

Preaching About Sex: Some Pastoral Theological Suggestions

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I cannot remember ever hearing a sermon on sex, probably because I am not a fundamentalist and my prejudices tell me that fundamentalists preach on it—or moralize against it—with some regularity. This may not be true, but I would bet my *Interpreter's Bible* that fewer sermons have been preached on sex in the mainline churches than any other pastoral topic.

This may actually be all to the good. There may be some virtue in silence if the alternative is legalistic moralizing or sentimental idealizing. Our recent religious past—meaning the Victorian era and its lingering effects—has contributed more than its share to the linking of sex with anxiety and guilt, and should make us wary of renewed efforts from the pulpit. Besides, it is often less than clear what is to be said about, say, premarital and extramarital sex or homosexuality, in a time of so much uncertainty and change in sex ethics. Our silence is understandable; it may also be prudent.

But I am not convinced that a strategy of avoidance is our only option, or the best one. Nor am I pleased to think that sermons giving forthright attention to matters of sexuality may be heard only in conservative churches. Sex is vitally present in every human life, and almost certainly a problem or preoccupation of everyone to some degree. Only a naive pastor could suppose that sex “is not a problem for my people,” though it may be that church involvement tends to obscure perceptions of existing sexual tensions, frustrations, questions, and erotic desires. Further, I suspect that many of the moral questions people privately ask themselves are sexual: what *is* wrong with extramarital sexual relationships when marital excitement declines? *is* monogamy ultimately a cruel deception? *must* love and sex go together? *are* men and women profoundly different sexually? Such questions may seldom be voiced in polite religious company, but a pastor who knows human nature also knows that they and dozens like them are real moral concerns for many persons.

All of this suggests that sex does need to be considered from the pulpit if Christian proclamation is to address the contemporary world at points of significant need. Given the preoccupation of popular culture with sex, its commercialization through advertising, and the confusing array of sexual morals and mores today, it seems particularly urgent that thoughtfully authoritative homiletical leadership be forthcoming from the historic denominations on this subject.

The trouble—as every pastor instinctively knows—is that sex from the pulpit is a touchy, controversial, and dangerous subject. It would be easy to embarrass or anger a congregation by preaching on it. Sex is inherently private; its public consideration in a liturgical setting, even if done with personal depth

and sensitivity, is apt to seem presumptuous to people who normally guard their personal feelings and experiences, especially in worship. Some psychologists in fact believe that religion and sex are fundamental adversaries, the former forever seeking to control and restrict the latter. This seems plausible to me, despite liberal theologies that tell us otherwise. In any case the subject is a homiletical minefield even in this candid, post-Victorian age. But its importance for preaching is, for that reason, all the more urgent.

Now I certainly do not regard myself as an authority on either sex or preaching, being a pastoral theologian, counselor, and seminary professor by trade. But having been pressed by the editor of this journal to offer preachers any help I can, here are a few suggestions on how and what to preach, when preaching on sex:

1. *Be considerate of your congregation's emotional vulnerability.* What seems like commendable candor to you in discussing sexual behavior or feelings may seem like threatening invasions of privacy or veiled personal references to your listeners. Announcing, for instance, that most divorced persons resume an active sex life after a certain number of months may not win the gratitude of the divorced in your midst, however correct your information or "pastoral" your intent in giving it! We can be thankful we no longer live in a time when phobic secrecy surrounded public discussion of sex, but conversely should not be misled by popular injunctions to "let it all hang out" on the deceptive rationale that there is nothing shameful about sex, unless we wish to learn some uncomfortable lessons in human nature. Public forthrightness about sex today is deceptive and often antisexual; it leads the public to believe that deep feelings and personal care are not involved and that some protective privacy is not necessary. But sex requires a subtle interplay of hiddenness and disclosure; the widespread cult of sexual frankness violates this subtlety in an ironically antisexual way, destroying rather than protecting its power and vitality.

