

One Flesh: Sexuality, Scripture, and the Church

Session 1- Bodies, Souls, and Human Life: Our Creation in the Image of God

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Why This Course?

- We live in contentious times in our culture and in the Church.
- There is a probable separation coming in the United Methodist Church over issues of human sexuality, likely within a year
- Local churches will likely have to make decisions about their future and their affiliation
- Those decisions should be made with as much information, sensitivity, and care as possible

Human Sexuality

- The presenting issue, but it goes deeper into issues of biblical authority, worldviews, and theology
- We tend to hold certain positions on human sexuality, but we don't always know why
- We also tend to characterize those who disagree with us as less informed, unfaithful, or even evil without fully understanding their position.
- In order to make good decisions, and make them in a Christian way, we must be willing to listen, to understand, and to articulate what is before us

We are talking about people...

- Most importantly, when we are talking about “human sexuality,” we are talking about the lives of real people
- Setting up “straw men” is not helpful—real people tend to resist categorization
- We must think theologically and pastorally
- Ultimately, we must think and act as people who are “in Christ” no matter the position we hold

TLUMC Mission

- Building followers of Jesus Christ who love and serve God and neighbor.
- The key question: “How will we demonstrate love for God and love for our neighbors?”

Goals for the Course

- To understand the cultural hermeneutics surrounding 21st century western views of sexuality and marriage
- To present a theology of sexuality and marriage through the lenses of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience
- To enable people to articulate their particular position and posture through the lenses of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience
- To present, as clearly and accurately as possible, both the affirming and traditional views of homosexuality
- To consider a way forward in ministry with all people through modeling the ministry of Jesus

Guidelines

- Listen carefully, especially to the things with which you may disagree. The goal is understanding, not debate.
- Work at being able to articulate the views of the “other side” in their own words, as well as articulate your own position clearly
- Evaluate your emotional responses—what are you feeling and why are you feeling this way?
- Assume the best of everyone
- Avoid generalizations and straw men—speak with respect and compassion for all

The Pastoral Challenge

- There are people in the room with various views and with various stakes in the discussion. All of those views must be honored, even if there is disagreement.
- There are lots of other things I would rather talk about! But this is a necessary discussion as the church considers its approach to ministry and its future. It's important to have "the talk."
- I carry the burden of wanting to maintain the health and vitality of this church and desire, as much as possible, to keep this family together even when we might disagree on important issues.
- I also have my own position and took vows to uphold the doctrine and discipline of the church. I will do my best to hold that in tension with respect for those who disagree. I ask you to do the same.

Examining Our Lenses

Hermeneutics

- “Concerning interpretation, particularly of the Bible”
- Hermeneutics is the interpretive lens through which we view the Scriptures
- Hermeneutical lenses can include personal experience, cultural norms, education, age, denominational tradition, worldview, etc.
- It’s important to name these lenses for ourselves and then to understand them in others. And we must learn to evaluate them and even challenge them.

A Wesleyan Hermeneutic

- The so-called “Quadrilateral” (Albert Outler) - but not exactly
- **Scripture:** Primary - the witness of the text itself in its context
- **Tradition** - how the text has been read over time by the Church
- **Reason** - the logical capacity to discern meaning
- **Experience** - how the text gives one an assurance of salvation (the testimony of the Spirit) - but now it has come to mean personal experience

Worldview

- Overarching story that orders one's view of the world
- Like water to a fish—surrounds us and we don't often question it—it's what we breathe. Worldview creates values, norms, and assumptions that we may never question
- Worldview addresses what we believe “about the nature and significance of life itself” (Hauerwas)
- When worldviews collide, there is deep conflict—we are living that conflict now around the difference between a biblical worldview and a postmodern western worldview when it comes to sexuality
- Hermeneutics is a subset of our worldview—before we can interpret, we must become aware of what story we're living

**How We Got Here:
A Brief History of the
Western Worldview on Sex**

The Division of Truths

- Pre-modern cultures: a natural order and a moral order integrated into an overall unity
- Modern age (post-Enlightenment): reliable knowledge is possible of only the natural order—of empirically testable scientific facts
- A dualistic view of human life: body/mind, body/personhood, secular/sacred,

Cartesian Dualism

“I think, therefore, I am.”

MIND

A free, autonomous self

BODY

A mechanism operating by natural laws

Kantian Dualism

“Mind is the law-giver to nature.”

AUTONOMOUS SELF

Free to impose one's own interpretations on
the body

PHYSICAL BODY

Raw material with no intrinsic identity or
purpose

Person-Body Dualism

PERSONHOOD

Emotions, rationality, personality

BODY

Utilitarian, material object, machine

The “Religion” of Sex

- Sigmund Freud - sex as biological drive - “the main purpose of our entire mental apparatus.” Marriage is a “gross invasion” of sexual freedom
- Alfred Kinsey - Sex is “a normal biologic function, acceptable in whatever form it is manifested.”
- Wilhelm Reich - “The core of happiness in life is sexual happiness.”
- Michel Foucault - “Sex is worth dying for.” It is “more important than our soul.”

