

My question to ponder, if you are not interested in taking on the task of reading this rather long article: *What would it look like to move beyond talking about sexuality and all the complex definitions, associations, and issues brought up by the topic of sexuality, and to move toward talking with persons about sexuality on a face to face level, holding their concerns and evolving human identity as sacred- as something to be nurtured, honored, and upheld as a gift from and glimpse of the Divine?*

If I had to come up with a title for this article, it would be:

“Sacred Sexuality: Seeing Sexuality As a Gift From the Divine” by Joseph Allen Stone III, a student at McAfee School of Theology.

It’s spring semester of my senior year in high school. My knees shake a little. I feel my voice grow hoarse as I rehearse my lines. “Now or never,” I repeat to myself. I make sure my hair is combed and my appearance doesn’t look too messy. I look at my accomplishments: mascot for my school (Go Wolverines!), 1st tenor in my choir class, and B+ average GPA. I take stock of my attributes: nice, quiet guy with a good singing voice. I may not be the most popular guy in school, but almost everyone knows of me (or that I’m the older brother of Andrew). This is the day I ask one of my classmates to prom. I walk up to her, stumble over my lines, but succeed in getting my point across. She tells me she’ll think about it, returning her answer as a handwritten “let’s not mess up a good friendship” note. I sit at home, feeling dejected. As much as I would like to try, I cannot shut down my sexual impulses and need for emotional and psychological intimacy. (Don’t worry, I found a date to the prom. That night I was announced as “Joseph Stalin.”)

Simply being celibate does not prepare one for a lifelong marriage. There needs to be a structure for singles to grow, spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally. Quite a number of congregations don’t have adequate resources to meet their single congregants’ needs. Many, if not most, places of worship are focused primarily on attracting and empowering families, which is not a bad thing, but at the same time can result in some unwanted assumptions and expectations on singles:

It’s a great mistake to assume that intense sexual desire can be set aside until marriage, that someone who does not marry has no interest in sex, or that formerly married persons lose desire for sexual intimacy. For a great variety of

reasons, some people simply do not marry or remarry. There's nothing abnormal about being single.

That needs to be said in a culture in which it's assumed that one should marry and in which single persons are so often the target of biting comments about their sexuality. They are hounded at times with cruel questions: "When are you going to find Mr. Wonderful?" "Isn't it about time you made some woman happy?" ...¹

As a Christian, I see the traditional Christian stance on addressing human sexuality as focused on marriage and relationships leading to marriage. A simple ideal of physical abstinence is not enough. One cannot place one's "urge to merge" on hold to save one's self until marriage. Studies show that abstinence only education is not as effective in preventing pregnancy as its more "liberal" counterpoints.

In his book, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*, Mark Regnerus, a professor of sociology at the University of Texas, analyses the results of three national surveys of teenagers and 250 interviews he conducted, and found that self-identified "evangelical" teenagers are slightly more likely to have sex than their non-Evangelical peers, "... Whereas non-evangelical teens have sex for the first time at age 16.7, the average age for evangelical teens is 16.3. Even worse, evangelical teens are more likely to have had three or more sexual partners (13.7 percent) than their non-evangelical peers (8.9 percent)." ²

Single people need a resource of encouragement and information to turn to, especially when it comes to being a part of a religious community. When the need for spiritual guidance is recognized by a single person, he or she will more than likely visit a church, mosque, or synagogue. If that place of worship doesn't have the resources to meet the single person's emotional and spiritual needs, he or she will invariably move on:

Single sexuality, when it is discussed at all, falls under the category of "premarital sex." Church clearly expect that those who are single will get married and that those who have been married and now single through divorce or widowhood will simply disappear into the closet until they marry again. The slogan recently

¹Herbert W. Chilstrom and Lowell O. Erdahl. *Sexual Fulfillment: for Single and Married, Straight and Gay, Young and Old*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 65.

