

Faith Mennonite Church
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Body & Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God
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Honoring the Gift of Sex

I did not choose to preach on this topic. Before I knew the subjects, I had chosen this date as most convenient. I have chosen four passages from the Bible and will make a few comments and read a poem relating to each.

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ¹⁹ So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said,

*"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."*

²⁴ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2.18-25)

I looked to the tradition of my roots, the Moravian Church, especially Count Zinzendorf, our leading theological thinker. Zinzendorf was a German nobleman and clergyman who lived from 1700 to 1760. He argued that the distinction between male and female was established as part of creation in Paradise; therefore sexuality must be intrinsically good and everlasting. Marriage was not a response to the expulsion from Eden or a response to the punishment of death. Sex was created by God from the beginning to be a sacrament to express the soul's primary and everlasting relationship with Christ. Whatever the "original sin" was, it was not sexual intercourse, according to Zinzendorf, since there was sex before Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Zinzendorf also criticized the traditional teaching that marriage is only for procreation, asserting that childless couples are still married in the eyes of God. Children are a blessing of marriage, but the primary purpose of sexual union was to make Christ's love visible. Marriage was to be a sacrament, a means of grace that displayed physically Christ's love for his bride, the church.

I read a poem by John David Burton, an American poet and Presbyterian pastor who died about ten years ago. I think this poem speaks especially to our culture, which often tells us something is wrong with how we look and we need to buy something to fix it.

To a Woman Who Likes to Sleep Naked with Me

"They were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed." (Gen. 2:25)

You eschew negligees
of silky black, lacy white, and satiny pink.
You come with me, wet-toweled, from shower
to sheets, there to nestle into our bodies'
curves, as through to say,
"I am here; what you see is what you get."
Thus we meet, as did that Eden pair, available
to each other in the order designed by God.

There remains in you mystery other women seek
—and some men need—to have enhanced by filmy

gown. There are parts of you I have yet to know,
perceptive mind, will for service in the world.
whimsical humor to see the absurdity in me.

If ever you choose to clothe yourself in any
“see-through” for our time together, I will be
glad for whatever you choose to wear, variety
being the spice of life. Still, I am pleased you
sense no fragile fabric as defense, thus eschew
silky black, lacy white, and satiny pink.

My Scripture study suggests that the Genesis
writer is concerned with more than sleep.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.³⁰ The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. . .³⁸ Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1.26-31, 38)

The Bible frequently says that God’s relationship to the Jews and Christ’s relationship to the church are like marriage. This is troublesome because of the general assumption in the culture from which our Bible comes that the man rules over the woman. But we can perhaps still profit from that metaphor of relationship. Here are the last lines of a prayer sonnet, “Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God,” by John Donne, a poet, Anglican minister, and contemporary of Shakespeare.

Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto Your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free;
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

The Christian tradition of the virgin birth of Jesus troubles many because it has often been understood to say that sexual relations are bad. This poem, also by John David Burton, sees this rather as an expression of a need of God:

God + Mary = Jesus

A Christmas Poem

“God sent his son, born of a woman.” (Gal. 4:4)

God, we have found You out, learned You could
not do on Your own what You wanted done above
all else, to let Yourself be seen in a Form so
fair that human eyes would look again, again, and
yet again, to let Your Voice be heard in a voice
so clear that—above the sounds of hate—human
ears would listen, listen for the love.

All of this You wanted, and You could not do it
on Your Own, unable—earthworm like—to
reproduce Yourself with Yourself alone. Even You,
the Lord of Life, cannot do it on Your Own.

For You to be made Flesh, a peasant girl is needed, a girl quite like all the women ever born to bear daughters and sons, to nurse them in the night, watch them grow, then let them go to a world which often slays the children.

You, O Lord, cannot come among us except as You are birthed as we are birthed, "of a woman made."
You, Who rounded earth in the hollow of Your Hand, could not come to earth except as You were willing to round the belly, swell the womb of a peasant girl.

All year long the preacher's word tells of God, high and holy and lifted up, apart from us.
The Christmas word is "God Plus Mary Equals Jesus."

