

Introduction to the theme:

Begin with piecing the Body together: does each part experience, or understand, the world in the same way? The hand has a very different way of encountering the world than the nose, doesn't it? And the eyes—do they experience the world the same way as the feet? And yet all of them working together help the whole body to understand all about this creation and the world that we live in, don't they?

In our Bible readings today, we're going to hear a very old story about God's creation of human beings. There are two different versions of the story in the book of Genesis, and although there's a lot that could be said about each version, I think one of the most important points about today's version is that we are all connected to each other. God created us in such a way that we know deep down that we're connected, we're somehow part of each other, and we long to experience deep connection with other people and with God.

Our second Bible reading today says even more about that. The apostle Paul—who was writing to a church that had several people who were disagreeing amongst themselves, some of them suggesting that others weren't very important, or saying that they weren't part of the group—said that every single person is important. Because every individual makes up part of an even larger body, and that is the Body of Christ, which stretches across the whole world. [Show the picture of the body/with love*Christ*God at the centre, as well as at the edges—because everyone is helping to share the love at the centre. But in order for that to happen, we have to be working together, and not against each other.] So we need to practise unity. We all need to respect each other part, and take care of each part; because when one part hurts, the whole body hurts.

Last Sunday, we shared a joint service with our sister churches, St. Mary's and St. Bartholomew's, in Holton. That was the first Sunday of a week-long observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. There are differences between our church—the United Reformed Church—and the Church of England. So, it was good to be reminded that we are all part of the same body.

This Sunday, we're still observing that week of prayer for Christian Unity, but we're focusing on the fact that we're not even always united in our own church: we have different points of view in this congregation, as well as in the United Reformed Church more widely.

In 2007, The URC's General Assembly was asked to express a united opinion about Human Sexuality and God's creation. But as the discussion became a debate, with very different opinions being expressed, they realised that they couldn't find a united statement that everyone could agree with. Across the last five or six years, we've continued to try to talk about it in different ways. And last year, in 2012, the Human Sexuality Task Group produced a booklet and CD entitled, 'Living with Difference: Deepening the Dialogue'. In the booklet it says that these were developed "to help local churches and individuals to understand the Commitment on Human Sexuality agreed by the General Assembly in 2007 and to begin a discussion on the issues that lie behind it."

The Elders, and Adult Christian Education, and Worship Ministry Teams of our church have decided that we'd like to try to engage this issue in a meaningful way for a month, and so we've arranged to have the next four Sundays' sermons center on the subject of Human Sexuality and Creation, and on the final Sunday—17th February—we'll also have an after-worship discussion in the Church Hall where we'll use the booklets to help us in our discussion.

“Human Sexuality and Creation: What the Bible Says (and Doesn’t Say)”

Sermon One in a Four-part Series

27 January, 2013

Genesis 2:4-7, 15-25

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

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When Kit was 4 years old, we were living in Copenhagen. I went in to collect him from his kindergarten class, and he was sitting hunched over a book, completely absorbed. When I asked him what he was reading, he snapped the book shut and put it behind his back. “Nothing,” he said. I picked it up and began to page through it: ‘Where Did I Come From?’ was the title, by Arthur Robins and Peter Mayle. As I leafed through the book, which included a number of rather graphic cartoon images of how babies are made, I asked him, “What do you think about this book?” And his swift response was (in Danish) “Det er fræk”—“It’s naughty.”

I was shocked. (Only secondarily did it occur to me to be somewhat surprised that the book was on the kindergarten classroom bookshelf . . . I had experienced enough other cultural differences that a sex education book in the toddler classroom wasn’t enough to startle me.)

I’ve thought about that incident many times across the years. Where had our son gotten the impression, at four or five years old, that sex was naughty or bad? Why was that the word he used, and not “embarrassing” or even an understandable “yucky”? Why fræk, naughty?

The fact is, the world over, the issue of human sexuality is one of the most compelling, curious subjects under the sun for most people. But for some reason, it’s also one of the most difficult subjects to talk about in meaningful ways. Most of us learned, somehow, from an early age that sex not something we *really* talk about—it’s the subject of jokes and innuendo and most television humour. Maybe there was an awkward conversation about it with your parents, or your children—known in general terms as ‘The Talk’. Although, in the last several decades, sex education has been offered in the schools—which means that some of us got to live through a few excruciating, awkward classes where either no one wanted to make eye contact, or there were nervous jokes made about much of what was being presented.

The so-called sexual revolution of the 1960’s through the 80’s opened floodgates of research into and communication about sexuality—about the roles of gender and identity; about women and men, their respective authority and presumed social duties and ‘place’; the sexual revolution challenged traditional notions and ways of talking about—and indeed, ways of being in—relationships, both hetero- and homosexual.

Unfortunately, although most of us would agree that one of the main activities of the Church is that of engaging questions of meaningful and holistic relationship, the Church—by which I mean the many members who make up the one Body—has found it difficult to have meaningful and open conversations about human sexuality. There are a number of reasons for that, some of which we’re going to be considering across the next several weeks here at Wheatley U.R.C.

