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Texts: Psalm 42; John 15:7-13; 17:20-23; 1 John 4:7-8; Revelation 21:1-3; 22:1-2

This Is Really about That

The story of Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons begins in Genesis 25.¹ We're told that Jacob and Esau's struggles as brothers begin in the womb. Later, when Esau is famished, he sells his birthright to Jacob. When their father Isaac is dying, Jacob cheats Esau out of his blessing. And when Esau finds out, he's furious and vows to kill Jacob.

So Jacob runs for his life, stopping to sleep in a random place by the side of the road. That night, he has an intense dream in which God speaks to him and says, *I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*²

What God does here is astounding. People at that time believed the gods resided in religious places – temples, holy sites, shrines, and altars. But this God is different. This God speaks to people at random places along the way. This God doesn't need temples and holy sites, and rituals. This God will speak to anybody, anywhere, anytime.

Jacob then takes a stone and sets it up as a pillar to mark the spot, making a vow, *If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God.*³

Years pass. Jacob marries, starts a family and eventually reconciles with Esau. And then one day he returns to the spot where he made his vow to God. The book of Genesis says, *He built an altar, and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.*⁴ *Bet* is the Hebrew word for house. *El* is one of the names for God. Bethel, the *House of God*.

Imagine hearing Jacob talk about this stone pillar. He's telling anyone who will listen about something that happened to him years ago and he keeps stacking rocks on top of rocks. And he talks about a vow he made to God. And then he starts calling this pile of rocks Bethel, the House of God.

What if you asked, "Jacob, what's the big deal? They're just rocks." I imagine Jacob would reply, "Yes, they're rocks, but they're more than rocks. I was on the run. I thought my life was over. And God saved me. These aren't just rocks. They're a symbol of life for me. God came through for me."

We do this all the time. If I were to go through your house or garage or smart phone, I guarantee I would find some of the strangest things. Jewelry, pictures, antiques, art projects, text messages – we hold on to them because they point beyond themselves. If I were to ask you about a particular item and why you continue to hang onto it, you'd probably respond by talking

¹ This introduction is adapted from Rob Bell, *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections between Sexuality and Spirituality*, Zondervan, 2007, pp. 10-15. The sermon title is the title of Bell's introduction in *Sex God*.

² Genesis 28:15

³ Genesis 28:20-21

⁴ Genesis 35:6-7

about the people and events connected with them. But that would only be the start. Those relationships and that place and that time are all about something else, something more.

If we kept exploring, you'd probably end up using words like trust and love and belonging and commitment and celebration. This is my childhood teddy bear. It represents the love and security I felt as I was growing up. This is the stuffed animal my pastor's wife gave me for high school graduation. It helps me remember the support of my home congregation. This is the gift my college boyfriend made me. It doesn't work quite right; neither did the relationship. This is the afghan my mother knitted. I think of her when I use it. This is the basin and pitcher my congregation gave me as at my ordination. It represents the love and support I receive from this congregation.

This physical thing – this picture, artifact, gift – is actually about that relationship, that truth, that reality, that moment in time. *This* is actually about *that*.

Whether it's what we do with our energies. Or how we feel about our bodies. Or wanting to have the control in relationships. Or trying to recover from heartbreak. Or dealing with ferocious appetites. Or the difficulty of communicating clearly with those we love. Or longing for something or someone better. Much of life is in some way connected with our sexuality.

And when we begin to sort through all the issues surrounding our sexuality, we quickly end up with the spiritual. Because *this* is always about *that*.

And so there's a guy who always has a girlfriend. It's become a joke among his friends that the day he loses one girlfriend, he finds another. They actually use the phrase "trade her in" behind his back. This raises questions. Why does he need to have a girl? What is his real need, the one that drives him to get a girl? And if we could get at that, would he not need a girl so much?

And there's someone who has a coldness in their heart toward their spouse, but it's really about something that happened years before they even met.

And there's this woman who's single and fine with it but still has this sense that she's a sexual being. And she's trying to figure out how to reconcile this because her married friends keep trying to set her up with a "nice" guy they know, which gives her the feeling that her friends think she's somehow incomplete because she isn't married.

And there's a couple who keep having arguments about things that are so trivial. Yesterday they got into it over how the cars should be parked. And the day before it had something to do with the phone bill. And before that it was about whose turn it was to take the dog out. And now they're in the kitchen debating how a tomato should be properly sliced.

They've been living together now for several years, and would say it's been great, but they're at the point in the relationship where issues like trust, commitment, future, kids, and marriage are starting to linger in their minds and hearts, and underneath it all they both have the question: "Are you the one?" But neither of them has ever actually voiced it. And both of them experienced their parents' divorcing at a young age, so anytime the subject of marriage comes up, things get confusing and tense very quickly. So they're just now realizing that this argument really has nothing to do with how to slice a tomato.

Because this is really about that. It's always about something else. Something deeper. Something behind it all. You can't talk about sexuality without talking about how we were made. And that will inevitably lead you to who made us. At some point you have to talk about God.

