

# *Temples of the Spirit*

1 Corinthians 6:19

BAMF

Sermon by Dan Schrock

February 2, 2014

*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (NRSV)*

**I**n today's sermon I'm going to be talking about sex within the context of marriage. If you become uncomfortable with this at any point, you're welcome to leave—the rest of us will just assume you're sauntering out for a bit of coffee! Talking about sex pushes buttons in people, so we want you to care for yourself in appropriate ways.

**M**any of us in the modern world regard marriage as something of a capstone in human experience. The ideal, we think, is to marry, have children, buy a home, and live the good life. The fact that so many gay and lesbian couples want to marry shows how much marriage is idealized in our culture. Marriage is a sign of being socially accepted. A sad consequence is that single people sometimes feel like second-class citizens, especially in the church.

It wasn't always like this. For roughly the first 1500 years of Christian history, singleness was the ideal and marriage was thought to be a second-class. The ideal Christian did not marry and have children, but stayed a celibate single and (usually) went live in a convent or monastery. Celibate singles were considered to be the best kind of Christian.

On this Sunday when we talk about marriage, I hope we recognize that marriage is not the baseline human experience. The baseline human experience is actually singleness. All of us are born into this world as single people, and even if we marry, many of us will also die as single people. In fact, 44% of American adults

are single.<sup>1</sup> So let us remember that singleness is normal. Let us remember that the Christian church was founded by a single person. And let us remember that even though some of us might be married for most of our life, others of us will be single for most or all of our life. In some ways singleness defines the human experience more than marriage does.

**W**hen the planning committee started working on this sexuality series, they soon realized we would have to make some choices each Sunday in what we talk about. Today is a good example of that. Marriage is a big topic, and in one worship service and one Christian education hour we can't explore everything.

In light of our congregation's vision statement, I'd like to focus this sermon on marital intimacy as a spiritual practice. Our vision statement calls upon us to employ spiritual practices as a way of become more intimate with God. A spiritual practice is anything we do with the intention of enhancing our spiritual development. Several hundred spiritual practices are available to us, and marriage is only one of them. Again, we want to remember that singleness, and single sexuality, can also be a spiritual practice. In much of Christian history, single celibacy was treated as a spiritual practice.

We come to the topic of sex in marriage recognizing that many of us were first introduced to sex in shameful or hurtful ways. Maybe our cousins showed us copies of Playboy magazine when we were in third grade. Maybe we were raped or sexually abused by an older person, and were thereby forced to learn something about sex at a premature age. Perhaps we first saw acts of sexual intimacy on the Internet. These experiences and others like them have instilled in many of us

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<sup>1</sup> Christena Cleveland, "Singled Out: How Churches Can Embrace Unmarried Adults," <http://www.christenacleveland.com/2013/12/singled-out/>. Accessed January 8, 2014.

shame, pain, or anxiety about sex. Consequently many Christians do not see sex as a cherished gift from God to be thankful for. More often we see sex as a guilty burden. This makes it hard to view sex as a joyful spiritual practice.

We have a great God, and one of God's great abilities is to heal and transform our painful experiences of sex, whether from abuse, pornography, casual sex, or adultery. I have witnessed healing occur in some people who've experienced these things. The healing might take a very long time and require much hard work, but healing is possible.

We also recognize that even within a covenanted relationship, sexual intimacy can be complicated. One of the benefits of having the Song of Songs in the Bible is the honest way it portrays the dance of intimacy. Sometimes the dance flows and sometimes it requires hard work. One person can be interested and the other person not so much. Work, children, laundry, cooking, mood, emotional distance, physical ailments, disability—any of a dozen things can make sexual intimacy complicated. Consider the following imaginary conversation.

“Can we now?”

“Now isn't a good time.”

“Ok, when is a good time?”

“I don't know—later.”

“Fine.”

“Whatever.”

And the couple pulls away from each other, a little frustrated, a little unfulfilled.

**G**ood communication is vital. People often say that women especially need good communication with their partner in order to feel better about the relationship. I would argue men benefit from good communication too.

