

With Love: exploring relationships, sex, ethics, and God with young adults

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April 11, 2019

A Postmodern Hellscape

In November 2017, Twitter user @MaxKriegerVG posted a series of tweets considering the architecture and aesthetic of The Cheesecake Factory. This series of tweets achieved some viral energy, with the opening salvo being liked 126,000 times and retweeted 47,000 times. Krieger's opening shot was simply "If you want a fully immersive 'postmodern design hellscape' themed dining experience I highly recommend dinner at The Cheesecake Factory."¹ To support his argument, Krieger describes the restaurant's exterior as featuring "Greco-roman cornices, seashells above pseudo-arched doors, topped with a dome airlifted from f----- St. Basil's" and an interior world of "aesthetic chaos" that includes palm trees, 2000 era chic lighting fixtures, mosaics, fresco-like murals, and pseudo-Egyptian faces that top columns that evidence "unchecked white exoticism/orientalism run amok."² The longer Krieger considers the details the more surreal his experience:

TCF blasts you w/ a 'luxury dining' aesthetic while cutting some/bizarre/corners. They serve you water in tankards, seat you in wicker chairs at marble tabletops. Then you realize your tankards are plastic, your wicker is plastic, and your table is vinyl-lined particle board.³

Krieger moves beyond the décor to the actual menu, only to find "the most intentionally obtuse culinary document [he's] ever seen. It wants to DISORIENT YOU....there is no rhyme or reason to them. This menu is not your friend. It is actively trying to mislead you."⁴ Once the food

¹ This series of Tweets has been aggregated at <https://twitter.com/i/moments/969105464117157888?lang=en>, retrieved April 5, 2019.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

arrives, it is “not bad, not great, but good,” and the namesake cheesecake is “in a lonely counter cooler” and “feels utterly inconsequential by the time you reached it” and it seems that it “meant something once.”⁵ For Krieger The Cheesecake Factory is quintessential American capitalism: “Wealth run wild. Chaotic visual fantasies realized w no aesthetic discipline. An obsession with appearance of luxury. Gross excess that excels at feigning its quality.”⁶

Many of the qualities of the postmodern hellscape that Krieger describes in a national franchise restaurant can also be said about “mainline” or “progressive” Christian traditions, including my own, The Episcopal Church (TEC). In an effort for broad appeal, and under the auspices of inclusion, we have created an environment that often falters under close inspection. In an effort to embrace our postmodern context, we attempt to distance ourselves from those Christian traditions that speak in absolutes, the end result being that our “hipness” and broad offering of options produce something that is not bad, not great, but good.

Within my work with college students and young adults, this “not bad, not great” feeling comes up with frequency in the area of sexuality. TEC has spent 50 years engaged in the debate over human sexuality. Divorce, same-sex relationships, and cohabitation have consumed much time and energy with the church. TEC is not alone, as these conversations have enveloped other mainline churches, some faring better than others, but many experiencing some sort of ecclesiastical schism. As we have been arguing over property and trademarks and who can use the church for a wedding ceremony, we have created a void of Christian formation and ethics around sexuality. Churches may offer a course that offers a buffet biblical or theological positions, perhaps some biology concerning safer sex practices, but often it is determined to be safer to just not talk about it.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

"Lies, damned lies, and statistics"

In 2017, half of Americans ages 18 and older were married, and while this number has remained relatively stable, it is down 8 percentage points since 1990.⁷ Love (88%) is the top reason for getting married, followed by making a lifelong commitment (81%), and companionship (76%).⁸ Having a relationship recognized in a religious ceremony comes in fifth with 30%.⁹ In 2016, 18 million Americans were living with an unmarried partner, an increase of 29% since 2007.¹⁰ While half of the cohabiters were younger than 35, the rate is rising quickly among Americans ages 50 and older.¹¹ In a 2015 survey by the Barna Group found that 65% of participants agreed that cohabitation was a good idea.¹² This agreement increases to 72% of Millennials (1984-2002) and 69% of GenX (1965-1983).¹³ Of those surveyed, 84% responded the reason for cohabitation was to test compatibility for marriage.¹⁴

When asked about the purpose of sex, approximately half of Millennials and GenXers chose “to express intimacy between two people who love each other”; “to reproduce/to have children”; or “to connect with another person in an enjoyable way.”¹⁵ When asked their views on the “traditional Christian sexual ethics”¹⁶ the top five choices of Millennials and GenXer’s were:

⁷ “8 facts about love and marriage in America,” Abigail Geiger and Gretchen Livingston, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/13/8-facts-about-love-and-marriage/>, retrieved April 5, 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://www.barna.com/research/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation/>, retrieved April 5, 2019.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ <https://www.barna.com/research/what-americans-believe-about-sex/>, retrieved April 5, 2019.