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." (John 2.1-10)

Here is a quotation of Zinzendorf on the picture of Christians, the church, being married to Jesus: "All souls are Sisters. He knows that secret; he has made all souls; the soul is his wife. He has formed no *animos*, no manly souls among human souls, only *animas*, [feminine] souls, who are his Bride, candidates of rest in his arms. . . . Therefore it is not only women who enjoy the mystical marriage. A man can also act 'as a consort, as a playmate for the marriage bed of the blessed Creator and eternal Husband of the human soul.'"

What this language does, though it feels very strange to us, is to play with all gender distinctions. Men are "women" married to Christ; men and women are equal as the "bride" of Christ.

Another Burton poem sees Jesus, the unmarried one, as one who brings joy to life.

Member of the Wedding

"There was a marriage at Cana in Galilee . . . and Jesus was invited to the marriage." (John 2:1)

Strange and passing strange
that they should ask Jesus to the wedding.
Do they, doubting He will have a wedding of his own,
want to offer Him a part of joy in theirs?
Perhaps they think His presence will bless them
on their special day, as he blesses beggars and
children in the streets of every town.

What does Jesus think of the invitation?
Does He think of the wife He is never to have,

of children of His own never to be born?
Perhaps He has to settle for the hope that,
because of Him, every man will be a better
lover/husband/father, every woman more willing
to take a chance on loving and being loved,
children beyond number cared for in the Name of
Him Who had no child of His own loins, no son
nor any daughter to show in pride to Mary.

Maybe Jesus is invited to be nice to the village
Son Who never seems to have much fun, the parents
of the bride thinking that a day of celebration
will make up for all the dull, drab days in the
carpenter shop and the dusty travels with those
who are called disciples.
How could they know, how could we know, that
Once Jesus is let in, for an hour or for a day,
they and we will never again settle for
anything less than joy?

Strange and passing strange, that
they and we should invite Jesus to the wedding.

*⁶ Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.*

*⁷ Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of one's house,
it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Solomon 8:6-7)*

Here are some reflections on marriage from a recent article in *Sojourners* by pastor-theologian Martha Thistlethwaite:

‘God is in the connections’ is a point Beverly Harrison, the noted ethicist and theologian, makes so well in her book *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. With the ‘power of relation to sustain us . . . we can learn what we need to know. Christian love—both God’s love for us and ours for God and each other—means this: that we discover and experience . . . a new wellspring of caring that fuels our passion.’ . . . This kind of passionate connection should be at the heart of the commitment of love in marriage. The ‘holiness’ of holy matrimony comes from this kind of sacramental practice. It is not given to a couple, any couple, whatever their sexual orientation, by virtue of a pastor like me saying the words over them in a sanctuary, though the promises couples make to each other in marriage ceremonies are very important. But these are not ‘once for all’ kinds of promises. I tell couples (and myself!) that they must choose to be married every day. Every day you have to get up and decide to perform this holiness, giving and receiving, confessing wrong and forgiving wrong, caring enough to stand by in sickness and in health, and talking it through.”

Screwtape Letters, by C. S. Lewis, a twentieth-century British academic and lay theologian, is a series of letters from one devil to another, about their task of turning people from God. In Letter IX, we read the following, from the devil’s perspective: “Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and

satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures; all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden."

A final poem of John David Burton, about his relation to his wife:

Once, As She Was Dying

Once, as she was dying, Jean said,
"Get in bed with me."
The night nurse had left early, the
day nurse would be late, no children
were at home. At 5:30 in the morning
I sat in my bathrobe by her hospital
bed in the back of our house.

Disconnecting IV tubes, taking off
my bathrobe, I slipped into bed by
her. She said,
"We have had good times in bed."
I replied, "You bet we have."
She said,
"We will not make love again, but we
have had a lot of love."
I answered her,
"We have love. We do not need to make it."

We were there a little while, holding
hands and being quiet, remembering more
than forty years. Then I kissed her and
got up, being careful of her body, wasted
by Myeloma, connecting IV tubes, putting
on my bathrobe, then sitting down beside
her bed to hold her hand again.

Once, as she lay dying,
Jean said, "Get in bed with me."

(Poems are from John David Burton, *There Is More to Loving a Woman* [Ontos Books, 1988].)