

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Shooting Ourselves in the Foot¹

Genesis 2.18-25; 1 Corinthians 6.12-20

Russ Dean, January 15, 2006



In a Charlotte Observer editorial several years ago entitled “a trajectory of decline,” columnist Bobby Miller opined, essentially, that our country is going to hell in a hand basket, and that we are being led there by a decline in our sexual values.² The causal factors of our sure demise? Mr. Miller lists the usual suspects: an increase in premarital sexual activity, cohabitation among couples, same-sex relationships, and the rise of AID’s to pandemic proportion. Citing a study of disintegrating civilizations by the noted historian Arnold Toynbee, Mr. Miller warns us that the fall of these civilizations “usually was preceded by a ‘surrender to promiscuity,’ the widespread acceptance of low moral standards previously confined to their under-classes.”

I suppose Mr. Miller would add this preacher and today’s sermon to his rant against our “liberal obsession with ‘tolerance’ and ‘diversity’ [which supplants] our sense of shame.”³ You see, despite the fact that I, in no uncertain terms, support what

¹ The title of the sermon comes from a quotation (found later in the sermon), but I could not help but note the following delicious irony: The ancient Hebrews had no specific word for “genitals,” and variously referred to these “private parts” in euphemisms – naming the genitals “feet” was one of the most common. In the famous Isaiah passage, for example, we read: “*In the year that King Uzziah died... Seraphs were in attendance above [the Lord]; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew*” (Isaiah 6.1-2). Scholars recognize this covering of “their feet” as a covering of “their genitals.” So, I offer this sermon as an invitation for us to think more clearly about our sexuality, lest we should “shoot ourselves in the foot!”

² I do not have the exact date, but the editorial appeared in August of 2001.

³ It seems to me that the real object of Mr. Miller’s ire is our “liberal obsession,” or just being “liberal.” The polarizing language of such editorials (from both the left and the right) does a great injustice to the varied perspective of American thought (which is in reality a full spectrum, not just a “left” and a “right”), and the value of dialogue. “Liberals” and “conservatives” need to learn to dialogue, and truly learn from each other without entering the conversation with such vindictive labeling, which always serves to stifle

conservatives love to call “traditional family values” (I am for marriage, and I am against adultery!), despite this, I think Mr. Miller is wrong,⁴ because his jeremiad against our declining values is a perfect example of the “self-righteous, paternalistic, and uncompassionate tone” which the former monk, Thomas Moore, sees as all-too-easy and all-too-typical of analyses of our culture today.⁵ Mr. Miller sees our “loss of shame,” as the real problem. With Thomas Moore I see the real problem as the fact that even after a so-called sexual revolution in this country, we still cannot discuss our sexuality, not in the culture and certainly not in the church, without couching the conversation in an aura of shame.

Why, for example, did I have to read and re-read and question and second-guess and wonder and worry and fret about how you would respond to the words on today’s bulletin cover?⁶ I know of no other lyric, of any musical genre, which speaks more eloquently, more beautifully to the rightful use of intimacy, in a rightfully committed relationship of fidelity and love. What could be more Christian, more appropriately worshipful than that? Yet even here, in 2006, in a progressive church like ours, because we are still ashamed of our sexuality, I feel as if I need to read them to you, whispering, “and with wild abandon (whisper: make love to you) just like a true companion”?

dialogue. If we cannot learn to see ourselves in one another, to learn from our differing perspectives, such false polarization, as Mr. Miller’s article represents, will destroy us.

⁴ Based on my above footnote, I chose the wrong word here. Mr. Miller is not “wrong” (a polarizing statement), but I find his article misdirected. I try to explain this in the rest of this paragraph.

⁵ “Some, of course, would say that affairs are the result of a breakdown in traditional morality. Whatever the merits of this analysis, it is generally presented in a self-righteous, paternalistic, and uncompassionate tone – indicating discomfort with sex and with the moral complexity it may bring into the lives of ordinary people. It’s difficult to trust an approach to life’s most fascinating and challenging mystery that demonizes sex or deals with sexual problems without showing heart.” Thomas Moore, “Sex (American Style),” in *Mother Jones* magazine, Sep./Oct., 1997, p.60.

