

25 January, 2009  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; I Cor 6:12-20  
Mark 1:14-20

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Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that that second reading sounded a lot like last week's passage. A *lot* like last week's passage. You're thinking, "Isn't it bad enough that we have to hear that once every three years, without having to hear it twice in two weeks?" Some of you are probably thinking, "Has Deborah lost her mind?"

Quite possibly. This passage is one that raises a lot of questions. It raises questions about how many of us live. It raises questions about how we understand the role of women. It raises questions about how we struggle with difficult passages in Scripture. After church last week, one parishioner, whom I respect greatly, referred to the reading as "that Medieval passage about fornication." I'm not sure what he meant by that, and, when I asked him, he did not remember even saying it, but it sounded to me like an attempt to move the passage into the past of Christianity, to relegate it to the status of a cultural relic-- something we have outgrown. I have to say, I am uncomfortable when we dismiss too easily the words of Scripture. I emerged from that encounter feeling called to preach about this passage, to see what, if anything, it has to say to us in the 21st century. In order to engage these questions fruitfully, I feel it will be necessary to be realistic about current practices. As a result, this sermon will contain material that is not appropriate for children under the age of 11. If you have a child with you today, please take your child into Sunday school or to the Nicholas room. An usher will come get you at the end of the sermon. If you have an 11-year old with you, you may want to take your child out; you will need to make a decision about whether you are willing to have a candid conversation with your child after church today. I suspect that I will raise material which makes you uncomfortable. I also suspect that I will raise nothing your child has not heard about or been asked to do.

While I was in college, one of the highlights of the year was a mass demonstration called Take Back the Night. Each year, thousands of women and men would flood the streets of Boston after dark, carrying placards and wearing T-shirts, chanting and singing, calling for an end to violence against women -- the violence that lurked in our alleys, our streets, and our homes. Many were wearing buttons which read: "My mother, my sister, and me: one in three." It referred to the number of women in the United States who are raped. One in three.

Change scenes, to UCLA during the 1990's. The scene is a freshman composition class. Because I need to engage students in the work of thinking and writing constructively about controversial topics, I have decided to assign an essay by the theorist Camille Paglia. The essay is notorious in academic circles. After years of conversation upholding the equivalence of the genders and the absolute right of women to be free from assault, under all circumstances, Paglia has dared to argue that there are real and substantive biological differences between men and women, that men are predisposed toward sexual violence, and that any woman who chooses to dress provocatively, attend a frat party, or walk down a dark street alone is inviting trouble. I figure it'll give us a stimulating discussion.

As I approach the classroom, I hear a rather unusual babble of excited voices. Most of the students, it seems, have assumed Paglia is a man; one has said, "I think she's a woman." I confirm Paglia's womanhood, and they are off on a heated debate. Eventually, we work around to dating customs on campus. I ask if there are circumstances under which they feel they are somehow obligated to have intercourse. They reply that, if they are taken out for dinner, it's expected -- not if they go to McDonald's, but if it's a nice restaurant. I ask about the cut-off; they reply that, if dinner

costs around \$20, they really feel they have to go through with it. "The streetwalkers on Sunset Boulevard cost more than that," I comment.

Change scenes again, to New York in the last few years. My sister is on the phone, upset by an incident that happened on the school-bus that afternoon. Apparently, a little girl sitting near her, a fifth-grader, said, "I'm hungry. Does anyone have a candy-bar?" When no one replied, she went to the center aisle and offered to exchange sexual acts for candy.

Change scenes again. In 2004, *Newsweek* published an article on adolescent sexual practices. A recent study of undergraduates had concluded that 78% of students had engaged in "hooking up," which referred to one-time sexual encounters in which the idea was to go as far as your partner would allow with as little conversation as possible -- and with no plans to speak or meet again. Researchers questioned whether this practice would produce adults who had much "sexual experience, but no real relationship experience," and who would have difficulty acquiring the skills necessary to maintain "committed relationships." (*Newsweek*, October 4, 2004)

St. Paul says, "Shun fornication!" (I Cor 6:18)

Which of these scenes disturbs you the most? The prevalence of rape, the social pressure to engage in sex as a *quid pro quo*, the child who sees it as less important than candy, encounters in which anonymity is the goal, or St. Paul's blanket prohibition? To some extent, each of these examples represents an extreme. Each is rather far from what most of us would consider healthy exercise of sexuality. But they are not unusual. 78% of students is not a minority. One woman in three is not a marginal phenomenon. These are mainstream practices.

We are accustomed, I think, to pride ourselves on the sophistication and health with which we approach sexuality in the 21st century. We have rightly discarded the idea that sex is shameful, dirty, or fallen. We have moved beyond the idea that women are subordinate to men, and accept that sex is meant to be pleasing to both parties. We have embraced physical pleasure as a good and proper aspect of human life. But the examples above suggest that we have not yet gotten it all right. There is still unhealth in how we use our bodies. Domination, violence, and tacit coercion remain prevalent. There may still be some place for a Biblical view and the insights it can bring, even in our modern world.