2. *Remember the diversity of persons and personal needs among your listeners.* It is overwhelmingly easy to generalize from one's own needs and experiences by assuming that everyone struggles with the same questions or shares the same values as oneself. It behooves the pastor, who obviously cannot directly address all sorts and conditions of "men" specifically, at least to be clearly aware, for instance, that a girl of sixteen will bring to a sermon on sex a markedly different agenda (and less developed identity and defenses) than an unmarried woman of thirty-five or a married man of sixty.

3. *Know yourself, sexually.* One of the hallmarks of contemporary pastoral care and counseling is the principle that emotional honesty and self-awareness are prerequisite to accurate empathy and effective counseling. This principle holds (with some modifications) for preaching also. The preacher who is unduly anxious, self-conscious, or conflicted in his or her own sex life, or who has not honestly faced his or her own sexual history, is likely—if not certain—to project those tensions into the congregation and into the biblical text in some form, distorting both and communicating his or her emotional distress in unconscious ways. This may take the form of moralistic anger, compulsive and inappropriate humor, sentimental idealizing, or a limitation or distortion

of theological vision. Of course no pastor should expect personal perfection as a criterion for preaching the gospel. The question is simply whether preachers are inwardly willing, in their spiritual preparation, to claim their personal, confused, embarrassing, partly failing, partly fulfilled sexual experience as their own so that they can think and speak without emotional distortion.

4. *Be aware of your built-in biases.* By “built-in biases” I mean those that come with the territory of being male or female in our society. The women’s movement has rightly insisted that much of what men, for instance, take for granted as universal in matters of sexuality, like attitudes of conquest and emotional detachment, are in reality *male* attitudes, derived perhaps from biology but certainly also from the distorting effects of social privilege and power. It is humbling to discover such systematic distortions of value, judgment, and perception in oneself, all the more so because they stem from seemingly impersonal, i.e. large-scale social sources having little to do with what we perceive as our uniquely personal experience. Yet the biases of social privilege (or social oppression) shape us profoundly. It is incumbent on the preacher to undertake, in addition to intimate emotional self-knowledge, the corresponding *social* self-knowledge of race, class, age, and sex as a part of one’s spiritual discipline for preaching. In particular, it is important to try to understand one’s topic from the standpoint of the “other side,” especially if one is in the position of relative power. Reading Shere Hite’s *The Hite Report*, for instance, will give men an uncomfortably enlightening perception of themselves as lovers—from the woman’s perspective!

5. *Take due account of your real authority with your congregation.* Every pastor has the ecclesiastical authority of ordination and presumably the charismatic authority of a divine call to preach the Word as conscience and Scripture require. But there is also an informal authority that arises from the trust, respect, and affection a congregation bestows on its pastor in response to the quality of her or his actual presence with them. This informal authority confirms (or questions) the formal and vocational authority and must be honestly appraised in judging the extent to which one’s preaching on sex will be heard as authentic pastoral leadership or simply as personal opinion or prejudice masquerading as divine truth. In my opinion, the preacher’s message is not bound, in the last analysis, by an estimation of how people will hear or respond to the Word. But this freedom can become arrogance, abuse, and exploitation if not lovingly gauged to the readiness of people to hear and be led. This in turn is a function, in part, of the quality of one’s total ministry over time—pastoral care, systematic education, worship, and administration. Some pastors simply “win the right to be heard” more effectively than others on controversial or sensitive topics, not only because of personal qualities but because their whole ministry prepares congregations for their leadership.