⁶ I included a portion of the lyric of Marc Cohn’s, “True Companion,” including these words: “And when I take your hand / I’ll watch my heart set sail / I’ll take my trembling fingers / And I’ll life up your veil / Then I’ll take you home / And with wild abandon / Make love to you just like a true companion / You are my true companion / I got a true companion.” I wanted to print a text from the Song of Solomon, but I dared not be that racy!

We may well be in a trajectory of decline as a nation, I'm not necessarily disagreeing with Mr. Miller,⁷ but I believe we will never right that course by wagging moralistic fingers, by preaching easy sermons of judgment and woe (which are always the easiest to preach), and by identifying the symptoms as the cause of our disease. If the nation is, in fact, on a trajectory of decline, it is not because of an increase of sexual promiscuity. (I believe the truth is:) Promiscuity is on the rise because we still do not understand the gift of our sexuality.

More to the point of today's topic, I could say: If more marriages are, in fact, in trouble today, it is not because more spouses are having illicit affairs. (I believe the truth is:) Spouses turn to inappropriate means of fulfillment because we still do not understand the gift of sex. Thomas Moore says,

Sex is the ritual recovery of vitality and life. It makes marriages, creates families, and sustains love. It takes us momentarily out of our minds and into our souls.⁸

The problem as I see it is that we have misunderstood the place of sex as it relates to our appetites. We treat sex as if it is all about the flesh. The problem is that sex is really about the body, instead. Now let me explain.

If you join Mr. Miller in thinking America is a cesspool of sexual immorality, you should have seen ancient Corinth. From what I've read, the city in which Paul established one of the first Christian churches would make Las Vegas look like Bob Jones

University. I'll spare you the spicy details, but I will tell you that in the midst of all this

⁷ I think this is an open question, though there are times that the headline news makes me want to agree strongly! Sensational and highly publicized immorality pummels us from our various media sources, but how do we really judge our "moral health" as a nation? How do we compare the immorality that seems openly rampant today, with a society that, for example, accepted unconditionally the enslavement of a race of people, or the Jim Crow treatment of African Americans before the 1950's, or the oppression of women in all the various forms such immorality has taken in our own, advanced nation? Are we really less moral today?

⁸ Moore, "Sex (American Style), p.58.

debauchery, there was a church with some pretty intellectual sophisticates who had figured out how to live the good news and have good life at the same time. Paul had spoken to them of “freedom in Christ,” and they reasoned that since all of this church stuff is about the soul and spirit, since our bodies are just vessels to contain the part of us that really matters, then we can do with our flesh anything we want. Augustine would much later echo Paul’s liberating theology in his famous dictum, “Love God and do as you will,’ and this was precisely the attitude that had given these Corinthians Christians a libertine view of the body and especially their sexual mores.⁹

Their attitude was not altogether unlike the attitude of Harry, as in “When Harry Met Sally.” Do you remember? Harry loved Sally, as a friend. Sally loved Harry, like a brother. So, he reasoned, they could have sex, just for the sex of it, and it would not affect their fraternal relationship. It’s just sex. Or, like Robert Redford’s millionaire character in “Indecent Proposal.” He comes to a young couple, offering one million dollars for a no-strings-attached one-nighter with the beautiful wife. And the struggling couple reasons, with an equally skilled detachment and misunderstanding of the power of our greatest gift: One night... One million dollars... He doesn’t love her... She doesn’t love him... It’s just one night... It’s just a physical thing...

But Paul rightly said, it’s never just a physical thing. It’s about the body. Do you remember my little extemporaneous lecture to you a few weeks ago?¹⁰ I got all worked up about dualism. For Paul, the body wasn’t just a container for the soul. The body

⁹ Augustine’s theology, of course, did not condone a libertine lifestyle but implied that if we truly love God, our will becomes so saturated with the will of God, that our desires become God’s – what we will choose is not those “works of the flesh,” but true acts of love and justice. Jesus prayed, “...*not what I want but what you want*” (Matthew 26.39).

