



**“God is Good:
The Gift of Sex”**
Song of Songs 7:1-12
1 Corinthians 7
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A North American physician had given two months to work in a remote part of Africa. On the air flight back home, current movies were being shown and the doctor found their content jarring. Each movie seemed to centre around sex and sexual intercourse as if this was the most important topic in the world. And yet the physician had spent two months dealing with issues of disease, poverty, and death. When the plane stopped to refuel in Brussels, the man saw magazine after magazine for sale that depicted women’s breasts in various stages of exposure. This also seemed odd, because he’d been in a culture where women regularly bared their breasts – not in any sexual way – but simply to feed their children.

“Welcome back to Western civilization, he thought to himself.”¹

We live in what could be called an over-sexed culture. Now that doesn’t mean that all of us are necessarily getting a lot of sex. But images of sex are all around us. Sex is used to sell magazines, it’s in the advertisements on the billboards as we drive into Calgary. The jokes we tell often centre around sex as do the curse words we choose to use. Sex is a key part of the content of our television programs or our movies. We sit watching a screen where two people who’ve only known each other a short while suddenly are taking their clothes off and making passionate love to each other – and there’s been no discussion about commitment between the two of them, let alone a conversation on having safe, protected sex.

One place you won’t necessarily hear about sex and that’s the Church. We don’t talk about sex, we don’t show pictures of sex, no one’s getting even partially undressed here.

Well, actually we do talk a lot about one aspect of sexuality. In the United Church – particularly 20 to 30 years ago, we talked about homosexuality. Well, maybe didn’t necessarily talk about it – we fought about it, caused divisions, split off from one another. One of my greatest pains as a teenager was watching the Church I loved be in such conflict. I saw people say incredibly nasty things to each other or refuse to speak to each other. I was taught as a child that Christian community was to be loving and respectful. But it wasn’t what we were. Today, we watch as our brothers and sisters in

¹ Philip Yancy, “Holy Sex: How it ravishes our souls,” *Christianity Today* 2003, adapted from Yancy’s book, *Rumors of Another World* (Zondervan, 2003)

the Anglican Church worldwide do similar – fight, build up their different camps, walk away from one another. Ahh, yes, we are great examples of Christians loving each other as God loves us.

So we have secular society selling us ‘sex’ as if it was some ‘thing’ and church people preoccupied with fighting amongst themselves.

Now, I believe that sexuality is a gift from God. Sexuality is about wholeness, it’s about health, it’s about good relationships, it’s about respect, love and forgiveness.

We have a beautiful example of that wholeness and health in the reading that Sandra read from the Song of Songs. Song of Songs means it’s the best of songs. It’s a love song between two people in love. Right at the center of some of our oldest scriptures, we have poetry about love and making love. The passage Sandra read comes after the two people who are in relationship have had an argument. Instead of hatred and anger, they use words of appreciation and respect and love for each other. There is forgiveness and beauty in these words. There is great intimacy for these two people are in a very significant relationship that matters greatly to each of them.²

But then, several hundred years later in the New Testament, we have the Apostle Paul writing to the new Christian community at Corinth. This is Paul – who as far we know never married. And he reduces marriage-- a beautiful intimate relationship between two people -- to lust. ‘Well, if you can’t control your lustful urges than it’s OK to get married.’

Now, there is a lot of good in what Paul says and I’ll get to that later. But this reduction of a beautiful, intimate relationship between two people to lust has caused us great difficulty through the centuries.

The early Christian Church grew up in the backdrop of Greek and Roman culture where temple prostitutes were incorporated into worship activities. The Church set important, helpful boundaries against that. But some took that too far.

One church writer from the third century was Saint Augustine of Hippo. He also never married. He converted out of the “pagan background and tormented by his own guilty past, connected the transmission of sin with the act of intercourse....(He) proclaimed that sex for any purpose other than conceiving is a sin. He came to regret that God had created sex in the first place.”³

Augustine’s contemporary, St. Jerome also wasn’t helpful. He did incredible work on translating the Bible into the Latin version which the Church used for a thousand years – although he directed himself into this study to get himself away from sexual temptation. “To husbands, he declared, ‘ Anyone who is too passionate a lover with his own wife is himself an adulterer’.”

