

The Gift of Sexuality

by Rev. Ben Willis (First Presbyterian Church, Milford, PA)

The Third Book of Moses, Leviticus 18:1-12 [NLT]

1 Then the LORD said to Moses, 2 "Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. I am the LORD your God. 3 So do not act like the people in Egypt, where you used to live, or like the people of Canaan, where I am taking you. You must not imitate their way of life. 4 You must obey all my regulations and be careful to obey my decrees, for I am the LORD your God. 5 If you obey my decrees and my regulations, you will find life through them. I am the LORD.

6 "You must never have sexual relations with a close relative, for I am the LORD.

7 "Do not violate your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; you must not have sexual relations with her.

8 "Do not have sexual relations with any of your father's wives, for this would violate your father.

9 "Do not have sexual relations with your sister or half sister, whether she is your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether she was born into your household or someone else's.

10 "Do not have sexual relations with your granddaughter, whether she is your son's daughter or your daughter's daughter, for this would violate yourself.

11 "Do not have sexual relations with your stepsister, the daughter of any of your father's wives, for she is your sister.

12 "Do not have sexual relations with your father's sister, for she is your father's close relative...

[And the passage continues, showing the ways a people can honor God with their sexuality, and find life by honoring Him.]

We've been reading through the Old Testament together as a congregation in 2007. Because of Palm Sunday and Easter I'm a little behind the rest of you (focusing here on Leviticus 18 this morning). But don't be concerned, I know that all of you have just finished Deuteronomy and gotten into the opening passages of Joshua. (And I promise to catch up with you next week.)

I'm focusing on this passage from Leviticus because of a recent conversation I had with an older woman from another church concerning her son. He's grown, no longer living at home, and his mom had grown concerned watching him go through relationship after relationship: falling "in love", getting sexually involved, moving in together – living like husband and wife without committing to be husband and wife – and then breaking up and moving on to the next relationship. Having raised him in the church, she had

tried to confront her son about his behavior – the foolishness and wickedness of his treating these women in these ways and treating himself in these ways. Her son replied that he had never heard a sermon or Sunday School lesson about sex and marriage during all of his years growing up, so clearly God nor the church cared about such things. And if his mother had a problem with it, it was her problem.

Now their church may never have talked about such things during Worship or Sunday School. Godly sexuality is a challenge to address in the multigenerational environment of most churches. But I am going to – appropriately, I hope – talk about these things this morning so that none of us - young or old – can ever say God and His church don't care about such things.

The Bible speaks so clearly that both Adam and Eve were handmade by God, handmade according to His good design. When God looked at all He had made, including the bodies of Adam and Eve – and sexual relations – He declared it all pleasing and right and ... very good.” (v. 31)

God created sex for many reasons: clearly procreation is one; physical pleasure perhaps another; a means that husbands and wives can express the love they have for each other that strengthens their marriage bond in a way words alone cannot.

When people talk about sexual relations in our culture today it is primarily a discussion about two bodies coming together. But the truth is that in sex more than just two bodies come together, two souls come together, as well.

Our culture tends to view the human body as a pleasure machine, inviting and enticing us to satisfy all its many appetites. In movies and talk-shows, pop-music and romance novels, sex is discussed and portrayed as though it were just another bodily itch to be scratched. However, God says that what we do with our bodies matters.

We human beings do not have a body, and also a soul, and added to that a heart and a mind. We are not separate parts awkwardly cohabitating this skin we're in. Human beings are one – indivisible whole: heart, mind, body, soul together. We cannot engage in something with our bodies without our hearts and souls being affected, too. When we bond physically with another person through sexual relations, our hearts and souls also bond.

The classic verse used in most weddings gives us a glimpse into this mystery: “A man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24, KJV) The meaning of the Hebrew word translated cleave is “to adhere”. A man and a woman stick to each other. And a component of the glue that makes them stick, amazingly enough, is sex. In the physical act of sexual relations, body and soul come together as “one flesh” in a bond meant to last for a lifetime.

This “mysterious soul connection” is what helps us understand why sex is worth cherishing and reserving for the intimacy of marriage: Because God intended for that soul-connection to be formed. He knew it would take something special between a man and a woman to bear the weight of life together. This “glue” is what helps couples endure together the stress and strain of crying babies and aging

parents, of lost jobs and chronic illness. This bonding also gets couples through the small things. It means that when one spouse is irritated with the other, when she hates his new haircut, or when she has – again! – disappointed him in some way, they are still deeply connected in this mysterious bond.

It’s a bond given between a man and a woman (and not men with men or women with women or humans with other creatures) because “...God created human beings in His Own image. In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). By God’s good design it is man and woman in the “one-flesh” bond of marriage that shows forth God’s image. (Though God does grant the gift of His image to those who choose not to marry for the sake of the Kingdom – see Matthew 19:12.)

Can you see why God places firm boundaries around the sexual experience? God’s intention is that sexual intimacy be reserved as safe place, as a holy place in our lives, where nothing defiled, nothing but blessing, touches us. It is the great, good heart of God that says in the letter To the Hebrews: “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed be kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” (13:4)

This morning’s Scripture reading was from Leviticus 18:1-12. This chapter ends with words of warning, as well: “...obey My instructions, and do not defile yourselves by committing any of these detestable practices that were committed by the people who lived in the land before you. I am the LORD your God.” (v. 30) We cannot tamper with God’s intention without consequences. A bond of great depth is created when two people have sex – whether they intend to establish that bond or not. That’s why the shame and betrayal and loss are hard to shake when we’ve slept with someone and then the relationship dissolves. (There is probably no more contradictory expression than when someone speaks of casual sex.) We can’t share this form of intimacy outside of marriage and brush is off lightly. Not without beginning to cut our hearts and souls off from our bodies. (And that comes with twisted consequences of its own.)

In creating us as sexual beings, God is telling us a bigger story. The union of a man and woman is only part of it. The Story behind the story is that God desires union with us. This is the real intimacy we were made for (and one day will actually know). And once it’s clear what God is trying to give us through this mysterious soul-bond of our sexuality, His “no’s” about sex look different, don’t they? God is not restricting our freedom or spoiling our fun. He is falling over Himself to safeguard all we are created for – all that He declared good and right and wonderful – all that He is telling us about His great love.”¹

¹ This sermon borrowed heavily from the article by Paula Rinehart, “A Union Like No Other,” *Discipleship Journal*, January/February 2007, 43-47, with thanks to the author and glory to God.