²Roberto Rivera y Carlo, "A Peculiar People," *Pure Intimacy*, online: <http://www.pureintimacy.org/piArticles/A000000421.cfm> (accessed 11 November, 2009).

adopted by the United Methodist Church might stand as a summary of the traditional view of sexuality: “celibacy in singleness, fidelity in marriage.”³

When I look at the rate of marriage and divorce instances in America and the instances of marital problems due to *porneia* and adultery, which is often cited as top causes behind divorce (other than financial woes), it's impossible for me to deny the power of the *Eros* nature of humanity. I live in a culture that is saturated in sexual images and messages, that separate the act of sex from its beneficial role as part of an intimate, mutually interdependent committed relationship among two consenting adults. What was once temple prostitution in the Old and New Testament is replaced by messages and images that have resulted in over 13 billion dollars a year for the porn industry. This in turn continues to make sex an inherently dirty taboo to be exploited because of our American tacit fascination with breaking with the Victorian conventions of old in exchange for what we would rush to deem a sexual liberation from the oppressive sexist structures that force people into traditional marriage, which is viewed as an antiquated institution dealing with the outmoded issues of birth control, disease prevention, and the legitimacy of offspring. In short, sexual images and messages sale products, movies, music, and an ideal of sex without the complexity of emotional attachment.⁴

We need to re-envision a better way to prepare individuals for psychologically healthy relationships and remove the harmful taboo of sex which tempts many into pornography (namely, the misogynistic and violent images found in it, and the unrealistic expectations set up because of it, i.e. anatomical proportions and sexual endurance), prostitution (the oldest profession- so I'm told ... it's horrendous that a person's body can be rented out like a room at a sleazy hotel), and adultery. As a young single male, when I see the instances of my young friends marrying and divorcing, and I am discouraged to put a ring on my finger as a lifelong commitment to coupling with another person.

³Karen Lebacqz, “Appropriate Vulnerability,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*. edited by James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1994), 256-261.

⁴Adam Smith, “Let's Talk About Sex,” *Relevant Magazine*, online: <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/relationship/features/17625-lets-talk-about-sex> (accessed 8 November, 2009)

I am reminded of “the fall” narrative, a theological perspective I don’t subscribe to. This view prescribes that God made Adam aware of the tree he is not to partake of. From that Adam and Eve (did God inform her not to partake of the fruit, or was that Adam’s responsibility to tell her?) were able to make a conscientious decision. But the tree was allowed to exist in the Garden amongst the “beneficial” trees. Adam and Eve’s sin was in eating a piece of fruit. And yet, I can gather a shred of truth from such a disagreeable view- there are many “trees” in our lives that are very harmful to “partake of.” We need to be made aware of those trees that exist among the beneficial trees.

Another interpretation brings in a positive representation of the “tree of knowledge, good and evil” (this one I was reminded of by Kim Chernin in her preface to her book *Reinventing Eve: Modern Woman in Search of Herself*). This view states that God placed the “tree of knowledge, good and evil” as an invitation to Adam and Eve to become aware as God is aware. The only real mistake they made was in the hiding of their physical, emotional, and sexual vulnerability. All they needed to do was stand in their nakedness and face the creator that formed them (and their unmentionables) from the dust of the earth. Instead embracing his vulnerability, Adam engaged in an unprecedented power move and shifted the blame to Eve, and Eve blamed a serpent. (... I guess that’s where the power of “myth” lies- the conveying of a spiritual truth and an explanation as to why things are the way they are ... this myth unfortunately has been read in such a way as to lead to a horrible reality for the vast majority of our human history- a seemingly unbreakable patriarchal power forced onto the lives of countless young girls and women, all because Eve was a “bad girl,” and her punishment was to be served out indefinitely through the lives of her female descendants.) Writing about sexual vulnerability, Lebacqz conveys in her article “Appropriate Vulnerability”:

Sexuality has to do with vulnerability. Eros, the desire for another, the passion that accompanies the wish for sexual expression, makes one vulnerable. It creates possibilities for great joy but also for great suffering. To desire another, to feel passion, is to be vulnerable, capable of being wounded.

There is evidence in the Scripture for this view of sexuality. Consider the Song of Songs (the “holy of holies”), which displays in glowing detail the immense passion and vulnerability of lovers. This is not married or “preceremonial” sexuality, nor are children the justification for the sexual encounter. It is passion pure and simple. And it is graphic sex. The Stoic fear of passion is not biblical. From the Song of Songs we can recover the importance of sexual desire as part of God’s creation.

It is equally important to recover the creation stories in Genesis, which are often grounds for our interpretation of what God intends human sexuality to be. It is from these stories that we take the phrase “be fruitful and multiply” and turn it into a mandate for procreation. It is from these stories that we hear the deep call for union between sexual partners: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh... and the two shall become one flesh.”

