

Before last week it had been a good seven years since I preached about how we followers of Jesus are to use understand and express and enjoy our God-given sexuality. Who knows, after these few Sundays, it may be seven more.

Once we give our lives over to God, we give over the right to every element of our lives: our desires, our dreams, our values, our behavior. It would be odd, and counter-productive—although entirely natural—for us to say, “OK, God, I will trust you with my intellect, and my spiritual life, and my finances, and my habits of diet and drink—but I will keep enjoying my body as I see fit. Hands off, God! (You might remember the very natural, very understandable prayer of that brilliant but late-blooming sage of the early Church, St Augustine of Hippo. Jesus was gradually winning him over, and his prayer was reputed to be, “Give me self-control and purity, O Lord—but not just yet.”)

To be followers of Jesus means that we are striving to live, more and more, trusting that whatever we turn over to the guidance of His Holy Spirit will be made right, will be brought into line with the perfect will of God. We trust that those elements of our lives which we submit to the Spirit will be brought, by the grace and power of God, from the negative column which bring us confusion and pain and regret, into the positive column of our life-experience which bring integration and fulfillment to ourselves first, and then to others around us.

To live “in Christ” is to live according to the principles Jesus taught and embodied. It’s easy for us Americans, steeped in independence and individualism as we are, to forget that one of His great gifts for us is to live in Christian community. For our own blessing, yes, but also as a “light to the nations”—for the blessing of others—to live according to principles distinct from those driving the popular culture. We, His, are always remembering our lives are being conformed to Christ’s image and example, guided by the charter of His Kingdom. He has established His colonies, outposts of His heavenly Kingdom here on planet earth. Our allegiance is to God first, and this changes everything.

During the past few decades a great chasm has been quietly emerging in the West with respect to sexual behavior. So quietly, in fact, it’s possible for us barely to have noticed. We see how people dress and act on TV and may think nothing of it; we see how students (and sometimes parents) dress at the local high school and we may think nothing of it. But I think our Lord wants us to think something of it—we are called to live as His people set apart, no matter the direction of the culture—so let’s think together.

Sociologists would probably locate the roots of the massive widespread change in the sexual attitudes and norms of the Western world in the more broad social upheaval which came to the surface in the 1960’s. There were plenty of causes for that upheaval. The polarizing and ultimately unpopular Vietnam War served as a rallying point which tended to pit two generations, two worldviews, against each other. A widespread awareness began to emerge that the inherited role models for women and men were unfairly rigid and constricting (e.g. men got to go out and earn a living while women were expected to stay at home and raise the children and be content with “women’s work.”) The availability of the birth control pill had a huge impact—it promised to

dissociate a woman's sexual activity from pregnancy (and remember, back then there was still a sense of shame attached to unmarried pregnancy, and although it has always taken two, there has long been a double standard and popular disapproval which far more stigmatized the woman.)

Many of the pioneering women in those times believed they were struggling toward nothing less important than a sexual revolution: against inequality, against injustice, against oppression, against conformity. There are some who think they are continuing the struggle.

At one point there was a heady sense of revolution: the intentional rejection and a deliberate re-imagining of sexual freedom, sexual independence. Now, a generation or two later, that pioneering sense of "changing the world" has morphed to a much more relaxed one. From what I read and hear is going on in the culture out there (thank God, my own experience and vantage point is now that of living within this colony dedicated to be loyal to Jesus, our risen King beyond this dimension) these days, "out there" sexual behavior is viewed more like a consumer choice: some prefer vanilla, some strawberry, some chocolate. Would you like your order with or without fries today?

When a formerly Christian culture evolves away from any sense of the sovereignty and love of God, it's inevitable that it will eventually arrive at very different conclusions from, say, the ten commandments, or any precepts revealed by God thru Christ. How could it be otherwise: we believe God has created us intentionally and uniquely, and that God has a design and goal to our human nature in general, and a purpose and eternal destiny to our individual lives in particular. Our culture, increasingly, believes there is no God, or no God of any account, and that therefore there can be no God-given rules or principles. [This clash of premises forms the basis underlying virtually all socio-political partisan conflict in the US today.] Therefore, by default, whatever feels natural, whatever they think does not hurt others, whatever maximizes their free choice, which enshrines their pursuit of pleasure, personal power, and convenience, is likely to become the norm.

