

Sermon Notes for 2/28/16 (Lent 3)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Theme: LIVING GOD’S IMAGE IN A SEX-CRAZED WORLD

Hymn: LBW 102 (On My Heart Imprint Your Image)

The Point: Our God calls us away from the world’s assumptions and values to live a life of chastity and faithfulness as it pertains to our sexuality.

Introduction: Would you disagree with me when I suggest that we live in a “sex-crazed world”? If we look realistically at what goes on around us with eyes informed by God’s will, it would seem pretty clear that our world has some distorted ideas of what sex is all about. Sex is used to sell anything from Doritos to Cadillacs. My generation prized its identification as the “free love” generation – but all too often what that phrase came to mean was “sex whenever we want it.” Pornography, adultery, sexual addictions, prostitution, sexual bondage – all seem to be at epidemic proportions. Today we want to consider what it means that we are called to be **LIVING GOD’S IMAGE IN A SEX-CRAZED WORLD.**

These are not new things, of course. Here is what Paul writes about the ancient people of Israel: “God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. . . Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.’ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.” Sexual immorality was part of the rebellious spirit of Israel, and many paid the ultimate price.

I think this C.S. Lewis quote hits the nail on the head about our society’s sexual proclivities: “Suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theater by simply bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? And would not anyone who had grown up in a different world think there was something equally queer about the state of the sex instinct among us when you can get a large audience together to watch a girl undress on the stage—strip tease act? The Christian teaching on sex is very unpopular. Sex can only be had within marriage, and with complete fidelity to married partner or else, total abstinence. This, today, is considered impossible. Either Christianity is wrong or the whole world is.”

I don’t believe Christianity is wrong, but I do believe the world is. It is significant that we are called to love as the highest calling in life. “Love God” and “Love your neighbor” – these are the two greatest commandments, according to our Savior Jesus. This calling is the polar opposite of self-love or self-centeredness. This love is more than a physical expression so narrow as the sex act. In fact, we might argue that far too much of sexual expression or sexual enjoyment is simply an expression of one’s own love of self, which is the exact opposite of the love to which Christ has called us. As Isaiah puts it, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” Spending our time, energy, and resources on what does not satisfy – does that not ring bells when it comes to the glut of pornography and sexual titillation that is found on the internet or even our TV movie channels (or even primetime at certain times and places)?

But that does not mean that sex or sexuality is bad. In fact, God created us in the very beginning “male and female” and pronounced the whole arrangement “very good.” And what is it that is so very good about our sexuality? God has created us as sexual beings, not to make us live in constant frustration, but so that we would learn that His way is best, even when it is not consistent with our desires. He made us male

and female so that we could find ways to fulfill one another in ways that build up rather than tear down. God's ways and thoughts are higher than our own.

As The Message paraphrases Paul's words in 1 Corinthians, "There is more to sex than mere skin to skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. As written in Scripture, 'THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE.' ... We must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever – the kind of sex that can never 'become one.' There is a sense in which sexual sins are different from all others. In sexual sin we violate the sacredness of our own bodies, these bodies that were made for God-given and God-modeled love, for 'becoming one' with another." (1 Cor. 6:16-18)

Violating the sacredness of our bodies – that is a penetrating accusation. To quote C. S. Lewis again, "The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside of marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union." We are creatures who are body, mind and spirit. To try to join just the bodies is to swim upstream against God's purpose for our lives. It is like taking one part of a recipe, for example, eating a mouthful of flour and saying it is just as tasty as carrot cake – and not nearly as messy.

Another English theologian by the name of G.K. Chesterton once wrote persuasively: "Sex is an instinct that produces an institution; and it is positive and not negative, noble and not base, creative and not destructive, because it produces this institution. That institution is the family; a small state or commonwealth which has hundreds of aspects, when it is once started, that are not sexual at all. It includes worship, justice, festivity, decoration, instruction, comradeship, repose. Sex is the gate of that house; and romantic and imaginative people naturally like looking through a gateway. But the house is very much larger than the gate. There are indeed a certain number of people who like to hang about the gate and never get any further." I like an attractive gateway as much as the next person (except perhaps the architect, whose appreciation can go a lot deeper). But I wouldn't want to spend a rainstorm or a blizzard out in the gateway. I want the safety and protection of a home. That is what marriage and family are designed to do – to create a protective and secure set of relationships where love can grow and where we can learn some important things about ourselves as sexual creatures.

Of course, we parents need to be careful about what we are teaching our children (and what we may learn from them) concerning their sexuality. A little boy asked his mother where he came from, and also where she had come from as a baby. His mother gave him a tall tale about a beautiful white-feathered bird. The boy asked his grandmother the same question and received a similar variation on the bird story. Outside to his playmate he said, "You know, there hasn't been a normal birth in our family for three generations." (story attributed to Howard Hendricks, *Homemade*, 9/1989) The children may know more than you think.