¹⁶ Ibid., “Traditional Christian sexual ethics teaches that sex should only be within a marriage between a man and a woman.” Participants were instructed to pick three of the following options: moral (36%), good (28%), healthy (27%), right (27%), unrealistic (22%), anti-gay (16%), too strict (13%), repressive (13%), virtuous (12%), unenlightened (9%), wrong (7%), and damaging (6%).

	GenXers	Millennials
Moral	32%	26%
Good	30%	25%
Right	27%	--
Healthy	25%	25%
Unrealistic	20%	20%
Anti-Gay	--	19%

When responses were considered in light of faith, the top five choices for Practicing Christians were moral (53%), healthy (45%), right (41%), good (38%), and virtuous (19%).¹⁷ The top five choices for those with No Faith were unrealistic (36%), anti-gay (27%), repressive (25%), too strict 17%), and don't know (17%).¹⁸ The five choices for those of Other Faiths were moral (28%), right (26%), anti-gay (24%), unrealistic (22%), and good (21%).¹⁹

Looking more broadly at relationships, a 2018 Pew Research survey found that 6 in 10 women in the U.S. said they had been sexually harassed.²⁰ Between October 2017 and September 2018, #MeToo hashtag had been used on Twitter more than 19 million times.²¹ A majority of U.S. teens (59%) have experienced some form of cyberbullying.²² One-third of adults believe in a higher power, but not the God described in the Bible.²³ While beyond the scope of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "18 striking findings from 2018," Abigail Geiger, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/13/18-striking-findings-from-2018/>, retrieved April 5, 2019.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. Of teens ages 13 to 17 42% say they have been called offensive names online or on their cellphone, 32% say they have had false rumors spread about them and about one-quarter report having received unsolicited explicit images.

²³ Ibid.

this exploration, it is important to note the rising trend of young people delaying or forgoing sexual relationships.²⁴

Sex in TEC

At TEC's most recent General Convention much attention was paid to same-sex marriage and the possible revision of the Book of Common Prayer. In the midst of this was a proposal that would authorize a service of Blessing a Lifelong Relationship. The drafters of this resolution stated it was "intended for couples who desire to formalize their monogamous, unconditional and lifelong relationships that are 'something different than a marriage in that [they do] not include the merging of property, finances or other legal encumbrances.'"²⁵ The use of this rite might be prompted "by the needs and rights of children of a former marriage; a need to maintain individuals' ability to uphold the financial obligations and commitments of their household; and a desire to maintain their ability to support themselves with shelter, food and health care, recognizing that a new marriage would cut off the benefits they receive from their former spouse, and if their subsequent marriage should end in death or divorce, they would be left without any pension or health care."²⁶ Younger members of the committee requested the development of "spiritual practices, to aid individuals and couples in discerning their vocation to relationship, be it to singleness, celibacy, marriage and/or parenting."²⁷ This rite was not adopted by General Convention and was referred back for further study. The committee stated that the development of such resources would be guided by: "Qualities of relationship that ground in faithfulness the

²⁴ "Why Are Young People Having So Little Sex?" Kate Julian, *The Atlantic*, December 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/>, retrieved April 5, 2019.

²⁵ "Convention's marriage task force proposes non-marriage rites, ways to minister to cohabitants," Mary Frances Schonberg, Episcopal News Service, April 4, 2018, <https://www.episcopalnewservice.org/2018/04/04/conventions-marriage-task-force-proposes-non-marriage-rites-ways-to-minister-to-cohabitants/>, retrieved April 5, 2019.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

expression of sexual intimacy include fidelity, monogamy, commitment, mutual affection, mutual respect, careful and honest communication, physical maturity, emotional maturity, mutual consent, and the holy love which enables those in intimate relationships to see in each other the image of God.”²⁸

While a major driving force behind this resolution seemed to be an older generation’s desire to alleviate the guilt of relationships that do not conform to the church’s teaching but that are not fiscally beneficial, the call of younger members for more guidance for discernment stood out. Within my own ministry context, students and young adults general respond that their faith should be relevant to their relationships and decisions about sex but acknowledge that generally what they receive is that sex outside of marriage is sinful or no discussion at all. With the season of Lent looming, a traditional time for special programs of study, I set out to develop a program to teach and discuss sex.

Resources

Shameless: A Sexual Reformation is an offering by Nadia Bolz-Weber. Bolz-Weber is an ELCA pastor and founded House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado. This book continues Bolz-Weber’s memoir-esque style, drawing from stories of her parishioners and her life experiences. She sets out with the bold goal of taking us back to our foundations of our understanding and teaching on sex. Through moving stories, she lays bare the harm caused by the church to those people that did not fit the norm. Bolz-Weber’s text is remarkable for its

²⁸ Ibid.

insightful sharing of people's stories²⁹ and of the author's challenging reading of scripture.³⁰ This text is for a popular audience, and Bolz-Weber does not disappoint with thought-proclaiming stories and commentary. While she does not necessarily propose a clear replacement ethic for sexuality, she does challenge the reader to consider their identity and relationships in the context of how a liturgical community gathers and worships. This is done through the telling of a baptism service in the final chapter. She leaves the reader with this, "What does sexual flourishing look like? It looks like: Incarnation, Gratitude and generosity, Everyone, without exception, Accompaniment, Forgiveness, Connection, Holiness, Poetry, Shamelessness."

