

# The Body's Grace: Sexuality and Intimacy

(Wellington Central Baptist Church 31 May 2015, Darren Ayling)

This is the second week in our series called the Body's Grace: Theology and Sexuality.

Last week we set the scene and introduced a constructive Christian ethic.

This morning I want to consider sexuality and intimacy in the light of that ethic.

Next Sunday Bronwyn Kerr will speak on sexuality and power and then we'll finish our series considering the church and same sex marriage.

There were a couple of things that I said I'd repeat each Sunday in the series-

the church's history in dealing with sexuality is poor and frequently abusive.

I think in any interaction with sexuality in the Church this needs to be confessed and lamented.

As with the expression of human sexuality there is both beauty and brokenness in the church

and often in the area of sexuality its our brokenness that prevails.

I also want to acknowledge that talking about sexuality for some is not a safe place perhaps because of past or present experience.

We want Central to be a place of safety and so if this series stirs things for you please speak to Bronwyn or myself or Andrew, or with someone else you trust.

The other thing that I am keen to repeat each week is that at present in many church traditions there is a raising of sexuality to the level of dogma,

and I think that this is unhelpful.

Sexuality is not complete,  
neither is it tidy,  
sex is a sign of desire,  
not the completion of the desire.

And with that in mind this series aims to raise more questions than provide answers.

There are a range of perspectives on sexuality held in this community

and that is a good and right thing so these reflections are offered gently and tentatively

and my hope is that they are received in that light

and similarly other conversations that may be prompted by this series are conducted in the same manner.

I said last week that it's a running joke that Darren is spending a lot of time thinking about sex-

I was in the library last week having spent some time reading and as I walked out down the rows of shelves still thinking about sexuality

my peripheral vision caught the title of a book that was in large bold print-

and my peripheral vision lodged the title in my brain as 'Christ and coitus'-

this of course would be of interest in this series,

so I stopped took a couple of steps back,

realised I was in the health section of the library and discovered the actual title was 'Crohn's and Colitis',

I laughed out loud and realised I needed to get out more.

The age of thinking about sexuality is getting younger and younger, it's one of the flip sides of advances in technology. And increasingly young people are being informed about sexuality by pornography.

Various media reports suggest that the average age of boy's first exposure to pornography is 11 years old.

A recent article in the New Zealand Herald reported on what pornography is doing to teen romance-

the article reported on two studies by UK universities that found a high percentage of teenage boys regularly view pornography and one in five has "extremely negative attitudes to women".

A Europe-wide poll found 40 percent of girls aged between 13 and 17 had been coerced in to sex acts.

The disturbing feature of pornography is the objectifying of women as this Herald article describes 'Pornography's core narrative is that there are two types of women: nymphomaniacs and those who haven't yet realised they're nymphomaniacs but are about to have a light bulb moment.'

Increasingly young people are turning to the internet to learn about sex and relationships,

the writer of the Herald article suggests:

'What they'll learn from pornography is that relationships are just a matter of physical proximity. Porn doesn't do relationships - it skips all that getting to know, falling in love stuff because no one views porn to watch people gaze into each other's eyes.'

Porn is anti-love since love leads to monogamy, and where's the fun in that? Who wants to be limited to one body when there are all those appendages and orifices out there?

If teenagers are getting their life lessons from porn, then we're not merely contemplating the end of innocence, we're contemplating the end of romance.' (Paul Thomas: Internet Porn is Killing Teen

Romance, *The New Zealand Herald*

[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=6&objectid=11445015](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=11445015))

Pornography is the antithesis of intimacy, and this is shaping how society views sexuality where intimacy is unnecessary for sexual encounter- it is purely a recreational pursuit that is about self-fulfilment.

Perhaps in a traditional context we would see sex that has no depth of relationship attached as risky sex-

but I would suggest it's the opposite it is in fact sex with limited risk- because it is unwilling to risk committed mutual faithful relationship.

And the message that not just porn but mainstream media increasingly gives us is that sex with little or no relationship is all good

because its about your own self-fulfillment.

Sex then becomes commodity-

it is something we consume.

You may recall the recent story in Christchurch of the couple having sex in the office that was witnessed by patrons of a bar across the road,

filmed on cell phones and put up on the web.

It shows how much our culture has shifted that no one alerted the couple,

they were instead watched voyeuristically as if it were entertainment.

And at one level the response of the bar patrons is hardly surprising when sex is seen as a commodity.

The Brothers K is a novel by about life and spirituality and in it one of the main characters, Peter,

reflects on a sexual experience he says this:

Well, yeah, it was fun, I guess. But the trouble, see, was that we knew we didn't love each other. So even though we got excited and all, it came down to a matter of, I don't know, not mauling each other exactly, but just sort of operating each other. Like a couple of cars or something. Yeah, that's about right. It was like we'd each invented this car, see. But there was no way of seeing how well our two cars ran without her getting into me and me getting into her and each of us test-driving each other.

