

Texts: Song of Solomon 2:1-4, 10-13; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Honoring God's Gift

When I sang the song, *His Banner over Me Is Love*, in Sunday school, I had no idea it came from the Song of Solomon. I don't think I knew anything about the Song of Solomon other than listing it between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah when memorizing the books of the Old Testament.

The Song of Solomon is a poetic celebration of erotic love.¹ It's also referred to as the Song of Songs. This reminds us of titles for Jesus such as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It's called Song of Songs because the song of which it sings, that of passionate, joyous, sexual love, is recognized as a great song among all songs.

This poetic book is included in the Bible largely because biblical scholars, both Jewish and Christian, read it as an allegory – a story with a pattern of symbolic meanings. Jews read it is a picture of God's covenant with Israel. Christians interpret it as elaborate symbolism of marriage between Christ and the church.

We can also see this poem pointing beyond itself in a different way: that all desires, all longings are spiritual in the sense that they seek to overcome our incompleteness, which lies ultimately in our separation from God. We long for oneness – with God, with creation, and with each other. Sexual intimacy is an earthly enactment of that longing. Song of Songs is where we find this longing of the flesh and spirit enshrined and joyfully honored in our Scriptures.

But there's nothing in the Song of Solomon to suggest that its writer meant anything beyond its depiction of the sensual enchantment of the lovers with each other. While other readings have their place, there's power in a more literal reading of the text. It's good to read it as a celebration of God's gift of sex.

One aspect of the Song of Solomon that isn't reflected in all translations of the Bible is that it's written as a dialogue. The main conversation is between a man and a woman. At different points it also includes friends and the "daughters of Jerusalem."

Love takes place in community, among friends, and the community benefits as the love between the two overflows into the lives of others. The act of making love, as we call it, has the power to actually create and deepen love not only between a couple, but also the love of a community as the couple shares their synergy, their gifts, and, often, their children, with the community, and as those gifts keep rippling out to bless others.

Wendell Berry affirmed this idea in an essay he wrote after the sexual harassment phase of the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court justice confirmation hearing in 1991.²

There is no satisfactory way to deal publicly with sexual issues, there is also no satisfactory way to deal with them in mere privacy. The indispensable form that can intervene between public and private interests is that of community.

¹ Much of what follows comes from Leonard Beechy, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Adult Study Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, p. 17; Joel Miller, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Worship Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, pp. 20-21; and Karla Stoltzfus Detweiler, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Youth Study Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, pp. 18-19.

² Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, Pantheon Books, 1993, pp. 119-121.

A community identifies itself by an understood mutuality of interests. But it lives and acts by the common virtues of trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion, and forgiveness. It encourages respect for all its members.

Such a community has the power to enforce decency without litigation, to influence behavior. And it exercises this power not by coercion or violence but by teaching the young and by preserving stories and songs that tell (among other things) what works and what does not work in a given place.

Such a community is a set of arrangements between men and women that include marriage, family structure, and responsibility for the instruction of young people. These arrangements exist, in part, to reduce the volatility and the danger of sex—to preserve its energy, its beauty, and its pleasure; to preserve and clarify its power to join not just husband and wife to one another but parents to children, families to the community, the community to nature; to ensure, so far as possible, that the inheritors of sexuality, as they come of age, will be worthy of it.

All of this—the background on the Song of Solomon and the words of Wendell Berry—helps to explain why I’m talking about sex today and using words in my sermon that we don’t normally hear at church. Given the prevalence of sexual images, sexual innuendo, and sex talk we encounter in our daily lives, it seems important to talk about the subject in our faith community. This isn’t a weekly or even yearly sermon topic. In fact, this is the first time in my ten years here that I’ve preached a sermon series on sexuality. Actually, this sermon is long overdue. Some of you may not think it’s not appropriate for me to talk about some of the subjects and use some of the words that are included in today’s sermon. If that is the case, I ask your forbearance.

Today, we continue our series on healthy sexuality based a resource from our denomination titled *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God*. *Body and Soul* addresses four basic themes related to sexuality: our bodies and how we see them; our human need for intimacy in our relationships; the place of genital-sexual expression; and the ultimate “holy desire” that is the foundation of our relationships with God and with others. We considered the first two themes last week. Today we focus more specifically on genitality – having sex.

