

[[If we think of Christ's Church as a colony of heaven, an outpost of citizens living as aliens in a foreign land whose first loyalty is to their Lord far away, it would necessarily mean that colonists live by different standards, different priorities than the regular citizens all around them—otherwise they have ceased to be colonists and have simply been integrated into the dominant culture. (We who follow Jesus understand that life works best, and it pleases God most, when we submit our time, our energies, our finances to Him. It should come as no surprise that this includes submitting our bodies to him also. Life works best when we try to obedient with every hour of the day, every element of our lives, in every room of the house. We are learning that whatever we withhold from the Holy Spirit and insist on controlling ourselves simply means that's one more element of our lives Jesus cannot make right, cannot restore or realign—cannot redeem. Not that we ever manage to get everything perfect, but we understand this is His goal for us, His followers.)]]

You may have noticed. In the culture all around us there seems to be an undue interest in sex. You can't buy your yogurt and loaf of whole grain bread at the checkout stand without noticing that inside the glitz magazine are the "10 Secrets to Drive Him Wild in Bed." (I suppose, so he might go out with you a second time.) The TV shows and movies Hollywood churns out glamorize all sorts of sexual arrangements—including very sexy looking stars who find each other attractive and by the end of the movie fall in love and move in together with no hint of a single relational glitch on the horizon. I guess in Hollywood all sorts of arrangements just work out, happily ever after, but which in normal lives of us normal-looking people lead to broken relationships and broken hearts and broken lives. (We have a lot of data in from the Sexual Revolution of the Sixties, and one of them, duh, is that our choices and actions have consequences. You can't fool Mother Nature. You can't fool God.)

In our lesson from Mark, Jesus (citing Genesis) is telling us "for this one reason, the man shall leave his own parents and become joined to his wife to become one flesh—literally and figuratively—and they are to remain together for a lifetime." Because God has created us male and female, because God has a divine purpose and design in mind. No wonder the culture around us then looks at us, if at all, as weird, unhealthy, repressed, puritanical. When we take seriously what Jesus has told us, we stand out. Colonists do. We would expect this: if there is no God, then there can be no God-given design to humanity, and whatever the majority decides, however the majority behaves then comes to determine the norm. [By the way: our sexuality is far more than enough for one sermon; this morning I will not be focusing on the "hot button" issue of homosexuality and heterosexuality; I'm not even focusing on divorce, which is what Jesus is really addressing in our passage. Because divorce presupposes marriage, which is itself up for grabs in our popular culture.]

I have to admit the Church has sometimes contributed to the negative way others sometimes look at us. At times the Church has acted as if sex were "gross," as something less than a marvelous and pleasurable gift from God. (As if God didn't know about the male/female thing, or that the stork really doesn't bring babies, or that sex can be a lot of fun.) The early Church, influenced by Platonist philosophy, widely and quickly forgot its Jewish roots—and what Jesus had taught—and started teaching that spiritual things were

a lot more pleasing to God than physical things. (Maybe they looked at the fact that Jesus remained celibate and single as the highest example for everyone, forgetting that Jesus, you might say, had an extremely large God-assignment for His life: change and save the entire world, and everyone in it, no force or coercion allowed, and He only got three years to put the whole thing in motion. How was He going to manage that if he was married and he had to spend his time dealing with the spiders around the house, warming up the formula for the midnight feeding, coaching his kids' soccer team, spending plenty of quality time with his wife...?)

By Medieval times, I have read, Church officials had decided it was a sin for married couples to have sex on Thursdays because that's the day Jesus was arrested, and Friday was no good because that's the day Jesus died on the cross. It was a sin to have sex on Sundays—everyone knows that, the day of the Resurrection—and those penitential seasons are off limits since sexual enjoyment is no way to experience repentance—so that rules out sex during Lent and Advent. By the time the Church got finished with all this, there were only 44 days out of the year when it was OK for married couples to have intercourse. (I know: some of you are thinking this would be incredibly awful—no wonder the Catholic Church lost so many members when Luther came along! I hope none of you is thinking, “I wonder if I could find a copy of that calendar on amazon.com?”)

The Bible does not think sex is sinful, and Jesus does not, and neither should Christ's Church. (Remember the sequence of Creation back in the very first chapter: God made the night and the day, and saw that it was good,...God created the birds of the sky and creatures of the earth, and saw that it was good...and God created, in His image, human beings; male and female He created them—and God blessed them, and saw that this was *very* good.

(As you are reading some portion of the Scripture each day, eventually you will cycle thru 1 Corinthians. Remember 7:5, from that old spoilsport Paul? “Husbands, your body no longer belongs to yourself, but to your wife; wives, your body no longer belongs to yourself but to your husband—do not hold yourself back from the other, except when, for a specific length of time, you both mutually agree to devote yourselves to praying instead. And when you're done praying, go for it!” (Of course this injunction comes within the context of mutual respect and covenant commitment; it is never warrant to use force or manipulation or abuse. *This is the norm* for couples married in Christ.) [And maybe if I preached on this passage a little more often we might become the only UCC church in the country where men outnumber women!]

