

The Body's Grace: Theology and Sexuality Sexuality and Ethics

(Wellington Central Baptist Church, 24 May 2015, Darren Ayling)

This is a series on Theology and Sexuality-

to be human is to be physical,

flesh and blood,

and part of our humanity is our sexuality-

how does our sexuality point us toward our participation in God and

what it means to be truly human?

This is not a self-help series-

there will be no ten tips to spice up your sex life.

I want to consider more about what it means to be sexual beings in a sex-mad society.

It's been a joke in the office and at home that Darren has spent a great deal of time thinking about sex-
and it's true.

One of the questions that I've struggled with is this-

Is a Sunday morning worship service the context to look at human sexuality?

It's a good question I think-

and the more I've thought about it the more I've thought that yes it

is-

what is the purpose of our Sunday morning gatherings?-

this, too, is a good question.

And there are a number of good and right answers to this question-

to form us as followers of Christ,

to continue to develop our relationships as Christian community,

to recalibrate ourselves to the mission of God in the world-

and all these are good answers.

But I would see the primary function when we gather is to participate in the worship of the Father, through Christ,

in the Holy Spirit-

and I would suggest that this is not just the aim of our

Sunday gatherings but in fact the chief purpose, as the Westminster confession, would have it, of humanity.

We understand that Christ-

the incarnate Christ,

the human Christ has taken our humanity into the presence of God

-

flesh and blood humanity-

that is the great mystery and wonder of a Christian understanding

of God-

that through Christ humanity is represented in the relationships shared between God the Creator, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Sexuality is part of our human identity and so it is this humanity that is drawn in to God's presence.

And when we consider the power that sexuality has in our lives-
invoking joy,
wonder,
shame,
anxiety,
yearning,
woundedness,
curiosity,
fulfilment –
it must be near the centre of our humanity.

And so it is good and right that sexuality is part of our reflections as a community who worships together.

Having come to that conclusion that yes human sexuality is something that we should consider in our corporate worship-

I've also discovered that it's not an easy topic to engage with.

When I look back on my own experience of sexuality being discussed in the church context,

there are very few to recall-

but two stand out- one I'd rather forget and the other I have forgotten.

The first was when I was a youth leader at a church in the South Island during my last year at University-

the youth pastor was going to be away over Easter so she asked me to be the main leader for our group at camp –

she handed me a hospital pass-

there were guest speakers at the camp- and there was a lot of time given by them for 'ministry time' –

without warning one evening as they prayed over this group of teenagers-

they prayed against the spirit of masturbation which in their discernment had possessed a significant number of the young people there-

the whole thing was a nightmare of confused, guilty and shamed kids and bemused leaders.

The second that I did forget was a brief series on intimacy in marriage when I was in my twenties-

Lou and I didn't marry until we were 34- so a series on sex in marriage in my twenties had very little to say to me.

And so I've simply forgotten much of that content. I don't recall much corporate engagement with sexuality beyond that.

In this series,

the Body's Grace,

a title I've borrowed from an essay by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury,

we'll spend four Sundays considering human sexuality-

today I want to set the scene and look at Christian sexual ethics,
then next Sunday we'll consider sexuality and intimacy,
then Bronwyn Kerr will speak on sexuality and power,
and then in the final week I want to consider the church and same
sex relationships.

There is a couple of things I will repeat every Sunday in this series-
the first is this-
the church's history in dealing with sexuality is poor and frequently abusive.

The Church is a place of both beauty and brokenness and sadly
when it comes to sexuality it's our brokenness that has often prevailed.

My hope is that in this series we confess and lament the
brokenness, and celebrate the beauty of human sexuality.

In preaching this series I want to acknowledge that I don't have sexuality all
sorted-

I'm not trying to present myself as an icon of sexual wholeness and
to say here is the way walk ye in it.

This series is not trying to teach dogma or doctrine – sexuality is not
something that we can put in a tidy system, although there have been
many attempts to,

and this series aims to raise more questions for you than provide
answers.

I will also repeat each week that I understand conversations about
sexuality to be difficult for some perhaps because of past or even present
experience.

We want Central to be a place of safety for people and if this series raises
any issues for you please speak with Andrew or I, or Bronwyn.

Something else I will repeat about sexuality is that there are a range of
perspectives on sexuality –

we value Central as a place of welcome and respect.

One of the things that I lament at present is that in many church
traditions thinking around sexuality is being raised to the level of dogma
and I think that is misguided and unhelpful.

And so in presenting to you some thoughts around sexuality,
the intention is to offer those thoughts gently and tentatively,
and all I ask is that you receive these thoughts with that
understanding,

and that if the series prompts conversations with others after the
services or during the week please hold gently what others offer to you.

I've also realised that as I've reviewed the content of this series I'm
likely to irritate everyone at some point-

and I don't do that lightly-

but I use that word irritate in its most positive sense- it's when
something truly irritates us we are prompted to engage with it at a deeper
level .