6. *Avoid sheer moralizing and idealizing.* Early in its modern development the pastoral care movement became aware of the counterproductive consequences of passing moral judgments (blame or praise) without first establishing and communicating an empathic understanding of the counselee’s perception of the problem. This important principle was later *misunderstood* to mean a flat repudiation of any moral judgments in counseling, but the basic

principle rightly understood is still absolutely critical to any counseling that seeks to facilitate healing and personal growth. It is equally applicable, it seems to me, in preaching. Sermons are indeed occasions for articulating one's convictions about moral and spiritual truth; but this must be done on the context of an empathic articulation of the life situation of the listeners if such judgments are to be heard as redemptive rather than as merely judgmental, condemnatory, or flattering. This is not the same as condoning or coddling what one regards as sinful—a sort of sentimental, spineless liberalism. It is rather a plea for a real attempt at understanding and communicating that understanding. Great spiritual discipline and congregational leadership are called for in attempting, for example, to *understand* homosexual persons before “evaluating” homosexuality. It is a spiritual cop-out to jump to judgment.

7. *Do your homework in Scripture, tradition, and contemporary knowledge.* Preachers and professors both generally assume they already know, basically, what the Bible says or what the church (or psychology) teaches on a subject. We can hope this is true; but it is also a dangerous initial assumption. Any preacher who takes exegesis seriously or searches the history of the church knows there are many surprises in store, that the tradition is more diverse than we imagine, that its questions, doubts, and uncertainties are more searching than we often expect, and that even its more confident proclamations of faith are given with a certain reverent reserve concerning literal details (e.g. Jesus' resurrection). Similarly, a careful reading of church history or present day social science often contradicts expectations on topics like pre- and extramarital sex, abortion, and homosexuality. Responsible preaching, especially on sex, requires diligent scholarship, not only to correct distortions but to teach the real Scriptures and their tradition and not our fantasies about them. In the heat and fury of controversy on topics like homosexuality, such patient, faithful research and teaching may seem a weak response at first, but in the long run they are indispensable for upbuilding the church. Truth must be honored in all of its complexity and uncertainty if it is ever to be found in all of its ultimate simplicity.

8. *Interpret the meaning of sex theologically as the context for moral guidance.* The moral perspective is likely to be the first way that sexual topics like premarital sex or homosexuality are considered. But it is important to complement ethical reflection with questions of *meaning* to prevent moral understanding from becoming shallow and arbitrary. But do not too quickly assume that theological meanings are obvious or simple, and do not resort too quickly to defining sex as a mystery and leaving it at that. If we are honest, there *is*, I think, great puzzlement, for example, in the sheer power and persistence of sexual desire. It often seems, at bottom, so indifferent to any moral direction (at least from a male point of view). Why is this so? What does it mean that such a force is a part of God's good creation?

9. *Identify and critique popular illusions.* As sexually arousing as a Brooke Shields or a Playboy bunny may be for men or a Robert Redford for women—and there is little point in pretending otherwise—the fact is that the messages conveyed by sexual advertising, popular culture, and its sexual “philosophies” simply are not, in the final analysis, the truth about sex, though like

most captivating falsehoods they contain (and distort) truthful insights. Sex is fun; the female body is visually exciting to heterosexual men (the opposite may or may not hold for women—the reports are mixed); and in some primal sense, sexual fun is good—good in and of itself—period (just as the Bible says!). Hefner, Shields, and their likes are not total lies; but like all heresies they entail deadly distortions and deceptions in their overall message about what it takes to be happy and about the role and meaning of sex in human relations. Moreover, it is not beside the point that these images and philosophies are not “naive”; they are the direct instruments of commercial promotion and may be seen, in some larger sense, as one of the means by which whole classes of human beings (women, the young, etc.) are exploited by powerful economic, social, and political interests. Sex is political, as well as economic, social, cultural, and religious. There is an urgent prophetic need today to call these spades for what they are. Culture criticism, feminist criticism, black criticism, and so forth, are required reading, not because these critiques are necessarily free from their own distortions, but because preachers cannot afford to ignore voices that attempt to identify and unmask the demonic everyday illusions about sex (and many other things) that ensnare us all.

