

“At the Intersection of Faith and Life: Spirituality and Sex, Part 2”

First Presbyterian Church; Jamie White

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This morning, we come to part two of our short series on spirituality and sex. These two weeks are part of a larger, ongoing sermon series we'll return to from time to time over this next year to talk about a number of real-life issues we encounter at “The Intersection of Faith and Life.” If you were not with us last week and missed part one of this sermon, please circle back and give it a read/listen, since it really does set the stage for what we're talking about today. Last week we talked about sexual ethics, about having a container substantial enough to hold the gift of our sexual flourishing. I explained that before we can talk about what goes in the container—in this case, our sexuality—we've got to make sure we've got a strong enough to container to support it. So that was last week, really thinking through our container, looking at our ethics around sexuality. But now, this morning, it's time to talk about what goes in that container, namely, God's good gift of sex. We are going to take a closer look at the bible's book of erotic poetry, the book of Song of Songs. Let's first begin by looking at just a few beautiful (and mild) lines from the conclusion as we get started. Here the Word of the Lord:

**“Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned.” Song of Songs 8:6-7**

There's really something about being in love, isn't there? Especially those early days of romance and anticipation. It can feel all consuming. You know, the Greeks viewed love as the result of Cupid's arrows. Which I understand, because so often, it feels like you can't really control love... that love is something that happens TO you. Which is why we nearly always describe it as falling in love. We say things like we're “head over heels,” or “we've been swept off our feet.”

I told you last week that God is not anti-sex, and that the bible is not anti-sex... despite what you may have heard. It is more than just unfortunate that historically the church has often tied so much of its teaching about sex to sinfulness. And that's been happening for a long time. Origin, one of the early church fathers, famously castrated himself to try and deal with his own sexual desires. Augustine, because of his issues with

sexual guilt, egregiously tied sex up in his doctrine of original sin. He wrote that while sex is necessary to procreate, the accompanying lust was proof that the sexual act was impossible to perform without sin. Thomas Aquinas thought that sex was at best, a neutral appetite and had to be directed toward bearing children. This kind of repressive sexuality in the church has had far-reaching consequences too, impacting everything from the celibacy of catholic priests and nuns to the many, many Christians who are simply afraid of sex.

But our text tells us that love—and in particular, the sexual physical expression of love—is stronger than death, that it burns hotter than any flame, that it is unquenchable. Even the Apostle Paul, our unmarried celibate church-planter, who really seemed to believe that life would be a lot easier if everyone was single like he was, understood that for most people, sex is deeply important and a way of expressing love and experiencing pleasure. (Sure, there are a small number of folks who either find themselves asexual or choose to be celibate.) He too compared the intensity of sex to an unquenchable fire, when he encouraged folks to seek out a life partner, writing **“for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” -1 Cor 7:9**

So, I find it terribly sad that the church has generally been unwilling to talk about it... or if they do, they've only focused on the potential dangers and sinfulness of sex. I've heard plenty of those sermons, I'm sure you have too. I grew up in evangelical purity culture, which basically distilled the bible down to one overarching teaching about sex; “No.” That was it; “No.” No matter what questions we had, “can we, or should we, or what happens when” the answer from the bible was always, “No.” We were basically taught that sex is dangerous, dirty, gross, and you'll probably get some horrible venereal disease, so save it for the one you love; true love waits. So, that wasn't very helpful. And then most parents were deeply uncomfortable teaching their kids about sex. Mine were. Other than some basic info on human biology, I was clueless. Most people relied on the schools to cover it, but really those lessons only came in 3 parts: 1. here's how the basic plumbing works. 2. here's what terrible disease you'll get if you even think about having sex. 3. Let's watch this live video of a woman giving birth. (that'll scare 'em.)

A lot parents waited until their kids were in college to tell them anything, “Okay Johnny, now that you're a junior in college, let me teach you about the birds and bees.” By then it was a little late... Johnny ended up teaching dad a few things. My friend Greg told me that when he moved into his college dorm, he opened his suitcase to find that his mom

had packed a giant box of 500 condoms. He was mortified. Mostly, because he wasn't yet sexually active having spent his teenage years on the basketball court, but also because his mom had never spoken a single word to him about sex. He said he remembers thinking, "500 condoms... what on earth does my mom think I'm going to do in college?!"

I think this is likely a common narrative for many of us. The messaging was that sex was dangerous and shameful and it was our job, to simply take our sexual desires and shove them deep down to figure out later. The big problem with this is that it forces us to be *less than human*, or what one author calls the temptation to be either an **angel or animal**. On one extreme, some folks try to be an angel, a non-sexual, divine being... they suppress their human sexuality, assuming they can live above it, and they deny that part of themselves in their attempt to be pure. They try and live like angels. This is often what the church has taught them to do. I can't tell you how many couples show up in my office for counseling, who tried desperately to live like angels, only to discover that once they finally felt like they were now "morally" allowed to flip that switch, that they couldn't do it. They had 'saved' themselves for marriage, but had so deeply repressed their sexual selves that, not only did they not know what to do with their desires, some weren't even sure they had them anymore. If you grow up ashamed of your sexuality, that doesn't just go away the second you're in a committed relationship. Being an angel doesn't work.