¹⁰ I forget now the sermon, but in the children’s time a book was read to the children essentially delineating the body from the soul – “the real part of you is down inside,” was the line that sent me over the edge! Before I preached, I went on a little rampage about how un-biblical such theology is. I explain again in this paragraph.

wasn't just flesh and blood. The body, the *soma*, as the Greeks called it is all we are. We are a living *soma*. *And God breathed the breath of life into the man and he became a living soul* (Genesis 2.7). When we join our bodies together in sexual intimacy, it is not just a union of the flesh, it is a marriage of bodies – heart and soul and mind and strength (Mark 12.30), all that we are, joined: *and the two shall become one* (Genesis 2.24).

How many affairs have occurred, justified by the offending partner with the all-too-familiar: “It didn't mean anything. It was just about sex.” But it's never just about sex. Because sex is never just about sex – sex is about our deepest intimacies, about giving ourselves away, completely, to another. Sex is, in a word, about our souls.¹¹

We live in a sex-saturated culture. There is no doubt. There is much for us to be concerned about, maybe the greatest of which is that all this over-stimulation is both cause and effect to the misunderstanding of our own greatest hunger. The theologian Miroslav Volf has said of our problem:

[In this culture] we value sexual desire so highly that we do not want it to refer beyond itself. As a consequence, we are incapable of seeing sexual pleasure as a sacrament for something more enduring. . . Far from finding fulfillment, the self turned in upon itself loses itself in [emptiness] the emptiness of its own meaninglessness. Our obsession with the self is equal in wisdom to the act of shooting oneself in the foot.¹²

The problem, in society as in marriage, is, ironically, not that there's too much sex around us, but that there's probably still not enough. More than a

¹¹ Though I have not read it, Thomas Moore has an entire book devoted to this subject: *The Soul of Sex*. This kind of statement is not generally well-understood. (Someone told me after church, “I liked your sermon, but I don't care what you say – sex is about the body!”) I think that Moore is right, that our basic problem is that we have misunderstood what appetite sex really feeds – it is not just a physical, carnal, erotic appetite, but a much deeper, more holistic need. It is the appetite of our deepest self (flesh and spirit), which scriptures refers to as our “soul.”

¹² Miroslav Volf, “Freed from selfhood,” *The Christian Century*, January 24, 2001. Volf also comments, a little more graphically: “Sex therefore gets reduced to ‘the neurological effects of vascular congestion in the genitals,’ as one critic put it.”

thousand years ago Hindus of India carved into the walls of their temples erotic figures depicting “every imaginable sex act within a context of worship and prayer.” We squirm at this “Indecent Proposal.” How immoral! Perverse! Lewd!

Yet Thomas Moore wonders:

[why would] Indians put their sexual fantasies on temples while we give ours over to pornography. This is one of those questions that... if we could answer it, (he says), would pinpoint exactly what’s wrong with our culture.¹³

Other traditions within the Christian Church call marriage a sacrament. I believe they get it right, because they recognize that the heart of this thing, which is so important to the vitality of family and church and nation, is not a legal contract between consenting adults, but rather an offer of (an opportunity for) relationship that can lead us beyond the fulfillment of purely physical needs. A sacrament, by means of some outward act, points to an inward grace. When we give ourselves to one another, with “wild abandon,” there is much more to be found than physical ecstasy. Scripture insists that giving ourselves away, is the only way to find God.¹⁴

In sex, in marriage, in simple acts of self-less love, then,

May it Be So!

¹³ Moore, p.56. I am not suggesting that we should carve erotica into our sanctuaries (I don’t think Moore is, either), but recognizing that we have divorced sex and sexuality from the language and life of the Church may help us understand why we have, as a culture, such a fascination with its abuse outside (and, tragically, inside the Church as well).

¹⁴ “Theologian Sara Coakley has observed that whereas moderns think talk about desire for God is veiled talk about desire for sex, ancient Christians assumed the opposite – desire for sex is really veiled desire for God.” Jason Byassee, “Virgin territory,” *The Christian Century*, October 4, 2005, p.9.