Good Christian Sex: Why Chastity Isn't the Only Option –And Other Things the Bible Says About Sex is a 2016 book by Bromleigh McCleneghan, a United Church of Christ pastor. This text examines not just sexual ethics, but theology and ethics of many aspects of relationships. Her book covers topics such as sexual pleasure and desire, sexual ethics, theology of the search (concerning singleness, sex, and waiting), a theology of vulnerability, a theology of intimacy, a theology of exes, a theology of fidelity, and a theology around leaving and staying. While McCleneghan's nature is perhaps not as compelling as Bolz-Weber, she does provide a well-rounded discussion of scripture, theology, and contemporary learning from the field of counselling. Of the texts chosen for this project, McCleneghan's is the most accessible and broad exploration of the topic.

Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics is a 2006 book by Margaret A. Farley. While this book saw popular sales, it is not necessarily for a popular press audience and

²⁹ A particularly powerful story is in Chapter 4 – Double-Stranded Helix: Cindy's Bible, and tells of a young woman wrestling with scripture and her sexuality and the demands of purity. In a moment of setting herself free she burns her Bible, but not before removing the four Gospels because Jesus never hurt her.

³⁰ Throughout the text, Bolz-Weber offers a retelling of the Creation story that challenges some of our traditional assumptions. She also provides an interesting reading of the Parable of the Talents from Matthew 25:14-20, and challenges the reader to consider sexual stewardship.

reflects the author's time spent as the Gilbert L. Stark Chair in Christian Ethics at Yale University Divinity School. This text was cited by both Bolz-Weber and McCleneghan in their works. Farley faced controversy over her work particularly because of her positions taken on masturbation, same-sex relationships, and divorce. After a thorough survey of sexual ethics, chapters five and six lay the foundation for and develop a framework for a sexual ethic.

The Program

With the above listed texts, along with the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, I set out to construct a program for young adults to explore this topic. *With Love: A Lenten Program* was designed to be offered over a five-week period during the season of Lent. The topics were:

- **Identity: Belovedness, Community, Sexuality**
This introductory session focused on participants current understanding of sex in the Bible, and drew on Bolz-Weber and McCleneghan's texts related to the Genesis story, including the view of sex as God's first blessing, and an understanding of sexual pleasure and desire
- **Others: Friends, Enemies, Strangers**
This session focused on readings of scripture concerning our relationship with others and McCleneghan's text around singleness
- **Sex: Holiness, Agency, Justice**
This session largely focused on Farley's Framework and Bolz-Weber's presentation of the Parable of the Talents
- **Romance: Singleness, Coupled, Endings**
This continued the exploration of Farley's Framework and utilized McCleneghan's text on exes
- **Fidelity: God, Self, Others**
This continued the exploration of Farley's Framework and utilized McCleneghan's text on fidelity

In sessions in both the five-week program and a weekend version of the program, Farley Framework generated the most discussion and was received well by participants. I must confess that I was surprised that a handout of a chart would prove to be folks biggest take away.³¹

Each session had some ground rules:

³¹ The handout is found at the end of this paper.

1. Participants should be respectful to everyone, and should show respect for individual's experience
2. After the first session, we operated with a group assumption that sexual intercourse and sexual activity was at the least moral neutral.
3. That folks that believe that the traditional sexual ethic of the church is good and right and should be continued are a valued and important part of the conversation.
4. That all persons are created in the image of God, including heterosexuals, cisgender, asexual, celibate, sexually active, virgins, partnered, single, married, or LGBTQ+.

The final session of the five-week program was held on April 11, 2019, so at the time of writing there has been insufficient time to gather feedback.

Should we do this at all?

I would like to say that throughout this process I was met with resistance from those that uphold the traditional sexual ethic, but I did not. While sex within the confines of marriage is the stated Christian norm, most folks that I encountered have accepted the reality that sex was occurring regularly outside of the confines of marriage. The times that I did experience some pushback was largely around the idea of stating that things can be determined to be right or wrong. The discomfort about the project came from folks that were reluctant to enter the sexual fray with any sort of ethic in fear of excluding or judging.

But if we concede that the church has something to say in the area of sexual ethics, the question then is should we succumb to the postmodern malaise and concede marriage as the norm? My answer is yes.