² commentary on the end of an argument between a couple from Elizabeth Lumkes, 4Four Blog, Youth With a Mission, Turner Valley Base, AB

³ Historical commentary and quotes from Philip Yancy.

“In the succeeding centuries church authorities issued edicts forbidding sex on Thursdays, the day of Christ's arrest; on Fridays, the day of his death; on Saturdays, in honor of the Blessed Virgin; and on Sundays in honor of the departed saints. Wednesdays sometimes made the list too, as did the 40-day fast periods before Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost, and also feast days and days of the Apostles, as well as the days of female impurity. The list escalated until, as John Boswell has estimated, only 44 days a year remained available for marital sex.”

The Protestant Reformation brought about some shift in attitudes towards sex but hundreds of years of repression is hard to undo. During the Victorian era, repression came back “ even to the extent of covering the legs of furniture lest they arouse impure thoughts.”⁴

Historically as Christians, our Church’s severe attitude towards sex holds a great responsibility for the counter reaction so prevalent in society.

Philip Yancy says in his book *Rumors of Another World* that we’ve been a bunch of prudes. But likely the greatest problem with our prudishness is that we’ve “silenced a powerful rumor of transcendence that could point to the Creator and originator of human sexuality, who invested in it far more meaning than most modern people can imagine.”

Don’t we know deep down, that sex is an act of transcendence, it’s something believably, beyond ourselves. Says the writer in Ephesians “glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.” Sex is a sacred act, yet through the ages, we have desacralized it through repression and denial and in our clumsiness we have made a very powerful false god. “Sexual power lives on, but few see in that power a pointer to the One who designed it.”

“Sex has a near-sacred quality of mythic, numinous power. We select our sexiest individuals and accord them the status of gods and goddesses, fawning over the details of their lives, broadcasting their bodily statistics, surrounding them with paparazzi, rewarding them with money and status. Sex no longer points to something beyond; it becomes the thing itself, the substitute sacred.”⁵

Love songs “tap into romantic yearnings but promise more than any person can deliver. "You are my everything." "I can't live without you." These are words that only God can fulfill – no human person could fulfill that for another. We’re only human.

With such a cultural focus on sex – you can’t help thinking something must be wrong with you if you’re not having sex , a lot , on a regular basis. And yet, more and more, households in our society are single person households. People divorce, People loose a spouse, people don’t get married. The reality is not all of us are blessed to be in a committed relationship for 100 per cent of our lives.

⁴ IBID

⁵ Yancy

And here's where Paul's message to the Corinthians is so important. He says, "I'm single. I'm still a whole person. Jesus loves me and he loves you, too." Paul's message was so important in a society where widows were considered worthless. Paul's saying, "you matter. You're important. Not only that, but God has called us to this important mission. Not everyone yet knows this wholeness, this accepting love. We need to tell others, so they, too, may be whole."

As Christians today, there's a lot of temptation out there. We have a lot of sexually provocative images and words coming at us meant to tantalize and titillate. Sexual attraction and urges are natural things but it's up to us to make healthy choices. What shows will we watch on TV? Will we be discerning about messages in advertising and entertainment? What websites will we frequent? Yes, sexual urges are natural but it's up to us how we channel that energy. Our forefathers and foremothers were wrong in saying we were supposed to just repress these feelings. They are real. How are we going to channel them? Not by visiting pornographic website or renting R rated movies with graphic sex scenes. Not by building up divisions with others through conflict in the body of Christ. We put that energy into building positive relationships – with God through prayer, building up our marriages, building up our friendships, our communities, getting out and walking in nature, being in touch with the goodness God has made. Working towards making this world a better place.

"If humanity serves as your religion, then sex becomes an act of worship. On the other hand, if God is the object of your religion, then romantic love becomes an unmistakable pointer, a rumor of transcendence as loud as any we hear on earth."⁶

⁶ Yancy