

“The First Thing”

August 7, 2022

God’s Good Gift of Sexuality series

My current favorite show is Grantchester. I’m a sucker for a good British period drama. It’s a Masterpiece Mystery set in the 1950s focusing on a police detective and an Anglican priest who work together to solve crimes. Both of them have their personal struggles, which makes it even more interesting, but they also deal with real issues. In a recent episode, the investigation surrounded some indiscretions at a brothel, and one of the characters lifted up the “shame attached to sex,” particularly encouraged by the church. She said, it’s the big three “love, sex, and shame.”

Remember the time period – the 1950s. I don’t think she’s wrong. Having conversations with family members who were growing up in that time and hearing from some in our congregation, it’s clear that sex and sexuality weren’t discussed very much. You didn’t talk about the timing of the marriage and the birth of the baby, which was sometimes less than nine months. You didn’t talk about your loving aunt and her roommate who were together for years. You didn’t talk about abuse, assault, or harassment – sometimes it was just accepted, overlooked, or ignored. You didn’t talk about unexpected pregnancy or the struggle to conceive. You didn’t talk about shaming those who were having sex and teasing those who weren’t. You didn’t talk about the spouse who cheated – sometimes frequently. You didn’t talk about pornography as a real threat to relationships. You didn’t talk about how to honor those who are single – understanding that not everyone will get married or have children. I’ve heard all of these examples from people within the past week. Some are mine; some are yours.

It’s easy to see that there’s a lot to cover here. I don’t think issues around sexuality are markedly different than any time period before now, but we hear more about them. Aspects of life are different – people are living together and marrying later (maybe), which also means the divorce rate is lower. Statistics show that young adults are actually less sexually active now than in previous generations. It seems like media makes everything more available – and at a much younger age. But even so, generations before now still faced issues with human sexuality; it just presented differently or was never discussed.

If sexuality was ever discussed in church, it was usually in a negative light, which only perpetuates shame, or it was in moments of gossip about other people. It's always more fun and easier to look around and talk about everyone else than it is to look inward, and so our discussions remain fairly surface. That doesn't mean we need to share everything, but we need to be realistic about it. Our faith in Jesus Christ informs every part of our lives, and sexuality is no exception.

Scripture does address sexuality in very positive ways, and we can embrace sexuality as God's good gift to be shared in **covenant** and **commitment** with **consent** and **care**. Remember those 4 Cs. Sexuality is a part of God's realm. We can talk about it. We should talk about it. We must talk about it. I hope we do talk in our families, but I know it often doesn't happen as openly and helpfully as it could.

If you learned about sex and sexuality from trusted family, I'm glad, but I know for many it was from others outside of our family – and sometimes we heard inaccurate information. I offer you this quote from our Social Principles – our best effort to address social issues: “The Church should support the family in providing age-appropriate education regarding sexuality to children, youth, and adults.” We know that talking about sexuality helps to empower children to stand up for themselves and probably contributes to safer world for them.

If we want people to have a faith perspective about sexuality, then the church – the Body of Christ - must be willing to talk about it with honesty and integrity. I understand that we may not agree on issues relating to human sexuality, but we don't have to fully understand in order to care about and love others, including their health and well-being. Differences in sexual orientation don't have to make sense to me for me to care about everyone's safety and health, and I should because we're all created in the image of God. Safe spaces are important – and literally life-giving and perhaps even life-saving. People need to feel safe and loved; it can literally save lives.

If we want to relate to and nurture the spiritual lives of people, both younger and older, many of whom have no church connection, we have to be willing to engage in discussions around sexuality. All of us are sexual beings - that's who we are. God created us with sexuality, and it matters to our whole being.

Sexuality and spirituality are not separate issues; they are intertwined even though we try to separate them. 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 – upbringing, experiences – both positive and negative, and more. We have to own that as we seek to understand where others are coming from.

Even though sexuality is a part of God’s good creation, we shy away from talking about it. It’s almost secretive – something we don’t talk about – rather than private – something we can hold dear and keep a healthy boundary around with those who are safe for us. There’s a difference between secrecy and privacy.

The goal of this series is to invite us to reflect on what Scripture offers in terms of the positive view of sex and sexuality along with developing a sexual ethic as the Body of Christ with the hope that it will enhance all of our relationships.

We haven’t always 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. Our discussion about human sexuality in the larger United Methodist Church is not new and has been ongoing for 50 years.

When someone speaks about “biblical sexuality,” I ask what exactly they mean because there’s a lot there in Scripture – some good and some not-so-great. An overview of Scripture is important. As Rachel Held Evans writes, “the Bible is full of surprises. It includes erotic poetry and explicit sex scenes along with meticulously detailed laws about copulation and cleanliness.” There are warnings against sexual immorality, and we know that some of our most celebrated faith ancestors have sordid sexual histories. We’re not talking about people without their own struggles.

But, first thing in the account of creation, we hear that sexuality is a good gift of God. Our whole humanity, including sexuality, is who we are as God’s good creation. We’re created in the image of a relational God and designed to enjoy an intimate relationship with our Creator and with one another. Bishop Will Willimon says, “How countercultural it is for the church to assert that all of life, even our sexual life, is to be lived for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor.” Still, we struggle to claim sexuality as more than casual encounters or recreational. It’s meant to bond us together in sacred intimacy. **SLIDE:** Trivialization of sex, far from liberating us, robs sexual intimacy of its power. It’s a good gift.

There’s incredible power in this good gift. If we read closely, there’s a mutuality and equality in God’s creation of humans – all of us made in God’s image. At the start, there’s this amazing picture of God’s grace. Woman is created as a helper – *ezer/edzer* is the Hebrew word. A helper is not a second-class citizen or servant; this is not a hierarchy. Humans are helpers to one another. And regardless

of our relationship status, that's true. We need one another. We need help from one another, and we find joy and love in helping others.

There's that line in Genesis about the first humans being "naked and not ashamed." Perhaps it's literal, but maybe it's also a figure of speech. When we trust each other, there's no need to cover up or hide who we are.

For those who take it literally, we need to be careful. Somehow, we've made a jump that isn't there. Keep reading in Genesis 3, and we get to the story of how sin came into the world. Sin is about disobedience to God – going beyond the limits God sets; it's not sexuality or recognizing nakedness. Sex isn't sinful in and of itself. Rather, Scripture calls us to see one another as made in God's image – not to objectify one another. We're made in God's image; we're not objects. We're called to see one another in our full humanity. But we don't spend a lot of time on making the positive connections between sexuality and spirituality.

There are lots of facets of this discussion, and I invite you to contact me if you have things you want to discuss. They're important. And I hope we hear the first thing – that sexuality is a good gift to be shared in covenant, commitment, consent, and care.

SLIDE: Goodness of Sex

Sex and sexuality – both good gifts of God

God created us with the capacity for love and communion

Empowered us to create new life – co-creators with God

Made us sexual beings with equal dignity and worth

So that's where we are today as we come to the table and take this time to celebrate God's grace in our lives and celebrate God's grace in all that we see and all that is. This is a feast of love – a reminder of Christ's love for us and our call to see one another as made in God's image, our call to love others in his name. Let us pray...