

The following sermon was prepared and delivered by Rev. Greg Flint, pastor of First Congregational Church in Eugene, OR

GOOD STUFF

Excerpts from the Song of Songs
February 2, 2003

It's always interesting when the Wednesday evening Confirmation Class discovers the Song of Songs. The room becomes unusually quiet. An outside observer would wonder how in the world I manage to get a room full of 9th graders that immersed in the Bible.

Finally, I ask the group for reflections.

"This stuff is rated R," someone will say.

"Yeah, it's erotic poetry," I say.

"Some of it's pretty hoaky," someone else offers.

"Yeah," I agree.

"So, when the guy talks about climbing the palm tree," someone else will say, "He's not really talking about a palm tree, is he?"

"No, he's not," I say.

"I didn't know the Bible talked about sex like this," another voice adds.

Indeed, most people don't know what the Bible says about sex, assuming though that when scripture does speak about sex, it's in terms of "thou shalt not's."

And if you listen to some of the loud voices of the Bible-wavers, you would believe that scripture presents sexuality as the root of all that's wrong in the world: "After all, didn't all the trouble start when, you know, Eve seduced Adam, and they, you know, did it?"

Well, that's not what the story of Adam and Eve is really about. And scripture does not portray human sexuality as something to be feared or as inherently dangerous. Nor is sexuality presented as antithetical to, or a threat to, or opposed to spirituality.

Instead, if you read scripture carefully, sexuality is portrayed as an essential dimension of our humanity, not just because we need to procreate to survive, but because sexuality is good and pleasurable and one of the God given ways we can live love.

The Bible is clear. The Creator created us to be sexual beings, not just for reproduction, but because God also intends and blesses sexual intimacy and pleasure.

That's why the Song of Songs is scripture, holy text, without once mentioning God. Because the experience of sexual self-giving, in a relationship of commitment and respect, trust and responsibility, mutuality and loving surrender... is also spiritual...is also of God...is also a Godly communion....

But we live in a culture that is sexually traumatized.

On the one hand, there remains all this religious baggage, most of it unrelated to the Bible, which depicts human sexuality as this dangerous secret necessary for making babies. There's even this theology proclaimed first by the early church father Augustine in the 4th century, that original sin is passed on generation to generation through sexual acts, as if sin is some kind of sexually transmitted infection.

You know, Augustine needed a good therapist....

But his theology survives in those religious voices proclaiming that all sex outside of a marriage between a man and a woman is sin. And that sex inside of marriage is for procreation only. And that the violation of this standard causes all manner of moral decay.

I mean, the implied message has too often been: "Your sexuality is the nasty, dirty, bad part of you, so save it for someone you marry." What kind of message is that?

And it is always sadly astonishing to me how many adults tell me that they suffer from sexual dysfunction and blame it on religious upbringing and guilt about their sexuality.

But the culture also traumatizes us....

Did you really watch the commercials during the Super Bowl? How many did not have a sexual theme? Or is there even one television sit-com that isn't really just a string of sexual innuendoes?

We... and our children...are bombarded daily by a type of unnatural, unspiritual sexuality that is highly commercialized and exploitative, and doesn't include in its suggestiveness or explicitness information on healthy, loving relationships based on real intimacy and responsibility.

As I was recuperating at home after my little recent cardiac adventure, I actually watched some daytime soap operas. And there's just lots of pathetic sexual acting-out, without any real portrayal of joy, or respect, or responsibility, or anything resembling real love.

And at one point I found myself yelling at the screen, "For God's sake at least put on a condom!"

And I wondered how many children home early from school were watching. And learning...what?

Yet, most American parents remain tongue-tied when it comes to having regular, honest communication about sexuality with our children and youth.

The most common pattern in U.S. households is still to wait as long as possible to have the dreaded sex talk. And then the talking mostly focuses on behavior or sexual acts - the do's and don'ts.

But sexuality is only secondarily something we do or abstain from doing. Sexuality is not just a sex act. For sexuality is an identity. It's a developmental process that extends from birth to death. And it includes all kinds of behaviors, not just intercourse.

And the unfolding of sexuality is natural and normal and a wonderful part of life. And we need to talk about that. Not just how sex can be harmful, which of course in the wrong kind of relationship - where it's coerced, or too soon, or treated as simply recreation - sex can be...harmful. But we also need to talk about the values and timing and relationship context within which sex is truly one of the great gifts and joys of life.

Children and youth need to learn not just about the sexual plumbing. And they need to hear more than just "don't...until." They need to hear about what sexuality means as part of the whole fabric of human experience. And the truth is we are not doing a good job of telling that truth....

And so as a nation among western nations we rank near or at the bottom in terms of the sexual health of our young people. We have nearly seven times the teen pregnancy rate of the Netherlands, seventy times the adolescent gonorrhea rate of France, eight times the teen abortion rate of Germany, and young people in these countries become sexually active later and have fewer partners than U.S. teens.