As a matter of fact, even our immediate spiritual ancestors, the Puritans, were not prudish about sex. We have letters from Mass. Colony Governor John Winthrop to his wife when they were still separated by the Atlantic. Don't worry: there was nothing prudish about their sexual desire and delight in each other. We have the record of one early New England Puritan congregation in which a wife went to her pastor frustrated that her husband was not paying attention to 1 Corinthians 7:5—he was refusing to have “fulfill his marital responsibility” (that is, refusing to have sex with her)—and the man got excommunicated, thrown out of that church. They cared about such things.

Puritans have been misunderstood about such things not because they were uptight about married sex—but instead because they understood this gift to be such a profoundly holy gift from God. They were not ashamed or inhibited about sex—but they

were private about their sexual relations for this very reason: they knew sex was so awesome, so holy, it was not to be cheapened or debased, or made public or common.

This is probably a good time to pause and acknowledge a few things. This is going to be one of those mornings when if it will be an OK outcome if I manage to tweak or offend just about everyone, more or less. We acknowledge that every good gift from God also has the capacity to wound us, and that all this talk about the holy and awesome gift of our sexuality is very painful for some among us. It's a very personal subject. Most of you know I was married once before (1981-1984, no children) and that divorce was painful on many different levels. No doubt some of you have also made decisions which have left their scars. I am not the only divorced adult here. Some of you may be out-of-control addicted to pornography, allowing fantasy images you cannot have to ruin the real marriage you do have. Some of you would give anything to be able find a mate—someone with whom you are yearning to share all the joys and sorrows and intimacy of a covenanted marriage commitment. Some of you may have gone thru the mess of an affair. (Bad idea.) Some of you feel stuck in a marriage with no sexual or emotional intimacy, and this marriage business is sure not all it's cracked up to be for you. Some of you have been victimized or abused or raped in the past, and sexuality is still terribly conflicted for you. Some of you may be uneasy about sexual intimacy and may not even know why. Some of you have enjoyed a blessed and healthy marriage and thru no fault of your own it is no more. Some of you may be anxious about how you look, or how you might perform, or even who you are.

We live in a broken world; so much pain where God intended so much blessing. So much for us to keep handing over to our Redeemer Jesus Christ, who promises to redeem our broken hearts, our broken bodies, our broken spirits, our broken lives.

Jesus tells His followers that God's design for sexual expression and fulfillment is to be lived out within the boundaries of a lifelong, committed, covenant relationship. Because this teaching is hard, because it may sound alien or too inflexible even to us colonists, because "I know I can handle it—I'm the exception to the rule"—because we fall short, does not change Jesus' mind nor His word. God's purpose for us is good; for our good and not for our harm. Not because sexual intimacy is not powerful and pleasurable—because it is!

When I was growing up we lived at the end of Grove Ave, which deadended in front of our driveway. Grove Ave ended in a bumper-level wooden white barricade with little round red reflector lights and a chain-link fence because Adobe Creek ran perpendicular, right thru it, at that point. (Obviously our little street was not prominent enough to get its own bridge over the creek, or even a little footbridge the way the people on Louis Road got.) Adobe Creek had been nicely engineered and improved, its carrying capacity greatly increased and with straight, beveled cement sides and a flat cemented bottom, and every few years in the dry summer season the city workers would go in with tractors and scoop up and truck away the mud and silt and weeds which would settle on the bottom.

The reason Adobe Creek was paved and cared for by the city was not because the engineers had no respect for the rainy season and the capacity for flooding as winter rains rushed out to the Bay. Just the opposite: because these waters did have such capacity and

such power, they needed to be channeled and controlled. Otherwise our home and many others would have been flooded, with a great deal of destruction.

Jesus understood the terrific strength of the urges for intimacy and sexual pleasures with which God has designed us human beings. He knew the capacity for destruction and pain inherent in our passions overflowing their boundaries—and so, since the beginning, committed lifetime relationship has been the “safe place”, the channel, for expression of our sexual longings.

The biochemists now understand a bit more of how God created all this to work, and how we are indeed created to bond with our sexual partner. When we make love, rivers of the hormone oxytocin are released within our bloodstream. It contributes to our pleasure, and it also contributes to our innate bonding urges. (It’s the same hormone released when women breastfeed: designed to help them relax and bond with the new baby. God seems to have designed oxytocin to be one of our body’s ways of creating a family, not just a baby.)

Here’s another reason God cautions us against joining in the Sexual Revolution, against expressing ourselves sexually with someone, independent of commitment, whenever we may think we have fair opportunity. Whatever our politics or our highest loyalties, when we have intercourse with someone the oxytocin still gets released. This may help explain why couples who live together and develop a sexual relationship before they’re married have a significantly worse chance, statistically, of enjoying an enduring and fulfilling marriage.

