude yourself into thinking that indulging your appetite whenever you want is the secret of self-fulfillment*
- *if you go ahead and eat its fruit, you will die.*

But if you listen to me and discipline your appetite you'll find life.

But they didn't listen and ate. I suspect that they thought they were modern, and knew best.

And what is true with food in the garden is true with sex.

It's God's good gift, but God sets the boundaries for our good

– and calls us to discipline the appetite that is good and natural and normal! In fact, God's says to Adam and Eve – and to us too

“The purpose of sex lies is within the boundaries of marriage.”

It has nothing to do with your self-fulfillment as such . .

(thinking about self-fulfillment, we need to note that Jesus was never married and never had sex – One could hardly say of Jesus that he lived a life that was ‘unfulfilled.’)

But within the boundaries of marriage

it’s to function like a sacrament (1 Corinthians 6:16-17) – in which God takes the ordinary and the natural (like the water, food, wine, of baptism and communion); God takes the bodies he has created – *not only* to produce new life, but (beyond procreation) to bring joy, and bind a man and woman together for ever. God turns the natural and normal into the sacred!!

So we have to keep in mind God’s action in Creation and in making us in his image as accountable beings.

Creation and Responsibility hand in hand and so to do Christ’s **Crucifixion and Resurrection**

- Jesus became incarnate in the body
- was crucified in the body
- and resurrected in the body

And when we affirm in the Apostles’ Creed

That we believe in the “resurrection of the body,” part of what we are saying is that our bodies matter to God:

They are not morally neutral, but they matter for all eternity

Indeed it is through Jesus’ death in the body that Paul explains to the Corinthians (1 Cor.6:14-15, 19-20)

That Jesus not only brought us forgiveness with his death, but he brought us under new ownership: he owns us! Hook line and sinker! Soul AND body!

⁹Do 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

Do not, he says, give your body away to anyone who will not commit to you for life – to anyone who loves you any less than Jesus who gave his life completely to us and for us.

The sexual ethos that pervades our culture is pervasive and powerful.

1. It’s not all bad . .

2. But it’s also, not all true!! It’s certainly not modern, but ancient

And the only way I know to counter-balance it

3. Is with principles that are even more ancient and that have been in the mid of God from the beginning . .

To remember

1. our Creation *by a Good God who gave us bodies*
2. the gift and obligation of Responsibility
3. Christ's Crucifixion *that bought us*
4. And his and our eternal Resurrection – in the body . . .

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800