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~~Lust~~

“Giving Up Lust”

John 8:1-11 | Lent V

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“Giving Up Lust”

John 7:53-8:11

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Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down, and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who'd been caught in adultery, and, making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. And Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

She said, "No one, sir."

And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on don't sin again."

John 7:53-8:11

The church in which I grew up taught us that sex is the most shameful, awful, dangerous thing, so we should save it for our one true love. You could be prideful, envious, angry, slothful, greedy, or gluttonous and still be a respectable

Christian, but if you committed a sexual sin, you were in big trouble. The church acted like sexual sin is the only sin. When they said immorality, they meant sexual immorality. Purity meant virginity. Once you lost your purity, you could not get it back.

This led to inconsistent dress codes and peculiar rules for teenagers. My church had a rule against mixed bathing—which is not as interesting as it sounds. “No mixed bathing” meant girls and boys could not be in the swimming pool at the same time. Before marriage, we were not supposed to do anything remotely sexual. If we had jokes about purity, we were supposed to save them for marriage. When we got married, it could be a free for all, as long as it was with our spouse. It is a sign of progress that ushers no longer pass out scarlet letters, but whenever the church’s message about sex starts with shame, we have to remember that’s not what Jesus taught.

Our culture is not helpful. Lust is in—not just X-rated stuff, but advertisements that make it on to our screens, women in bikinis, men in speedos, whose connection to the cars they are selling is tangential at best. The seven-deadly-sins-kind-of-lust is not desire or passion. Lust is the self-centered, misdirected sexual desire that hurts you or someone else. Lust is a sinister preoccupation which damages relationships.

Lust promises excitement, but then leads to an ever-increasing craving for an ever-diminishing result. Lust does not work, because lust is the craving for salt of someone dying of thirst. Lust takes us to an inner world that does not include the things that matter most.

Peter Yonkers writes: “Lust dehumanizes the other. In

fact, lust needs to dehumanize the other. Lust doesn't work when the other person is fully human. That's why exotic dancers always have fake stage names. You would never have a dancer use her real name, because that gets in the way of the objectification that lust needs. A man leering at an exotic dancer doesn't want to know her real name. A great way to empty out these clubs would be to stand up before a dancer was about to come on and say: 'This is Sultry Susan, but her real name is Mary Wallinski. She has four brothers and sisters. Her parents divorced when she was five. Her mother is an alcoholic. She's been married twice. Her last husband beat her. She has two kids and is struggling to get by. She likes dogs and would love to be a dental hygienist someday.' That would short circuit the lust. Lust doesn't want the full humanity of the person with their needs and their vulnerabilities. Lust distorts, disappoints and dehumanizes."

Lust treats others, as well as ourselves, with less value than we deserve. Lust ends up turning and walking away. Lust devastates through promiscuity, a fraud, which usually leads to loneliness. Lust starts out bright red, but turns out to be dingy gray. Lust destroys through the billion-dollar sex trafficking industry. Lust destroys through pornography, the path of lonely lust. We talk about people using pornography, but users end up feeling used, sad and broken by their addiction.

Lust leaves us feeling alone. We understand that lust looks best when we are most starved for love. Lust can deliver instant pleasure, but then it leads to jadedness, despair, and shame.

One popular argument is that anything goes as long

as no one gets hurt, but it does not work that way. Even if lust does not directly burn someone, the smoke damage is extensive. Sex is never really casual, because the one-night stand turns people into things. The casual romp for recreation is playing with nitroglycerin. Drunken encounters with strangers do not lead to real joy. Teenagers having sex are more likely to be depressed. If spring break hook-ups were truly fulfilling, then there would not be so many songs about wanting someone to hold you forever.

Paul Ricoeur writes, "Everything that makes the sexual encounter easy simultaneously speeds its collapse into insignificance."

Part of the pain of meaningless sex is that the full cost is not known until later. Sometimes people without evil intentions create scars that last a lifetime. Who's to say who gets hurt and who doesn't? Some of the injuries are internal. It may be years before the X-rays show anything.

We need to ask, "If we follow selfish, empty desires, what sort of people will we become?"

The problem in our sex-saturated society is not that we talk too much about sex, but that we talk about it superficially. We need to be more honest. We need to think about what it tells us that studies consistently show greater sexual satisfaction (in quality and quantity) among those who are faithful to their partner.

We need to celebrate God's gift of sex in a world that does not understand. While some conservative churches suggest that sex is the worst possible sin, the message from many liberal churches is that sex is no big deal, but it is. Sex is a big deal, because it is one of God's best ideas. People

have struggled with how to celebrate sexuality without using one another, and how to encourage commitment without shaming one another, for as long as people have been having sex.

In the eighth chapter of John, the scribes and Pharisees are trying to shame someone. They have no trouble finding this woman. No one is surprised she is there—even as no one asks where the man is. She does not claim to be innocent. Maybe she could not find any other way to make a living. She did not know what else to do. Maybe she felt trapped in a loveless marriage and decided that anything was better than nothing. Somewhere along the way it fell apart. Now she stands half dressed in front of a leering mob. She has reached rock bottom.