10. *Interpret the psychophysical dimensions of sexuality in relation to larger themes as a part of the whole of life.* Sex is good in itself but it does not exist by itself. It is part of the same biopsychic unity that also becomes ill, ages, and dies. This is a sobering thought but sages and seers have always sensed a close relationship between sex and mortality—our “finitude.” Some say we seek sexual pleasure in order to defy or transcend death, others that sex itself is merely a detour in our quest for final quiescence in death. In any case it seems to me that much of the idolatrous exaggeration of the physical aspects of sex in our culture is related to its isolation from the rest of life, particularly the universal facts of illness, aging, suffering, violence, and death. We are preoccupied with fantasies about sexual fulfillment—that it requires an approximation of a Brooke Shields or a Robert Redford, for instance—only because we have not learned to integrate the facts of aging, ordinary ugliness, failure, and realistic frustration into our total sense of life. And to the extent that we “deny death,” i.e. our mortality, and try to *live* in an unreal world of sexual fantasy, we find ourselves unable to live within the bounds of moral obligation or personal fidelity which eventually confront us with life’s realities. But the Bible and our theology can call us back to a more full acceptance of life and thus to a more rich and natural experience of sex itself. This is not easy and never has been. It is a work of spiritual development and transformation; it requires faith and trust in the God of creation by the work of the divine Spirit, though it may be aided by thoughtful, imaginative, and courageous preaching. Such preaching may offer a vision of life in its wholeness as a real possibility for real persons by the transforming power of God’s Spirit.

11. *Interpret the psychosocial aspects of sex in the context of the Christian life as a whole.* While sex presents many questions, the final or deepest ones have to do, for Christians, with the nature of Christian life itself. Grace, love, forgiveness, covenant responsibility, and new life in the Spirit, lived in the community of faith engaged in God’s work in the world, constitute the

larger framework of theological meaning and ethical imperative shaping our understanding of sex. How, for instance, does new life in Christ affect sexuality? To borrow loosely from H. Richard Niebuhr's helpful typology of Christ and culture, does the life of faith free us to be fully and simply "natural"? Does it set us *against* our sexual inclinations in some sense? Does it *perfect* or *complete* our natures? Does it stand in *paradoxical tension* with them? Or does it somehow *transform* our natural existence? If the Reformed Tradition, as Niebuhr says, generally accents the transformative position (despite ambiguities in all of them) the question then becomes how or in what sense Christ transforms sexuality. Unfortunately this idea has often been interpreted to mean the suppression and control of sex by "self-mastery" equated (wrongly) with transformation. Suppressive control may betoken conscious and behavioral *change* but is not the same as *transformation*, which connotes a deeper qualitative change of heart, desire, and motive. Can our deepest sexual longings, both frivolous and profound, be transformed into Christ's glorious likeness and still be truly sexual—fun, exciting, silly, deep, problematic, mysterious, fulfilling—and truly our own? (My own belief is that they can, but that we have all but lost any authentic understanding of spiritual transformation today. We either reject the idea out of hand as impossible, believing that our feelings and desires cannot be developed through any sort of discipline or practice, or superficially confuse it with repressive ideals and techniques, believing that desire must be forced into obedience by will power or through repressive religious experiences. There is a whole theological and spiritual frontier to be explored here.)

12. *Make your first and your last words on this subject—and on every subject—the bountiful and sovereign grace of God.* Sex like everything human is filled with blessing and bane, fulfillment and failure, conviction and uncertainty. It helps, again and again, in our struggles to know and to live the truth—and in our perverse desires to evade and defy it—that our lives are ultimately given and forgiven by One who is working toward a loving and just completion of this great drama of existence of which sex in all of its variety, power, and mystery is a part. Moral rules, goals, and principles, and religious interpretations of all sorts, are essential to our role in that drama, Yet in the last analysis—thank God—we flourish not by right conduct or correct understanding, but because we are loved by One who knows our frame and remembers that we are dust and loves us with a love that passes understanding. As fear, guilt, and anxiety inevitably inhibit sexual vitality, so divine grace can redeem and enliven us again and again in our sexual struggles and uncertainties. This is good news that deserves to be heard, and to be preached as well as we can say it.