Even though I’m still a bit closer to the beginning of the sermon than to the end, I thought I’d let you know where I intend to end up. I agree with the focus statement provided for this session of *Body and Soul*.³ *Sex is a good and sacred gift of God, designed for communion, procreation, creativity, and pleasure, and best expressed within a life-long covenant of mutual respect and equality. For single, celibate people, there are healthy ways to express sexual energy and fulfill needs for intimacy.* Of course, these two sentences still leave a lot of room for discernment and discussion.

Sex is powerful.⁴ At its best, sex offers such an intense sensual pleasure, such soul-satisfying intimacy, that we may forget that this is God’s invention. When two people give themselves to each other completely – body, soul, and life – they regenerate the community that blesses and surrounds them. The products of this union – love, offspring, bonding, intimacy – spill over into the community’s life. In this way, the couple can be said truly to be “making love.” The reading from 1 Corinthians 13, often used at weddings, is a beautiful expression of what mutual, self-giving love looks like.⁵ It also helps hold together the erotic nature of sexual love with the difficult self-giving nature of agape love.

The power of sex is also seen in its ability to gather to itself the very worst of human impulses and behaviors: violence, exploitation, manipulation, addiction, selfishness – all the shadows that dehumanize, debase, and distort our lives.

³ Miller, *Body and Soul: Worship Leader Guide*, p. 18.

⁴ Much of what follows comes from Beechy, *Body and Soul, Adult Study Leader Guide*, pp. 16-21; Miller, *Body and Soul, Worship Leader Guide*, pp. 20-21; and Detweiler, *Body and Soul, Youth Study Leader Guide*, pp. 18-24.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Clearly, sex is not a gift to be taken lightly. If there is such a thing as “casual sex,” it is foreign to Christian understanding and spirituality. Sex is simply too powerful – for good or ill – to be casual.

The Bible affirms and celebrates sexual love. Obviously, sexual intercourse is essential in God’s mandate to “be fruitful and multiply.” But sex is also strongly linked to love and commitment. It’s not a mechanical physical act; rather, God has designed our bodies in such a way that it is to be pleasurable and joyful, and a reflection of God’s own pleasure and joy in relating with us. After all, we are made in God’s image, created with a capacity for deep communion with another.⁶

For many in our culture, the pleasure of orgasm sometimes seems to be made into an idol – something that preoccupies their attention when thinking about sexuality. Some refer to it as “the big O.” God created this pleasure, so we can affirm it. Reading in Genesis 2:24 that two people become one flesh reminds us that the original intention of sexual intercourse was to bring humans into all-encompassing union. The biggest “O” is not orgasm but oneness.

Paul’s discussion of sexual issues in 1 Corinthians – chapters 5, 6, and 7 – establishes that: (1) Our bodies, with their sexual urges, are a good gift from God. In fact, the Holy Spirit lives in us, in our bodies. So, what we do with our bodies is a spiritual matter, as well as a physical one. (2) The good use of sex requires clear boundaries against distortions and immorality. Having sex outside of a committed, mutually loving relationship is a good way to sabotage healthy sexual and spiritual growth. Paul calls this kind of sexual behavior *porneia* (often translated *fornication*) and tells us to avoid it. (3) Sexual behavior has community-wide effects. (Paul agrees with Wendell Berry.) (4) Singleness and celibacy are not inferior, secondary conditions, but are instead honored. (I talked about this a few weeks ago in a sermon on singleness.)

In order to “glorify God in your body” as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:20, each person needs to learn how to set boundaries and discern appropriate, God-glorifying sexual expression. That’s where it gets tricky and I’m less confident about what to say.

President Bill Clinton came to mind this week. When Clinton said, under oath, that he had not had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, he was using a definition with which many people, including at least some Christians, agree. We all learned later, of course, that he’d had oral sex with her. When he claimed that he hadn’t had sexual relations, he meant he had not engaged in genital intercourse.

Most people have a progression of physical interaction in mind when talking about sex.⁷ We sometimes talk about where to “draw the line” on this spectrum, meaning where we should stop in order to be safe and moral. Often we assume that the appropriate place to draw the line is before genital intercourse or other genital interaction, and that may be a good boundary to set until marriage.

