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“The Hope, Love, and Joy of Sex”

Exodus 20:14

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

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You must not commit adultery
—Exodus 20:14

Liberal Mainline Protestant ministers in New York do not preach on adultery—unless they start a series on the Ten Commandments without thinking ahead. It is awkward to preach about infidelity, because the church has often embarrassed itself with its prurient interest in sex. Since St. Augustine the church has frequently deserved its reputation for being against sex. For centuries, religious people made it seem like God is out to keep us from having fun.

Among the great variety of acts of immorality, sexual immorality was often put first on the list, if not in a special category. Churches used to give the impression that this sin is the one that marks you for life. That has never been the Christian message, not the gospel, and not true to God's grace.

It is a sign of progress that the ushers no longer pass out scarlet letters. The realistic approach is to pay less attention to the seventh commandment, to downsize the Decalogue. This rule seems old-fashioned because our society is understandably reluctant to make judgments about sexual behavior. What's the fuss if it is between consenting adults? What business is it of anybody else?

According to research, between 20 and 25 percent of married men cheat, and between 10 and 15 percent of married women cheat. Rates of cheating have not changed much in the past few decades, but attitudes have changed. And not in the direction we might guess. People

disapprove of infidelity more now than they did a few decades ago, because people's views about marriage have changed.

Surveys from the 1970s suggest it was much more common for people to accept that their spouse cheated. They did not expect their partner to be their best friend, confidante, and an amazing lover like many do today. People expect to get everything from a relationship with a spouse, and so they are more likely to get angry at the idea of affairs. <https://www.livescience.com/56407-how-many-people-cheat.html>

In fifteen states adultery is still a crime, though in twelve it is a petty offense or a misdemeanor. The maximum punishment in Maryland is a \$10 fine. If they raised the fine and enforced the law, they could get rid of their state income tax.

If this commandment seems unrealistic, it is, in part, because, for a long time, our society had an unrealistic view of marriage. For years, almost every married couple on television was happily married. People who went through the horrible pain of divorce had the additional pain of being ostracized, because they had not held up the illusion of married people living happily ever after.

The truth is that marriage is hard and complicated. People get married for the wrong reasons. They marry the wrong people. They become the wrong people. Couples get bored, lonely, and angry. The excitement does not last.

Scientists tell us that what we call "falling in love" can be attributed to the presence in the body of a drug called phenylethylamine, a natural amphetamine. The problem is, according to the research, we build up a tolerance for this

chemical in two to four years. Some of you are doing the math. Love at first sight is easy to understand. It is love after forty years that is the miracle.

Divorce rates peaked in the early 1980s and have been steadily decreasing since then. Current trends suggest that only a third of today's marriages will end in divorce. And yet, Psychology Today says that six of ten couples that stay together are unhappy and four of ten have considered leaving their partner. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/contemplating-divorce/201709/are-you-among-the-growing-number-unhappy-married-people>

So the pendulum has swung. Our society, which used to have an unrealistic view of marriage, now has an unrealistic view of adultery. Stories of perfect families that live happily ever after have been replaced by new fairy tales with sizzling, fiery affairs: Marriage Story, Brokeback Mountain, Fatal Attraction, Gone Girl, The Descendants, Crazy Stupid Love, Silver Linings Playbook, and Unfaithful.

A lot of movies are about a person getting married to someone who is wrong for them and then getting swept up by someone who loves them for who they are. Or there is the romantic comedy where someone is engaged to a successful lawyer when a sensitive soul shows them the light. In Sweet Home Alabama we are supposed to believe Reese Witherspoon would dump Patrick Dempsey for Josh Lucas.

This is how Robert Capon describes the temptation to commit adultery: "This woman is all women, and when you chose her, you embarked on a life of imagination, which adultery cruelly violates, and breaks up the music in your head, and also, it is a lot of work to scout up something inferior to what you and she can create at home. You have

roamed the Western world in search of the perfect tuna sandwich. Your wife makes a good tuna sandwich. Your powers of imagination are what make it perfect.”

The typical person who gets involved in adultery is in search of the perfection and magic that they have been told is out there, somewhere. There is a remarkable irony in naming this activity “adultery” since so much of the behavior is more juvenile than adult (John Holbert, *The Ten Commandments*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 87).

The new view of adultery is no more real than the old view of marriage. Adultery is a fraud. Promiscuity is not smart. There are, of course, people who commit adultery and never look back, but that is not usually the case. Far from being bright red or orange, adultery turns out to be dingy gray.

According to most studies, the majority of people who break up their marriage to marry someone else are later sorry. Of those who marry the one for whom they break up their marriage—only about ten percent—about 70 percent of those get another divorce. Partners in an affair who go through a divorce to be together are twice as likely to end up in another divorce than marriages that did not start with an affair. <https://affairadvice.wordpress.com/2012/12/09/do-affairs-end-up-in-successful-relationships-13/>

Of the 30% that do stay married, most are not happy (Stewart Vogel, *The Ten Commandments*, New York: Harper Collins, 1998, 223-224). Most regret what they have done.