Without denying the importance of these phrases and their traditional interpretation, I would stress another passage- one that has been ignored but is crucial for completing the picture. The very last line in the creation story in Genesis 2 reads: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25). In ancient Hebrew, “nakedness” was a metaphor for vulnerability, and “feeling no shame” was a metaphor for appropriateness. We can therefore retranslate the passage as follows: “And the man and his wife experienced appropriate vulnerability. “ As the summation and closure of the creation story, the verse tells us that the net result of sexual encounter- the purpose of the creation story of man and woman as sexual beings who unite with one another to form “one flesh”- is that there be appropriate vulnerability.

Vulnerability may be the precondition for both union and procreation: without a willingness to be vulnerable, to be exposed, to be wounded, there can be no union. To be “known,” as Scripture so often describes the sexual encounter, is to be vulnerable, exposed, open.

Sexuality is therefore a form of vulnerability and is to be valued as such. Sex, eros, passion are antidotes to the human sin of wanting to be in control or to have power over another. “Appropriate vulnerability” may describe the basic intention for human life- which may be experienced in part through the gift of sexuality.

If this is so, then a new approach to sexual ethics follows. If humans are intended to have appropriate vulnerability, then the desire to have power or control over another is a hardening of the heart against vulnerability. When Adam and Eve chose power, they lost their appropriate vulnerability and were set against each other in their sexuality.⁵

The Problem With Chastity

Monica Furlong expresses some objections to the traditional Christian teaching on absolute premarital chastity:

First, that it expressed a real and precious insight that sexual desire can be destructive, that *real* promiscuity encourage a split between love and desire that erodes relationship.

⁵Lebacqz, 258-259.

Second, that it expressed an ambivalence about women. On the one hand it protected them from the ravages of male desire at a time when no reliable contraceptives were available to them. On the other hand it viewed them no so much as persons as property to be handed over intact from father to husband..., with relationship seen only as a lucky incidental.

Third- and from our point of view much the most important, since this is where we have to start thinking and questioning- it ignored the positive value of sexuality, grudgingly allowing it as a practical necessity within marriage for the “procreation” of children but implying that in an ideal world everyone would live like a monk.

It is this latter Muggeridgean view that some of us feel a need to reject both in our own lives and, so far as we can influence them, in the lives of others. That sex can be healing and joyful (sometimes outside of marriage as well as in it), that it can lead to personal growth, that it is a way of knowing God, above all that it is *good*, still takes a certain nerve to say in Christian circles; and I have no doubt that I shall undergo the usual penalties for saying it.

But the repressive and sex-hating voices still seem to dominate our discussion of sexual morals, and it seems important that other voices should speak up. For it is, I have come to believe, by knowing the wonderful goodness of sexuality and by valuing it as we value all good things, that we can work best against those who try to make it trivial or impersonal. If we despise the body and its delights, we open the way to the cynical exploiters.⁶

Another author, Michael Hartwig writes on the harm caused by the Church over its traditional teachings on celibacy and sexual abstinence. In his preface to *The Poetics of Intimacy and the Problem of Sexual Abstinence*, Hartwig asks:

How do people prepare for committed relationships of covenantal sexual love? Is the virtue of chastity, understood primarily as control of sexual desire and pleasure, sufficient? If not, how do young adults learn how to be appropriately vulnerable, to embody intimacy in graceful ways, to share power with another, to decide whether a particular relationship warrants commitment, and how to sustain affection through the various seasons and moods of relational life? Does sexual abstinence prepare young adults for these kinds of virtues? (pgs. xiii-xiv)

He further questions, “Is long-term and lifelong sexual abstinence harmful to personal and/or social well-being and, if so, what implication does it have for traditional Christian sexual morality?” (p. 2) He immediately concludes that long-term sexual abstinence is harmful and immoral if not warranted by concerns about equally serious harms, such as sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. At the same time, his thesis does not argue against intentional celibacy, just mandated abstinence.

⁶Monica Furlong, “Sex before Marriage,” *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1994), 263.

