Human Sexuality: Part 1

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

We begin today a five-week sermon series on human sexuality as one concrete expression of what it means to practice the 4th covenant, “Live faithfully.” We start with what the first book of the Bible has to say about the issue. We will then explore over the next two successive Sundays the Song of Songs, one of the least known and most mysterious books of the Bible. I doubt you’ve ever heard a sermon before based on the Song of Songs. Finally, we will examine what Jesus and the Apostle Paul have to say on the subject.

Why should we devote five Sundays to the topic of sex? Why not? Everybody else in America seems to be talking or snickering about sex. The modern media are virtually obsessed with it. They act as if everybody is having or thinking about sex all the time.

I like what William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, said back in the late 1800s, “I would rather have all the risk associated with a free discussion of sex than the great risk we run by a conspiracy of silence.”

When Christians engage the subject of sexual ethics, invariably the conversation circles back to the issue of authority. What has authority for Christians in the realm of sexual morality?

We embrace three core beliefs in this church, one of which declares Scripture to be our authority. When it comes to human sexuality, this is where our belief in Biblical authority is put to the test. There is a growing number of people today who categorically reject all external authorities. The only authority is the human self. I am my own authority. The Holy Bible has been replaced with the holy self. Personal experience determines what is authoritative for my life.

God gives us the Bible as the standard by which Christians order their lives. We place personal experience under the authority of the Bible, not over it.

The Bible has a unique status in our community. The medical and behavioral sciences have much to say to us. But science has a derivative rather than an original authority for Christians. Only the Bible has an original authority. The Protestant reformers referred to it as “Sola Scriptura.” Scripture alone has authority in all matters of faith and its practice.

Christians are becoming increasingly ignorant of the Bible. Some of us have uncritically embraced the cultural assumption which regards the Bible as outdated and prudish. Nothing could be further from the truth! God’s Word teaches a positive, life-embracing ethic of human sexuality.

We begin today at the beginning, in a book about beginnings—
God created us as sexual creatures. Sex, then, is God’s idea!

Genesis itself. Perhaps you’ve heard me say that Genesis is not primarily concerned with the question of how God made the world. If Genesis’s purpose was to explore how God made the world, it would have been written in a far different manner. The primary objective of Genesis is not to tell us how God made the world, but why God made the world. Why are we here?

There are two creation stories in Genesis, but don’t let that worry you. The first creation story in chapter 1 is more chronological in nature, revealing the natural sequence of creation, while the second creation story in chapter 2 is more topical, focusing specifically on Adam, his environment and the formation of a mate. In chapter 1, creation reaches its climax on the 6th day: “So God made man in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). God did not make us souls first and add bodies later. God fashioned us into male and female bodies and then breathed life into us. We are told at the close of the sixth day, “God saw everything he had made and it was very good” (1:31).

God created our bodies and pronounced them good! We affirm the goodness of God’s creation. Our bodies are good, not bad.

Gnosticism was a first century heresy which threatened the church. Gnosticism subscribed to the notion that our souls are superior to our bodies, which led to two equally disastrous conclusions. It either led Gnostics to believe the body was evil, resulting in a rigid asceticism, or that the body was immaterial, fostering a libertine attitude toward the body.

Orthodox Christianity rejected Gnosticism. Our bodies are good, not bad. Our bodies are a temple for God’s Spirit to dwell in, a thought to which we will return several weeks from now when we consider Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 6:12-20).

God created us as sexual creatures. Sex, then, is God’s idea! The church sometimes communicates the message that sex is bad. When kids hear that sex can be enjoyable, they become suspicious that adults have been lying to them all along about sex. Let’s be perfectly clear: sex is God’s good gift to people. But like any gift, sex can be appreciated for what it is or horribly abused.

Not everything we do with our bodies is good for us. Our culture has adopted the attitude; if something feels good, do it! Since when are feelings altogether trustworthy? Don’t merely evaluate something by how you feel in the moment. Determine how you feel the following morning.

