

Jesus and Sex

Mark 10:1-16

We're talking about sex. It must be some kind of *sweeps* month or *high-attendance* Sunday. If we had one of those signs out front that shows the title of the day's sermon, that we're talking about sex, we might well have a full house! Sex is a *hot topic* in our society.

It seems, usually, that sex talk in church is just about what you shouldn't do and shouldn't think. The current climate of our society is one of extremes. On the one hand, so much sexuality is explicit or heavy with innuendo. It feels exploitive. On the other hand, there is a reaction to gratuitous sexuality that seems condemning and oppressive. We can feel caught in between those extremes and feel confused or frustrated. How do we follow Jesus with our whole selves, including our sexuality?

Look at our leaders. A few years ago, President Clinton followed the example of too many leaders before him by exploiting a young woman for sexual and ego gratification. Then, still in the headlines, Congressman Foley makes indecent overtures to Congressional pages. These scandals and the wider epidemic of sexual predation they reflect, and the frantic responses of so many politicians provide a perfect illustration of our ability as a culture to be selectively indignant.

Why is all this important to our lives? Why is this important to our journeys of faith? As human beings, we are made to feel strong attractions and intense feelings. All this touches something deep within us. Our identity as sexual beings is basic and vital to our humanity.

What would Jesus do? What did Jesus say about sex? What guidance can we get? First of all, there is no concept in the Bible of sexual orientation or any particular lifestyle. Every biblical reference is to sexual behavior. Specific actions are condemned or they are condoned.

There may be as many as 300 references in the New Testament to appropriate or inappropriate sexual behavior. Many of these references are attributed to Jesus, but no more than three appear in the gospels on the lips of Jesus. None of them speaks to our contemporary *hot-button* issues: abortion, same-sex marriage, and pre-marital sex.

Jesus confronts the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well with her inappropriate behavior – that she has been married five times and is living with a man not her husband. He also challenges the accusers of a woman caught *in the act of adultery*, daring the one who is without sin to cast the first stone. Finally, he answers the Pharisees' who ask him about divorce. The incident, recorded in Mark's Gospel, is our biblical text today.

Jesus continues trying to teach his followers *the way of the cross*. Today's text is a continuation of what we have been studying the last two Sundays. At the beginning of Mark 10, Jesus enters the region of Judea, moving toward Jerusalem and his final confrontation. In crossing this border, the story's atmosphere becomes much more intense.

Right away, some Pharisees challenge him. "What are a man's rights when it comes to divorcing his wife?"

"Well, what did Moses say?"

"He said it was okay for the man to divorce his wife if he gives her a written notice."

"That's not the point! The issue is not a man's rights, but God's nature and purpose."

Jesus moves to a deeper truth. He cites Genesis that males and females are equal in marriage – "the two shall become one flesh". Jesus speaks to the need for equal treatment in marriage and divorce for both women and men. He also reinforces the importance of the commitment of marriage.

Jesus' answer is not legalistic. Clearly, there were times when divorce was an appropriate action in the first century. There are times in our contemporary society when divorce is the better alternative to continuing in a marriage. A fifty percent divorce rate, however, is far from the ideal.

The ideal of marriage is a lifetime commitment between two people and God. It is not a license oppressive or abusive behavior. It is also not a relationship of convenience, to be terminated when no longer convenient. This is true for all significant and intimate relationships.

The point Jesus makes is that women and men have reciprocal rights in marriage. He refuses to be sucked into what was evidently a *hot topic* conflict between competing theological schools.

After Jesus finished teaching the disciples privately, he replays an incident that took place in the previous chapter. A child appears. The disciples attempt to shoo it away, but Jesus embraces it. To be like a child is to be *the least*. It is to be non-dominating and to take the part of victim rather than perpetrator of abuse. The *way of the cross* means to transform social system at its most fundamental level – in the family, in our intimate relationships, and in our individual lives.

This teaching is one of those very few occasions Jesus, in the Gospels, discusses a “sexually-related” topic. The topic is marriage and divorce. The underlying issue involves our identity as sexual beings – beings created with sexual identity and for intimate relationship. This identity seems to be inseparable from our call to love God and others. How do you embrace your identity as a sexual being? Can you respect others in terms of their identity as sexual beings without being blaming or judgmental?

Jesus evidently never talked about sexual orientation. How do you think he would have approached that subject in light of his other teaching? Jesus spoke very little about sexual activity. How do you think he would have approached that subject in light of his other teachings?

We come back to Jesus and sex, which is another way of saying to Jesus and relationships. He teaches us about transforming its most basic structures: our family, our life partner, and ourselves. What about the sex? Jesus was not forthcoming about the *do's* and *don'ts* of sexual activity.

Greek is the language of the New Testament. Every language has its own unique character, its strengths and its drawbacks. There are four Greek words represented by the English word *love*. *Storge* is affection. *Philos* is friendship. *Agapé* is self-giving, Christ-like love that represents God's love in human form.

Eros is romantic love, sexual love. We tend to connect it to the word erotic then leap to the image erotic carries in our culture – tending toward pornographic. *Eros*, however, is the complete opposite. With pornographic eroticism, the focus is on the self and how others make me feel, titillate me, or service me. *Eros* focuses on the beloved. It is the feeling of being in *love* when one thinks of nothing but the beloved.

It is this capacity to love so fully and deeply that draws us to God, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit. It is this power of *Eros* love that transforms us into beings capable of *Agapé* love, able to honor one another, able to lay down our lives for our friends. In this, we follow Jesus' example. He has called us friends. In this love, we are community and we experience the love of God. At Crossroads Church, this is what we are. This kind of community is who we are

Two weeks ago, at the Sermon on the Mound, we developed some ideas about the core business of Crossroads Church. Most of what was shared had to do with the type of community

Crossroads is. Last Sunday, we talked about the nature of this community and began to think about what *doing* comes from our *being*. This morning, we are looking at one important aspect of what we do.

The core business of Crossroads Church is to be a certain kind of community: a loving, nurturing, and teaching community for the purpose of living the presence of Jesus in the world, of paying attention and respond to God, of helping others hear and respond, to God, of accepting people as they are, and of acting for truth and justice.

The sign out front says, "ALL are Welcome!" Welcoming ALL is one significant part of our doing. We advertise ourselves as a welcoming and affirming congregation. We specifically welcome and affirm people whose orientation as sexual beings includes being gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender -- and straight.

This congregation's stand is an extremely important aspect of our ministry, of what we do. Not every person at Crossroads has the same understanding or perspective about sexual orientation and that hot button issue of same-sex marriage. Uniformity of belief has never been our core business. We welcome all people, regardless of sexual orientation, because it is act of justice in light of the prejudices in our society and the oppression many gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender people have suffered. We welcome all people because that's what Jesus would do.

There is another, even deeper, reason for why we do this. It is a more personal reason. One writer expresses it this way:

Sexuality goes to the core of a person. Attached to a person's sexuality is the capacity to feel affection, to delight in someone else, to get emotionally close to another person, to be passionately committed to him or her. ...Sexuality is part and parcel of the human capacity for love. To be afraid to feel sexually is to short-circuit the human capacity to love.

(What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality by Daniel Helminiak)

We do not exist as a congregation to teach people to be afraid to love. We do not exist as a congregation force people to choose between religion and their sexual identity. We do exist to invite and encourage people to embrace both their religion and themselves. This is a word we have to speak to our society – a word that, if heard, will bring healing. May we never cease to act out of who we say we are in Jesus' name.