Part of the pain of infidelity is that the full cost is not known until much later. The fabric of a community is forever torn, and the process of reweaving is sometimes slow, sometimes impossible. Those who say that what goes on in our bedrooms is nobody’s business are naïve. Sex

with another's partner unleashes forces that threaten to destroy our part of the world, or at least to chew it into a messy pulp (Holbert, 97-98).

Even so, the way adultery turns out circumstantially is less important than what it does to our soul. When Jesus talked about this commandment, he warned against the damage done to our hearts. Jesus' point was that we destroy ourselves when we treat anyone as an object. Presumably that includes even a spouse. Jesus' standards go beyond legality.

50 years ago, people thought adultery said something about the state of one's soul. Now we think of adultery as a symptom of a bad marriage. Maybe both are true.

Lewis Smedes said, "We cannot take our bodies to bed with someone and park our souls outside in the car to wait."

We need to remember that sex is God's idea. God came up with sex for procreation, communication, and connection. God created sex with all of its wonder, oddness, and fun. God blessed our sexuality, warned us of its immense power, and told us how best to enjoy it. The problem in our sex-saturated society is not that we talk too much about sex, but that we talk about it so superficially. Our culture misses the sacred nature of God's good gift.

In a rabbinical story, God discusses the Ten Commandments with the angels before giving them. Some of the angels think the commandment not to commit adultery is too stringent and ought to be deleted.

The angels argue that it is unnatural, "Why should people be so restricted?"

God replies, "Humans were created for meaningful relationships with one another and with me. They were made for love. If they can't learn to be faithful to one another, how will they ever learn to be faithful to

me?" (John Killinger, *To My People with Love*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1988, 82-83).

Faithfulness is recognizing the sacredness of the people we love and the goodness of a genuine commitment.

This is Raymond Carver's poem, "Waiting."

Left off the highway
and down the hill.
At the bottom,
hang another left.
Keep bearing left.
The road will make a Y.
Left again.
There's a creek on the left.
Keep going.
Just before the road ends,
there'll be another road.
Take it and no other.
Otherwise, your life will be ruined forever.
There's a log house
with a shake roof on the left.
It's not that house.
It's the next house,
just over a rise.
The house where trees are laden with fruit.
Where phlox, forsythia, and marigold grow.
It's the house
where the woman stands in the doorway
wearing sun in her hair.
The one who's been waiting all this time.
The woman who loves you.
The one who can say,

“What’s kept you?”

(Raymond Carver, “Waiting,” *Good Poems*, New York: Viking, 2002, 299).

A couple is experiencing a lot of conflict. They fight over money, fight over time, fight over their children, and, of course, fight over what the fights are about. Once the couple had been deeply in love, but they are not as young as they once were. Their hearts do not race when they see each other anymore. So many things fill up the time they used to give to loving each other. They know they are heading in the wrong direction.

Then one day while the children are at school, they have lunch together. There sitting in a restaurant they have a conversation that makes their quarrels seem less important. They still have problems, but they begin to believe again. They would not say it this way, but they feel God calling them to love more fully.

The wife holds up her glass for a toast and says, “In spite of everything.”

We see this commandment through the lens of our own experience. Some have been deeply wounded by someone they love who committed adultery. Others have been to the edge, but have not gone over, and know the real possibility of this happening in their life. Still others have been there. They know firsthand the damage of their actions, and their need for God’s healing. Others may be in the midst of this mess and are wondering how they could be so unlucky as to stumble into church on this particular Sunday.

Many, if not most, of the people in this room are single—single by choice or circumstance, single through the death of a partner or the death of a partnership.

They deal with unique joys and challenges in nurturing their important relationships.

All around us are bright children and alert youth who are watching us to see how best to live. The best way to live is with love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, love that never disappears, never falls down on the job, and never gives up. Love never ends, because ultimately nothing defeats love—no bad choices, no tragedy, no disappointment, and no disillusionment.

We put our heart and soul into our relationships and treat the ones we love with attention and respect. We choose not to behave in ways that bring pain, fear, or insecurity to the people we love. We teach our children that there is nothing casual about sex. We give ourselves to hope, love, and joy.

A few years ago, the graduating class of East Stroudsburg University heard this story: A minister and scholar in South Carolina wants nothing more than to be president of a particular college. All his life he works for the position and he finally gets it. Just as he is beginning to fulfill his dream, his wife is diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Her health degenerates rapidly to the point where he cannot possibly take care of her and work his full-time job. He decides to give up his position as president of the college.

His friends are stunned.

They ask, "What are you doing? Your wife doesn't even know who you are."

He answers, "She might not know who I am, but I know who she is.

She's the woman I made a promise to love and care for until death do us part" (Vogel, 234).

The rules he is following are unrealistic. The love with which he lives is unreasonable and holy.

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