

Sermon: Talking About Sex Rev. Mark Bigelow

Scripture Readings: Song of Solomon 2:1-7, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Today's sermon is a squirmer. The kind that makes some people feel uncomfortable and start to squirm in their seats just a little bit. Today we are talking about sex. But, even more uncomfortable than that I'm going to share some of my own reflections on talking to children about sex. There is nothing that makes parents squirm more than talking to their kids about sex. I know, I have a spotted history in this area myself. So this being father's day I decided to talk about one of the most important, yet difficult parts of being a father.

I first ventured into the sex-talk arena as a freshly-minted minister. Upon graduating from seminary I became the youth minister at First Plymouth Congregational Church in Englewood, Colorado. One of my primary assignments was to teach the confirmation class. I had no clue. I turned to the senior minister for help, but he believed in a hands-off approach to management. He told me he didn't know what I should do and should work it out for myself. (I don't think he had any clue either.) This turned out to be a great approach for me to do my own research and I eventually wrote my own curriculum.

It became clear in my research that confirmation needed to equip the students to become faithful adults in a holistic approach. So we studied not only spirituality and the Bible, but also ethics, image of self and society and we had a section on sexuality. The first year I taught the class I was relieved to find a great new book written for Christian teens that seemed to cover all the bases. It was simply entitled, "Sexuality and the church: A Resource for teens." A small book, yet quite an explicit and comprehensive discussion of sexuality. So I ordered copies for each of my students and handed them out during the Sunday night class. Tuesday morning I received a phone call from one of their parents. She was angry that I had given her daughter the book. She characterized it as a book that would be appropriate for married adults to read, but certainly not teenagers in the church. I really squirmed that day. As it turned out nobody else complained and I continued to use that text for several years with no further incident. I did learn something though, in the future I met with the parents and told them what I was doing before I did it.

I've also learned that for parents talking about sex isn't just about learning the right words to say. It is as much more about our own ambiguities. Talking about sex stirs up some of our own deep-seated fears and insecurities. It's hard to talk about because we don't know what we think about it. In some ways we are a lot like the Bible on this issue.

Our two readings today illustrate the great variety of ways we have of thinking and talking about sex. The Song of Solomon is a wonderful love song celebrating the pleasures of attraction and romance. It is a song in praise of love—in all its romantic

forms, emotional and physical. The first time I was asked to read it aloud for a wedding I was actually uncomfortable. A minister friend asked me to read one of the more erotic parts of the book for her wedding. I really squirmed that day. I didn't need to be so anxious. It is wonderful poetry celebrating love—emotionally and physically. The author has a deep appreciation for God's great gift of sexuality.

On the other end of the spectrum is our friend St. Paul. Paul's approach to sexuality reveals his thorough grounding in dualistic Greek thought. It is the matters of the mind that are most important to Paul and his philosopher friends. The body tends to distract the mind and so needs to be held back. In 1 Corinthians Paul objects to prostitution, but in doing so exposes his low regard for sex in general. Celibacy is the purest form of life to Paul; he only sanctions marriage for the weak who can't remain celibate.

Many of us are like the Bible—full of ambiguities and contradictions. We enjoy our sexuality, yet we don't talk about it. We desire sexuality in our own lives, yet feel conflicted about it. We want our children to postpone inappropriate sexual behavior, yet we aren't clear about what we mean. We are conflicted about our own sexual experiences. And a lot of us are still struggling with the message we heard as children from the church that could be summarized, as "Sex is dirty, save it for someone you love."

Sorting out our own thoughts, values and views is the first step in being able to talk to kids about anything. My contribution today is to share some thoughts on the church and sexuality.

Paul was right in one regard—our bodies are a temple. A temple created by God with a capacity for great pleasure and terrible pain. A temple that needs to be cared for and treated well. A healthy sexual attitude begins by thanking God for the multi-faceted abilities of our bodies. Sexuality is first about accepting and understanding the needs, desires, and possibilities of our bodies. Our desire for sexual pleasure is a natural and wonderful part of life. Contrary to St. Paul our bodies can serve to enhance our spirituality, rather than distract from it.