The Biblical understanding of sex is an integral part of its understanding of human personhood. According to Scripture, a human being is an embodied soul. We cannot have a soul without a body, nor a body without a soul. At the time of creation, God did not take a soul and put it into a body; she built a body out of mud and then breathed in life. (Gen 2:7) This understanding was tested in the early years of Christianity, when a man named Origen, arguably the first great theologian, argued that our souls existed with God before they received bodies. His idea was condemned as heretical, on the grounds that it dissolved the fundamental unity of body and soul in human beings. (This is also why Christians reject reincarnation: we are supposed to be embodied in the world to come as well, and if you've got one soul which has inhabited more than one body, things get sticky at the resurrection of the dead!) This unitary understanding stands in stark contrast to that of certain Greek and gnostic theologies, which held that people are really souls, trapped in bodies, and that the goal is to escape our bodies.<sup>1</sup> Christianity replies that we cannot escape our bodies; we are our bodies.

This means that what happens to our bodies, what we do with our bodies, must, necessarily, impact our souls. We see this truth often enough in studies of infant attachment: people who were not held when they were babies develop severe psychiatric problems, and often have difficulty forming bonds of love later in their lives. The touch of the flesh is necessary for the development of the mind. The touch of the flesh in sex develops a bond between the parties, not only as bodies, but

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<sup>1</sup> This dualism infiltrates Christianity from time to time, and must be beaten back.

as human beings, and we must live our futures in the light of that relationship. Genesis tells us, "The two become one flesh." (Gen 2:24)

Each of the distorted forms of sexual encounter that I mentioned earlier violates this psychosomatic unity. Rape accepts the unity, but uses it to injure the personhood of the victim. The *quid pro quo* issue puts a price on your value as human being by placing an assumed price on your body. Christ reminds us that we are not worth \$20 or even \$200; we are worth the life and death of our Savior. The utter immaturity of the fifth-grader denies that the body has any value at all. To her, it is worth less than a 65-cent candy-bar. The implication is that what her body does has no importance to her as a human being. Hooking-up, the deliberate pursuit of an anonymous encounter, errs in the other direction: we are supposed to be having sex, it says, and having it often; whom we have it with matters as little as the choice between chocolate and Cheez-Whiz. It asserts that bodies alone have value, and seeks to deny any role to the mind or the heart.

St. Paul, on the other hand, focuses his remarks on the potentially-exploitative nature of intercourse. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall be one flesh.'" (I Cor 6:15-16) This is a complex passage, and there are many potential objections to Paul's use of the word "prostitute." It implies, to us, a value-judgment: that the only sort of woman who might be willing to engage in fornication is a whore. It recalls to us the whole panoply of sexist language which divided women into virgins or whores, leaving no space for women to enjoy their body's pleasure. But St. Paul was engaging his time realistically. Before the availability of safe, effective birth control, sex was a high-risk activity for women. The woman who found herself pregnant outside of marriage could be killed. (This is one reason that Mary's pregnancy was so scandalous.) If she was allowed to live, and if she survived child-birth, she would be unmarriageable: a single mother with responsibility for a child, prostitution her only real option for earning a living. If the girl wasn't one already, she became a prostitute when she was seduced. Even today, a girl who has a child before she has finished school is much more likely to be poor, uneducated, and dependent; her options have been permanently narrowed. Even comedies, like last year's film *Juno*, reveal this situation: the father of the baby went on being a track star, while the pregnant mother was getting the hairy eyeball in the school hallway and moaning about being twice the size of a whale.

Perhaps this is why sexual continence was identified at the church's very beginnings as one of the hallmarks of a Christian. The book of Acts tells the story of the spread of Christianity in the years immediately following the death of Christ. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, both St. Peter and St. Paul acted to bring Gentile converts into the fellowship of the church along with Jews, without making them follow Jewish law. But this was controversial; it seemed to negate the terms of the Covenant that God had given to the Hebrew people. And so a council was called at Jerusalem, to determine what to do with Gentiles who wished to follow Jesus. After some discussion, it was decided that they could be accepted without following Jewish law: all that was required was that they "abstain from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood." (Acts 15:20) Each of these commands touches the relationship between body and soul: what you eat and who you sleep with determine who you are. Because sex outside of marriage was inherently exploitative in the first century, Christians had to shun it, for *Christians do not exploit one another*. St. Paul makes the point explicit: see to it, he writes, "that no one wrongs or exploits a brother or sister in this manner." (I Thess 5)

Beyond this ethical framework, St. Paul is appealing to Greco-Roman notions of the freedom of the person -- not only from the tyranny of others, but from the tyranny of the self. The Roman Stoic Musonius writes that the man who has intercourse with a prostitute sins against himself and "defiles the God in his own breast." (cited in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New*

*Testament*, VI: 583) It is an almost identical statement to that of St. Paul, and refers to the belief that full personhood consists, not in being enslaved to one's whims and desires, but in rising above them to choose a course that is free and moral and right. This is hard for us to hear in a culture which exploits our every whim by urging us to shop, to buy, to experience, to yield. We are the heirs of Oscar Wilde, who said, "I can resist everything but temptation" -- but it is part of what we admire about Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, or Martin Luther King: they chose, not what was easy, but what was right.