So that's what we did. We test drove our cars. And we *were* our cars. Which was very exciting, and confusing, and made us feel all this gratitude and shame and wonder and embarrassment toward each other. But when it was over, we felt too much the way you'd feel after test –driving a regular old Ford or Chevy or something. You know. It was like, okay, everything runs great, yeah you're welcome, thank you too.

And that was it. Which just isn't right. The driving itself was just too wonderful to end up feeling like that so I won't do it again. I mean, not in that way. I want a form of wonder that doesn't turn me into a car. I want a wonder that *lasts*.

(David James Duncan, *The Brothers K*, Doubleday Press, 1992)

Peter's sexual encounter devoid of intimacy distorts the beauty of sexuality.

The church also distorts the beauty of sexuality by containing it within rules,

framing it in the language of shame and hiding sexuality in such a way that prevents a community from dialoguing well.

I read somewhere about the practice in churches in Victorian times where the legs of pianos were covered in thick material to prevent the lusting after flesh that a shapely piano leg may promote.

Hiddenness about human sexuality is destructive and goes against the narrative of desire that we see in the story of scripture.

We can sometimes be afraid of the strength of our own sexual desires,

and the reality is that our desire is often quickly distorted by our own brokenness,

but the strength of sexual desire itself affords us glimpses into the strength of desire that God has for humanity,

and that as well as sex itself is something to be celebrated.

The Song of Songs does just that

it celebrates sexuality – for many years the Song of Songs was read simply as allegory –

a description of Christ's love for the church, because it simply couldn't be about sex-

but it is that

a collection of poems that celebrate the erotic love of a couple- and there is no shame and there is much joy,

and mutuality.

The Song drips with erotic metaphor, celebrating desire and sexual union:

*She speaks :*

“Let the north wind blow,  
the south wind too!  
Let them spread the aroma of my garden,  
so the one I love may enter  
and taste its delicious fruits.

*He Speaks:*

My bride, my very own,  
I come to my garden  
and enjoy its spices.  
I eat my honeycomb and honey;  
I drink my wine and milk” (Song of Solomon 4:16- 5:1, CEV)

Just in case you were wondering- no actual fruit was consumed in this story!

The Song joyfully celebrates the expression of human sexuality, it celebrates the body and the knowing of the body.  
And in the context of the narrative of desire that permeates the story of the Bible,  
the Song celebrates also the desire God has for humanity.

What is also striking about the Song of Songs is how sexuality, far from hidden,  
is celebrated by the community of friends of the lovers.

The song illustrates much of the sexual ethic suggested last week, A sexual ethic for communities of faith that choose to have an approach to sexuality that goes beyond rules,  
for communities that choose to dialogue about sexuality  
And this ethic,  
based on the work of David Jensen has these markers:

Ethical sex involves

Consent

Mutuality

Covenant and Trust (mention truth)

Community

Joy

No unjust harm

Elements of this ethic will be touched on in each of the messages in this series.

For sexuality to be truly intimate these virtues of consent, mutuality, covenant, community, joy and no harm are necessary.

Because of time,

and because I’m a Baptist minister,

we’re going to glance at the three of these virtues that begin with C –  
consent,

covenant and  
community as they relate to ethical sexuality and intimacy.

Consent is a vital quality of good sex-  
it implies the freedom to say yes and to say no.

Consent understands that both partners have a voice that is  
heard and respected.

When consent is present lovemaking is possible, without  
consent it becomes abusive and violent.

Consent is also not a one off- but needs to be revisited.

Sadly marriage has been seen by some as the one –off  
indicator of consent and this is a dangerous mindset. ‘Marriage’ as  
David Jensen suggests ‘does not license consent, but provides a  
ground where it may flourish.’ (David H Jensen, *God, Desire, and A  
Theology of Human Sexuality*, WJK press, 2013, p124)

Consent is informed from a Christian perspective in the story of  
redemption,

where God creates people in freedom-

a freedom to make choices, to not be coerced,

but the freedom is a freedom *for* relationship- in order for love  
to thrive,

love for God and love for others,

freedom must exist.

One of the great distortions of human freedom culturally at present is  
the idea that freedom has no reference points but the self-  
my desires,  
my wants,  
my needs-

and this is pervading all aspects of culture including the  
expression of sexuality.

We would probably understand consent as a given in the area of  
sexuality,

but think about the messages that culture gives us in  
advertising and in the language around sex-

“buy this and you’ll get sex”

is an underlying message of much advertising, and  
people talk about sex in terms of “getting it”, and “hitting on”  
and subtly the language we use is undermining  
consent as a virtue of good sex.

A Christian sexual ethic sees consent as one of its  
markers.

But consent cannot be the only marker – even though  
this is what our society would have us believe.

consensual sex is good sex,

but there is more that characterises good sex:

Covenant is also a counter-cultural marker of good sex- culturally we are told that sex more often with more people represents a more free and mature humanity.

The idea of promise and covenant is viewed suspiciously and seen as outdated.

This is contrary to the narrative of desire that we see in the Biblical story of God constantly moving out ecstatically- God the creator, moving toward creation in love, and moving toward particular people making promises with them.