Less obvious, but no less tragic, is the tragedy of those who accuse her. They do not want anything good to happen. Their plan is to use a rule to destroy someone. Their lack of recognition of their own guilt is not an oversight, but a conscious, self-righteous decision. They stand, with stones in their pockets, at least as guilty and broken as the woman.

The crowd keeps pushing forward. The woman weeps as they push Jesus for a response. He kneels and writes with his finger in the dirt. This is the only record we have of Jesus writing anything. He may have been drawing in the dust while he gets control of his anger. A few chapters earlier Jesus is furious when the temple of God is defiled. Imagine his anger when they defile a child of God. Maybe Jesus writes down the sins of his accusers. Maybe he writes to draw attention away from the woman, to make it less painful for her.

Jesus stands and says, “Anyone who is perfect can throw the first stone.”

One by one, they all walk away. They all walk away: not just the accusers, who claim to be standing up for family values; not just the onlookers, who like judging people; not just the disciples, who thought they were on Jesus’ side. They all walk away. Jesus’ point is that we destroy ourselves when we treat anyone as an object.

When Jesus is alone with the woman, the story’s unexpected turn becomes even more improbable: “Has no one condemned you?”

“No one.”

“Neither do I.”

God loves unexpectedly, unceasingly, and immeasurably. Nobody gets kicked out for having a rotten life, because God wants to give us a better life. If Jesus leaves the woman just the same as when she was dragged before him, then he is not giving her any real hope. Who’s to say she won’t be caught again next month, next week or the next day? It is not enough to start over. Something has to change.

Jesus says, “Go, and don’t sin anymore.”

Jesus believes that something inside the woman has changed—not that she will live a perfect life, but that she will live a different life. People whose lives have been destroyed by lust can have new, better, different lives. Single people, partnered people, all people can live in God’s love and with God’s love.

We can be faithful to what is good, true, and beautiful. We can live with love that is better than lust. God created sex for warmth, intimacy, procreation, communication,

and connection. God came up with sex with its wonder, oddness, and fun. God blesses our sexuality and encourages us to find the best ways to enjoy it.

A few months ago, Carol and I officiated a wedding in Washington, D.C. When the lovely couple said, “We’ll pick the biblical texts we want you speak on,” we said, “Sure,” because we’re accommodating ministers. Most couples pick 1 Corinthians 13—“Love is patient and kind”—which is sweet, or John 2, where Jesus goes to a wedding and changes water into wine, which is a great trick.

The couple gives Carol a piece of wedding cake, a text in Isaiah on the hope of God’s love. They give me Song of Solomon 2:10-13, the romantic text that Rawson read earlier. The entire poem is eight chapters long and is a fine example of ancient Hebrew erotic poetry. It is two Norah Jones albums.

The poem raises questions like: Is this really in the Bible? How did this get in the Bible? Why didn’t they give the text about sex to Carol?

These particular verses in Solomon raise questions. “My lover speaks and says, ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and go.’”

Is her lover inviting her to go with him, or does he need some alone time?

“The winter is past. The rain is over and gone.”

Is her lover saying, “The weather’s great. You go on. I’ll catch up.”

“The flowers appear on the earth.”

This is always good advice. We need to stop and smell the roses.

“The time of singing has come.”

Are the lovers musicians, going on tour? Are they choir members, preparing for worship?

“The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom.”

Maybe her lover is inviting her to lunch—a fruit salad and a glass of wine.

“My lover said, ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.’”

You could read this as an invitation to elope, which is increasingly attractive for many.

Song of Solomon is about sex. There is an entire book of the Bible about sex, and how we need to respect and be grateful for sex.

Tony Campolo was asked to be part of a panel discussion at a university in Philadelphia on the topic of sexual freedom. Campolo is a Christian minister. He is invited to be the one person defending the idea that sex needs to include commitment. As they get near the end, he realizes he is losing the debate. He is surrounded by brilliant students who think the only requirement for sex is consent. They believe that sex is about the individual fulfilling his or her own desires.

Then Campolo remembers the story that a friend told him about the day his mother died. She is at the kitchen table when she slips out of her chair unconscious. Her husband of 54 years is broken. After the funeral, her two sons and husband stand by the casket.

The father pulls his sons to him and says: “Boys, it was a wonderful 54 years. Your mother and I loved each other, cared for each other, and took care of each other, but it’s over and it ended just the way we wanted it to end.”

I wanted your mother to die first. I didn't want her to go through the pain I'm feeling right now, and the pain I'm going to go through because of her absence in the days ahead. I didn't want her to suffer what I'm suffering. We can go home now. It was a good 54 years and it's been a good day."

Campolo says, "You can't understand love like that, if all you care about is your own desires."

God helps us—those with partners and those who are single—see the sacredness of the people we love and the goodness of honest relationships. God protects us from the lie that others are not as important as we are. God teaches us to put our heart and soul into treating others with attention and respect. God helps us love.

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