If we continue to insist that sex will only be discussed within the context of marriage, we will continue to abrogate our responsibility to speak to the needs and questions of our young

people that clearly seek guidance. Relationships in the 21st Century continue to develop, and the church should seek to speak to what is the reality of the world around them. The Church should also come to terms with the fact that the 20th century notion of sex within the confines of a loving married relationship is not a long-held tradition. Marriage has always been caught up with complications of power and property and until the modern period, often had very little to do with love.

If we are willing to let go of the stumbling blocks in the sex conversation, we may find that our tradition—of a deep relationship to Scripture that is explored through our tradition, reason, and contemporary learning—may give us the best tools to speak to this post-modern age. Postmodernity favors the individual narrative over the metanarrative, it gives great weight to personal experience and story. We are Christians are built for such things. Our Hebrew scriptures are filled with stories of individuals and their relationship with God, with the contradictions and inconsistencies of personal narratives held in tension and conversation. Our Four Gospels are examples of the power of a localized narrative, and of course Jesus spoke and taught in stories and relationships. The Epistles of Paul tell the powerful story of Paul’s relationship with God and the founding Christian communities.

Though it may be ironic, I believe Paul has something to teach us about how we have these conversations about sex in the postmodern age we find ourselves. In Acts Chapter 17, Paul is in Athens, and after preaching in the synagogue finds himself at the Areopagus. There he points to the statue inscribed “To an unknown god” and declares that what is unknown to them Paul will proclaim. While recounting the saving acts of God Paul quotes not scripture but poetry:

“For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”³²

As Paul stood in the pagan courts and invited them to see through their art and their poetry the blessing and grace of God, we postmodern folks can do the same. We can offer powerful witness using all the tools available to us to create an experience of welcome and invitation to find God in the midst of their lives. We can teach our young people to order their whole lives according to the love of God in Jesus Christ, and to hold nothing back. We can offer them something more than a thin veneer and the appearance of luxury, and invite them into real relationships with themselves, their families, friends, neighbors, churches, and with God.

Paul’s reference to pagan poetry holds a special place for Episcopalians because it has found its way into one of our beloved prayers:

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being; We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
*Amen.*³³

³² Acts 17:28, *New Revised Standard Version*

³³ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 100

Farley Handout

Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” *Matthew 22:37-40*

Norms for Sexual Justice³⁴

Basis	Norm
Respect for the autonomy and relationality that characterize persons as ends in themselves, and hence respect for their well-being:	<p>1. Do no unjust harm <i>Harm: Physical, Psychological, Spiritual, Relational</i> <i>Harm can be a failure to support, to assist, to care for, to honor, in ways that are required by reason of context and relationship. Forms of harm: exploitation, battering, rape, enslavement, negligence about safe sex; Deceit, betrayal, disparity in committed loves, debilitating forms of desire, seduction, pain of unfulfillment</i></p>
Respect for autonomy:	<p>2. Free consent of partners <i>This norm is violated by rape, violence, or any harmful use of power against unwilling victims. Less dramatic forms of violating free consent: manipulation, seduction of people who are immature, have special dependency, or loss of ordinary forms of power. Truth-telling and promise-keeping are important here: deception and betrayal are coercive.</i></p>
Respect for relationality:	<p>3. Mutuality <i>Both give and both receive; both are active and passive. Roles are not pre-determined, especially roles based on gender. Opposite of complementarity.</i></p> <p>4. Equality <i>Important traits: social and economic status; age and maturity; professional identity; interpretations of gender roles—all can POSSIBLY lead to inequality. What is needed for equality is an appreciation of the uniqueness and difference of the other, and for each to respect each other as ends in themselves.</i></p> <p>5. Commitment <i>This norm is not included to guarantee the family order or to tame concupiscence. Human relationality offers the potentiality for knowing and being known, loving and being loved. Commitment is a means, not an end.</i></p> <p>6. Fruitfulness <i>Not just reproductive fruitfulness. Love between persons violates relationality if it closes in upon itself and refuses to open to a wider community of persons. Without fruitfulness of some kind, any significant interpersonal love (not only sexual love) becomes egotistic. Some ways that love moves beyond itself: nourishing other relationships; providing goods, services, and beauty for others, informing the fruitful work lives of the partners in relation; helping to raise other people’s children.</i></p>
Respect for persons as sexual beings in society:	<p>7. Social Justice <i>Social justice is the kind of justice that everyone in a community or society is obligated to affirm for its members as sexual beings. This principle asserts that, regardless of the sexual status of persons, they have legitimate needs for incorporation into the community, for psychic security and basic well-being, and make the same claims for social cooperation among us as do those of us all. Sexual partners have always to be concerned about not harming “third parties” – future loves, children of one partner. They need to take responsibility for the consequences of their love and their sexual activity. No love is just “the two of us.”</i></p>

³⁴ Farley, Margaret A., *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 2006.