

## “Loving Well”

Jesus affirms love as the way to eternal life. What does it mean to love God, neighbor and self? And why are we so bad at it? I have a hunch it is because throughout Christian history, we have separated “Christian love” from sexuality. We tend to spiritualize and depersonalize the “love” Jesus speaks of. It has no texture, no desire; it’s an obligation. However, ***I think*** Jesus wants us to “*love well*” with our soul, mind, strength and heart . . . and I’m convinced changing our approach to sexuality will help us with that.

First, we need to expand our idea of what sexuality is. Second, we need to reconnect Christian love with embodiment and thus ourselves as sexual beings.

So, what does sexuality mean? We don’t use the word sexuality that often, definitely not in church and usually not from the pulpit. We have been trained by culture and religious history to automatically reduce sexuality to particular behaviors or battles over orientation. So, our sexuality education follows suit. We minimize sexuality to “facts.”

Facts about:

How babies are made?

What sexual intercourse is; when and when not to engage in it AND with whom?

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How our bodies will change at puberty?

Contraception and STD prevention? And so on . . .

Good information, but it doesn't teach us how to "love well."

The "facts" of life need to be more than biological data points because these only reflect a very small portion of what "sexuality" is all about.

Sexuality is much more than behaviors or orientation. We are all sexual beings from birth to death – God created us that way. Sexuality is like our personality; unique to us, but shared in its features with others. Sexuality includes the biology and physiology of our bodies and information about sexual and reproductive systems, as well as how we care for our bodies. Sensuality (how our bodies respond to pleasure primarily through our senses) and intimacy (the experience of reciprocated emotional closeness to another person or higher power) are also aspects of sexuality.

In our relationships with self, others, and God, we come to know our sexuality. We do not have complete control over interpretations of it. In fact, some definitions and understandings are forced upon us. Messages from our culture, religion, and history construct for us many different, conflicting, and at times unhealthy ways to interpret our sexuality. In other words, our sexuality is shaped by the time and space in which we live. For example, we all have a body

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and thus an image of that body. How we relate to our bodies—the comfort or discomfort we feel—is shaped by what our culture values, by what friends and family say or look like, and by our faith. Unfortunately, the positive message that we are created in the image of God is often lost; an affirmation drowned in a sea of enhanced images of “perfect bodies” or comments from others that we are ugly, fat, too skinny, too hairy, too wimpy, the wrong color, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

Sexuality, understood in its fullness, means we need education at all ages and developmental stages that helps us to care for and respect our bodies and practice building and maintaining relationships. Loving well, includes caring about all aspects of sexuality – health, intimacy, sensuality, relationship, and so on.

This expanded view of sexuality compels us to broaden the “Facts of Life” related to sexuality.

We need to add:

- Our bodies change throughout our lifetimes.
- Desire and pleasure connect us to God as readily as they do to each other.
- The greatest commandment cautions us against myopia – such as giving away our sense of self, or using another as an object, forgetting about god, or cutting off all other relationships for the sake of one.

Talking about these “facts of life” as they relate to sexuality AND our faith can help us love well.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a description of sexuality found in my chapter “Sexual Health and Integrity” in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* eds. Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens, (Fortress Press: December 2013).  
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On to the second idea, to reconnect Christian love with embodiment and thus ourselves as sexual beings . . .

Healthy sexuality is a cornerstone for all our relationships, even with God. Hear the Psalmist today:

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,<sup>\*</sup>  
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips  
<sup>6</sup> when I think of you on my bed,  
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;  
<sup>7</sup> for you have been my help,  
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.  
<sup>8</sup> My soul clings to you;  
your right hand upholds me. (NRSV text)

That sounds a lot like how we might talk about a beloved in a sexual relationship; it is sensual and intimate. Mystics and saints often spoke of their relationship with god in this way.

Many of us might find this connection a bit off-putting or even creepy. I think that is a primary failing of our Christian traditions. Somewhere along the way, we got suspicious of bodies and very suspicious of sexual desire. So considering how our relationship with God feeds, informs, and shapes our sexuality needs to be retrieved.