Now, on the other extreme, there are plenty of folks who rather choose to live like animals. These folks just give into any of their sexual appetites, assuming they can't really help it anyway. The body wants what the body wants. They live as if they don't have any self-control, they're just animals. This is often what we see in our culture. Sex is simply for pleasure and release, so who you're sleeping with doesn't matter. It's about purely physical urges, animal instinct. But we know this doesn't work either... sex isn't just physical.

Which is why, no one would ever say to a woman who had been raped and was still struggling years later, "why can't you just get over it? Sex is just physical. You don't still cry about your broken arm from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade do you?" No one would ever say that. Likewise, no one is confused about why the grief of a breakup is always so much worse when it involves someone you've been sleeping with. No, no matter how animalist our culture might be, deep down we know that's rubbish. Which is why just as many of these folks—the ones who have been trying to live like animals—show up in my office feeling disconnected from their own bodies and realizing that no matter how much sex they are

having or how much porn they are watching, they feel lonelier and emptier than ever. Because sex is about so much more than physical desire. Being an animal doesn't work either.

Angels or animals; both extremes are equally unhelpful. And that's because we're not angels and we're not animals; we are human beings. **Human beings are at once embodied with sexual, physical desires AND also hardwired for connection, intimacy, and commitment.** In order to experience sexual flourishing we must acknowledge the fullness of our humanity. This is why it matters so deeply that we talk about sex, and specifically name the truth that our complex, human sexuality is a gift from God to be celebrated.

Friends, God is very much pro-sex. Now, unfortunately, it's pretty rare that we hear that side of the story. I'd wager that most people have no idea that Song of Songs is even in the bible, or if they do, they've got no idea what it's about. But let's change that, shall we?

This short book of erotic poetry is part of what we call "the wisdom literature" of holy scripture. In your bible it might be called Song of Songs or Song of Solomon. That's due to a reference to Solomon in one of the poems; so, some translators have chosen to add his name into the book title to tie it to larger wisdom writings of Solomon or to allude to it being "in the style" of Solomon. Scholars are in agreement however, that he is not the actual author. The Hebrew title for the book is literally—Song of Songs. It's a Jewish idiom, like the "holy of holies" or the "king of kings"... it's a way of saying that this is the "greatest of all songs."

Based on what I've already shared, you probably won't be surprised to hear that the Song's inclusion in the canon of Scripture was a matter of some debate among rabbis in the first century. Some considered the love poems too scandalous for inclusion or little more than drinking songs. The matter was eventually settled by the great teacher and mystic, Rabbi Akiba, who said, **"The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."** -Mishnah Yadayim 3:5

Yet even with the Rabbi's support, for many centuries the church either simply ignored the book altogether or they argued it was just an elaborate allegory for the love between God and the Israelites or between Christ and the church. Now, to be sure, there

is nothing wrong with using romantic love or physical imagery to describe the love between us and God. The Christian mystics did this for centuries. In fact, Bernard of Clairvaux is famous for writing 86 sermons on Song of Songs, and he never even made it past chapter 2! He believed that romantic love was the highest form of love between the soul and God, that love was the closest we could get to making sense of divine union. The modern-day mystic, Simone Weil, put it well when she said, **“People sometimes condemn the mystics for using the language of physical love when talking about their love for God. But what other language do they have? What other language do we have?”** So, there’s nothing wrong with using these poems as a way to describe the love between God and God’s people... but that is primarily not what they’re about. They are about sex.

The Song consists of poetic dialogue between a pair of lovers, a man and a woman, though it is the woman’s voice we hear from the majority of the time, something fairly unique for ancient scripture. There is no clear narrative plot. Rather, the poetic scenes are connected by sensual and repeated themes: passion, vivid descriptions of each other’s bodies, admiration for one another’s beauty, memories of past encounters, fantasies of future encounters, fearful dreams of being separated, and passionate longing for sexual union. Unfortunately, most of our English translations have been so watered down that you can’t always tell what’s happening, which I believe has done a great disservice to the church.

We’ve long believed that the only place we can see an expression of passion and desire is from our culture. Whether it comes by way of all those sexy rom-com movies (Bridgerton, anyone?), or all steamy vampire novels that have taken our culture by storm, or even in pornography. Most folks assume that popular media is where they can find expressions of passionate sexuality. But in the bible? No way.

