

“At the Intersection of Faith and Life: Spirituality and Sex, Part 1” 1 Cor 6:12-20
First Presbyterian Church; Jamie White
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This morning we’re diving into a new sermon series that we’ll return to occasionally over this next year entitled, “At the Intersection of Faith and Life.” There is often a temptation to believe that as people of faith we have two selves, almost like a split personality... we’ve got our real life—work, school, friends, money, sex, politics, family—the stuff of everyday living. But then we’ve got our spiritual life—church, bible study, worship, prayer, beliefs about God, morality, theology—the “faith stuff” of life. So, we come here on Sundays, and we engage in the faith-side of life, but then often really struggle to connect that back to our actual lived experience. We might feel split.

Now, I think this can happen for two reasons. First, the realities of living in our culture often feel very different from the reality of trying to live in God’s kingdom. In fact, the way of Jesus is often in direct conflict with the ways of our modern, western culture. Sometimes the tension between these realities can make our integration and congruence difficult. But another reason I think we tend to feel a split between our ‘real’ life and our ‘spiritual’ life has to do with what we’ve decided is off-limits in church. There are all sorts of issues that we face day-in-and-day-out that quite frankly, rarely see the light of day on a Sunday morning. That is the point of this series... to quite purposefully meet at intersection of faith and life. To think and talk about a number of issues we regularly face as we try to navigate what it is to be a human being trying to live for God. So, this morning and next week, we’re going to talk about sex. We’ll touch on other issues later this year.

Now, I know sex is a loaded subject, for all sorts of reasons. I imagine you might be having any number of reactions to this morning’s subject. Maybe it’s curiosity. Maybe sex isn’t talked about in your family or friend circles. It might feel awkward for you... so maybe you find yourself curious. Or maybe you’re on high alert or even guarded right now. Maybe because of your strongly held beliefs... maybe because of trauma or shame about something you’ve experienced. Maybe because of the harm done in a religious tradition you’ve left behind. You might feel ready to critique or defend a particular position. Maybe you’re worried I’m going to say something unsettling or off base. But however you come today, I would guess I have your attention this morning.

The beloved Mr. Rogers so wisely said, **“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that’s mentionable is manageable.”** We can talk about this, friends. Even more, it matters that we do. Sex is deeply important, it’s central to what it means to be human, and it impacts us all. But even if we come to a conversation about sex with a shared awareness of how sex is understood more broadly in our culture, we’ve also each been through things that inform

our beliefs, practices, and comfort around talking about sex. I say that to remind you that if you've had particular sexual experiences, especially anything that might veer into the categories of trauma or addiction, these two weeks might be a bit unnerving. But again, if it's mentionable, it's manageable. Even more, I hope this series sort of gives you the permission to might need to think more deeply about your sexuality.

Because here's the thing, God is not anti-sex, despite what you may have heard. The bible is not anti-sex. In fact, right smackdab in the middle of your bible is a book of erotic poetry called Song of Songs. It is entirely about romance, desire, sex, and pleasure. God made us sexual beings—and yes, procreation is part of that—but even more, we're created with a capacity for attraction and love, and to experience pleasure and sexual connection. We're actually going to talk more about that side of sexuality next Sunday; the gift that it is from God. But before we get to Song of Songs, I think it's important to talk about sexual ethics.

I'm sure you all remember the hip-hop duet, Salt-N-Pepa, whose catchy 1990 song lyrics say, (If you know it, sing along with me) *"Let's talk about sex, baby. Let's talk about you and me. Let's talk about all the good things and the bad things that may be. Let's talk about sex."* Here's the thing, no matter where you come from today, I think we can all agree—whether you're a person of faith or not—that sex needs some sort of ethics to support it... sex needs some boundaries, some definition, in the words of Salt-N-Pepa, "to talk about all the good things and all the bad things" that are possible.

For me, the image I find most helpful when we begin to talk about ethics of any kind, is to think of a bowl or container. I mean, I love salad, but having lettuce, veggies, and salad dressing all over my counter isn't great. No, I need a container or bowl to hold it all. But before we can talk about what goes in the bowl—in this case, the stuff of pleasure, sexual connection, and flourishing sexuality—we need to know what our container is. Do we have an ethic substantial enough to hold sex?

This morning, we're going to hear from the apostle Paul, who you might remember was a first century, Jewish pharisee turned Jesus follower turned church planter. His letters make up over half the New Testament. In one of his letters, we learn that Paul was never married and was celibate his whole life. Now you may be wondering how a celibate guy has anything to teach us about sex. I mean, that's kind of like a vegetarian telling you how to barbecue steaks.

But, the reason I'm turning to Paul's letters is because they are very helpful for those trying to live at the intersection of faith and life. Paul travels around the Greco Roman world telling folks about Jesus and all these little churches start to pop up. And it becomes quickly evident that these new Jesus followers really aren't sure how to live in the midst of their pagan culture, so they write to Paul and say, "help... what are we supposed to do now?" Paul basically writes letters

back-and-forth to these churches to offer them practical advice and some basic theology. So, as you read Paul, you ought to note that you're basically reading someone else's mail. But you've got to remember ... we only get to hear one side of this letter exchange... so we're stuck trying to figure out what sorts of issues Paul is specifically addressing. And while biblical scholars aren't always exactly sure, it's clear that these church folks ask a lot of question about sex. Why? Because the Greco Roman world was a pretty sexually rampant culture and placed a supremely high value on sexual freedom. So, these new Christians, they had questions.

We're going to read from the first letter to the Corinthians in just a second, but you'll want to know a bit about the city of Corinth first. Corinth had quite a reputation for being a wild and immoral city. There were several pagan temples, but the largest was to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and boasted thousands of temple prostitutes available for all your "worshipping" needs. Corinth was also a port city, with lots of folks coming and going. Think of it as the Las Vegas or Red-Light District of the Greco Roman world. In fact, historians tell us that it was a well-known practice for people to come to Corinth from all over to blow all their money on partying and temple prostitutes. It was such a wild city that if you wanted to insult someone who was especially immoral (not matter where they were from), you'd call them a *korinthiazomai*; "you must be from Corinth" was the joke.

So, these new Corinthian Christians write to Paul asking for help. Let's look at Paul tells them.

Hear the Word of the Lord from 1 Cor 6:12-20 (NIV) : **"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything. You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies."** The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

I want you to notice that Paul begins this section by quoting the Corinthians... who it appears have been using some popular slogans to justify their sexual freedom. "I have the right to do anything." Another translation says, "All things are lawful for me." Now, you're going to see a

lot of quotation marks when you read Paul's letters, where Paul is likely quoting something that the Corinthians have said or written to him previously. But understand, that is an interpretive translation decision. The ancient Greek of the New Testament does not have any quotation signifiers or punctuation marks, so scholars are making a judgment call and you're reading their best guess every time you open an English Bible. Now, these guesses are informed by other historical sources and interpretive markers, but this is really important to note, because Paul's letters are always the most difficult to contextualize in our own time. Some of the most damaging and problematic teachings throughout church history have come from misinterpretations of Paul. Because again, we're reading someone else's mail and then, only half of it... and it can be tough to parse the particular issues Paul was addressing.

In our text this morning, it appears that these folks have adopted some slogans about their freedom and right to do whatever they please. **"I have the right to do anything." "Food for the stomach, stomach for food, and God will destroy them both."** Basically, do what you want, eat what you want, because your body is going to rot in the end anyway. But these slogans aren't really about food. They're about sex, or at least Paul uses them this way. They speak about the temporality of the physical body. Essentially this is about ancient Greek dualism, one of the most significant issues that plagued the early church. Dualism suggests that what is really "real" is the mind and the intellect and the soul. The body is just this bag of flesh that we find our "true" selves trapped in for the moment.

Now folks tended to go one of two ways with dualism. The ascetics decided then to punish and deny the body, even to the point of self-harm, because they didn't see their bodies as part of their true selves. They wanted to escape or distance themselves from their body. Then, in the opposite direction, the one we see playing out in Corinth, they're saying "well look, everything physical is passing away, but since at least for now we need to keep these bodies going—we've got to eat everyday—we might as well just feed every physical desire we have because it's all temporary anyway."

This is essentially: "Eat what you want. Sleep with who you want. None of it matters anyway. We'll all be Spirit-beings soon enough, free from these bodily desires in the end." But dualism always ends up going way too far... which is what Paul is often spending his time and energy writing letters about. In fact, there's a meme that makes its way around the internet every couple years, (**SHOW MEME**) and the joke is that you can summarize all of Paul's letters with two simple Pauline statements. 1. "We are heirs through unfathomable grace to unimaginable glory." 2.) "I am, as a personal favor, begging you sick little freaks to just be normal, for like five minutes."

This discourse we read in chapter 6 is in response to a very real situation happening in Corinth, one that Paul lays out in chapter 5:1-2: **“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that even the pagans do not tolerate. A man is sleeping with his father's wife, and you are proud of it! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?” -1 Cor 5:1-2**

Scholars agree that what's being described here is that a young man is sleeping with his stepmother while his father is still alive and well... a painful humiliation to his family and especially to his father. But this church seems to have signed off on this affair proud of their freedom, proud to be so progressive. It is this context (along with some nasty lawsuits happening in the church) that Paul drafts the vice-list we find in chapter 6 where he says, **“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” 1 Cor 6:9-11**

Now, understand, Paul does not just randomly bring up sexual immorality, adultery, and homosexuality here. He's talking very specifically about forms of sexuality that he considers predatory. In fact, let me just quickly point out that this translation of “men who have sex with men” is far too oversimplified. I’ve taught on this before, but the specific Greek words that Paul uses here are arsenokoitai (arseno-koy-tai) and malakoi. And the reason that he uses two different words is because they delineate between the active and passive role in sex. Nearly all scholars are in agreement that what Paul is talking about here is pederasty, which was VERY common at the time and is defined as **“pederasty: a sexual relationship between an adult man and a boy, practiced in Ancient Greece and Rome.”** This is basically the ancient version of sex trafficking young boys to older, wealthier men. You can find examples all over ancient literature describing this very common practice. These pederasty relationships (if you can even call them that) were always unequal, commonly violent and abusive, and quite often a form of child slavery... basically just one way folks were giving-in to rampant sexual desire for the purposes of self-satisfaction, something Paul is unequivocally against.

Now what would Paul or other biblical writers think about modern, mutual, loving, committed, monogamous same-sex relationships? The truth is, we just don't know. But that is absolutely NOT what Paul's talking about here in 1st Corinthians (or anywhere else in the New Testament). And let me be clear here, our LGBTQ siblings are unequivocally a gift to us today in the church, created in the image of God, beloved children of God just like every cis, straight person is.

Friends, the point Paul is trying to make is that sex is to be mutual, not predatory. That's why sex shouldn't be the result of an affair with your stepmom that humiliates your father and family. That's why sex shouldn't be the result of an economic or power imbalance. That's why sex shouldn't involve prostitution or pagan worship or pederasty. This entire section is about weaponized sexuality. Once we understand this, we can begin to see what Paul is doing as he builds out an argument for a sexual ethic that honors God, ourselves, and others.

Remember what we read earlier: **The body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies."**

Paul is connecting sexual ethics to a theology of embodiment. Paul is clear, our bodies are more than just temporal flesh machines, they are the very temple of God. Salvation is not about escaping our bodies, but rather uniting them with God's purposes. God loves our physical bodies, even died for them. If the incarnation—God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ—tells us anything, it tells us that our bodies are a gift to be cared for. And that means that what we do with our bodies matters. How we treat ourselves, how we treat the bodies of others, it matters deeply. So, if you are sleeping with your stepmom and humiliating your family, you're abusing them. If you're sleeping with someone but you're not considerate of their sexual autonomy and desires well then, you're using them. If you're sleeping with someone to put pressure on them or coerce them or control them then you're manipulating them... and none of this is honoring God and it's definitely not honoring our own bodies.

But here's the thing friends, Paul knows we need far more than a list of rules if we're going to flourish sexually. A healthy sexual ethic is so much more than just "Are you married? Yes or no... then anything goes." Because for far too long we've been told that if we check the right boxes we can continue to be as selfish as we want with our sex. But that's not the way of Jesus and it's not the wisdom of scripture. Rather, it is the message we get from our culture.

Think about it... we too, have our own slogans. "If it feels good, do it." "If I'm not hurting anybody, it doesn't matter what I do." "It's a free country." "Follow your heart." "Live your truth." Have these slogans made it into your sexual ethic? As good and freeing and liberating as our own cultural slogans might sound to us, do we not see evidence that they're not always helpful, or "beneficial" as Paul puts it? Instead of liberating us, they end up enslaving us, holding us captive.

I would argue that we are not too far off the city of Corinth. Their sexual culture is not so dissimilar from our own. We might not have temple prostitutes and pederasty in the public square, but we have a whole generation that is getting their sex education and ethics from social

media and porn. We have unparalleled access to sexually explicit material and violent pornography that is quite literally rewiring people's neurochemistry around sexual arousal. We live a rampant hook-up culture that allows us to simply swipe right and get what want in a 25-mile radius. And this is not just a young person's problem, studies show that sexually transmitted diseases have more than doubled for those over 65 years of age in the last ten years. Mental health professionals report that sexual addiction has now become the most prevalent kind of addiction out there, beating out drugs and alcohol. The statistics on the prevalence of sexual abuse and assault, both for children and adults, are off the charts. So, no, I'm not sure our cultural container is doing the job. We too need a profound theology of the body, a container strong enough to hold our sexual selves.

Paul is encouraging us to move our sexual ethic from the category of morality—simple rules about what right vs. wrong and good vs. bad—and instead place it in the category of wisdom. Rules and slogans will never be sufficient friends. The Corinthians might have been using sound logic to argue for their progressive “rights” when they said, “I can do anything I want.” But what did Paul say? “not everything is beneficial”... Friends, just because you can technically do whatever you want doesn't make it wise, doesn't mean it will honor your body.

Only when our ethics are rooted in the wisdom and love of God, will our container be big and strong enough to hold our sexual flourishing. Our sexual ethics must be rooted in, not just about what we're against, but what we are for. That is what Paul is trying to do here when he pleads with us, “please, for the love that comes from God, treat yourselves with care. Love yourself, care for one another... especially in something as profound as your sexuality.” We are being called to develop enough wisdom to make healthy choices for our own bodies and for those we love. It's about learning to reject any and all practices that harm and exploit, no matter how common or acceptable they are to us. It's about learning to celebrate the kind love that lifts up and heals no matter how unfamiliar it might be to us. It's about slowly, steadily welcoming the God that shows up in our daily decisions to live with and for each other in the model that Jesus has set before for us. What we do with our bodies, it matters. And our God cares deeply that we experience sexual freedom, wholeness, and flourishing. May it be so, for each one of us.