For some of you the tentative nature of these reflections will be particularly
annoying-

we like systematic and rational conclusions, something that is tidy
and complete-

but I would suggest that in the area of sexuality if we aim for completeness and final statements we turn sexuality into an idol- we become idolatrous – because what is clear from the Biblical story is that sexuality is not complete, neither is it final, the sexual experience is not the completion of desire, but a sign of desire- it is nothing more nor nothing less than this.

The other thing to say about human sexuality, and a real risk of a series of this nature is that we take sexuality far too seriously, sexuality as well as having the potential to be spiritual is undeniably humorous.

As Rowan Williams says “Most of us know that the whole business is irredeemably comic, surrounded by so many odd chances and so many opportunities for making a fool of yourself; plenty know that it is the place where they are liable to be most profoundly damaged or helpless. Culture in general and religion in particular have devoted enormous energy to the doomed task of getting it right”. (Rowan Williams, *The Body's Grace*, available at http://www.igreens.org.uk/body's_grace.htm)

A few years ago Time Magazine included a feature article on sex and society and it made this observation: 'Of all the splendidly ridiculous, transcendently fulfilling things humans do, it's sex- with its countless permutations of practices and partners – that most confounds understanding. What in the world are we doing? Why in

the world are we so consumed by it? The impulse to procreate may lie at the heart of sex, but like the impulse to nourish ourselves, it is merely the starting point for an astonishingly varied banquet. Bursting from our sexual center is a whole spangle of other things- art, song, romance, obsession, rapture, sorrow, companionship, love, even violence and criminality- all playing an enormous role in everything from our physical health to our emotional health to our politics, our communities, our very life spans. Why should this be so? Did nature simply overload us in the mating department, hot-wiring us for the sex that is so central to the survival of the species, and never mind the sometimes sloppy consequences? Or is there something smarter and subtler at work, some larger interplay among sexuality, life and what it means to be human?' (Jeffrey Kluger, “The Power of Love Time, January 19, 2004, p64, quoted in Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality*, InterVarsity Press, 2015)

Time magazine, hardly a theological journal, asks some good questions, and ten years after the article was written, society has answered some of those questions in lamentable ways, seeing sex as little more than a recreational pursuit. The prevailing sexual ethic in society could be summed up as ‘If it feels good do it’:

The current understanding of sexuality in western society is described well in an essay by Jon Davies in the book *Sex These Days*:

The prevailing view 'sees the body and its sexuality as the central location of the 'self', and which sees any repression or restriction of the self and its sexual appetites as a denial of human being. This is the view that promotes and celebrates the plasticity of the body's sexual energies: an ability to form and reform an ever expanding mesh of bodily linkages. Sex is about pleasure not love; passing the time- excitedly- with a friend, acquaintance or stranger, without commitment or hurt. Sex is not an expenditure of the self toward the other, but a return to self: an investment in self-fulfilment. Its goal is not procreation- the mutual making of life in excess of the sexual partners, whether as children or as the enhancement of the human *habitus*, the enriching of common life- but self-satisfaction, the glow of successful performance. Sex is like food, a commodity, and the culture in which it is bought and sold is a veritable pornotopia.' (Jon Davies, 'Sex These Days, Sex Those Days: Will it Ever End?' in Jon Davies, Gerard Loughlin (eds) *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society*, A & C Black, 1997, p8.)

This seems a fairly accurate assessment of our sex-saturated society. What does a Christian worldview have to offer in this context? What is a Christian ethic that speaks constructively in to a sex-mad culture?

I read somewhere recently that Christianity needs a new sexual ethic- the writer suggests it's not that the old one was bad – it was that there wasn't one.

Instead what we've had functionally is a line- or as this writer suggested a prohibition and it goes like this

Married? (yes/no)

If Yes: sex= good

If No: sex = bad

(<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2013/02/10/the-problem-with-evangelical-sexual-ethics-is-there-arent-any/>)

And this perhaps oversimplifies the reality-

but functionally this is how the church has operated.

This line struggles to speak beyond its own rule.

Think about singleness today for example where the average age of marriage is so much higher,

where singleness encompasses widows and widowers, and those who are divorced.

Our sexuality is more complex than rules.

And what is worse,

we have been punitive when people have gone against the formula-

I'm sure many of us know of people who were excluded by churches because they were on the wrong side of the line.

But not only have we been punitive,

punishing people with our line,

it's also blatantly wrong- there are far too many stories of sexual violence and abuse in marriage,

and sadly within marriages in the church.

And conversely many sexual relationships where people act ethically toward each other and they don't have a marriage certificate.