After Matariki we'll be returning to the book of Exodus, and that is a story of God making a covenant with a particular people, promising never to forsake them.

And this promise of faithfulness is how God's desire is expressed.

The prevailing view of sexual expression is that eventually desire wanes and the remedy is to move onto someone else.

Covenant would see this differently

Teresa of Avilla wrote the Interior Castle in the late 1500's it is a story of Spiritual journey towards a greater knowing or union with God.

She uses sensual language throughout- and focuses on the idea that intimacy draws one into a greater knowing, there is always more to know,  
more to learn,  
more to love,  
a greater letting go of self.

And this idea of ecstasy,  
of being outside of oneself,  
to being increasingly known by an other,  
becomes more possible in the context of faithful covenant.

David Jensen speaks of the idea of both desire and rest when it comes to covenanted sex:

“Whereas the consumer narrative of sex fosters an indefatigable quest of doing it all night long, all the time..., Christian narratives juxtapose the pursuit of pleasure with its accompanying rest. Making love, in this regard, is not synonymous with physical acts that lead to orgasm, but in the broad scope of coming to know, coming to touch, coming to pleasure, coming into each other's arms, and falling asleep side-by –side”(Jensen, *God, Desire and a Theology of Human Sexuality*, p34).

Covenanted sex allows for the increasing letting go of the self, of seeking the pleasure and knowing of the other.

Rowan Williams talks about the idea of taking time in his helpful essay *The Body's Grace*:

'But it should be clear that the discovery of joy means something rather more than the bare facts of sexual intimacy. I can only fully discover the body's grace in *taking time*, the time needed for a mutual recognition that my partner and I are not simply passive instruments to each other. Such things are learned in the fabric of a whole relation of converse and cooperation; yet of course the more time taken the longer a kind of risk endures.

There is more to expose, and a *sustaining* of the will to let oneself be formed by the perceptions of another. Properly understood, sexual faithfulness is not an avoidance of risk, but the creation of a context in which grace can abound because there is a commitment not to run away from the perception of another'. (Rowan Williams, *The Body's Grace*, available at [http://www.igreens.org.uk/bodyys\\_grace.htm](http://www.igreens.org.uk/bodyys_grace.htm))

I love that: a commitment not to run away from the perception of another- this is the great risk and invitation of a covenanted approach to good sex.

Debra Hirsch suggests that

'Covenant love is the more holy, truthful, revelatory and self-giving form of love that should come to characterize our relationships. But it requires an abiding commitment to each other's interests, to the

ongoing search for truth, vulnerability, the risk of getting hurt and the accountability of our community'. (Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality*, 2015)

Community is another marker of a Christian sexual ethic that values intimacy.

If you were like me when you first saw community as a marker of ethical sex I imagine you were wondering what the community has to do with sex.

Is Darren going to promote polyamorous relationships?

(no is the answer if you're wondering, although I have read some out there distorted theological stuff that uses the fact that there's three in the Trinity as a justification for non-monogamous relationships.)

Community as a marker of good sex respects that privacy in sexual expression is a good and right thing but that ultimately sex is not just for the benefit of the couple.

A more appropriate reading of the life of the Trinity in this regard is that the unique and particular bond of love shared in the Trinity also,

in its over-abundance,

flows out into love for creation.

And the idea of sex adding to the community in procreation is part of this idea,  
but it's not limited to that.

Again David Jensen has some helpful reflection on this:  
'Good sex...can render a couple more receptive to the love of community and more capable of showing love to community and world. The primary public marker of good sex is not how many children are produced through sexual intercourse, but the degree to which the sexual relationship is an animating factor in extending the circle of love and justice beyond the couple to the wider world'.  
(Jensen, '*God, Desire and a Theology of Human Sexuality*', p133)

Sexuality in a Christian worldview is about pleasure and joy, but it also is about what the sexual life of a couple produces in terms of the quality of life of the community.

In this way our sexual lives reflect something of the love of the Trinity.

'Sex is public', says Jensen, 'not because our sexual relations are plastered on big screens across the land, but because it can foster greater loves and deeper compassion. The question of community is not "how many children does sex produce," but "does the pattern of sex foster the kind of hospitality and compassion that characterises

the reign of God?" Good sex in other words, cares about community.  
(Jensen, p135)

This Christian ethic where good sex involves consent, mutuality, covenant, community, joy and no harm invites dialogue-  
whether you have been involved in a long term relationship or whether you are contemplating initiating a sexual relationship –  
how does your expression of sexuality affirm and celebrate these virtues,  
sex that is marked by consent, mutuality, covenant and trust, community, joy and the absence of harm?

Humanity is created in the image of God,  
our sexuality is integral to who we are,  
Christian communities could have much to say about sexuality-  
we will only do so constructively when we speak out of grace and not of rules,  
when we speak in terms of ethical conduct instead of moralistic legalism,  
and when we come from a place of joy and celebration rather than a place of shame and hiddenness.

May we learn to dialogue well.