As with any gift comes responsibility. The more wonderful the gift, the more awesome the responsibility. Responsibility is as commonly paired with sexuality as peanut butter is with jelly. Responsible sexuality is a well-used phrase—as well it should be. But being responsible means more than refraining from early sex, or using a condom, or being tested. Responsible sexuality also means that if you are going to be in a sexual relationship then you need to treat it well. Sex deserves respect—in when it is used and how it is used. It is often heard in churches that teenagers need courses on sexuality education—I think that it may be just as needed for adults. Not only to understand and appreciate our sexuality, but how to use it well. People in a sexual relationship could often use a class to reflect on their intimacy needs and how to meet them.

We also acknowledge that sexuality and relationships are at their heart about intimacy. Each of us craves intimacy. We achieve intimacy in different ways at various stages of

our lives. For a child intimacy is about a trusting relationship with her parents. For teenagers and young adults friends meet much of our intimacy needs. For older adults children and extended family join the ever-present need for friends. Sexuality is not just about genital contact. Sexuality is about feeling loved and giving love. This may be celebrated no matter our age. One way the church could be particularly helpful is to honor and uphold the relationships of the older adults in our community who may be widowed or divorced and primarily find intimacy in friendship, and from others in the church.

Our sexuality is indeed a wonderful gift, an awesome responsibility and all about intimacy. Having said that you may still be wondering—what do I say to my children, or grandchildren? Come on, preacher, didn't you say you were giving advice for fathers today? Yes, I am. The first thing I have to say is you need to clear about your own values. And your values not need be consistent with your past history. We learn from our mistakes. If you feel guilty about acting out in your younger, or not so younger days, don't sit around feeling guilty about it. Life is all about making mistakes. That's why Christianity is all about forgiveness and starting over. Talk with friends, or family, and know what values you want to communicate. In our UCC tradition we don't talk about rules so much as guidelines and values. Values like honesty, respect, trust, commitment, compassion, equality and justice. These all need to be present in a healthy sexual relationship.

It is important for parents to be able to articulate these values not only so our children know they are important—but also so we can model what they need to do in their own relationships. In order to have intimacy you need to be able to talk about these values and how important they are. If a parent can talk about respect for ourselves and others then our children will be more able to say to their friends, "I respect myself and deserve that from you." We want to equip our children so that when they do begin an intimate relationship they are able to say to their partner, "These are the values that are important to me and this is why." That is not easy—it takes practice. The practice field is at home talking to parents.

A second pointer for parents comes from the Song of Solomon-- do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready! Age-appropriate is the key—and it is never too early to start (with talking that is). With young children we need to teach them to understand and respect their bodies. For teenagers it is reinforcing the importance of avoiding premature sexual experimentation. Not because it is dirty or bad, but because it is unhealthy. We want our children to grow up to be adults who can have satisfying intimate relationships. We know that early sexual experimentation can interfere with a healthy development of our sexual self. So we tell them we want them to wait for their own health. Just as it takes a certain maturity level to drive, or to drink, or to vote, so it does to experience sexual intimacy.

A final hint is to not confine the sex talk to a sex talk. Use teachable moments. One of my favorites is watching sitcoms. It seems that the creative well has gone so dry in Hollywood that every sitcom has come to rely on sex for the majority of their humor. If your kids like to watch shows like *Friends*, or *Will and Grace* watch it with them. When

something happens that you don't like tell them why. If you feel uncomfortable about a scene let them know it. Ask them how they feel about the actions of the various characters. These conversations will most likely be very short—about the length of a commercial break—but many short conversations will do more to reinforce your values than one long one.

If we were to take a survey here today of the number of minutes our own parents talked to us about sexuality the average would probably be around 7.5 minutes. I know I would be bringing down the average as my parents spent maybe 30 seconds on the topic. We as parents, grandparents, and loving community members want to do better. We can if we spend the time to be clear about our own values and then take some time to talk to our children. Our sexuality is a wonderful gift of God, it deserves our attention.

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