

Message Series Content:

This is a transcript of Fr. White's Homily as he delivered it for this series. Content membership also includes video links to watch the messages, weekly summaries, calendars with scripture, series artwork, and daily devotionals for parishioners which accompany each message.

A Way Forward - Week 1

Liturgical Year B

Winter Series

A few years ago, a parishioner asked to see me, which I don't actually do very often, since most things people want to see me about should actually be discussed with the proper staff person. But this person assured me this was something for me so we meet.

When the guy came in he was nervous for sure, and I am like, this could go anywhere. I've heard it all. But it didn't at all go where I thought it would. Instead, he's like: *"Can I talk to you about your current message series?"* and I'm like, *"OK, sure, what's up?"* We were doing a series called "Counterfeit Gods" about the basic hypocrisy of many Christians. So this guy says, with great respect and reluctance, *"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but I think you're losing people over this message. I know people who have walked away offended and have decided not to come back to Nativity."*

Please understand that we don't go out of our way to offend people, we do it effortlessly. It just comes with the job. Jesus offended people all the time, and lots of people heard him and walked away. So we sort of figure if we're not ever offending anyone, ever, we can't possibly be preaching the whole Gospel. That's why every single week we present you with some kind of challenge or conviction and also why at least once a year we have one whole series that just stands out as especially challenging and liable to

offend. And in case you're wondering when that series is this year: you're here and this is it.

Today we begin a brand new message series, which is new for us in several ways. Before getting into this series, or even telling you what its about (I'll let you guess for awhile) I have to confess that I didn't want to do it.

There are a host of reasons why...

- I am concerned there will be some pushback
- I know what I do say lend itself to misinterpretation and misrepresentation. I can easily imagine the phone calls of complaint on Monday morning
- I'm not sure how to address this topic in the liturgical setting of Mass and church
- Or with a congregation representing a wide span of ages and experiences
- I am not sure of the proper boundaries in any setting
- And finally in obvious and not so obvious ways, I am not the right person to even address this issue at all anyway

But none of those are good enough reasons to continue to ignore this topic as a church family. Members of my staff, who often disagree with me and unfortunately never hesitate to tell me so, argued that this series is absolutely necessary and long overdue. And eventually I came to agree with them.

I am presenting this material not because I am confident or qualified, but because I am concerned.

- I am concerned that as a Church we are not addressing this topic in a way that is helpful to most people.
- I am concerned that so often in the Church this topic goes only to the hot button polemical issues that can divide us and ignores the actual issues that actually apply to most people
- I am concerned that because people do not know God's wisdom and plan on this topic, many marriages and families are damaged.
- And more deeply and maybe most importantly I am concerned for the next generation who face challenges and struggles when it comes to this topic that could not even have been imagined a generation ago.

We're talking, of course, about relationships, dating, intimacy, love and sex. And many people find themselves in the middle of it all not sure of what they want to do or believe, much less how God calls them to live. So we are going to do our best to bring some clarity.

On one hand we live in a highly sexualized culture, a culture that is saturated with sex. And while its not my style to get into the trenches of the so-called cultural wars, everyone would probably agree that television, movies, music, the Internet, graphic material available anywhere and everywhere, even advertisements that are today more graphic than the pornography of previous generations.

While many families will be watching the Super Bowl this weekend, you can guess there will be more than a few inappropriate ads that you won't want your kids to see.

On the other hand our culture loves romance. "*And they lived happily ever after*" is still the bottom line on every romantic comedy. Add to that the multitude of online matchmaking services, along with a growing list of reality TV shows built around helping individuals navigate their relational options. So while

- we are a culture distracted and obsessed with the idea of unencumbered, consequence-free pleasure,
- we can't seem to abandon our attraction with long-term relational exclusivity either.

And that's true for women *and* men.

So over the next few weeks we are going to work to bring some clarity to these confusing issues. We can't possibly handle every question and tackle every issue, but the plan is to get us started in the right direction, to simply get the conversation going. We hope the conversation continues around the dinner table, in small groups, with parents and their teens and pre-teens, married couples, couples who are dating, and all of us in prayer.

Along with the weekend messages, we have six different workshops available through this series to help you get more guidance on how these issues applies to your stage of life. I encourage you to sign up. In those workshops we'll go deeper with staff who *are* qualified to

speaking: there are workshops for singles, teens, married couples, there is a workshop for men and a separate one for women. Take a look at our web site, we also have invitation cards available in the lobby.

Today we want to start by talking about God's plan. And here is the thing about God's plan: it is always simple. That doesn't mean it is *easy*, it's almost never *easy*. But it's always *simple*.

And yet, while God's plan is simple, life can be complicated, and becomes more so as a result of our sin and selfishness, as a consequence of our own bad choices or those of others. So next week we are going to look at the reality of our need for healing in this area. Then finally in the third week we'll look at how God wants to lead us forward.

