

Faith Mennonite Church
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Body & Soul: Healthy Sexuality for the People of God
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Intimacy: From longing to commitment to trust

Ruth; Genesis 2:15-18; 21-23; Romans 12:9-15

I recently heard a story on a radio program discussing the developmental tasks of 20-year-olds in our culture. A therapist told of a young woman, in her 20s, who came for counseling as she was trying to find direction for her life. The young woman was living with a boyfriend but it was more a relationship of financial convenience than commitment. One day, upon arrival for a session, the young woman broke down crying. When the therapist inquired about what was going on, the young woman explained that she had gotten a new address book. She carefully copied over all the names and contact information from her previous book to the new, but when she got to the page that said: "In case of emergency, contact: _____" she lost it. Although she was sharing a bed with a man, she had no one, including him, that she trusted sufficiently to list in that category.

This was a defining moment for the woman, and, with the help and urging of her therapist, it set her in a new direction. In a relatively short time, she networked and found a professional opportunity in another state, which gave her an excuse to leave the unhealthy relationship she was in and begin building relationships based on respect, commitment, and trust. Sometime later, she communicated back to the therapist that her work was fulfilling, she had met someone with whom she had made a life-long commitment, and they were expecting a child.

Last Sunday we began our series on healthy sexuality by claiming and naming our physical bodies as good, as a reflection of the image of God. The creation story from the first chapter of Genesis was one of our reference points. In that story the creation of male and female appears as a singular event in the text: "male and female they were created." But the creation story we find in the second chapter of Genesis provides a more dramatic narrative, highlighting the central role that *relationship* plays in defining who we are as humans. It is a story that seeks to fill in the blank: "In case of emergency, contact: _____."

In Genesis 2 (which we have not read today, but was one of our summer readings) God begins creating just one human—*adam*, the earthling, made of soil. God notices that the earthling is lonely and sets to create companions. God brings forth animals—land animals, sea creatures, flying birds (and probably fruit flies), and God lets the earthling name each one. Naming, in the ancient Hebrew worldview, was a way of knowing, of relating. Yet none of these animals satisfied the earthling's loneliness.

So God goes back to work and this time, God creates another human, not from the earth, but from the very human. This new human, a woman, *Ishshah*, in Hebrew, joins *Ish*, the man, as a partner and strong support. And the editor who crafted these ancient stories summarized with these words: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh [or one kin]. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:24-25).

All of us, throughout our lives, in our 20s and in our 70s, whether we are single or are partnered, whether we are gay or straight, experience the loneliness and the deep longing of our mythic ancestor *adam* for intimacy and companionship. Ronald Rolheiser, in his book *Holy Longing: The Search for Christian Spirituality*, defines this longing for intimacy as sexuality. He writes that "Sexuality is an all-encompassing energy inside of us. [...] It is the drive for love, communion, community, friendship, family, affection, wholeness, consummation, creativity, self-perpetuation, joy, delight, humor, and self-transcendence" (Doubleday 1999, p. 194). (Who said sexuality was just about sex?!)

What a lovely list! And what a helpful framework for thinking about sexuality as intimacy and relationship. Intimacy and relational longing are not simply a matter of finding a life partner, are not simply about romance or a sexual relationship. Rather they encompass the broad spectrum of relationships that help us grow into healthy human beings. We experience intimacy in our infancy as flesh to flesh we receive nourishment from our mother's breasts and cradle protected in our father's loving arms. We experience intimacy as growing children as our parents and extended family and friends let us listen in on difficult conversations and model committed,

covenantal love and respect for diverse opinions. We experience intimacy in early adolescence, when we share secrets with best friends—and sometimes get betrayed. And certainly our development leads us to a time when intimacy includes sexual attraction, the discovery of a spark that draws us to another in ways that are beyond words.

But even when we arrive at a point of a covenanted relationship, in which we make a life-long commitment to another, joining body, heart, and mind, the intimacy that is shared sexually is only one part of the broad array of sexuality that Rolheiser describes. And, if we never bind ourselves sexually with a life partner, or if we lose a spouse through death or divorce, we can live vitalized, whole lives through relationships with family members, friends and here in our community of faith. This is not to say that such life is without struggle and on-going longing. And certainly we know that any enduring human partnerships will weather periods of intense struggle.