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It is ironic that Christians have historically had a difficult time accepting and honoring the body when we are a people of an incarnate God (John 1:14). The incarnation—the life and death of Jesus as God in flesh, a central component of Christian teaching—“promotes the value and significance of the body, which is never to be disregarded or treated with contempt.”<sup>[i]</sup> Jesus understood what it means to live in a body with all its limitations, as well as its beauty. He ate with his followers, washed with them, woke up with sleep in his eyes, and was dunked under water for his baptism. These are all things that require a body to be experienced. Jesus knew the pleasure of touch when his mother held him, when his friends greeted him, when Mary anointed him. He also experienced violence to his body when he was beaten and crucified. We are relational and it is our bodies that open us not only to the potential for great harm, but also to life-enhancing connection. “Far from being a first line of defense against the world,” our bodies “are in fact the very field upon which the self is called daily to meet the world.”<sup>2</sup> With embodiment comes vulnerability experienced in and through relationship with self, others, and God. The incarnation shows us that our bodies are integral to how we experience the world

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas E. Breidenthal, “Sanctifying Nearness,” in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Our Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, ed. Charles Hefling (Boston: Crowley Publications, 1996), 47.

and live in a variety of relationships. Our sexuality is part of who we are as human bodies. It was the same for Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

For me, it is not Jesus crucifixion that teaches me how to live or why I am a Christian. It is the love commandment. Perhaps Jesus would not have been crucified if folks got that right the first time around. The great commandment gives us three very important guidelines for understanding sexuality as it relates to the formation of healthy relationships (Luke 10:27). First, it reinforces the creation message about love of self and positive affirmation of one's unique personhood. Second, Jesus reminds us that balancing our love for God, ourselves, and others is ultimately our Christian calling and that all other actions will flow from that. Third, loving our neighbor as ourselves calls us to support and care for our neighbor in promoting his or her sexual development and health.

To live the love commandment to its fullest, I would argue requires what Cristina Traina, a Christian Ethicist calls Erotic Attunement. Attunement, Traina says, is “perceptive attention and adjustment to feelings, needs, and desires—both one's own and others'.” It is a “habit of

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<sup>3</sup> The content of this paragraph appears in my chapter “Sexual Health and Integrity” in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* eds. Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens, Fortress Press, 2013. In that chapter, I note the influence of M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 56. In Chapter Three, “Marking the Body of Jesus, the Body of Christ,” Copeland argues that we purposefully ignore the body in service of empire, marking particular bodies as less than human without acknowledging the systems we use to do so with regard to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and so on.

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acknowledging or desires.” Unlike popular culture’s perception of sexual desire, erotic love in the Christian tradition should help us to “desires(s) the person not as we fantasize her to be but as she is—incomplete and quirky, bumps, warts, and all. It enjoys and celebrates her gifts and strengths, but is also concerned for her holistic welfare. Nor does genuine erotic love overestimate itself. Rather than attempting to be the source of everything good for the beloved, it often stands back to let that person receive what she needs to grow in other ways.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, loving our neighbors as ourselves with erotic attunement, is an act of justice that includes affirming the uniqueness of who God created him to be **AS** he is **NOT** as we wish he were. We’ve all done this with someone we love--I wish he wouldn’t snore, I wish she could lose some weight, I can’t stand how loud they are, and so on. If only they were as perfect as I want them to be I could love them perfectly, right? Erotic attunement means we have a commitment to create safe space for all individuals to be free from abuse, violence, and harm as they develop life-giving and life-enhancing relationships with God, themselves, and each other. In the messy, new, old, confusing, friendly, familial, and mundane relationships in our everyday lives, we are called to love in a way that enables others to love.

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<sup>4</sup> Cristina Traina, “Erotic Attunement” in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* eds. Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens (Fortress, December 2013), p 44, 45, 47.

Talking about sexuality in church makes “loving well” possible. Where else can you learn to love well, with your body and soul? Communities of faith can . . . should . . . advocate for and educate those in their congregations about the holistic sexuality we discussed and in a way that connects our sexuality back to our experience of spirituality and God.

We desperately need a world that understands sexuality as sacred and advocates for values like honesty, respect, mutuality, and love as what constituted sexual integrity and morality.

That would be the world God intended. That would be a world where we loved well.