Rowan Williams articulates it this way:

Much more damage is done to this by the insistence on a fantasy version of heterosexual marriage as the solitary ideal, when the facts of the situation are that an enormous number of "sanctioned" unions are a framework for violence and human destructiveness on a disturbing scale: sexual union is not delivered from moral danger and ambiguity by satisfying a formal socio-religious criterion. ... decisions about sexual lifestyle are about how much we want our bodily selves to mean rather than what emotional needs we're meeting or what laws we're satisfying. "Does this mean that we are using faith to undermine law? By no means: we are placing law itself on a firmer footing" (Romans 3.31). (Rowan Williams, *The Body's Grace*)

So what can this firmer footing be?- what is an ethic that honours the faith we hold to,
that encourages us to actually dialogue and face the difficulties rather than a moral line that fails to raise questions of human meaning,
to learn what part sexuality plays in our learning to be human with one another,
to enter the body's grace as Williams suggests?

The default approach to Scripture when it comes to sexuality is to take individual texts as rules that we use to govern behaviour.

There's some problems with this approach though- it fails to see the overarching story or narrative of the Bible.

A further difficulty is that when we lift individual texts out and apply them as rules we often fail to account for the context the verse is in and also the social context when they were written-

this is particularly problematic when it comes to sexuality when the society at the time of writing was patriarchal and treated women as property.

Our mandate as the people of God is to place ourselves in the story of scripture, to participate in it and that changes how we read it.

Lauren Winner in her book *Real Sex* claims: We need to ask whether the starting point for a scriptural witness of sex is the isolated quotation of "thou shalt not", or whether a scriptural ethic of sex begins instead with the totality of the Bible, the narrative of God's redeeming love and humanity's attempt to reflect that.' (Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity*, Brazos, 2005, p30 quoted in Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality*).

The stories of sexuality in the Bible are complex and often disturbing:
as well as the beauty of Song of Solomon, the strength of Esther with King Xerxes,
Ruth with Boaz,
there is also David and his abuse of power with Bathsheba, -
and the strange story of Hosea and the temple prostitute.

And these stories as well as the unusual Old Testament laws and Paul's instructions shape our understanding of sexuality in the Bible.

But a shaping of a Christian sexual ethic is not best formed by these but rather by the overarching story or narrative of the Bible.

David Jensen is a theologian and ethicist who has considered the story of scripture and sees it as a narrative of desire:

Jensen says: '[we see the Biblical story as a story] of God's desire for us, of our desire for communion with God, and of our desire for relationship with others.

Sex is one dimension of the desire for communion and relationship. It is integral to who we are as an expression of longing for connection and intimacy'. (David H Jensen, *God, Desire, and A Theology of Human Sexuality*, WJK press, 2013,p15).

Jensen and others have described how right from the start God's desire literally fills the pages of Scripture, God's delight in creation,

God's breath in humanity,

God's desire intensified in covenant with a particular people,

God's desire made flesh in Christ,

and God's desire for completion in the confusing yet often erotic language of Revelation.

God's desire permeates the pages of Scripture

Psalms 139 captures that sense of desire and it's beautiful Psalm for Pentecost Sunday

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast. (Ps 139, 7-10,CEV)

And these verses capture something of the whole biblical story, a narrative of desire.

Rowan Williams says: "The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us." (Rowan Williams, *The Body's Grace*)

What is it about the nature of God's desire for us that can be participated in by the expression of human sexuality- what are the characteristics of that desire?

In answering those questions David Jensen constructs a Christian ethic that suggests markers of good sexuality.

For Jensen the markers represent not a place to end discussion of good sex, but a place to begin; good sex involves:

- 1) Consent
- 2) Mutuality
- 3) Covenant/Trust
- 4) Community

5) Joy

There are other ethicists who have done similar work and add another dimension around justice: Margaret Farley and Marie Fortune are two examples who emphasise that good sex does no unjust harm.

6) No unjust harm

An ethical approach to sexuality such as this seeks dialogue,
and over the next few weeks we'll be drawing on some of these markers,
and exploring them in more detail.

As is often the case with ethics there is a gap between ideal and reality,

historically what the church has done is used rules, or the line to bridge the gap,

what if we bridged the gap with grace instead?

M Scott Peck, the Christian psychiatrist wrote "sex is the closest that many people come to a spiritual experience. Indeed it is because it is a spiritual experience of sorts that so many chase after it with a repetitive, desperate kind of abandon. Often, whether they know it or not they are searching for God'. (M Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, Simon and Schuster, 1998, p220)

Sexuality is an integral part of what it means for humans to be made in the image of God,

it serves in some way as a response to the desire that God has for all creation and this needs to be our starting point.

Brian Wren's poem Good is the Flesh captures this well:

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,
good is the feeding, caressing and rest
good is the body for knowing the world...

Good is the body from cradle to grave,
growing and aging, arousing, impaired,
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh...

- (from Brian Wren, 'Good is the Flesh' in *Good is the Flesh: Body, Soul, and Christian Faith*, edited by Jean Denton (Morehouse Publishing, 2005).