Today, we’re going to take a broad look at what the Bible says (and doesn’t say) about the subject of human sexuality—and why that ought to matter to us.

One of the interesting bits of information I gathered from the questionnaire that many of you filled out in preparation for this series was that 41% of those who responded said Biblical teaching did not determine their attitudes toward sexuality at all. I wondered whether that response might have been because people couldn't think of specific verses or stories that related to their attitudes about sexuality, or because they didn't think what the Bible had to say is relevant to the issue, or some other reason.

Personally, I think that a lot of our social attitudes, our moral and ethical codes derive from Biblical principles. And although the ground has shifted dramatically in the past half-century, I think our ideas about sexuality have participated in this as much as anything else.

So, what does the Bible have to say about human sexuality?

Quite a bit more than you might expect. And yet, not always in explicit or obvious ways—which may explain one of the reasons why we are conditioned to be somewhat less than direct about it in the Church.

There are some bits of scripture that are quite explicit and highly erotic. The most obvious example is the Song of Songs. If you haven't ever read it, but are bored some lazy afternoon, have a little read through. You might be surprised by what you discover; you won't be the first one to think, "*That's in the Bible?!!*"

And there are other bits that are deeply troubling to our modern sensibilities. For example, the ways that women are understood to be property, inferior to men, ultimately little more than temptresses and sexual polluters.

There are lots of examples where euphemism is employed to disguise the sexual reference. For example, references to 'lying with', or 'knowing' another are common euphemisms for sex, much like our modern "sleeping with" someone else. Less well-known might be the reference to uncovering a man's feet, or lifting the hem of his garment (for example, in the story of Ruth); and placing a hand under a man's thigh—all would have been veiled references to exposing the man's genitals. References to certain fruits and vegetables—like mandrakes, melons and pomegranates—which resemble various body parts, are also sprinkled into stories of the Bible.

We need to take care in the ways that we read, interpret, and apply scripture to our lives, because, as the Biblical Scholar Teresa Hornsby points out, "Much of what is said about sex in the Bible is allegorical [and makes sex the touchstone for describing other relationships—whether religious or political]. For example, many of the prophecies and the narratives include examples of sex, rape, incest, and domestic violence. The Bible describes those situations in exactly the same way it describes the ongoing and sometimes disastrous relationship between God and God's people. . . . A story of incestuous rape, like Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar (both were offspring of David) foreshadows a civil war that literally tears apart the house of David. So, some of the verses that people read as binding upon our personal lives may have been intended primarily as allegorical commentary on the spiritual state of the Israelites and Christians."¹

¹ *Sex Texts from the Bible*, by Teresa J. Hornsby, SkyLight Illuminations, 2007, p. xvi.

There are, of course, certain texts that are regularly cited as Biblical evidence for God's will for the created order, and as showing divine displeasure with same-sex relationships. Among them are the story of creation we heard as our first reading—where God creates male and female, as helpmates and companions for one another. Indeed, there are explicit directives against men 'lying with a male as with a woman', describing it as 'an abomination' in Leviticus 18:22, and 20:13.

But we need to be careful with what we do with the Scriptures. Do we take some, but not all? How do we decide which verses we're meant to retain quite rigidly, and which ones we have the freedom to read as no longer relevant to our contemporary mindset or modern understanding?

In the latter passage from Leviticus (20:13), it commands that "a man who lies with a man as with a woman shall be put to death." We need to ask ourselves, as people in 21st-century Britain, are we "obliged to follow this law even if we're not Israelites? If [we] believe that the Bible is authoritative for [us]—that is, the Bible guides [us] daily in [our] family life, [our] business dealings, and [our] political leanings—we have to grapple with this passage and others like it."²

Another example, in Genesis 19, we find the famous story of Sodom and Gomorrah. It's a profoundly unsettling story for many reasons—not least because it demonstrates the depravity of the city and everyone in it, not to mention the fact that God is willing and prepared to destroy a whole city full of people. Two angels came to Lot's house, as the LORD was preparing to destroy Sodom because of the lack of anyone righteous being there. After night fell, all the men of the city, both young and old, came to Lot's house and tried to break down the door, in order to get to the two visiting men who were inside. They had intentions of raping and abusing the visitors.

Part of the horror of the story is that Lot, rather than issuing a flat refusal in response to what the mob wanted, offered his own virgin daughters as a tradeoff, instead of the visiting men. This ought to make us ask questions as well—if Lot represents the righteous person in Sodom, are we supposed to think that his action was somehow acceptable? What does it say about attitudes regarding sexuality and gender value, that it would be okay to offer a woman—one's own daughter, even—in exchange for the safekeeping of male visitors?

