

## Sexuality and Spirituality

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OK, this sermon has something to do with sex.

There, I said it. Now, everyone take a deep breath and ... relax.

OK, if you don't find it easy to relax, I can understand. Sexuality is a vast and emotionally charged subject!

Take, for example, a recent news report about a computer game called "Grand Theft Auto, San Andreas." While playing this game, you can crash your car directly into buildings or other cars and hijack them, shoot other people with guns, take their money, kidnap people, whatever. With all this violent action, the game was still only rated 'mature' when it came out. But then someone discovered a secret code which allowed you to see a sex scene in a bedroom.

The scene was with computer generated artificial characters, not photos of real people having sex with each other. But that didn't matter. Zap, the game was immediately changed to an 'adult only' rating. Copies for sale were pulled from shelves and put behind the sales counter. Now you can't get one without proof of age.

So, you might say that sex is more dangerous and scary than all of that violence put together. In our society, sadly, ... this attitude is nothing new.

But the United States isn't the only culture on the map. Different cultures around the world have vastly differing attitudes about sexuality and gender. In parts of the middle east, women wear a burka, a garment which hides the entire body, including the head and face. Even the suspicion of sex outside of strict cultural dictates is punishable by murder, sometimes carried out by members of one's own family.

Compare this to parts of scandinavia, where the human body is considered beautiful, magazines depicting nudes and people engaged in sexual activity are common and sold openly.

So, what is it about sex that could provoke such widely different reactions?

Consider sexual activity. You can experience great pleasure, but you also have great power. The power to create a new human being; to start a new life! And yet, you also have the power to spread disease and even death! And, ... you have the power to connect people in a highly intimate way.

Over thousands of years, we human beings have not only engaged in sexual activity, we have studied it, made rules about it, established teachings, theories, beliefs, laws, encouragement, and punishment. The result is an often confusing mix of messages. In this country, some people refer to sex as 'dirty' on the one hand, and yet also a very precious act that you must save for marriage. For the most important person in your whole life.

But now, just as the onset of puberty seems to occur at an earlier and earlier age, the average age to marry keeps getting later and later. Under these rules, the message to young adults today is to abstain from sex for an average of 15 years. And yet, these are the peak years of sexual desire and energy for most people. It seems to me that something has gotten way off track, here.

However, ...

... there are some people of the opinion that it's possible to teach, support, and encourage others to respect the power of their sexuality. To learn that responsible sexuality doesn't necessarily mean waiting until marriage. To have a positive attitude about sexuality - that the sexual aspect of human beings is actually a beautiful quality. A quality that is as important and as natural as any other.

In fact, erotic feelings might be considered related to mysticism. You may enter a different mental, emotional, and physical state compared to your normal everyday life. The exact nature of that state remains mysterious. Sure, we can talk about chemical changes in the brain and most of us have heard sexual arousal described in flat medical terminology. But what you can actually experience goes far beyond words.

And then ... there are people for which this erotic state is merely a 'quick fix' of pleasure for a fleeting moment. For still others, it represents a lack of clear headed thinking and decision making that can only get one into trouble.

And what trouble is that? Oh, there's quite a list.

One, strong desires can be very difficult to handle. One may feel that one is risking poor judgment on the way to satisfying that desire.

Two, a person must give up a certain amount of control in order to enjoy oneself. In a society such as ours that prides itself on the control of just about everything, including your own emotions, that's a scary prospect indeed. Losing control. Oooooooh! ... Look out!

Three, sexual activity can be addictive. And by that I don't mean how much time you spend doing something, but more of your attitude about it. How much you feel compelled or how much what you're doing interferes with the rest of your life.

Four, your sexual activity may involve other dangerous practices, an entire area I haven't really touched on.

Five, after engaging in something so intimate, it's likely for a special emotional or spiritual bond to start forming between the participants. The expectations that come with this can be mighty difficult to sort out, especially if multiple people are involved or related!

Six, you can create a new human life, as I mentioned earlier.

Seven, you can spread disease, as I also mentioned.

Eight, what you want to do may be opposed by religious and cultural teachings, expectations & traditions. Some of these are quite stern and threatening.

Phew! That is quite a list.

Admittedly, we now have some high technology to help us with some of these things, such as the pill and the condom.

(hold up condom, in package, for all to see)

Yes, this condom is very high tech. You don't think so? I have a workshop full of tools but I could not make one myself, that's for sure. This one that I hold in my hand cost about one dollar and fifteen cents. Now where can you get something to both prevent a new life from being created and protect you from many terrible diseases, all while having the time of your life! One dollar and fifteen cents. Wow.

But just as much as the condom may seem to solve these two problems, the risk of disease or pregnancy, that may only shift the focus onto some of the others issues. For example, a condom won't help you with your desires or someone with an addiction. So there are no easy answers.

And yet, ... in spite of all those reasons to be deeply concerned, sexual arousal and activity can be a most wonderful thing. A great gift. A built in 'feature' of almost every human being. An indescribable sense of one's mind and body singing together in harmony. Something for which one might look toward the sky and say thank you, thank you, thank you.

So, the question is, how do we reconcile these things? Throughout history and across various cultures, people have tried to stay out of trouble by creating different traditions, rules, teachings, and laws. Now we stand at a crossroads. We are seeing traditions shifting, institutions losing credibility, such as the scandals involving priests over the past few years. We are seeing same sex couples come out of secrecy to declare their love and demand equal rights.

But without these past traditions, these religious teachings, these laws, how can we find a way to help each other face the challenges that our sexuality presents to us? What can we do about uncomfortable feelings we might have about these changes? How can we fulfill our desires in a responsible way?

There is a growing sentiment that there are other ways to make responsible decisions about what one chooses to do with one's sexuality. One of those ways is to practice our sexuality in a spiritual, rather than merely religious context.

Spirituality is not the same as religion. To me, spirituality is your own understanding of your relationship to nature, your relationship to other human beings (as a part of nature), and to any other being or beings beyond the physical world that you believe may exist. These beings may be a God, Goddess, Gods, saints, souls, energy, power, love, or anything that may not be immediately seen, felt, or otherwise experienced or acknowledged by another person.

Religion, on the other hand, is more of a human organization, comprised of a theology (that being a particular take on spirituality), along with policies, practices, traditions, rules, documents, officials, structure, finances, and so on.

Just as spirituality varies from person to person, so will the ways in which a person decides how to express their sexuality. Now, if that sounds rather chaotic to you, all these people running around with their own idea of responsible sexuality, consider that we already welcome individual expressions of spirituality in this church. Yet, we have also come to agreement on seven principles.

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

So, just as our agreement on these principles has brought focus out of potential chaos, so also can we develop an agreement on principles to bring focus to our approach to spiritually guided sexuality. We are already doing this as we have voted to become a welcoming congregation.

Yes, there is more to do, but there is nothing necessarily that radical about it. Consider our first principle, we believe in the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." I think that makes a pretty good start to a guide to practicing responsible sexuality. Just don't forget to include yourself! Your worth and dignity is just as important as anyone else's. Your acceptance of your own sexuality, in all of its aspects, is a worthy spiritual quest, in my opinion.

Now, of course, in this short time, I have only briefly discussed how sexuality and spirituality are related. But wait, there's more. There are three of us here this morning, each with our own piece to present. And there other resources to help you if you want to explore this topic further, such as books, internet sites, lectures, and discussions groups.

I know it takes courage to go out and ask the important questions in such an emotion charged atmosphere as our society today. Nevertheless, I invite you to take advantage of these resources and learn more about this very important topic. Thank you.