[[As Dr Jennifer Morse Roback observes,] Their bodies are pumping out this “involuntary chemical commitment” to their partner whether the two would make a good marriage match, or not. A bit of an irony: we in the west have broken away from the institution of “arranged marriages”—how inconvenient to find out we are now subject to arranged marriages of a different kind, arranged when we hopped into bed with someone, the oxytocin coursing thru our systems, the bonding hormone flush within, only to wake up and find out later we are married to a really bad fit, a person we don’t know so well—because our marriage was arranged not by some elderly woman in the village but by the bodies and hormones of two young adults who hopped into bed and had sex together.]]

Although the results of the Sexual Revolution keep coming at us—now coming at us 24/7 on about 100 channels being broadcast into our living rooms or even bedrooms if we allow it—we are never forced to participate. We may be seduced, we may think it’s a good idea at the time...but we always have a choice, and the Spirit is always available to lead us in His Way.

In contrast to the norms of the culture, Jesus’ followers are always being called and encouraged into something higher, something more fulfilling. Those of us who are married: if your intimacy level or your sexual relationship with your spouse isn’t what you would like it to be, take charge and do something new about it. Can you still talk to your mate, can you still trust him or her? Do you believe God is asking you—do you believe the Holy Spirit will be with you—as you make the first significant move, admitting your contribution to the problem rather than settling for the standoff you may now be enduring?

There are many couples still trying to love one another, not yet divorced, still hanging on, when the main problem is simple pride—feelings on both sides have been

hurt, and neither is willing to take the risky first step back, to admit “I have been wrong, and I am sorry. I promise I will try to really listen to you, to hear what it is like to be *you* in this relationship, without correcting you or setting the record straight where you are misunderstanding me or rushing to tell you how you are a little mistaken here and there and how you really have no right to feel the way you do.”

I think most spouses in a strained marriage know what their spouse would like. (Many wives try to tell their husband in various different ways for years, until, finally feeling all alone and unable to bear it any longer, they give up in hopelessness and frustration. Husbands usually communicate differently, as you know. Wives: your husband may tell you only *one time*, as clearly as he can, and he will assume you got it. But if he has told you even once, he meant it.)

The problem in sad, lonely, sexless marriages is not usually lack of knowing what your spouse wants but your unwillingness to grant it. (“After all these years, the way he’s been ignoring me, treating me like dirt, you think I’m going to give in to him, have sex with him? Over my dead body.” “She does nothing but criticize me; whatever I do it’s never enough...and you think I’m going just going to open my heart and be honest and reach out to her all over again when every single time I try, she’ll start an argument and I always end up the schmuck? Why would I want to communicate with her at all?”)

But these are the same sad dynamics of people whose allegiance is not to heaven, not to Jesus. Of course, eventually, it takes two to have a relationship—so if you know that’s not going to happen, get out! If it is wishful thinking and denial and fear which keep you in your marriage, get out! Otherwise, I understand the Holy Spirit is always tilting toward reconciliation, leading us in the costly, risky ways of love and restoration. (Your marriage isn’t just between your partner and you, ya know—never mind the kids. What about your covenant promise? What about the living presence of the Spirit of God among you both, within you? What about trusting in God that even when you see no opening, no way forward, there is always a way forward?) Often just one willing spouse can significantly change the dynamics of a hurting marriage. Come talk to Heather, or to me, or to your mentor. Keep praying. Don’t just give up and passively wait it out. That is not an option for followers of Jesus; God has a better future for you than that.

And for those whose hearts have been so sorely bruised from previous relationships, or from abuse, or from divorce, or from the death of your spouse? Can you keep trusting that Jesus has a good future for you? That His Spirit will come and work in you and begin to heal you in precisely those places which are most intractable, most bruised, most discouraging? Will you keep trusting that it is where you are most flawed, the most willful, the most wounded, that He will do the most fixing, the most redeeming within you?

Thanks be to God, many of you in this church family are living out marvelous marriages. You are living out the good news of His redeeming. You know.

(I thank God for my wife Trish for many reasons. But I remember after my first divorce, before I ever met Trish, how ready I was to seek out a little feminine companionship, maybe a woman’s gentle presence to help heal where I felt most wounded. That, of course, was precisely the last thing I needed, and the last thing a loving God would have wanted to happen to me. Instead, God gave me a ton of energy to get involved and grow in new ways in my church. I had time for a new circle of

friends—true friends, most of them Christ’s followers, who loved me thru it all. I was given grace to simmer down a bit, and to be able to come to trust in God in a way I would never have known had things worked out differently. God gave me what I needed rather than what I wanted.

We live in a broken world. We are broken women and men.

This is what it means that Jesus redeems us. Our yearnings, our pain, our less-than-what-we-had-hoped-for (at least so far) marriage. Our singleness, our bruises, our loneliness, our scars and fears and anxieties. Jesus redeems.

“Behold; when you are in Christ Jesus, there is a new creation.”

Mark 10:2-9

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."