

Love or Lust? Gratefully Feeding or Greedily Consuming?
Based on 1Thessalonians 3:12-4:12, 5:12-15, David Jahnke, 11/16/14

So when I looked at the lectionary which provides scripture readings for worship, I saw that the part of chapter four in Thessalonians which we read today was skipped over. I was like, “Thank you Lord for skipping over the section about sex.” Talking about sex is kind of awkward anywhere so you can imagine having to talk about it in church. But as the week went on, my conscience would not let me avoid this. Sexuality runs too deep in our biology and our psychology and our theology as well to avoid.

Paul did not avoid it. He wrote to about it quite a bit about this as it was an issue in Hellenistic culture. There was a clash of cultures regarding Greek and Jewish culture in this regard. And for Paul this had everything to do with the holiness and love of God. Let me say up front that there is nothing profane about sex. In fact, I think it is meant to be the most holy of acts. It is about two people completely giving themselves to each other in love; it is about communion. It is meant to be life-giving whether new biological life is conceived or not.

God conceived life out of love in the beginning. Dare I say, God pro-created the world out of his love and holiness? God is pro-- for and toward-- creation—for and toward the object of God’s love.

Since the world came out of a holy God, holiness is deep within all things. It is 1. the remnant of the Creator, 2. the presence of the redeemer Jesus who took on the stuff of the world to restore the remnant, and 3. the power of the Holy Spirit underlying and sustaining all things and drawing us out of the profane and into the Kingdom of Heaven. There we receive order and holiness through sanctifying or setting apart time for study and prayer and worship and true fellowship.

These are all Kingdom training for our often unruly bodies. NT Wright wrote about St. Francis who called his body “Brother Donkey:”

It was a beloved part of St. Francis and yet it often seemed to have a mind of its own. It needed taming, a bringing into obedience, as one would teach a large and headstrong animal to do as it was told.

[But] our modern world has turned sexual desire...and practice into a moral free-for-all, where the only rule is that people must be allowed to express whatever desire happens to arise or be aroused within them. For Paul, as with all Jewish and early Christian teachers of moral behavior, that is like saying that you must allow

the donkey or horse, unbroken and untamed, to leap about in all directions, endangering rider and onlookers alike and doing no useful work.” [From N.T. Wright’s New Testament For Everyone, 1 Thess. 4:1-12]

The belief in holiness— that there is something other than molecules bouncing off of one another-- and the Kingdom training of our bodies brings self-control. And the order and peace that we find is such a blessing. But then, just as Jesus descended to the earth at Christmas, we are sent back into a wild world to stir and bring to the surface the holiness and divine order deep within others.

And we all know how much this is needed. Because just as the Greek world of Paul’s day was not exactly restrained regarding sex, the same goes for our own culture. The dark aspects of this have been unleashed through the secrecy and anonymity of the internet.

Here are a couple of stats on the damage being done to families:

- 68% of divorces involve one party meeting someone secretly over the internet.
- 56% involve one party having an “obsessive interest” in pornographic websites.
- \$16.9 Billion lost annually through lost workplace productivity due to watching pornography during work. And of course billions and more billions more goes to a destructive industry.
- And there were lots of scary stats re: youth so parents of adolescents, get an internet filter, period.

Let me repeat that this is not about suppressing sexuality. It is about returning it to its holy roots. It is a reminder that sex is about love, not lust; giving and caring and committing, not taking and using and dismissing. It is meant to bring wholeness, and glad hearts, not broken-ness and guilty ones.

When personal spiritual discipline brings self-control, the blessing spreads to our homes. Because if we have trouble with our own body, you can imagine the trouble that two bodies that have been wed together can create. I came across this Oswald Chambers quote the other day.

“I may get irritated because I have to live with an unusually difficult person. *You never think that, do you Hailey? Just last night, I did not practice what I am preaching. Lord in your mercy...* “I may get irritated because I have to live with an unusually difficult person. But just think how disagreeable I have been with God! Am I prepared to be identified so closely with the Lord Jesus that His life and His sweetness will be continually poured out through Me?” [My Utmost for His Highest]

Getting irritated with those to whom we have become bodily connected is natural but whether we have gained self-control determines what comes next. We can get angry and bitter which leads to unholy separation or brokenness which in turn can lead to infidelity in mind or even body.

Or we can follow the Holy Spirit and not repay wrong with wrong and instead calmly set ourselves apart— sanctifying yourself— this allows you to return to your other half with grace and sweetness, rather than angst and animosity.

Before my final illustration, I have a quick word for the single and to those called to celibacy either for a certain period of time or for their whole lives/ among us. You have a special and higher calling in this regard— one shared by Jesus and Paul and many of the early women in the church. God will reward you for your faithfulness in heaven. May he do so here on earth with abundant affection from families and friends and a particular anointing of His Spirit.

Now to my last point which is about the mutuality and fulfillment of true love-making. This represents the mutuality—how giving and receiving become intertwined-- and fulfillment of the making or doing of love in the world. This is our participation in the divine who is Giver, Gift and Giving.

I watched a documentary last night about an innocent man who was convicted of murdering his wife. He said that in his first few years in prison, he could not help but plot acts of revenge against the coroner and district attorney and lead investigator who distorted and/or withheld evidence and went after the wrong guy for no good reason.

And 13 years or so into his sentence, his son told him he did not want to come anymore. And then the son let him know that he had changed his name. The man had nothing left. And he cried out for the first time in his life for God. And at first there was nothing. But 10 days or 2 weeks later, he was listening to the radio in bed and harp music came on the classical station. And he was suddenly showered with golden light and tremendous love filled him.

He spoke then of needing to let this light and love filter into his life...which took some time. But eventually, he started doing things for his fellows inmates—in addition to kind words, he would surprise them with little gifts from the store; especially those who did not have anything. In receiving life, gift-giving started to pour out of him. And in this gift-giving he received fulfillment, even before he was freed. [From “An Unreal Dream, The Michael Morton Story”]

This is the power of love at work. It makes us realize the gifts all around us every day not to mention with us—we have so much goodness and giftedness within-- even if perhaps it sometimes seems like we are in prison. Every day can become a Christmas— a Christ-mass of God’s love which opens us up to receive all of life’s gift, including ourselves just as God made us!! And at the same time we receive Love, Love places us on our knees to offer all life’s gifts back to God.

So to the Giver of all good gifts; the one in whom there is no shadow of change be all the power and the glory, now and forevermore. And God’s people say...