I also want to acknowledge here that some of us have experienced deep violations of boundaries at some point in our lives and these experiences bring lasting pain that affect our ability to seek and find the intimacy for which we long. One of our callings as a community of faith is to be present to one another in acknowledging, confessing, and building the quality of respectful relationships that allow us, together, to seek healing and offer forgiveness where it is appropriate.

The story of Ruth is compelling because it portrays the intimacy of trust and commitment—the Hebrew notion of *hesed*—in these various dimensions: family, friends, and community. There is no single English word that captures the rich meaning of *hesed*. Our English Bibles often render it as “loving kindness.” One rather wordy translation I found on the internet defined it as “the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, ... love of ... God” [<http://www.hesed.com/hesed.html>]. This notion of *hesed* is central to Jewish ethics and theology and a primary Jewish virtue.

When Naomi is returning to Israel, after her sojourn in Moab, during which time her spouse and both sons died, her daughter-in-law Ruth binds herself to her mother-in-law in words that depict *hesed*:

*Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried.*

There are a number of things to notice in this beautiful passage of commitment. First, it is spoken by the foreigner! It is one of many examples in the Bible where tables get turned and outsiders become an example to the insiders. Ruth, the Moabite, utters this Hebrew *hesed* commitment. Second, this is a covenant expression, rather than a contract, for we don't find Naomi explicitly reciprocating. Ruth binds herself to a woman who, we would likely describe today as one who is traumatized. Despite Ruth's presence and commitment, Naomi re-introduces herself to her Bethlehem friends upon her return, as Mara, the bitter one who has come back empty-handed. But it is Ruth's covenant love and persistent presence that win the day.

In the next portion of the story, as Ruth goes to glean, to find food for herself and Naomi, we find an expression of *hesed* in the wider community. Boaz, the land-owner, recognizes Ruth's vulnerability but has also heard through the grapevine of her *hesed* toward her mother-in-law. He steps in to offer protection. The text suggests that women who were out gleaning without the protection of a spouse or family members might be physically vulnerable. That vulnerability is magnified, as we know so well today from stories of human trafficking, for women who are foreigners. Boaz gives strict instructions to his male laborers to respect Ruth and the other gleaning women.

Boaz continues to show respect by treating Ruth as the widow of a next of kin, regardless of her foreign status, and going through the proper steps to bind himself to her in marriage. In that ancient context of levirate marriage, the children that Ruth would bear would technically be the descendant and heir of her first husband rather than of her spouse Boaz. So, as Ruth made a covenant of *hesed* to Naomi, so Boaz makes a covenant of *hesed* to Ruth as he joins her in marriage. The compassionate commitment of these characters leads to the final scene of a new, multi-generational family unit, sharing in the joy of new life.

The portrayal of sexuality in the popular culture that surrounds us is so often about bodies as a symbol and so seldom about *hesed*—loving kindness in a wide range of relationships. In an article someone shared with me from a book titled *Promises to keep*, the author wrote:

Much of the power of sex over us is the promise it holds of the intimacy we long for. Sex means the other person is naked to me, without protective cover, totally available. Sex means full freedom to see and to be seen, to touch and to be touched, to be so close as to have full body contact [...]. This is an immense comfort. Sex is a wonderful symbol of intimacy. But, as we know, symbols can be empty of real meaning.

For what we *really* want is to enjoy this kind of togetherness at an emotional/spiritual level. We can have sex with someone we hardly know, and it feels very good physically yet leaves us still lonely when it is over. By contrast, we can share our very souls with someone else and end by feeling wonderfully close and cared for, though there has been no physical contact at all. This reaches a deeper level of need and its satisfaction abides longer. Sex has a powerful hold on our psyches precisely because it suggests and symbolizes all this, speaking unconsciously to our profound longing. When sex *goes with* a real heart-to-heart communing of persons, as the bodily expression and celebration of that more inward sharing of life, it is at its most exciting and satisfying (13-14).

We are made for intimacy. As children of a God who loves with *hesed* covenant love, as followers of Jesus, who bound himself to a community of disciples and friends, let us seek in all of our relationships to proceed in respect, in trust and commitment, so that we will grow more deeply in our relationships with one another and with the divine, that our desire for unity and companionship will be genuinely fulfilled.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (12:9-10; 15).