Good communication might be harder for men than for women, but both men and women need it. If you're male and you want to have rewarding, satisfying sex with your spouse, then one of the best things you can do is to become a better listener and speaker. This takes time and patience. Learning to listen and speak clearly with your spouse is part of what must happen if intimacy is to become a spiritual practice.

Another feature of sex as a spiritual practice is keeping the covenant. The Bible has several different types of covenants, one of which is marriage. All covenants uphold fidelity or faithfulness to the covenant. In marriage, the covenant is to reserve sex with your spouse. On the occasions when I've worked with instances of adultery, this is the complaint that always surfaces in the aggrieved spouse—the angry feeling that the other person “cheated on me and broke the covenant I thought we had with each other.” The wound of this runs deep. So we want to hold on to the wisdom that sex flourishes best in the context of covenant. That doesn't mean sex will always be great and wonderful in the context of covenant. But it can mean that sex in covenant will have a spiral effect: sex gets better as the relationship gets better, and as the sex gets better, so does the relationship. Maintaining the covenant is a crucial feature of sex as a spiritual practice.

Perhaps the main thing that turns sex into a spiritual practice is our purpose—the reason why we do it. I want to suggest that for a Christian couple the purpose of sex is to communicate with God, and in certain moments to become briefly united with God. In 1 Corinthians 6:19, Paul says our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. His metaphor suggests that our body—and the body of our spouse—are places to worship God. Our bodies are a locus, a center, of prayer and communication with God. If our bodies are temples, and if a

temple is a place to worship God, then our bodies are a context for connecting with God. All we do and all we are happens in our body. We are a strange and wonderful mix of body and spirit. This is true for both single people and married people. Of course we don't have to engage in sex in order to connect with God via our bodies but sex can be one joyful and pleasurable way to connect with God through our embodied selves.

During sexual intimacy I often experience something of the presence of God. No one has to convince me that there's a deep connection between our sexuality and our spirituality. Married people know that sex can sometimes produce moments of profound transcendence—brief but intense glimpses of eternity. In sexual ecstasy we can experience something of God. To be sure, sex isn't the only place this happens. We can also enter moments of profound transcendence in prayer or worship, but sex is definitely one place where this can happen. For Christians, sex is a way to commune with God.

Chuck MacKnee, who teaches psychology at Trinity Western University in Vancouver, has researched the sexual satisfaction of Christian couples compared to the sexual satisfaction of non-Christian couples. He found that Christian couples experience a higher level of wonder, euphoria, bonding, blessing, arousal, and transcendence during sex than other people. He says: "It appears that the peaks of sexual and spiritual connection among Christians were more holistic, involving full body gratification as well as emotional and spiritual highs." He says his study demonstrates that "peak sexual union requires mutual trust in the security of a committed relationship with another person, just as spiritual union requires unquestioned trust in God." Many people in his study said they found the experience of such sex "unbelievable." The after-effects were transforming and

empowering.<sup>2</sup> This dynamic of sexual intimacy helps to explain why the death of a spouse can be so difficult for a Christian. You're not simply losing your best friend; you're also losing one of your spiritual practices, one of your accustomed ways of communicating with God.

Covenantal sex can help us become more spiritually mature. This happens when we take steps to serve our covenantal partner rather than using sex to gratify our own desires. Let me be clear here, especially to men: that word "serve" doesn't apply only to women. It also applies to us men. Serving and seeking the good of our spouse is something we men can grow in, both in and out of bed. Sex is never something to demand or exploit or abuse, because if you do that it will ruin the gift. Any hint of abuse, manipulation, or violence will chase intimacy out of the relationship. True sexual delight has a selfless quality. It's an act of Christian discipleship to become a better lover of the person we're in covenant with. Becoming a better lover can be one way to become a better disciple of Jesus.

You and I are walking, breathing temples of the Holy Spirit. In the context of covenant, sexual intimacy is one of God's wonderful gifts to us. It unites us to our spouse and also unites us with God. Let us cherish the gift.

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<sup>2</sup> "Research: Christian sex better than Kama Sutra," *WMD*, July 27, 2008.  
<http://www.wnd.com/2008/07/70669/>