In the second creation story God determines, “It is not good that Adam should be alone. I will make a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18). This second creation story describes how Eve is fashioned from Adam’s rib. Some people freak at the thought that Eve is
created from Adam’s rib. Peter Lombard, a 13th century theologian, said about this verse, “Eve is not taken from Adam’s feet, to be his slave nor from his head to be his lord, but from his side, to be his partner.”

When Adam beholds Eve, he exclaims, in essence, “Wow!” Actually, what he says is more prosaic than that: “This is at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.... Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and the two become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). One flesh is the way Genesis depicts sexual intimacy. When Adam and Eve become sexually intimate, they engage in the deepest and most spiritual longing in their souls. Their physical union is not merely about sex, it’s about emotional and spiritual intimacy.

There is an intimate connection in these verses between body and soul. That’s why I am suspicious whenever I hear people use the phrase “casual sex.” Sex always takes a piece of someone else’s soul. There is a part of us that yearns to connect to someone’s soul. Maybe that’s why we chase after sex so much. We are looking for deeper connections with people.

Marriage is the union of one flesh. God created sex for marriage. Sexual intercourse is a life-uniting act that complements a life-uniting commitment. Philip Yancey says it this way, “Fidelity in marriage sets a boundary in which sex can run free.”

It’s not very far into Genesis before we encounter the story of “the fall.” Adam and Eve rebel against God and sexual desire becomes disordered. The task of Christian ethics is to rightly order these desires.

In 1632, a printer was fined a hefty sum of 300 pounds for making a horrible mistake in printing the Bible. He left the “not” out of the 7th command, so the commandment read, “Thou shall commit adultery.”

This printing error may not be so far-fetched anymore. There was a time when sex was the culminating act of committed love; now it’s a tryout for future involvement. A woman told me she had sex with potential suitors to determine whether they were sexually compatible. I couldn’t let her comment pass, so I asked, “What does that mean?” How does one determine sexual compatibility? She admitted that she didn’t have a good answer.

Genesis affirms three cardinal tenets. God created our bodies and pronounced them good. God made us sexual beings. God intended sex for marriage. As you hear me say these words, some of you will roll your eyes. This is just a bunch of old-fashioned hooey. Old, yes, as old as creation itself; but old-fashioned, no, a thousand times no.

We live in a sexually broken world. Some of us are leading sexually reckless lives and it’s killing us! Maybe what we learn in Genesis in not so old-fashioned after all.

It would be nice if our Christian values were supported by the wider culture. But times have changed!
As Christians we now find ourselves holding a minority position. We don’t like to stand out. We don’t want to sound intolerant. So we keep silent. Can’t we say anything that disagrees with the world of MTV? Oh, we privately click our tongues at sexual promiscuity, but we lack the courage to proclaim a positive, life-affirming sexual ethic.

Sex must be more than safe! God intended it to be sacred. We live in a culture that diminishes sex. Our pornographic culture has reduced people to mere bodies.

The church has the opportunity to be truly counter-cultural on this issue. In a sexually broken world, we can lift up a positive, life-embracing sexual ethic.

You may be living out of harmony with God’s desires for your sexual life. If so, I have good news for you. We believe in the God who forgives and pardons people. We worship the God who redeems and restores and transforms.

So what can you do? You can read Christian literature on the subject. I am influenced by two books from our bookstore. On the subject of Biblical authority, I refer you to Eugene Peterson’s book *Eat This Book*. Regarding matters of human sexuality, I direct you to Laura Winner’s book *Real Sex*.

As you turn your life over to the care and nurture of God, let me remind you that God’s presence in Scripture is most often mediated by other people. I invite your feedback to this sermon and topic of sexuality through email, phone or in person. Any sermon worth its salt is a dialogue between people. You can consult with a staff member. We can recommend Christian counselors who can be of help to you. You can identify a spiritual friend to confide and pray together.

We profess our allegiance to the God who forgives and pardons. We worship the One who restores and transforms.