After the sexual revolution, a generation of women and men has largely been conditioned to believe and behave as if their sexual activity concerned their bodies and their sense of pleasure only. As if sexual freedom and "enlightenment" would liberate young people from the old-fashioned religious notions that sexual union is best intended for one couple for a lifetime of commitment. Surely, they thought, freedom from commitment and unwelcome entanglements, freedom from broken hearts, would be just as easy to come by as freedom from unwanted pregnancy. Surely liberation would bring pleasure and fulfillment without raising those thorny issues of self-identity, and loneliness, and trust, and yearning for deeper connection, and lasting bonds of love. A generation of women has been raised to believe, and therefore live, as if they could separate liberated sexual behavior from old-fashioned consequences, and as a result they have been blindsided. You think it's all recreational—but then why do you feel so hurt and sad and empty and ripped off? [In Frederica Mathewes-Green's essay, "Bodies of Evidence," *Touchstone* magazine, ...It wasn't just about sex. It was about love. Eventually we came to find out "We can't just drive our bodies around as if they were sports cars. We have hearts in here, too, and they keep getting bruised, whether we think that should be happening or not."

We have observed a new generation of young adults. Among college age women today, there is a much greater percentage (than among their moms) who believe marriage to one man for a lifetime is their ideal, (e.g 83% believe marriage is a very important goal for them, according to a recent survey commissioned by the Independent Women's Forum) and who believe divorce should be extremely difficult [Pew Center Report on the Generation Gap]. These are children of divorce, of the failed experiments of some of the assumptions of the revolution, and their old-fashioned yearnings no doubt disappoint some of their pioneering mothers and grandmothers.

How sad, though, that of these same college women in the survey, 40% say they engage in "hooking up"—casual sexual encounters with no expectation of relationship. At least these 40% have learned well the lessons of the revolution—that their bodies are unrelated to their hearts, and therefore their emotional welfare and future. But still in spite of all that they yearn for the one lasting, intimate relationship for which the divine Creator has created them. They long for stable, happy homes but many have not been taught how in the world to help create one. The experiments of their parents failed, and their own young experience has not proved much better.

What massive devastation and suffering, and we're not even talking about the physical effects of the Sexual Revolution. Back in the 60's there was an awareness of three STD's. There are now more than twenty that we know of. There are now hundreds of thousands of couples who cannot conceive children they would love to bear and raise—another consequence of all that liberation. Back then there was no HIV-virus or AIDS. What massive brokenness, and what a worthy challenge for each one of us. (Thank God for the Church of Jesus Christ! Imagine what the statistics, the devastation, the prospects for the future of our civilization would be even now were there not tens of thousands of churches, colonies large and small, trying to protect our children from the relentless bombardment of the values of the media, of the culture around us today. Trying, sometimes, to influence that culture for good.)

Sexuality is apt to be understood by young women in the culture today as a means of consumer pleasure or as a vehicle to personal power over men. (Fair is fair; for time untold a proportion of men have always used sex as a means of conquest, a means of personal power over women who gave them the men their hearts or their bodies.) The revolution has taught women to be able to turn the tables. They may now tease men; many think nothing of dressing in ways calculated to tantalize a lot of men and to provoke male desires. (It's no secret that us males were always vulnerable to where our eyeballs led us, but the older code gave young men a break: young women would not intentionally provoke men by their dress for the same reason they would not intentionally taunt a 2-year old incessantly, mercilessly, by waving candy in front of its face only to yank it back...) [Or maybe I am mistaken: when young women go away by themselves, say for a retreat or a summer camp experience, and there are no young men around, do they still dress the same way?]

But turnabout is fair play, in the culture. But even this turnabout is likely to backfire, to once again hurt most the women in ways unanticipated by those revolutionaries. Now that women are encouraged to dress in provocative ways, ways which accentuate their figures in order to draw attention from men, it only perpetuates a new anxiety, a new competition. Who has the best figure? Who looks the cutest? Who

has the most time to be able to work out at the gym, or the most money to be able to get plastic surgery? How sad to see women created so very beautifully—God does some great work—now drawn into a competition (against other women, ultimately) to have to gain “market share” in the eyes of men? Whether merely to tease men, to “pay them back,” or whether to try to attract their attention to win them and ultimately to love them—the gradual change in women’s fashion is a cruel trend, and cruel, in the end, to women. (Like there wasn’t already enough peer pressure on teenage girls to stand out, to be popular, to look good, to look sexy—that is, to look more good and more sexy than the other girls? Who does this trend benefit, other than fashion merchandisers? It is devastating to a lot of young women.)

It must be very confusing for a young woman being taught to dress so that the men will stare at her body—all the while, I presume, there is something deep within her which is really wanting men to look into her eyes. It must be very confusing.

And for us guys: do we need to keep taking the bait? Are we so shallow that we always follow our eyes, that we keep responding to the women who spend so much attention on how they look rather than cultivating who they are? Do we keep rewarding the wrong messages? How important that we train our sons and our daughters in the ways of our Lord...