One current author (Stanton, Glenn) puts it this way: "Sex certainly isn't an end in itself, any more than a gate is an end. It leads us somewhere. Sex ushers us into something grand and glorious, more than we can imagine. Therefore, we need to understand its nature and participate in it as it was meant to be." This is what Paul means when he speaks of marriage as a great mystery, for it points to the higher reality, the mystery of Christ's union with the Church. He is the bridegroom; the Church is the bride. Marriage serves as a sign, a pointer to the reality of Christ's union with His people. That is just one of the reasons that we as Church insist that marriage is an exclusive relationship of one man and one woman for a lifetime.

Marriage is the pledge to love. It involves physical expressions of that love, certainly. But I cannot pledge to have sex with my wife every day until I die. I don't know what may intervene between now and then. I can pledge (and I have pledged, as she has also) that we will love one another and be faithful to one another until death separates us. That is the high calling of marriage every day that we live together. It does not guarantee that I will get everything I have ever wanted in a partner – nor does she have that

guarantee. But it gives us an avenue in which the sexual expression can find fulfillment according to God's will – and that is a high and holy calling.

Now I need to say a word especially to the young women in our midst today. Remember that sexual involvement is not a guarantee of commitment or stability. A study done some years ago at a Midwestern school showed that 80% of the women who had sexual relations hoped to marry their partner. Only 12% of the men had that same expectation. I hate to put down my own sex, but it seems pretty clear that sexual involvement is far more complicated for women than for men. Whereas men seem to be able to just walk away, the woman experiences a bonding that makes that separation more painful – and this is not just because she may become pregnant, though that has a lot to do with the situation as well. Living together without benefit of marriage exposes the partners to devastating consequences when there is no ongoing commitment to preserve and protect the relationship.

So what does this say to those who are not married, to the single (either by choice or not), to those who may face same-sex attractions, to those who are widowed, even to those who may be separated from their spouse (because of military service or imprisonment or refugee status or civil war)? The call is the same. Live a chaste and decent life, one which does not require sexual engagement with another. Love can still be whole-hearted apart from the full sexual expression. We also learn that in our families. I love my daughter whole-heartedly, with no desire to engage in sexual relations with her. Even most people in our society still frown on incest (although a Supreme Court that can find a constitutional right to same-sex unions may also find the right to such other practices at some point down the road).

I would point the single person to the life of Jesus Christ. He practiced, consistently and intentionally, a love that served other people in every situation of His life. No doubt He experienced the same sexual urges that you and I experience. Yet He chose the single life as His calling. Or perhaps we should say it this way: He postponed His experience of marriage until the Last Day when His Church, without blemish or fault of any kind, will be fully united with Him for all eternity. Do you not think that, if you petition Him for strength and patience to bear with the life of chaste singleness, He will not give it? As a matter of fact, we have the explicit promise in today's Epistle, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." You will know His strength in your time of need and temptation.

Refraining from sex with anybody else but my spouse – this is the command of our God. And He has never given any command that is not for our good. Oh, people may dispute it, professors may argue against it, doctors may avoid it, parents and grandparents may even ignore its truth. But the truth will stand firm. And if we need any evidence of its truth, we can think carefully about God's love. God's love is, by a diamond cutter's evaluation, "of the first water."

One theologian puts it this way (Jewett): "A diamond is 'of the first water' when it is without flaw or taint of any kind. Love can be degraded by the taint of jealousy: it can be debased by the taint of envy: it can be vulgarized by a strain of carnal passion. The test of purity is the revelation of the Love of God. Its brilliance is its holiness. 'God is Light and in Him is no darkness at all.' There is nothing shady, nothing questionable, nothing compromising in God's love. Its brilliance is 'of the first water.' The dazzling whiteness of eternal Light and eternal Love is God's holiness. Sunbeams can move among sewage and catch no defilement. The holy love of God ministers in the deepest depths of the human mind, is deeper than sorrow, deeper than death, deeper than sin. God's love imparts its own loveliness until one day we shall be altogether lovely."

Conclusion: Our God calls us away from the world's assumptions and values to live a life of chastity and faithfulness as it pertains to our sexuality. We are indeed sexual beings, but we are not defined primarily

by our maleness or femaleness. Our most primal description is that we are children of the heavenly Father. And when we fail to live out the call to chaste and decent living in our sexuality, we have a place to go where we can be sure that love and forgiveness are as abundant and free as we could ever hope for. We are people born of a loving relationship, born to build and maintain loving relationships, aimed at final loving relationships that will endure forever. To this Christ has given His life, and for us He continues to provide nourishment and forgiveness and mercy. When we have failed in those relationships, He renews us. And what we have done well, He commends and strengthens. To love Him is our highest calling, which we fulfill as we share His servant love with all those around us, also as we live as male and female under the grace of our Lord. In the strong name of Jesus, AMEN!