However, as Dr. Barbara J. Meyer points out in the book *Sexuality: God’s Gift*,⁸ both vulnerability and risk increase as we move from left to right on the spectrum. In general, as a couple moves along this continuum there is an increasing inner desire for relationship security (meaning that the partner will be there tomorrow) and exclusivity (meaning that the partner is not engaging in these same behaviors with other people at the same time). If physical intimacy is not matched by emotional intimacy and commitment, the relationship can be destructive.

Last week, I identified elements required for healthy, intimate relationships – friendship, acceptance, communication, trust, equality, shared values, affection, touch, time, and commitment. All of these must be present for true intimacy to occur. When we separate sexual relating from emotional

⁶ Beechy, *Body and Soul, Adult Study Leader Guide*, p. 18.

⁷ The progression may look like this: holding hands → kissing → sensual touch → lying together → intentional orgasm → genital intercourse.

⁸ Barbara J. Meyer, “The Gift and Nurturing Adolescents,” in *Sexuality: God’s Gift*, 2nd ed., ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger, Herald Press, 2010, pp. 88-91.

intimacy, says Dr. Meyer, “It is not easy to re-link them – and this seriously hampers full enjoyment of sexual relating for men and women alike.” There are times, even in a marriage, when it’s harmful to move too far along this spectrum of physical intimacy.

So how do we manage sexual energy when not in a committed, relationship? Assuming we are nurturing healthy friendships in general – even intimate ones – Dr. Meyer recognizes masturbation, or self-pleasuring, as a common way to cope, even though it, too, can be misused when it becomes an obsession, or an escape from relationships in general.⁹ Self-pleasuring is a safe way to release sexual tension.

But self-pleasuring practiced with pornography has harmful consequences.¹⁰ Porn turns sex into something simultaneously fantastic and exploitative. It removes it from the reality of relationship, imports outside standards into the bedroom, and objectifies whatever living and breathing fleshly person one might later have sex with. Pornography is destructive because it teaches its clientele expectations that are not connected to real men and women with real bodies (not to mention real souls, hearts, and minds).¹¹ It does not honor God’s gift.

Sex is a good and sacred gift of God, designed for communion, procreation, creativity, and pleasure, and best expressed within a life-long covenant of mutual respect and equality. For single, celibate people, there are healthy ways to express sexual energy and fulfill needs for intimacy. Even though we express our sexuality in different ways, we are all sexual beings throughout our lives, from infancy to old age. God’s intention is that life-giving, emotionally intimate relationships are for every person, regardless of their marital status, age, gender, sexual orientation, or physical or mental ability.

Traditionally, the Christian church reserves intimacy expressed through genitality, having sex, for those who declare their commitment to each other before God and the community in marriage. However, we know that couples of all ages, including Christian couples, who are in committed relationships choose to cohabit without getting married, at least in the legal sense. I had hoped that by this morning, I’d know exactly what to say about that. Does a committed relationship need to be recognized by the laws of the state and registered with the state for it to be considered marriage? Since love takes place in community and helps create community, shouldn’t the faith community have a role in the couple’s life and their creation of a household? What form does that role take? I continue have some questions about that.

What I do know is that each one of us needs to make healthy decisions about our relationships and how to manage sexual energy. And when we do things we wish we hadn’t, we’re assured that God is all about forgiveness and new beginnings. Any one of us can ask God’s forgiveness, receive it, forgive ourselves, and begin again to seek the path of sexual vitality that is healthy for us and pleases God.¹²

God is not out to torture us with unreasonable desires and restrictions about sex. Rather, boundaries outlined by God and taught by the church represent an invitation to wholeness and joy that is far more powerful and fulfilling than the casual, free-for-all kind of sex endorsed by North American culture.

God longs to *ble*ss us through healthy expressions of our sexuality. God *wants* us to enjoy intimacy, physical pleasure, and emotional connection in our relationships. God wants us to have *fun* being sexual beings. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

⁹ Meyer, pp. 9-100.

¹⁰ Detweiler, p. 24.

¹¹ Lauren F. Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, Brazos Press, 2005, p. 1112

¹² Detweiler, *Body and Soul, Youth Study Leader Guide*, p. 21.