So as we begin, we are going to look at a passage from the Gospel of Mark and use this as our launching point. Here's what it says.

*Then they came to Capernaum,
and on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.*

Mark 1.21

"They" refers to Jesus and his disciples, his first followers who were Peter and Andrew, James and John. So Jesus calls them and then soon afterwards he goes into the synagogue to teach. Look at the next verse. This is a huge verse to set up what we are about to talk about today. It says,

*The people were astonished at his teaching,
for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.*

Mark 1.22

This description of Jesus is used throughout the Gospels.
He taught with authority.
In other words he knew what he was talking about.
He speaks with authority because he is the authority on life.
He knows how life works, the whole of it, because it was

through him that all things were made.

John 1.3

And he teaches with authority for the success and well-being
of those who are following him.
So even the Jesus' teachings that feel a bit challenging or
difficult are not given because he wants something *from you*
but because he wants something *for you*,
for your well-being and success.

So what did Jesus authoritatively teach about today's topic?

First thing to know: sex is a divine design. God created it.
It was his idea. He created it for two purposes.

The first purpose is pretty obvious, at least eventually. The
Bible says:

*God blessed them and said to them,
"Be fruitful and increase in number."*

Genesis 1.27

He created sex for the purpose of procreation. God created it so that a couple can co-create with God.

That's actually an amazing power and an amazing gift.

The second purpose is not as obvious especially in our culture. He created sex in order to strengthen relationships. It is a physical expression of relational unity and relational permanence. It is meant to be an adhesive that binds two people together as one flesh.

For this reason a man will leave his mother and father and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Genesis 1.24

By the way, even if you're not interested in what the Bible has to say, science teaches about it too. The hormone oxytocin, which is released in the brain during intimacy is called the bonding hormone because oxytocin says to the brain *"bond with this person, love this person."*

And in order for intimacy to bind a couple together most powerfully and effectively, sex is strongest when reserved for marriage. Outside the context of love and marriage it can lose its ability to do that because it can easily become something else instead, other things it was never intended to be, in which people, especially young people, can get hurt, sometimes deeply so.

It is not purely physical.

That's why *safe sex* is a kind of misnomer.

The adjective *safe* is misleading.

What is labeled safe for the body can be dangerous for the soul.

While the body can have the capacity to successfully accommodate multiple and casual experiences with no apparent consequences, the soul cannot. You are designed for relational permanence and stability as given expression in your heart and your mind *and your body*. And that's what marriage is.

But Jesus didn't stop there.

He had even more challenging things to say.

Another time, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said,

You have heard it said, "You shall not commit adultery."

Matthew 5.27

That was the Old Testament Standard.

You cannot be with another person's spouse, which in itself was fairly ground breaking when it was rolled out.

Now Jesus says takes the standard and increases it exponentially. He says,

*But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully
has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out...

If your hand causes you to sin cut it off...

Matthew 5.28

This is hyperbole, but used to make a point.
Cut out anything from your life that will keep you
from the intimacy God wants you to have with your spouse
or your future spouse.

All of this was a new teaching.

People had never heard anything like it before.

If you think our culture is sex saturated

it has nothing on the culture of the Roman Empire.

Even most of the heroes of the Old Testament did not live
with the purity of heart Jesus talked about.

He amazed the people who heard it

because he was going so much deeper

than just the do's and don'ts of religious rule keeping.

Jesus was preaching and teaching people to think about life
from the point of view of the heart and the deepest desires of
the heart and the soul, the deepest part of you that is you.

And one of the greatest desires of the human heart
is for intimacy. Here's the bottom line of the series:

Purity paves the way to intimacy.

It paves the way to intimacy not just with your spouse or
future spouse, but every person in your life. And ultimately
for greater intimacy with God. This is why Jesus said,

Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.

Matthew 5.8

And while none of us is perfect the further along we are on this path the more clearly we will know God in our life and be able to hear him when he speaks to us.

And that's what he wants: an intimate relationship with us.

So as we wrap up, I just want to offer a couple of challenges.

- First, consider signing up for one of the workshops we will have over the next few weeks. Choose the one or two that fits your situation.
- Second, just come back for the rest of the series and be on the lookout for who you can share it with.

And here is one point I hope is unmistakably clear from this series and this is why we chose the title we chose. There *is* a way forward. There is a way forward and a way to reclaim what has been lost.

That's the whole story of the Scriptures.

That's the story of salvation. God creates what is good.

It becomes less good because of bad choices.

Then God begins the work of redemption and restoration.

There is a "A Way Forward" for each of us and all of us because no matter your past wherever or however you've failed or fallen God has a way forward for you.

Your past does not define your future.

God always provides a way forward, a way forward to purity and intimacy he wants for us.
