



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

Sermon

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United in Body

Week of Prayer: Praying over the broken body of Christ
1 Corinthians 6:12-20

As a young man, St. Augustine prayed “O Lord, give me chastity...but not yet.”

This confessional prayer captures something of the power of sexuality in our lives and the struggle that we humans tend to have with it.

The beginning point of any Christian exploration of sexuality is as that sex is a gift of God. A Mennonite statement on human sexuality says that “We affirm that sexuality is a good and beautiful gift of God, a gift of identity and a way of being in the world as male and female.”

Not only is sex a gift, it is also a power, that when expressed in a covenant relationship and with love and respect becomes a wonderful blessing, a power that unites and builds.

But, when it is pursued as an end in itself, sex can become a highly destructive power fragmenting relationships and leaving pain and brokenness in its wake.

That was the story in Corinth. Cliques, theological disagreement, class alienation were the issues that divided the Corinthian congregation,...and now we add to the list...sex.

To appreciate the struggles and issues around sexuality, context is important; both in an historical sense and in a personal sense.

Historical and cultural context

To gain some insight into the issues addressed in Paul’s letter to Corinth, let’s look at the cultural and historic context of the time.

Corinth was well known for its sexual libertinism; it had a bit of a reputation in the ancient world. To be “Corinthianized” was a colloquial way of saying you have totally let yourself go...sexually,... you have truly corrupted yourself.

Dominating the city of Corinth was a high promontory of land called the Acro-rinth, which was crowned by the temple to the goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty and fertility. It is estimated that 1000 prostitutes descended to the streets of Corinth every night.

Sailors, traders, and soldiers from the Roman legions were drawn to Corinth for more than official reasons.

It would be easy to draw comparisons between Corinth and any of the big cosmopolitan port cities of our own day.

Personal context

We also bring to this study our own personal histories. All of us have an emotional and deeply personal context for this subject.

And it is quite impossible to talk about sexual issues objectively. In fact, some of us may well feel considerable fear and anxiety in approaching this area; for other anger or guilt may be triggered.

Marriage and sex

In Graeco-Roman society in Paul's time, marriages were arranged according to economic and political considerations. Men tended not to expect to find sexual pleasure with their wives who were seen as matrons of the household; for sexual pleasure they went outside the home; so the business of prostitution flourished and had achieved a level of main-stream acceptance in the general populace.

In the Corinthian church, several sexual issues were causing astir, as reported in Paul's letter.

There was the issue of incest, which until Paul's intervention as reported in chapter 5, had been ignored and tolerated. There was apparently also some who sought out the use of prostitutes; this Paul alludes to in Ch. 6, verse 16.

In the Corinthian congregation, attitudes toward sex were severely polarized.

Some folks took a severe ascetic stand, no doubt in reaction to the prevailing culture; others took a liberal view of things, and did not see anything wrong with a certain amount of sexual adventuring.

The issues and questions that we will explore tonight reflect the agenda in our text and also have a continuing relevance.

What about sex makes it a force that separates?

Which is better singleness or marriage?

Should folks separate and live monastic lives in light of the desperate times?

What about pre-marital sex,...where there are no "victims?"

My reading of 1 Corinthians tells me that it is a very contemporary book in its addressing of sexual issues. We also live in a sex-soaked culture.

It is quite impossible to watch television, without being confronted with sexually charged images, if only from the advertising.

In Canada the statistics on marital breakdown in the church matches that of society in general, that is.... approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce.

As we explore this daunting subject, we do so, on the one hand holding on to our source of authority, the Scriptures, as well as our Confession of faith, which represents our best

interpretations; and on the other hand, seeking to compassionately face the realities of the world around us.

Let us reflect together, using the outline found in the study guide.

Why does sex separate people?

Sex is a gift from God, designed to unite...to build family, to build community; yet the tragic irony is that sex can destroy and break apart.

As pastors who have the uncommon privilege of listening to the lives of many folks as they trust us with their struggles and hurts, we have learned that sex separates in a great variety of ways:

The pursuit of pornography can separate a man's affection from his wife.

Sexual addiction when a person is driven and controlled by sex, can lead to marriage breakdown.

Childhood sexual abuse separates families, and can lead to inner fragmentation in its victims.

Then on another level altogether, how folks feel about same-sex marriage issues and other sex-related questions can separate family members and churches members; and churches from conferences. And in the conflicts that ensue many are hurt and alienated.

"In light of the harmful effects of much sexual activity, how can we still justify calling sexuality "a good and beautiful gift from God?"

Which is better, singleness or marriage?

In the popular media of TV and movies, young adults are often portrayed as physically incapable of existing in a healthy manner without being sexually active. Just watch the sit-coms. Virginity is something no one would ever want to admit to; to do so would lead to shame, personal marginalization and social failure.

How do Mennonite congregations deal with singleness? There has been a tendency to try their best to boost the young past singleness, by doing everything possible to see them get married, many of them at a fairly young age.

Being a single adult is not always easy in one of our churches. This is true for young singles as well as widows and widowers. Singles tend to be left out, because the social structure and social culture of our congregations tend to be built around the family and marriage. So, single people tend to be alone. For very many of them, this means loneliness. And for a good many of these it leads to re-location, where they will no longer be alone or lonely, be that in other churches or in

singleness bars.

I believe that we need affirm singleness and to appreciate the advantages of a single life. We certainly need to honour and support those who have chosen the single life, rather than seeing them as incomplete: “a half orange...looking for its other half.”

In our text Paul makes a case for singleness...celibate singleness.

How does he build his case?