I would agree with Hartwig's assertion that traditional religious teaching concerning sexuality needs to be reevaluated, so that the Biblical writers' intentions and contexts may again be regained. We have lost much of the context that the Bible was written in, which has led to the view that the Bible is antiquated and irrelevant. Speaking from my faith tradition, the Christian church is guilty of a history of vilifying sex as sinful, and in doing so it gained and retained political and social power in the prevailing culture. In recent decades, our American culture moved away from a theocentric and communal morality to a humanistic and individualistic morality. In reevaluating traditional Christian teaching, the Church will again capture the vision of God's gift of sexuality and the goodness of His (Her) creation, rather than playing into the taboos which often entice Americans into over-sexualizing their purchase and lifestyle choices, into becoming addicts of porn, and into objectifying persons as sexual objects to be manipulated or exploited.

Religious discussion of sexuality is focused almost exclusively on marriage and relationships leading to marriage as the sexual norm and ideal, and neglects the acknowledgement that single persons have a sexuality also. Even though Christ was celibate (as orthodox Christian teaching has "taught" me) and Paul preferred being single, the "normal" Christian is still viewed as a married one. Even those who choose a life of celibacy do so being viewed as incomplete. Hartwig writes, "Single adults were either feared (for their unchanneled sexuality) or pitied (for not having found a suitable spouse)." (p. 126)

What bothers me most as I write this paper is the idea that a person is incomplete until they meet their "soul-mate." There are plenty of broken persons in marriage, who remain broken in their marriages. How can anyone expect to be in healthy marriage if they are not healthy themselves? How can anyone expect someone to make them happy and content when they are not happy and content by themselves? As a single person looking forward to a lifelong marital relationship with whomever is my "Mrs. Right," I feel affirmed by James Nelson's statement about Single Christians (or persons in other religious communities and traditions):

... Single Christians have an important witness to those who are married and paired. Singles can remind others of us that no relationship, however ecclesiastically and legally sanctioned, no matter how many years of duration, will be life-giving when there is not the strength of individuality in each of its partners. When love's bonds become possessive, when love's bonds become stifling and enslaving, what once promised life now delivers death. Singles can remind the paired and married that there is no one form of life to which everyone is called. Rather, there are many different patterns and lifestyles that need to be woven into the rich tapestry of shared [faith-centered] existence.⁷

Even when one holds to the virtue of abstinence, one cannot escape gender and sexual identity. Even in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage, sexual identity is unavoidable due to implications of what it means to be a spouse and how those roles interact with one another in the partnership. Within the marriage partnership, questions of equality and who takes the lead, or who is best suited in tackling certain aspects of the marriage, will always be brought up, both consciously and unconsciously.

As with anyone seeking to be a minister (not just in the "ordained" sense) in reaching out to the world as a part of the *missio Dei* (mission of God), one will meet with persons who participate in premarital sex, divorced persons, LGBT persons, victims of sexual abuse, persons who are unfaithful to their spouses, and confused persons who struggle with their sexual identity, among others. In an overly sexed society which surrounds itself with images of lust and sexual exploitation, everyone is forced to grapple with the struggle of dealing with our humanity and carnal desires, and thus needs to receive instruction and leadership in how to interact, come to terms, and overcome the hurdles of human sexuality and what it means to be human in an ever-evolving, unfair, yet divinely created world. What would it look like to move beyond talking about sexuality and all the complex definitions, associations, and issues brought up by the topic of sexuality, and to move toward talking with persons about sexuality on a face to face level, holding their concerns and evolving human identity as sacred- as something to be nurtured, honored, and upheld as a gift from and glimpse of the Divine? In closing I feel in my most core

⁷James B. Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1983), 109.

of religious belief that our expression of sexuality, especially when it comes to being persons of faith, should first and foremost be one:

... About inviting God into this tender, beautiful, sensitive, happy, enjoyable, and spiritual part of our life- our sexuality- and feeling good and comfortable to have God there.... The beauty of creation is that God invites us into a partnership in which we also are invited to create. When two people bring a baby into the world through the gift of sex, the miracle of creation happens again. When someone by tender affection draws out a living response from another human being, we help to create a renewed person. Thus while sex in a very narrow definition is what happens when two people have genital sexual activity, it is much more than that. It is a relationship of love and trust that grows over a long period of time and includes the totality of what two people do with each other and to each other.⁸

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⁸Chilstrom and Erdahl, 3.