And this gets us to, perhaps, the only word in the passage which is as difficult as "prostitute" -- our old friend, "sin." *Hamartia*, in Scripture, does not refer to what is evil, debased, or guilt-inducing. It refers to what is misaimed, to what falls short of reaching the goal. In its original usage, it comes from archery, and refers to when a person aims at a target, misses, and kills someone by mistake. The problem with fornication, in other words, is not that it is inherently evil; it's that it falls short of the full purpose for which sexual intercourse was created -- the lifelong mutual love of two people who, together, share the intimacy of the body, the intimacy of the mind, and the delight and forgiveness of daily life. People who choose to use their bodies otherwise choose less: less growth, less trust, less depth. They sell themselves (and others) short.

I am not going to say that Christianity is only about perfection. The core of God's message to us in Christ is mercy, and perfect people do not need mercy. The God who forgave even Ninevah will surely forgive us. But we are not to be foolish about the consequences of our actions. It does happen that, sometimes, lesser goods can prepare people to receive greater ones. In certain cases, short-term relationships allow people to grow to the point that they are able to enter lifelong ones; but it does also happen that they leave the parties scarred, with baggage that makes it hard to trust themselves or another, or believing that people are to be used and discarded. Wendell Berry writes, "with one's 'sexual partner,' it is now understood, one must practice 'safe sex' -- that is, one must protect oneself, not one's partner...What a lie! Sex was never safe!...It is the strongest prompting and the greatest joy that young people are likely to experience. Because it is so powerful, it is risky, not just because of the famous dangers of venereal disease and 'unwanted pregnancy' but also because it involves and requires a giving away of the self that if not honored and reciprocated, inevitably reduces dignity and self-respect. The invitation to give oneself away is not, except for the extremely ignorant or the extremely foolish, an easy one to accept." ("Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community," 141-4)

And here we have the crux of the matter. Sexual intercourse is about giving one's self away, and receiving the self of another. St. Paul would say that your self already belongs to Christ; to give yourself away is to give away Christ's property. But whether or not you wish to accept that formulation, to give oneself away is not a trivial thing. It should be done with respect, in a context of deep trust, in hope and in love. It should be approached reverently, for you are your body, and if you treat your self with contempt, you are the one who will pay the price.

And you are not the only one. The Bible is clear that there is no such thing as an isolated individual. What one person does affects the whole community. We are used to thinking, "It's my body and my life; I can do what I want to with it." But when my college friend decided he was tired of caring for his diabetes and ended up in a wheelchair, that decision crushed, not only his life, but that of his young wife as well. The alcoholic who will not abandon his addiction; the spouse who shortens her life by overeating; the new father who begins to work out so that he will live to a parent to his child -- all these make decisions about their bodies which sustain or undermine those around them. Even so, in sex, your body is not yours only. When a young girl comes home pregnant and she and her family must make a decision, when a man brings AIDS to his wife and unborn children, when all across Africa grandparents are toiling in the fields and raising the young because there are almost no able-bodied young adults left and there is danger of famine -- it is impossible to deny that

our right to make choices for our bodies has limits. Each of us has the absolute right – the absolute right – to refuse to be subjected to violence, intimidation, or violation. But we are also called to use our bodies in ways that do not bring harm to others. *We are Christians, and Christians do not exploit one another.*

I am not going to draw a hard line here. What I want to say to you is this: God loves you. When you enter into relationships with one another, enter them trusting in that love. You do not need to earn love or buy it. You cannot extort it. You can only give it freely, and receive it in return. And it will change you. To enter into intimacy expecting to be unchanged is foolish. At the very least, you will maim yourself in your effort to be unaffected. You are your body; live in it, connected to it, because you surely cannot live without it.

And this: when we encounter an offensive or difficult passage in Scripture, it is foolish to jettison it without seeking to understand what it says. We would all regard as foolish the person who refuses to look at evolution “because it contradicts Scripture”; “look at the evidence,” we would say. It is equally foolish to refuse to look at Scripture because it contradicts what we think we know to be true, what we want to believe is true. Explore it. Think about it. Then, and only then, make your decision and live by it. Amen.