First, let's clarify that his reasoning is not based on a negative view of sex. I say this because Paul has been unfairly accused of having a very negative view of sexuality and a low view of women. Some of this bias comes from a misunderstanding of the phrase, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman.”(7:1)

This is not Paul's position; rather he is here quoting back to them a sentiment that was held by some of the conservative folks in the Corinthian church, which he then goes on to discuss. The NRSV, and some other translations, have added quotes to this phrase to make this way of referencing his teaching clear.

In verse 7 Paul shares that his preferred way to be is single. “I wish that all were as I myself am.” He refers to singleness as a gift from God.(v.7) (Note that the word he uses is “charismata” the same word for spiritual gift in chapter 12.)

In chapter 7, Paul goes on to lay out the advantages of singleness, as he sees it. He gives his opinion, (and makes a point to clarify that it is opinion, not binding teaching,) that it is best to remain single.

He suggests that it would be an advantage to be single in view of “the impending crisis.” Later in verse 29, he suggests that “the appointed time has grown short.” He is so convinced that the second coming is about to happen that he says stay as you are. Simplify your life. Stay single.

The complications and anxieties of married life are things best set aside; especially for those who make kingdom work their priority.

Even though Paul up-held this positive view of singleness, he also affirmed the goodness of the marital union. He affirmed marriage, including an active sexual relationship. See 7:2,5,9.

Paul held up celibate singleness as in his opinion the best way; nevertheless he affirmed sex and marriage.

What about marital sex?

So why is this an issue?

As a good pastor, Paul had observed what was

going on in the lives and families of this congregation. Remember he had spent one and a half years there.

Some wanted to avoid sex entirely. Perhaps because of the prevalent abuses of sex, they had reacted, to hold a negative view of sexual intimacy. This is not an uncommon response, especially when one or both of the partners have suffered sexual abuse of some kind.

Others were engaged to be married and were questioning this prospect.

Some thought that their new faith compelled them to end marriages to non-believing spouses.

Polarized views about sex and marriage made these difficult issues to deal with; so Paul provided his counsel.

Paul's counsel indicates a view that sex was not just for procreation, but for a level of physical care and affection that one partner owed the other in a healthy marriage. He spoke against the legalistic restraint of sexual energy as unhealthy.

He saw sex in marriage as being expressed and practice with sensitive mutuality, with each partner having an equal ownership and prerogative in the relationship as the other. He was concerned that both spouses should treat the other with respect, honour, consideration and dignity.

Such mutuality would have been very rare in the male-dominating patriarchy of Corinth.

As to the impulses to separate and divorce, his counsel was to stay where you are. If the unbelieving partner wants to stay married, stay married.

Is sex outside marriage ok, as long as there are “no victims?”

I would like to put this question into our present context.

The view and practice of sex that is being hustled by the popular media is that sex that is informal, that is practiced whenever convenient and with whoever you feel like; it is recreational; you do it for fun; it is democratic,... everybody has a right to get their share.

The weekly plots in the sit-coms often revolve around the sexual escapades of nubile young adults.

Music videos on the Much More channel crank-up the sexual fever to a high-energy, and athletic clip.

There is a notion that “victim-less” sex is ok; that is, if it is consensual and “nobody gets hurt.”

Imbedded in all this approach to sex is the notion that there need not be any commitment involved; in fact it works best if there is no commitment.

The liberal voices in the church of Corinth sound vaguely familiar:

“All things are lawful for me.” I’m free.

For example, some of the men visited with prostitutes. What could be wrong with that?

“Food is meant for the stomach and stomach for the food.”

This is a proverb suggesting that “since sex organs were made for sex,” let them be so used. It was an argument from design. But unlike the relationship of stomach and food, which we rely on for survival, this was a logic driven by the needs of pleasure.

Paul does not tear down the importance of freedom, but he sets freedom in a framework of accountability. Then he goes on to lay out some important principles for discerning sexual activity.

Paul’s teaching puts together two fundamental ideas:

One, is that sexual intercourse involves the bonding of two persons, making them One. This is the founding principle of marriage as taught by Jesus in Matthew 19... the joining of two to become “one flesh.”

The second principle is that of belonging. Christians belong to Christ.

(6:19-20)

Paul’s logic is based on the priority of belonging. “We are not our own. We are bought with a price.” Therefore, we belong to God.

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” he implores.

It follows that our belonging to Christ, including our bodies, is the first priority.

“The body is not meant for fornication, but for the Lord.”

So if sex is a way of bonding or joining with another, and if the Christian is already committed to Christ in faith commitment and baptism,... then the various sexual “joinings” that were going on in Corinth were serious breaches of covenant...not only with the marriage partner but also a breach of covenant with God.

So, Paul’s rhetorical question is: “Should I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?” and his answer: “Never!”

How can Christians be “united in body?”

At the center of this epistle, if we pay attention, we will feel something of the heart of Paul agonizing over the brokenness that he saw in the Corinthian congregation. As he penned this letter, he saw the healing of their brokenness, his inspired imagination giving him hope and courage to address the brokenness that he saw.

They had divided into cliques...

They were feuding over a variety of issues connected with worship...

They were making a mockery of the Lord supper by their divisions...

And in this study we have seen how they were sexually broken...

Central in Paul’s writing was the word “body.”

... the physical body...which some of them were abusing.

...“the body”... the congregation...“the body of Christ.”

Finally, there was the physical body of Christ as symbolized in the loaf and the cup of the Lord’s Table.

The call of this epistle is to One-ness: one-ness of husband and wife in sexual integrity and faithfulness;

One-ness of community around the Lord’s table;

And one-ness in mind and purpose as a congregation.

Paul saw a symmetry of these “bodies;” a harmony, a unity, where the individual bodies would be at one with their lord; and the members of the body of Christ would be One in accepting and caring for one-another as they honoured one another as equal participants of the body and the blood of Christ.

Prayer