And yet we refuse to learn from these other countries and continue to do what we've been doing in spite of a mountain of evidence that what we are doing is not effective.

For instance, our federal government basically only funds abstinence-only-until-marriage programs of sexuality education. So, to get the cash, educators must follow guidelines that mandate the teaching that abstinence before marriage, and sex within marriage between a man and a woman, is the only acceptable behavior; and that sexual expression outside of marriage will have harmful physical and psychological consequences.

And to meet the guidelines of these Federal programs, teachers can discuss condoms and contraception only in terms of failure rates....

Yet, we know that the vast majority of Americans did not and will not make it to their wedding night as virgins. And these marriage-only programs leave children in single parent households or gay/lesbian homes confused at best.

And there is no substantiated evidence these "just say no until you're married" programs work. Indeed, there's data suggesting that when teens in these programs do become sexually active, they are less likely to use contraception.

So, we continue to have a virtual epidemic of teen pregnancy and sexual infection in this country. Even as our politicians continue to ignore the best research and all kinds of evidence about what actually works.

And what works is comprehensive sexuality education that is value-based and includes discussion of the benefits of abstinence, plus accurate information about contraception and the positive meanings sexual expression can have.

That's the approach of many European countries. And it works. They have learned that if young people are respected enough to be given accurate and complete information, plus access to contraception, then those young people make better and more responsible decisions.

But here, we mostly continue to go the route of sexuality education based on anatomy at best and fear at worst, allowing ideology and religious dogma to dictate public policy and funding, even as we continue to be the least successful nation in the Western world in terms of the sexual health of our young people....

So how can we do better?

You could start by learning more about the Planned Parenthood initiative called, "Rights, Respect, Responsibility." We have an "R,R,R" working group in our church. Check the table in the Lobby this morning.

We can also support the team from our church who are spending the weekend here learning to use the "Our Whole Lives" comprehensive sexuality education program, designed for church settings. For what better place than our church to help young people learn about sexuality in this affirming and supportive setting? And what better place than here to empower parents to clarify their values and talk with their children about sexuality as one of God's good gifts?

For here, especially here, don't we have the responsibility to tell the truth - giving our young people the best information possible, so that they can make critical decisions about their lives, including their sexuality?

And then, as citizens, we can urge our political leaders to fund programs that work, rather than things based on moral absolutes and wishful thinking. It is outrageous to me as a religious person, that federal sexuality education policy and funding is dictated by one religious voice claiming to be the only true voice....

Of course, we want teens to abstain from sex... the longer the better for them. But many will not and most will become sexually active before marriage. How can we not design our sexuality education around what actually is?

And we know now there is ample evidence that giving young people age-appropriate and complete information, and access to contraception, does not influence them to engage in sex earlier. In fact, just the opposite is true. The data is clear. Young people that are given accurate,

realistic information and confidential health services...make better decisions...wait longer...have fewer partners...grow into adults with a healthy, joy-filled, spiritual sexuality....

In that Confirmation class we talk about the sexual relationship portrayed in the Song of Songs: how the relationship is wonderfully mutual; how the man is free to be gentle and vulnerable and the woman free to initiate in self-affirming ways; and how each adores the other's body in ways that say, "You are beautiful and loved, just as you are."

"There's some good stuff here," one of the class says.

So I read aloud some excerpts: "You are like a garden fountain...a flowing stream...a well of living water. I come...I seek...I put off my garment...I hold you...I drink your kisses...I bath in your love...I am anointed...."

Yeah, my palms sweat as I read, but it is good stuff - indeed, holy text. And our children and young people deserve to be told their sexuality is gift of a very loving God.

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SERMON NOTES

Readers are referred to the following helpful articles:

"Teens Need Information, Not Censorship," Advocates For Youth website - www.advocatesforyouth.org/news/speeches

"The Battle Over Abstinence," Newsweek, December 9, 2002.

"The Family Life Education Act," Advocates For Youth website - www.advocatesforyouth.org/rrr/flea

"We Can Do Better - Oregon Team Report on Western Europe's Successful Approaches to Adolescent Sexuality," Planned Parenthood Health Services of Southwestern Oregon, website - www.wecandobetter.org

NOTES ON THE SCRIPTURE TEXT

Over the centuries, there has been a lot of debate about whether the Song of Songs - in some versions also called the Song of Solomon - belongs in the Bible.

This debate focuses on the fact that the Song of Songs is a collection of sensual, erotic poetry, celebrating the sexual desire of two lovers. It is also the only book in the Bible that does not mention God.

But it was the wisdom of our Jewish brothers and sisters of old to include it as sacred text, knowing that spirituality and sexuality are intimately connected.