Sex. God. They're connected. And they can't be separated. Where one is, you'll always find the other. Sexual energy is deeply connected to our spiritual longings for communion with God. Sexual desires point to our ultimate desire to love and be loved by God.⁵ Sexual desires are holy in themselves and deeply connected to our ultimate desire to experience God's love and to be united with God.⁶

This is really about that. Sexuality is really about spirituality. To make sense of one, we have to explore the other.

Today, we conclude our series based on *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God* by considering the ultimate "holy desire" that is the foundation of our relationships with God and with others.⁷ I adapted the first part of this sermon from the introduction to the book *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections between Sexuality and Spirituality* written by Rob Bell. In this book Bell writes: *For many, sexuality is simply what happens between two people involving physical pleasure. But that's only a small percentage of what sexuality is. Our sexuality is all of the ways we strive to reconnect with our world, with each other, and with God.*⁸

This definition might seem too broad—but it does touch on an important point: that our sexuality is part of our deep human need for connection with other people, with creation, and with God. Bell's use of the word *reconnect* identifies our holy longing to join what has been separated. Our spiritual longings and our sexual longings are both expressions of the same underlying God-given energy. While the origins of the word *sex* do have to do with genitals, some scholars have also commented on its associations with the reunion of what has been separated. The word *sex* is related to the Latin root, *secare*, which means "to cut off," to "sever," "to disconnect from the whole."

Our sexuality, then, has two dimensions. First, our sexuality is our awareness of how profoundly we're severed and cut off and disconnected. Second, our sexuality is all of the ways we go about trying to reconnect.⁹ Spirituality and sexuality are the channels by which we seek to become connected, joined together, made whole.

You can be having sex with many, and yet you're alone. And the more sex you have, the more alone you are. And it's possible to be sleeping alone, and celibate, and to be very sexual. Connected with many. It's also possible to be married to somebody and sharing the same bed and be very disconnected. It's possible to be married to somebody and sharing the same bed and even having sex regularly and still be profoundly disconnected.¹⁰

In his book, *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser writes, *Sexuality is a beautiful, good, extremely powerful, sacred energy, given us by God and experienced in every cell of our being as an irrepressible urge to overcome our incompleteness, to move toward unity and consummation with that which is beyond us. It is also the pulse to celebrate, to give and to*

⁵ Joel Miller, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Worship Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, p. 24.

⁶ Karla Stoltzfus Detweiler, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Youth Study Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, p. 25.

⁷ Much of what follows is adapted from Miller, p. 27; Detweiler, pp. 25-26; and Leonard Beechy, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Adult Study Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, pp. 24-25.

⁸ Bell, p. 42.

⁹ Bell, p. 40.

¹⁰ Bell, p. 44.

*receive delight, to find our way back to the Garden of Eden where we can be naked, shameless, and without worry”*¹¹

This is about that. Sexuality is about spirituality.

Biblically, this “urge to overcome our incompleteness” can be traced to the Genesis story. We were created male and female, with desire for union in our very nature. Expelled from the garden, we lost our natural intimacy with creation and our Creator. Restlessness and longing are the human condition, a kind of memory of the wholeness and unity that we once had.

Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in John 17 shows us that human longing for union is matched by the longing of God in Christ that we “may be one” as the Father and Son are one. These readings highlight the coming together of human and divine relationships, refusing to separate love for one another and love for God. Since the beginning of creation, humans have longed to be reunited in intimate physical connection with another human and reunited in spiritual communion with God. The spiritual oneness which Jesus longs for his disciples to have and the sexual oneness that happens within a committed, intimate relationship both open doors for experiencing God’s love and glory in profound ways. Both are holy desires.

The book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, brings us back to the beginning of our redemption story. The tree of life reappears as the source of healing of the nations. Much to our surprise, rather than we going to heaven, heaven comes down to us. God makes a home among us, amidst a wedding feast. The spiritual and the physical, heaven and earth, are mixed and mingled, and reconciled together. Human longing is met by the redemptive longing of God, and all is whole and fulfilled.

Both sexuality and spirituality involve recognizing and responding to our deep desires. We can choose to respond to our desires for connection with God and others in life-giving ways or in destructive ways.

Our desire both anticipates and nudges us toward a completion that will be fulfilled in God’s time. Our sexuality is part of a deep, holy restlessness that is larger than the desire for physical pleasure and will never be wholly satisfied in that way. As Anne Krabill Hershberger observes, *We always relate to each other as sexual persons, but that does not mean we necessarily have genital sex in mind. Genital sexual intercourse is only one part of sexuality. A person can be a whole, healthy, fulfilled, and vibrantly sexual being without ever experiencing genital intercourse. Our sexuality is who we are, not what we do. Sex is not a compartment of our lives and beings that we can treat separately. Sexuality is about our full body-selves, about love and connection and attachment and friendship, about relating in its many forms.*¹²

We praise God for sexuality, then, because it’s God’s gift, and also because it’s God’s own longing in us—for union, for personal fulfillment within the fulfillment of God’s plan. Whether we are married or single, partnered or celibate, we fulfill our sexuality in the deepest way with every act of healing, blessing, reconciliation, and co-creation with God. Thanks be to God for this marvelous gift!

¹¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Doubleday, 1999, p. 196.

¹² Anne Krabill Hershberger, *Sexuality: God’s Gift*, 2nd ed., Herald Press, 2010, pp. 23-24.