

## **“Let’s Talk about Sex[uality]”**

July 15, 2018

*Hot Topics series*

I like romantic movies, though I know they’re usually fairly unrealistic. The Hallmark Channel shows the same story over and over again, but I still fall for it every time. I have a stack of pretty sweet letters from Ivan from 20 years ago when we started dating, and I keep more recent cards, too. And I’m still a sucker for a good love song. Anyone else?

What we have nestled in between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah - at the end of what’s called “Wisdom literature” and right before the Prophets - is a really good love song: Song of Songs - or Song of Solomon if you prefer.

Sometimes we forget that Song of Songs even exists. We forget that our whole humanity, including sexuality, is who we are as God’s good creation. There’s that line in Genesis about Adam and Eve being “naked and not ashamed.” But we don’t spend a lot of time on making the positive connections between sexuality and spirituality.

Instead we have the tendency to try to separate sexuality out as a separate facet of our humanity. We whisper about it. We wonder about it. We struggle to ask questions about it because we think we’re supposed to know everything. We feel shame about it. We feel joy about it.

We know the reality of sexual abuse and sexual harassment and the pain it causes. It’s not a new problem, but high profile cases have brought it to light. Right now, we’re in the midst of thinking and re-thinking how we talk to one another about it. What’s appropriate? What’s not?

In the church, we tend to ignore sexuality, or at least keep it a private matter - not to be discussed in good company. We haven’t done a good job at looking at God’s intention for sex and sexuality, and we’ve struggled with all of the complicated relationships in Scripture. (If you think Scripture is clear and consistent about relationships, just read through Genesis, and you’ll get what I mean.) We generally focus on sexuality when it’s about others, especially we can judge others and not look at ourselves.

And I’ll be honest that I haven’t preached often on sexuality specifically over the past 17 years. I’m pretty sure I’ve never used Song of Songs as a singular focus before today, though I love this book. Whenever someone complains that it’s difficult to read Scripture, that it’s boring, or that they don’t understand it, I tell them to try Song of Songs. It usually surprises people.

Some scholars say this poem is an allegory - a picture of God's love for Israel or, later on, Christ's love for the church. But, friends, I'm going with a literal reading today. This is a poem about sexuality. It's about love. It's even about sex and the good gift that it is. And I'm here to confirm that sexuality is a good gift of God.

I offer this as Ivan and I celebrate our 18<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary today. I promise you that wasn't my intention when we planned this series, but it's just how it all happened. So what wisdom is there in Song of Songs?

First, let's deal with the name of the book itself. Maybe you've heard it called Song of Solomon. Whether Solomon wrote it or whether it's about him, that's the connection. Solomon was a revered king. But in the Hebrew, it's called Song of Songs because it's "the song" - the greatest song. So, the greatest song is one that shares an intimate picture of a couple's love for each other.

Before you pick up a Bible in your pew and start reading now, consider when and where you first learned about and talked about sex and sexuality. Did your parents say something - anything - to you? Chances are, you learned something from other people, too - siblings, friends, classmates, and perhaps on TV or in movies. And chances are, some of the things you learned weren't accurate. Would you agree?

Can you imagine, though, if Song of Songs was the primer for addressing sexuality? This poem that uses incredibly vivid imagery to describe desire and love between two people. And it's for both male and female, and here's an interesting note - the female voice actually starts it off! This is mutual desire - not a one-sided relationship.

The natural images are very clear, even though some might not make too much sense to us (like someone's teeth being described as a flock of sheep whose wool had just been cut!). But who doesn't understand "your love is better than wine?"

The hope of this series is to help us consider issues we might be avoiding, and that's just as true for sexuality. Scripture does address sexuality in positive ways, and we can embrace sexuality as God's good gift to be shared in covenant and commitment. It's a part of God's realm. We can talk about it. We should talk about it. We must talk about it.

Some words from the introduction in *The Message*: "There are some who would eliminate sex when they think of love, supposing that they are making it more holy. Others, when they think of sex, never think of love." But they're connected - or should be.

Yet current culture would say that love and sex aren't necessarily connected. In our sex-saturated culture, we struggle to maintain any connection between sexuality and spirituality, and yet, the very fact that Song of Songs exists tells me that it matters!

These beautiful words address love in all of its excitement, spontaneity, beauty, power, and exclusiveness. What a gift to us! This is about honoring one another as people made in the image of God. What happens when we look at someone as an object?

We covered lust a couple of years ago, but the words still ring true. Much of what is portrayed as “love” is really “lust.” Someone said, “The desire of lust is to get. The desire of love is to give.” As William White says, “Love endures all things (from First Corinthians 13); lust endures very little.”

We may all shake our heads in agreement, but we have to own that sexuality is exploited every day. That’s our focus today - the church’s role in stopping sexual exploitation and everything that’s connected to it. It’s a matter of faith - of reconnecting sexuality and spirituality and reclaiming God’s good gift.