The men of Sodom became incensed, wondering who Lot thought he was—he himself having come as a visitor to their town, and they were about to set upon Lot himself to "deal worse with [him] than with the visitors." But the visiting angels saved him and thwarted the corrupt townsmen. (Genesis 19:9)

The story is often used as a 'proof-text' against homosexuality, but if you read the entire story, you see that the emphasis is less about the sex than it is about the utter lack of hospitality toward the stranger. This is only a story of sex insofar as the sex acts the men intended to perform were acts of violence and humiliation against the outsiders. If this was fundamentally a story about the wickedness homosexuality, it wouldn't have suggested that *all* the men of the city, both young and old, crowded around Lot's house in order to have their way with the visiting men.

² Ibid.

A few other passages, these from the New Testament, are also often quoted or used as 'proof texts' for the baseness of homosexual love.

The epistles to the Romans (chapter 1), 1 Corinthians (chapter 6), and the first letter to Timothy all have harsh words to say about same-sex relations. Although again, when we read them in their broader context, and with a deeper understanding of the theological and social points the authors were trying to make, it becomes less clear-cut that these are prohibitions against homosexuality itself, and more clear that they are exhortations against social practices that do not honour God, or the other person, or the relationships between them.

What did Jesus himself have to say about the issue? Not a lot. He didn't say anything about sex specifically, but all of the scenes where he directly addresses situations that involve sexual relationships involve situations of divorce and/or adultery.

In Matthew's and Mark's gospel accounts, Jesus was being questioned by the religious authorities, who were testing him. They asked whether divorce was acceptable, to which Jesus answered, "No." When the Pharisees pressed him, arguing that, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her," Jesus responded that, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her." The only case in which it could be acceptable, Jesus says, is if there has been infidelity in the marriage; otherwise, divorce was tantamount to adultery.

Jesus' response indicates his concern that women were not treated with equal value in society, and that men easily divested themselves of responsibility for women they had grown tired of by issuing them a certificate of divorce. In those cases, the woman was left completely vulnerable, and had no means of support—because in those days, the woman relied on her husband (or other men in her household) to earn the income, while she kept the home. Jesus realised that to cast a woman out of the home was to consign her to a life of prostitution or begging, both demeaning and soul-destroying.

Perhaps the most developed scene of Jesus engaging an individual with regard to sexual activity is the story in John's gospel, where the Scribes and Pharisees again tested Jesus by bringing before him a woman caught in the act of adultery. "Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women," the religious leaders announced. "What do you say?" Jesus stooped over and wrote on the ground—not answering them at first. When they kept on with their questions, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7) And he bent down again to write on the ground. Eventually, after every man had walked away, Jesus spoke directly to the woman, telling her that he did not condemn her any more than she had condemned by the other men. "Go your way, and sin no more," he said—giving her permission to live differently.

I think the only other thing quote we have about Jesus talking about sexuality is the passage where he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." (Mt. 5:27-29)

In this passage (and what surrounds it), Matthew's Jesus speaks in very strong—some might even say exaggerated—language in order to make a point. We must always consider the broader relationship we're part of, and we are called to do what's in the interest of

building up that relationship, not demeaning or diminishing it. Looking at a woman with lust is a way of objectifying her, of treating her as less than fully human and as a mere object to be possessed. Jesus was clearly trying to change that cultural understanding.

Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven is among us—it's an experience we can have here, in this world, now. Some of us have experienced it, even if only momentarily. Heaven is the blissful state of oneness or unity with God, and also includes moments of unity with the divine spirit that dwells in others.

Healthy human sexuality is all about recognising and expressing the innate desire each of us has within us for ultimate unity—union with God, with one another, and with a unique other person. (Although I must add that there are plenty of people in the world who are perfectly happy and healthy in their sexuality, without feeling the need or desire for partnership. Living as a single person does not necessarily diminish one's healthy sense of sexuality, any more than being partnered necessarily enhances another's.)

So, heaven is the state of union with God and with others—it's the state we naturally aspire to as human beings. Hell, on the other hand, is equally possible to experience here in this world—most of us have experienced it at one time or another as well. Hell is the state we live in anytime we are cut off from a sense of unity with God, or with others.

To this day, some of the most deeply-entrenched examples of injustice and power imbalance are rooted in issues of sexuality—glass ceilings, unequal pay for equal work, Church practices that deny equal authority and leadership to women and men, and rigid adherence to certain texts that condemn those unlike ourselves without considering context or new and transformed understanding. Depending on how one decides to read and use the Bible, it's easy to find justification for all of these attitudes in Scripture. All of them stand in the way of genuine unity.

We need to be thoughtful, prayerful, and demonstrate an appropriate balance between scripture, tradition, experience, and reason in developing faithful attitudes toward sexuality and what makes for life-giving, divinely blessed, holistic relationships with God and with others.

How we *read* the Bible matters, and what we believe the Bible ultimately *says*—and how we're meant to integrate the most significant messages—really does matter for people of faith. We are a people whose faith and life understanding is grounded in this holy text—and the prevailing message of Scripture is that of consummate divine love. May our lives bear witness to that above all else. Amen.