And speaking of men: women are not the only grownups affected by the sexual revolution. On the face of it, this revolution worked out pretty darned well for young men. It handed men an apparent victory, by default, for which they had always before had to work pretty hard. How much creativity, how much ingenuity, how much time and energy and charm have young men expended throughout the ages, in every culture in every land, to try to solve their perpetual dilemma: how to get sex without giving all that commitment, without taking on all the baggage that different cultures and civilizations have almost universally tried to load onto the sexual relationship? How’s a young man to get sex without having to give a price he considers too high: the rest of his life?

So I would say men have been fairly enthusiastic accomplices to the Sexual Revolution the feminists brought about. But men have paid a price, too. A man may not always feel so “ripped off” when the next day she won’t even talk to him, but men since this Revolution have been taught that they can compartmentalize their lives, that women exist for recreational companionship and sexual relationship. A man might keep thinking he can enjoy a string of women up to a certain point and then give himself to “the right” woman when she comes along, or when he decides he’s ready. Like a band-aid which starts coming off your finger in the swimming pool, eventually it loses its ability to stick at all. A man who gets used to separating sex from intimacy will find out it’s not so easy to reverse his habit. (Residents in the colony, followers of Jesus, recognize that often our assignment is not so much waiting until we find the right person as allowing the Holy Spirit to make us into the right person.)

A generation of young people has been taught that they can pick and choose among pleasures and consequences, among intertwined elements within our own divinely created human nature. They have been taught they can ignore or re-engineer feelings and instincts toward total self-giving and attachment, for long-term, committed fulfillment; deeply engrained instincts designed for self-preservation and perpetuation of the species. Unless we humans understand differently, we want to be able to pick and choose even from among our own human characteristics, as if, like gods we could transcend our God-

given nature. But whether we assent to reality or not, we cannot subdivide our human nature, picking and choosing what we shall be and become apart from the Holy Spirit of God. We are no gods or goddesses, and it has never turned out well when we forget.

Because God has designed us so our bodies and spirits and minds and hearts are all interconnected, the Scriptures have always encouraged the people of God, and anyone else who would listen, to enter advisedly into sexual relationships. Although there were alternative models in the Old Testament representing the inherited patterns surrounding the Hebrews, the norm, which Jesus confirmed, is that God has created us male and female for mutual respect, love, and enrichment.

So many of us know: by design or by accident, many people end up single. We know our gift of sexuality is also, for many, one which wounds deeply. Still, perhaps because of all that power—sexual union, in God’s plan, is intended to join two lives—not just two bodies. In the context of lifelong covenant relationship, God intends our sexual relationship to be the one place where we don’t have to pretend, don’t have to compete, don’t have to try to be better, don’t have to anxiously, perpetually, scan the mirror for signs of saggage or gainage. What a gift: to just be, and still to be loved, and totally loved!

The culture has reduced sex to power, to transaction, to struggle for “market share” when God has designed for our marriage to be the one place we are free to be vulnerable. Adam and Eve were said to be naked and unashamed; absolutely free and unself-conscious. (That’s not easy to attain this side of the Garden, but that is God’s plan and God’s hope for most of us. I believe God calls some to live as single people—but then even this estate comes to be received as a gift rather than a burden.)

Sexual union is the time and place in which God would like for us to be honest—yet in the games the culture plays that is the one thing most impermissible. “Out there” it may depend on how many drinks it takes to go thru with the encounter, on performance, on looks, on which masks are worn, which lies overlooked. God intends for us to “know” one another and be “fully known” when we are married. “Out there” insecurities and potential problems lurk in every bedroom; what the world calls liberation and freedom begins to look like anorexia and STDs and anxiety and pornography and far worse. They call it liberation; we call it bondage, pure and simple. Bondage.

But the more we dwell on sexuality the more we see it resembles the whole of our lives. Whatever our age, our station in life or relationship: don’t we all long to know others, and to be genuinely known? Don’t we all recognize the age-old problems of being alienated, fragmented, more alone than we would like to be? Don’t we all share the frustration of aspiring to one high standard, one set of hopes and ideals—and falling short? Don’t we all feel separated from God, alienated, all too aware of our limitations, our fear, our sin?

Thanks be to God, then: whatever our age, whatever our relationships: Jesus Christ is our Redeemer. Wherever our brokenness, wherever our sadness, wherever our hearts are heavy: as we allow Him, Jesus redeems and makes it right again. Makes it right, beginning this moment—maybe for the first time.

“Come to Me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble

in heart, and in Me you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.”

Genesis 2:18-25

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.