Friends, Song of Songs describes the sensual, physical pleasures of desire, arousal, and sex. I do not say this to embarrass or shock us, but in this Song we find allusions to sexual experimentation, masturbation, oral sex, descriptions of stripping for your lover, having sexual encounters inside and outdoors, and vivid descriptions of longing and desire. It’s all there. The woman says: **“Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere. Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.” -4:16** It’s pretty clear what we’re talking about here. The man says: **“How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights! Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, “I will climb the palm**

**tree; I will take hold of its fruit.” -7:6-8** You’re going to find it all friends. I mentioned our English translations have been watered down... here’s an example. In the NIV, 5:14 reads: **“His body is like polished ivory.”-5:14** but the actual translation is **“his loins are like a polished tusk.”**

These lovers go to great lengths to articulate their love for each other’s physical bodies. In chapter 2 we find the woman describing the way the man moves. Then she describes the way he stands still and looks out the window; she’s in love with every little thing he does. The man does the same thing, he describes in detail everything from her eyes and mouth, and hair and neck, to her breasts and navel, and the curves of her back and legs. The very physicality of this text is its gift. It reminds us that our physical bodies are beautiful and beloved, and that loving relationships occur within and not in spite of our bodies.

The lovers and their world are all celebrated as God’s very good creation. Phyllis Tribble and Ellen Davis, in both their commentaries on the Song of Songs, suggest that the striking garden imagery in the Song of Songs is the recreation and redemption of the fallen Garden of Eden from Genesis. A comparison of the Garden of Eden to this re-created Garden of Love is striking. In the Garden of Eden, we find sexuality entangled with guilt and judgment and shameful nudity after the couple eats from the tree. In the Song of Songs, we find love woven with play and imagination and delight – a nudity that is both exalted and desired... with no trace of guilt found anywhere. At no point during these erotic poems, does God interrupt the lovers and say “shame on you guys. Stop talking like that!” No, sexual desire is celebrated.

Even more—and this is truly stunning—in Genesis at the fall, we find that the woman is cursed with these painful consequences, **“Your *desire* will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” -Gen 3:16.** Now, this word “desire” is extremely rare and is found only in Genesis, before it is then used in the Song of Songs, when the young woman says of her lover **“I am my beloveds, and my beloved is mine. His *desire* is for me.” Song of Songs 7:10** The author of the Song, by using this rare word, is deliberately referring back to the Garden of Eden, where this rupture between lovers first occurred. In the original garden, there is unequal power between the lovers. But in the garden of the Song, the curse is reversed...there is no trace of domination anywhere. Theirs is a relationship of rich mutuality, in harmony with one another and with the natural world. The Song describes what could have been and can be again.

This humanity redeemed, this garden restored is what our church father, Irenaeus was getting at when he wrote that **“the glory of God is the human person fully alive.”** Not repressed, ashamed, afraid, addicted, or lonely. Not an angel, not an animal. But a human being, fully alive; in right relationship to God, to their own self, and to others. To be a human being fully alive is to have sexual desire, to have a libido, to have passion... but to express that in ways that honor, that respect, and that lead to life.

I had a couple people reach out to me this week, talking about how much they appreciated the sermon but noticing that I didn't explicitly tell us what to do and what not to do. Friends, that was intentional. Each of our own life stages and relational contexts will ask us to rely on God's wisdom for how we are to be a human being, fully alive, in regard to our sexual flourishing. What the wisdom of God looks like when you're a developing 13-year-old is obviously going to look so very different than the wisdom you'll need as a middle-aged adult. What your sexual ethics and sexual flourishing look like if you're in a loving, committed life-long relationship is going to be different than what you need when you're actively dating and trying to find your person. What this looks like post-divorce will look different than what it looks like in retirement years. What this looks like for someone who's survived sexual assault is going to look different than someone who's battling sexual addiction.

Let me say again, that just placing our sexual selves into rigid categories of good vs. bad, or right vs. wrong, will never be enough. Sameness is not fairness. You know, in all my years of pastoral ministry, the context of real people's real sexual lives has led me to a place where I am not always sure about what God forbids or what God allows. There is so much of what we face in our day and age, that the biblical text simply does not address and plenty of things that scripture allows that in our own time, are morally reprehensible (like polygamy). Friends, being a follower of Jesus demands so much more from us than simply following rules. Go check out the Sermon on the Mount from Mt. 5-7 if you want to see what Jesus does with our rigid categories of rules.

Rather, we are encouraged to rely on the Holy Spirit and keep aiming for wisdom and obedience. Paul puts it this way, **“continue working out your salvation with awe and reverence, for the one bringing forth in you both the desire and the effort—for the sake of his good pleasure—is God.” -Phil 2:12b-13 (NET)** Paul is basically saying, not sure what's right... put your life before the Lord in prayer, and with reverence, taking the Spirit's

direction seriously, seek the wisdom of God. God is at work in you, God will lead you to what you ought to do.

Friends, sex is God's gift to you; it is how you were made. A human being, fully alive. But like the Song reminds us, it is also powerful, an unquenchable fire. May you embrace this gift, but do so with the wisdom of our God. Amen.