The Sexual Revolution

- Actually began in the 1920s - post-WWI
- The advent of “The Pill” more conveniently separated sex from procreation
- Sex as recreational activity, separate from marriage
- 60s and 70s - proliferation of sexual freedom in popular media
- 1968 - Stonewall Riots - LGBTQ rights demonstration
- 80s - AIDS epidemic
- 2015 - Obergefell v. Hodges - Supreme Court case legalizing same sex marriage

A Sexual Worldview

- Our culture sees sex as vital to human flourishing and sexual freedom as an inalienable right
- One has absolute autonomy over one's body and can do with it what he or she wills
- Human behavior is shaped by biological drives and instincts, therefore the liberation of sex becomes the pathway to salvation
- Our culture sees celibate singleness as an odd, unfortunate, and undesirable anomaly (i.e. *The Forty Year-Old Virgin*)

The Sexual Revolution and the Church

- The Church often becomes a mirror of the culture
- Prioritizing sex and marriage - “Sex is dirty—save it for the one you love.” Pressure for young people to marry and “legalize” fulfillment of sexual needs
- “Purity” culture - calls youth to abstain but gives them no alternative other than “wait” - an inadequate sexual ethic
- Undervaluing celibate singleness (odd given that Jesus and Paul were both single)
- Conflict over LGBTQ+ inclusion
- We have tended to adopt and adapt to sexual norms in the culture

The Religion of Sex and the Church

- Pornography - 2/3 of Christian men watch, same rate as non-Christians
- Cohabitation - 49% of teens with religious backgrounds support it
- Divorce - 60% of people who identify as Christians but rarely attend church; 38% of regular church-goers

- Percy , *Love Thy Body* (p. 11)

Hacking a Hermeneutic

- Given this worldview, it's little wonder that our biblical hermeneutics on sexuality are often affected by the world around us, our experiences, our relationships, and our own desires
- The Bible's worldview can seem odd, out of place, restrictive, even cruel and unusual through a cultural lens that values sexual freedom
- But what if we reverse that lens? What if we evaluate the postmodern worldview through the interpretive lens of the Bible and its worldview?
- If the Bible is authoritative for us (the Wesleyan hermeneutic) then we must turn that lens upon the issue of sexuality, allowing that it may alter our worldview and hermeneutics no matter what position we currently hold.

Humanity, the Image of God, and Sexuality in the Bible

The Worldview of the Ancient Near East

- A polytheistic worldview - many gods who controlled the physical world
- World was created as a result of conflict between the gods
- Humans created as slaves of the gods, to do the gods bidding and keep them satisfied
- Kings and pharaohs were the “image” of a particular god, that god’s earthly representative
- Human nature - immanent with gods and nature

The Worldview of the Bible

- Genesis = a revolution in worldview
- One God, creates with a word (not out of conflict) - brings order instead of chaos - building a cosmic temple
- Day 6 - creates humanity - “image and likeness” given to all humans (not just a king) and given to male and female
- Reflection of divine community - singularity and community, similarity and difference
- Invested with the vocation of having “dominion” over the earth - to be kings/queens and priests in God’s earthly temple

Human creation

- Embodied - created as a unified person for life and vocation in God's creation
 - “Dust” and “breath” - material and spiritual
- Male and female (Genesis 1:26-27) - sexual difference, complementarity, equality
- Vocation - not slaves but royal regents
- Embodied-ness is not a curse, it is essential - “I am embodied, therefore, I am.”

A Unified View of Personhood

- Embodied creation means that the body is an indivisible aspect of human personhood
- The endgame of humanity is resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15)
- What we do with the body matters, including our sexual conduct (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)
- God, as Creator, has ultimate claim on how we use our bodies because God made them

Wesley on the “Image of God”

- **Natural Image** - a spiritual being endowed with understanding, freedom of the will, and various affections
- **Political Image** - to be “governor(s) of the lower world, having dominion over...all the earth.”
- **Moral Image** - “righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24)

The “Chief End” of Humanity

- “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” - *Westminster Shorter Catechism*
- The human pursuit (contra Freud, et. al.) is not pleasure, but the image of God—to glorify God with our lives, including our bodies
- Our ultimate sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment is found in the image of God—the key to human flourishing
- Chesterton: “The man knocking on the door of a brothel is looking for God.”
- Wesley - “The One Thing Needful” - renewal in the image of God

Sex in Biblical Context

- A biblical theology of sex will view it through the lens of God's intention in creation and God's ultimate goal of bringing forth new creation in Christ
- It will view humanity as being created in the image of God, but account also for the fallen nature of humanity and the "messy" nature of human life this side of God's kingdom
- It will put sexuality in its proper perspective—as one aspect of human life, not its ultimate end

Sex in Context

- The biblical context for sexual expression is in marriage (the vast majority of affirming and traditional scholars agree on this)
- The questions at hand are:
 - What is the missional purpose of marriage? What does it mean?
 - Can this missional purpose include same-sex marriages?
 - Why or why not?
- We will begin to dive into these important questions next week as we look at arguments from both sides and the relevant biblical texts

That's why discussing sexuality matters...

- Discussing sexuality, marriage, same-sex marriage, etc. isn't a peripheral issue—it's vitally important both theologically and anthropologically
- It's important because we're talking about people who are made in God's image
- It's important because we want to do our best to honor God and to honor the humanity of all those whom God loves and has created
- We may not come to conclusions satisfactory to all, but we will all be enlightened, enriched, and challenged by having the discussion