

Good Body

Matthew 5:27-30 (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

February 16, 2020

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:27-30)

Well, it’s time to address the elephant in the room:

Shakira, J.Lo and the Super Bowl halftime show.

Now, I know what you’re going to say.

You’re going to say, “I haven’t thought about that for two weeks,”

or, “I never thought about it at all,”

or, “I don’t want to think about it again.”

Well, you’re wrong.

You want it addressed, so I will.

Actually, what I found most interesting about the halftime show

was not the halftime show itself,

but the debate surrounding it, particularly among Christians.

Two weeks ago, this was the Controversy of the Day.

Do you even remember it?

One side clicked their tongues,

condemning it in its entirety as indecent,

at least according to their subjective sense

of the objective standard of Christian decency.

It reflected the continuing decay of Christian values, they said,
it promoted the objectification and exploitation of women's bodies.
They said all this, as if they really expected the Super Bowl,
that grand temple of hyper-consumerism,
to reflect Christian values.

The other side, though, defended the halftime show in its entirety,
at least according to their subjective sense
of the objective standard of Christian decency.
It reflected strong women, strong Latinx women, they said,
taking pride in their strong bodies to make a strong political statement.
They said all this, as if the popularity of the Super Bowl game and its halftime show
is not based at least in part upon the exploitation
of men's and women's bodies for profit.

Do you see the problem here?
In the frames provided by the prevailing ideological antagonisms,
the halftime performance must either be completely condemned
or completely supported.
And, meanwhile, with Christians so wrapped up in that debate using those frames,
people both inside and outside of the church
are left to think that the Christian sexual ethic
is either based on controlling women's bodies
or is no different from the cultural values on display at the Super Bowl.
And we wonder why some people want nothing to do with the church.

When we as Christians enter a public debate
using the frames provided for us by popular culture,
we wind up feeding the prevailing ideological antagonisms
rather than proclaiming the good news of Jesus.
What good is salt if it's lost its saltiness?
What good is light if it's hid under a bushel?

The original title for this sermon
was "Preventive Cardiac Care",
but I changed that title at the last possible moment,
just before the bulletin was printed.

I changed it because I think a sermon with that title,
promotes a message that has been promoted far too often in churches.
That is, sexual desire is a problem.
And so, when it's talked about,
it's usually either to condemn it
or to teach about ways we can restrain it or protect ourselves from it.

Now, to be sure, our verses this morning,
could result in a sermon titled "Preventive Cardiac Care."
After all, Jesus did teach that we need to pay attention to what's happening in our hearts

so we can protect ourselves from sexual temptations.

But if we begin there and keep our focus there – on prevention,
we'd be avoiding the questions that were left unaddressed in the halftime debate,
the questions that far too often are avoided in our churches.

What is sexual desire?

Where does it come from?

What are we to do with it?

How can we, or should we, embrace it?

And, what does it have to say, if anything, about how God made us?

What does it have to say, if anything, about God?

When we talk about sexual desire,

what is the good news?

Well, we begin with blessing.

When it comes to what God asks from us, that's where we must begin.

The entire Biblical story begins with blessing.

Creation is blessing, God taking nothing and making it something.

In those verses from Deuteronomy,

the people of Israel are told that God has set before them

life and death, blessings and curses

and they are urged to choose life, to choose the blessings,

so they may live fruitfully in the land of promise.

In the same way,

in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, from which the verses before us come,

the Beatitudes come first.

Jesus blesses before he commands.

Before Jesus asks his disciples to do anything,

he blesses them.

All of Jesus' commands, then,

begin with blessing.

So, when it comes to sexual desire,

what is the blessing?

Sarah Coakley says

that the only way in which desire can be safely acknowledged and explored is
if it is understood, most fundamentally, as desire for God.

I know, we're not used to thinking about it in this way.

Sex is so carnal, we think,

and theology is so . . . spiritual.

We get uncomfortable if we try to mix body and spirit.

Yet, Jesus is God incarnate --

God in the flesh, the carnal God,

and we are never to denigrate what God has called good,

including our bodies.

God created us with a desire, a longing,

to know and to be known,
to love and to be loved.
We long for communion – which is, according to the dictionary definition,
simply shared intimacy,

We long for atonement — which is, simply, at-one-ment,
to be at one with another.

We long for grace, to be received fully, as we are.

Communion? Atonement? Grace?

It shouldn't surprise us that those are religious words.

At its root, our desire, including our sexual desire,
was given to us by God as gift,
and it reflects a longing for God.

Now to be clear,
sexual expression is only one way we express this desire.

There are other ways,
reflected in our deepest family relationships and friendships,
ones where we give of ourselves to others,
completely, vulnerably, riskily,
ones where others give of themselves to us,
completely, vulnerably, riskily.

In his essay, *The Body's Grace*,
Anglican bishop Rowan Williams writes,
“We cannot make sense of ourselves without others.
We cannot speak until we've first learned to listen,
we cannot love without being the object of love,
and we cannot enjoy ourselves without being the cause of joy.”¹

We cannot enjoy ourselves without being the cause of joy.

Have you ever thought of enjoyment, of pleasure, as worthy Christian pursuits,
ones that are inextricably tied up with being human,
and ones that are inextricably tied up
with being the cause of another's joy and pleasure?

We are not simply passive instruments for another's desires,
and others are not simply passive instruments for our desires.

In First Corinthians, chapter 7, Paul uses the prevailing understanding of marriage
to get at the proper expression of this desire:
husbands and wives, marriage partners, should give themselves, their bodies,
to each other.

When people are married, they surrender complete ownership of their bodies
and give them to each other.