Sexuality and spirituality are not separate issues; they are intertwined. And just like anything, our particular worldview matters when we discuss sexuality. I am a heterosexual female. I have experienced sexism in my life and in my work. And there’s a lot wrapped up in our personal views about sexuality - our own and others’.

Some may be wondering about other aspects of human sexuality, and we’ll have a small group opportunity beginning in August to discuss other facets of human sexuality, including the church’s response to LGBT persons. This is an important discussion in our larger United Methodist Church, and an important discussion in our local church. But all of us are sexual beings - that’s who we are. God created us with sexuality, and it matters to our whole being.

And the ways that sexuality is exploited and cheapened matters, too. We are sometimes so concerned with others’ sexuality that we ignore our own struggles - or try to hid them. A colleague shared his struggle with an addiction to pornography. He is not alone - in the church or in the world. Pornography is a billion dollar industry, making more than Major League Baseball, the NFL, and the NBA combined. Stats say that pornography sites get more visitors in a month than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined - more than 4.5 billion hours each year.

But my colleague shared important truths about his own struggle that I offer with his permission. First, his addiction didn’t happen all at once, but little by little. It wasn’t one big choice, but small choices that led him to a place that he never wanted to be. Second, he lifted up the secrecy of pornography as a kink in his witness to faith in Jesus - who are we when no one is watching? That’s not just a question for sex and sexuality, but it certainly matters.

He lifted up the reality of his own hypocrisy - that while he was speaking out against sex trafficking, viewing pornography was contributing to the problem. And there is a connection – the demand for pornography has a correlation to sex trafficking.

And finally, he said, “The grace of Jesus is far more powerful than the sin in me” - not as an excuse to continue, but as a power to stop what is destructive and pursue good and life-giving things.

There are many resources that address pornography, but one is a website called “Fight the New Drug.” It’s an organization that’s trying to show how pornography is harmful to the brain, to relationships, and to the world – strictly informational. One of their taglines is “Porn kills love.” I invite us to see one of their short videos this morning.

**SHOW MEDIA:** Fight the New Drug - Porn Affects Relationships

“Think twice about giving your heart to something without a pulse.” A powerful sentiment along with the reminder that we’re called to vulnerability, which is what we read in Song of Songs. This is a relationship of mutual commitment, desire, and love. This is consensual - not coerced or forced. This is real - not imagined. This is not a transaction, but a relationship. This is two people who want to be together - not a person and a pixelated screen. If pornography is a struggle for you or someone you know, please share information with them.

As we engage these hot topics, I’m sharing our United Methodist Social Principles with you - a tool that help us engage our personal faith in Christ with the call to social action and think theologically about important issues. It’s a reminder that we must walk the talk.

Scripture is the foundation for how we engage these issues, but we know that Christian tradition, our ability to reason, and our experiences affect how we approach social issues, and in turn, political issues. Our Social Principles offer a lot about human sexuality and related issues. Here’s a portion of it:

**SHOW SLIDES**

### **Human Sexuality**

We deplore all forms of the commercialization, abuse, and exploitation of sex. We call for strict global enforcement of laws prohibiting the sexual exploitation of children and for adequate protection, guidance, and counseling for abused children. All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence. The Church should support the family in providing age-appropriate education regarding sexuality to children, youth, and adults.

### **Pornography**

Scripture teaches that humans are created in God’s image and that we are accountable to God through right relationship. Sexual images can celebrate the goodness of human sexuality through positive depiction in art, literature, and education. We deplore, however, images that distort this goodness and injure healthy sexual relationships.

We oppose all forms of pornography and consider its use a form of sexual misconduct. We grieve the pervasiveness of Internet pornography, including among Christians, and especially its impact on young people and marriages.

### **Sexual Abuse**

We deplore all forms of the commercialization and exploitation of sex, with their consequent cheapening and degradation of human personality. To lose freedom and be sold by someone else for sexual purposes is a form of slavery, and we denounce such business and support the abused and their right to freedom.

There's also clear language that sexual harassment is wrong and that sexual assault is wrong no matter what the circumstances. It's amazing that we need to say that, but with the reality of sexual violence and abuse of power, we must speak clearly and stand for justice, especially for those who can't speak for themselves. Yes, these issues are personal, but, in the end, they also affect our community and our world.

What do we do? We can learn about the issues. Some of you know that The Hope Project is a local organization engaged in fighting human trafficking, specifically freeing people from sex trafficking. A representative spoke to us last September, and there are ways you can be involved.

21 million people are victims of labor trafficking around the world, with approximately 5 million of those being victims of sex trafficking. If you don't think it's a reality here in our community, think again. Michigan is in the top ten states for human trafficking, and you can find many stories from around the state and even Muskegon.

We have to be a part of stopping the demand, and that starts with remembering who we are and who we're called to be in relationship with God and each other. Sexuality is a good gift that God has given each of us. We can celebrate it and give thanks for it. We can talk about it as a normal, natural, integrated part of our lives. We can use it to God's glory and for the well-being of ourselves and others. May it be so. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE