

Sermon
Week 5: Holy Desires
June 5, 2011

Last week at Palmer Seminary, as I was signing out yet another book with sex or body or erotic in its title, I gave into the need to explain myself. The librarian had already renewed my other 7 or so books, all on the topic of sexuality. And I was sure she was suppressing a smile, and her curiosity, with a list of titles like:

Honoring Our Bodies
The Erotic Word
Speaking of Sex
Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ
The Spirituality of Sex

So, I casually mentioned that we were doing a worship and Sunday school series on healthy sexuality. Basically, just trying to curb any assumptions she might be having of me in the moment. But what followed had nothing to do with curbing assumptions about who I was and why I was reading these books. Rather she, and another woman standing by the desk, perked up and said “Wow, that doesn’t usually happen in church!”

They wanted to know more. So, I told them about the series. How it is reminding us that sexuality is much more than just having or not having sex. That it was around different aspects of our sexuality:

- having bodies created in God’s image and the joy and struggle of living in those bodies;
- our need for intimacy, for meaningful connections with one another;
- recognizing and honoring the gift of physical pleasure and sex as gifts from God;
- and how our spirituality and sexuality impact one another.

This was interspersed with nods, comments like “that’s right” or “you wouldn’t hear this at my church” or “that’s so great, the church needs to talk about this.”

I went on to say that we wanted this to be a conversation and not just a proclamation from the pulpit. I told them our adult Sunday school class was centered on listening and sharing in small groups. And that most weeks I would preach a shorter sermon, then have 2-3 people share from their experiences and lives. Their eyes got a bit wider at that point and one of them asked “Like what kind of stuff?”

Well, like not fitting into the stereotypes of macho, strong, well-buffed men. Or how being a runner changed a woman’s perception of herself and the way she deals with life situations. Or about what intimacy is like in friendships and after losing a husband. Or how difficult it is to be vulnerable, show our feelings or ask for help at times. Or celibacy not being a death sentence, but rather can be life-giving, allowing you to see other aspects of life. Or parents sharing about their journey with their daughter’s sexuality and then decision to live with her boyfriend. And how that made them think about their own sexuality.

And had it been this past week, I could have added a wild man’s journey of living into the deep masculine. Or the struggle with identity when being gay in a heterosexual world, while wanting to stay connected to a Christian community. Or the impact one’s family has on our sexuality and the way we relate to others. Especially in terms of dancing!

But back to the room at Palmer Seminary.

When I began naming some of the aspects that people shared, they were visibly moved. The comments turned into how healing it is to have people name things like this in church. To be open about what we live with...both the joys and the struggles. At this point, the librarian said "What is the name of your church?"

So, talking about sexuality is one way to advertise and get people's interest!

This interaction also represents the encouragement that I needed for that particular day. I have felt God's presence and encouragement throughout this series; usually coming at just the right time. The message I keep hearing is

Stay in there.
Don't bolt.
This is where you need to be.

Sometimes feeling like a personal message, but often feeling like a message to our congregation.

Stay in there.
Don't bolt.
This is where we need to be.

This morning it feels like we are coming back to where we began...noticing the need to bring both body and soul together, both spiritual and physical aspects of life woven together, both sexuality and spirituality. And this is what we find in the final chapters of Revelation. The new heaven and new earth are not just spiritual realities, without some kind of physicality. This describes God coming to live with us, creating, healing, bringing us to wholeness not in a heaven somewhere, but in the material world.

Ben Witherington III in his commentary on Revelation says:

Just as John's vision of heaven does not amount to our exchanging earthly excitement and pleasure for heavenly boredom and asceticism, so also it does not entail a disembodied shadowy existence. The new creation is just that: a new creation involving persons in resurrected bodies and an earth that has been renewed...frankly I would not care much for a Creator God who chose in the end to abandon his material creation in exchange for a purely spiritual state of affairs.
(pg 277)

This section from the book of Revelation brings us full circle in this journey...

...from the wholeness of the Garden of Eden where God and humankind walked together,
...to the disconnection and dis-ease of the fall of humanity,
...into the picture of full healing where heaven comes down to earth,
tears are wiped away, and God moves into the neighborhood.

It brings together the spiritual and the physical, heaven and earth, God and humankind...mixed, mingled and reconciled together. What was once disconnected and cut-off is now fully reunited.

This is John's vision of wholeness and the full salvation of humankind. Yet it also begins now. We live into this desire to be reconnected not only with God but with one another. To live more authentically, more aware, more free of the things that disconnect us. To live in our bodies, in our minds, and in our souls...not just one or the other.

This desire for reconnection is found in both our sexuality and our spirituality. And not just in 13th century mysticism of God being our lover. But in real ways our desire for God and for deep connection with one another stem from the same place.

Desire is not a bad word...although it has been so for many generations in the church. Once again we find ourselves with a need to claim an understanding not based within the culture, but within the Scriptures and God's Spirit.

In Psalm 42 verse 1 the psalmist describes a desire for God:
as a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

Isaiah 49 (15-16a) describes God's intense yearning for the Israelites:
Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb!
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

Or Jesus in the beatitudes naming that those
"who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
will be filled" (Matt 5.6)

They all describe desire. A hunger. A thirst. A powerful bond between mother and child. A longing so deep that you cannot forget it. Like inscribing it on the palms of your hands.

Dan Schrock in his article, "Spiritual Desire", says
Desire is what allows us to love others, to fulfill our vocation, and to join with God's mission in the world. Desire gives us energy, passion, and the ability to press forward in a positive direction. Desire for the divine pulls us to prayer, worship, and Bible study. Desire propels peacemaking and justice-seeking.

The reality, of course, is that not all our desires are good. A desire for fame can turn us toward arrogance. A desire for wealth can make us envious. A desire for gastronomic delight can render us gluttonous...The life of faith is therefore in part a journey of discernment through our lesser desires in order to discover our deepest desire...authentic desire, consequently, is not selfish. It draws us outside of ourselves, toward God and other people. ("Spiritual Desire," *Eidon*, September 2009)

Desire gives us energy, passion, and the ability to press forward in a positive direction. And true, desire is not always life-giving, but that means we need to do the hard work of discerning. Usually with others around us, from a community that recognizes God's desires.

Authentic desire is based in God's love...both the passionate love and the self-giving love. When our desires become driven and we lose sight of one another, that is desire that comes out of brokenness rather than God's love. Deep love pulls us towards a deeper life...into more health and wholeness for ourselves, more meaningful connection with the other, and uncovers the deeper longing for some sort of reuniting with God.

Schrock gives three qualities to look for in this process of discerning authentic desire:

1. **It has to do with God.** The desire will in some way originate from or move toward God.
2. **It orients us to others.** True desire never focuses exclusively on our comfort, but always strives for connection with others. In short, our deepest desire gives us a mission.
3. **Living the desire gives us lasting joy.** This is not to say that living our deep desire will be without difficulties. Yet joy will underlie those difficulties. Our deep, God-granted desire will be something we genuinely want to do. It will elicit from us a resounding 'Yes!' ("Spiritual Desire," *Eidon*, September 2009)

Instead of rejecting, suppressing, and cutting off any connection with desires in general, we are to discern the shallow desires from the deep or authentic desires. At times, this is more work than just turning our backs on desire in general. But it is holy work. Work that leads us to reconnect and reunite what was disconnected, cut-off, or diseased. Work that brings greater wholeness.

We are "Woven Together by God: Body and Soul", as our bulletin cover states. Both as individuals...not just body or not just soul, but woven into one. And also as a community... woven together in spirit as well as in physical ways: in worship, in eating together, in conversation/discussions, during exciting and happy times, as well as struggling and sad times. God weaves us together, as individuals, and as a community. Like the individual strands on the bulletin cover, we each are woven with complexity; similar, yet unique. And our individual strand is also woven together with the other strands to form a unique whole. A weaving that shows the strength, differences, similarities, and connection.

This is what we have been doing over this series on sexuality. Being woven together to form a tapestry that shows the strength, differences, similarities, and connection.

This morning we will hear from San Juan and Julie. And as in past weeks, we remind ourselves that they do not speak for all women or all men, but from their own unique perspective, their own unique strand. And in hearing their stories and experiences, we become more open to tapping into our own and connecting with our spirituality and sexuality.

So, may we continue to be open to God's weaving on our particular loom. May we continue to be the body of Christ, standing together rather than alone. May we continue to stay in there, and not bolt. Recognizing God's affirmation that *this is* where we need to be. Amen.

~ Lorie Hershey, June 5, 2011