¹ Rowan Williams, “The Body's Grace,” *ABC Religion & Ethics*, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-body-grace/10101214> [accessed February 13, 2020].

Now, I get it, in this age of independence and sexual expression,
we want to protest, "My body is my own -- it doesn't belong to anyone else!"

And when I talk about surrendering bodies,
I can't avoid the fact that, in the church's history,
men have been much more comfortable
asking women to do the surrendering.
putting limits on clothing, hairstyles, roles, and who can serve in the church and where.

And, finally, it's important to say that these verses from 1 Corinthians,
the ones talking about giving bodies over to spouses,
have been used to coerce people (again, primarily women),
to remain in physically and emotionally abusive relationships.
Let's be clear, that's not the type of suffering that Christ calls us to.
That suffering is not redemptive.

At its root,
our giving of ourselves to another,
sexually or otherwise,
reflects Christ's giving of himself to us.
Like Christ, we open ourselves up to pain, to suffering, to rejection.
We offer our bodies, ourselves, vulnerably, for the sake of another's joy
because we see the other as worthy of our joy.

Our bodies are not our own.
They were created to be given,
to be given to another, to others,
not exclusively through sexual expression,
but not independent of it either.
It's the body's grace.

The task of church, Jane Barter Moulaison writes,
is not to speak to the unique bodily experiences of its members
so much as it is to shape Christian bodies.
The church seeks to conform Christians
to the narrative of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²

We cannot understand Jesus' teachings about adultery and lust,
if we don't first understand that our bodies, including our sexual desire,
is as gift, a good gift,
one which reflects God's desire in Christ's passion,
in Jesus offering his body to us, faithfully, fully and completely,
teaching us that we can love and be loved by God,
that God can be the cause of our joy,
that we, you, are the cause of God's joy.

² Jane Barter Moulaison, "Our Bodies, Our Selves: The Body as Source in Feminist Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (January 1, 2007), 352; accessed via EBSCOhost.com.

For Christians, 'our bodies' are never thoroughly our own,
they exist for the sake of building up others through tangible acts of self-giving love.

Now, do you see why lust perverts the gift that God has given us?

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'
But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust
has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
As a sixteen-year-old, when I heard these verses,
I imagined Jesus speaking directly to me with piercing eyes, condemning me.
And then, I sure didn't know what to make of what Jesus said right after that
about gouging and cutting those parts of your body that cause you to sin.

But when Jesus is talking about looking at someone with lust --
we can comfortably say that this teaching is both for men and women,
married and single alike,
he's not condemning simple sexual desire.
No, there's a dimension of intent here that we sometimes miss.
In this instance, the King James Version is closer to the message of the original text.
"Whoever looketh at a woman to lust after her
hath committed adultery with her already in his heart".

To see a person with desire is the result of our God-driven drive for mutuality --
to know and to be known, to love and to be loved.
And marriage, the context from which these teachings from Jesus come,
reflects the unending fidelity of God, God's steadfast love,
that begins with God's giving, and asks for our giving.

But to look at a person with the intent of using him or her to satisfy your desire,
that is the way of self-love, self-trust, self-assertion, and self-destruction.
It is to take someone else,
and to use him or her to please yourself.
It's a distortion of our God-given desire.

Jesus tells his followers
to do whatever is necessary to protect themselves from disordered desires.
"If your right eye causes you to sin,
gouge it out and throw it away," he said.
"It is better for you to lose one part of your body
than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.
And if your right hand causes you to sin,
cut it off and throw it away.
It is better for you to lose one part of your body
than for your whole body to go into hell."

Now, Jesus is using hyperbole to make his point, of course.
If Jesus had expected his followers to take this literally,

to remove those parts of the body that causes us to sin --
his disciples would be recognized not first by their love
but by their mutilated limbs and their gouged-out eyes.
(And I highly doubt there would be children.)

No, Jesus is teaching his followers that they need to deal with those cues
that take them in the wrong direction, that turn their hearts from God.
There is no aspect of our human identity
that God does not seek to redeem or that does not need redemption.
If we are to take seriously Jesus' instructions in his Sermon on the Mount,
we will engage in those practices that result in relationships
that affirm our brothers, our sisters, our spouses,
and ourselves as created in the image of God.

If you recognize yourself caught up in the vicious cycle of sexual temptations,
it is important to remember that God's grace
is sufficient to redeem you from anything that enslaves you.
If you recognize someone you love in a situations such as these,
it is important to remember that Jesus told you to love them.
Your brother or sister is too valuable to be enslaved by powers that lay their claim on them.
And your sister or brother is too valuable than to be seen for their sexual appeal
rather than the work of the Holy Spirit within them.

"We cannot make sense of ourselves without others.
We cannot speak until we've first learned to listen,
we cannot love without being the object of love,
and we cannot enjoy ourselves without being the cause of joy."

A rabbi once asked the student in his class a very simple question.
How can you know when night has ended and the day has come?

One student said, "It's when you can tell a palm tree from a fig tree."
"No," answered the rabbi.

Another said, "It's when you can tell a sheep from a goat."
"No," answered the rabbi.

Still another said, "When you can tell a rabbit from a dog"
"No," answered the rabbi again.

The students had no more answers.
And the rabbi said,
"Only when you look into the face of every man and every woman
and see your brother and your sister.
"Only then have you seen the light.
All else is darkness."

In the name of Christ,

through the power of the Holy Spirit,
may God's vision be our vision,
may God's desire be our desire.
and may God help us to help each other
live with joy, our joy and God's joy,
our joy and each other's joy,
together.

Amen.