

People Like Us: Love Appropriately
Exodus 20:1-14

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A few years ago one of my Preacher Camp buddies and I took a “Lectionary Sabbatical.” We thought that during that year we would just turn things upside down. Normally in planning my sermon I start with the Biblical story and see what it has to say to our world. But that year we thought we would start with the world’s story and see how it impacts the biblical story.

What we found was that the world is fighting to reclaim their festivals. Take Christmas. Very few biblical scholars believe that Jesus was born in December. All we have to read is that great line, *“And there were in the same country shepherds, keeping watch over their flock by night.”* Shepherds don’t keep watch over their flock by night in December! Even in Israel it is too cold!

No, what happened was that the Roman world had a big celebration in December for the Winter Solstice. The church just baptized it, took it over and called it Christmas! But now, Christmas is less about Jesus than it is about Santa! The pagans are fighting back!

That happens a lot!

Take Valentines Day. The Romans celebrated a fertility festival called Lupercalia that made Mardi Gras look like a Downton Abbey tea party. The church baptized it to make it more respectable, named it is named for a monk who was killed. Well, at least that is one of the legends. There were several Saint Valentines in the ancient world. One was killed for performing a wedding for you couples after Emperor Claudius II banned marriage, believing that it was causing a downturn in the quality of soldiers. Pope Gelasius declared February 14 as the day to celebrate, choosing this day because spring was associated with love and romance, and they believed that February 14 was the day when birds began mating.

But it took commerce to make it the day we know! The first Valentine Day cards showed up in Europe in the 1700. Over 1 billion cards are given every year—many of them in kindergarten classrooms where everyone must give everyone a card—but 1 billion! That is more than any other time of the year other than Arbor Day! (OK, you know that would be Christmas! But maybe Arbor Day cards could be a growth industry. You could be an early adopter!)

It is a commercial holiday! 62% of the population will celebrate this day with candy, flowers, greeting cards. We will spend more than \$20 billion on Valentine’s Day. And to cement the holiday of love, about 6 million couples get engaged on this most romantic of days!!¹

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=neb7dbPW0Sk>

But like the namesake of that day, we know that much of that love will die tragically! Maybe you have heard the statistics. 40% of all marriages in Canada end in divorce by the 30th year of marriage.² It is almost like the minister before saying, “I pronounce you man and wife,” should just flip a coin! 20% of all our population report that their parents are separated or divorced. 56% of all children live in a single parent household.

There are all kinds of reasons, but the truth is that the promise “*to be faithful to you alone,*” is so often broken. A recent study by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 37 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 35 think “*sex between two adults who have no intention of establishing a relationship*” is morally wrong. 37%³? That is all?

Do you see how it runs up against this commandment?

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

This is different from the commandment last week—Thou shalt not kill. As we mentioned, that really isn’t an issue for us. Killing is not something that we do—not in this church.

But this one?

This one hits a bit close to home.

Statistically speaking, there is someone in this room who has betrayed their spouse. Statistically speaking, there is someone in this room who has been betrayed by their spouse. There is no doubt in my mind that there are those in this room who, as a child, have been the victims of parents who broke this commandment. One of them is preaching this morning. This word, this commandment hits home!

And because it hits home the church has tended to not speak about it. We don’t want to offend that Sunday School teacher, that generous church member. Even when it hits really really close to home at church, when a pastor has an affair, we rarely talk about it. At least in public. The whispers flow through the halls, in the parking lot, in the grocery store. We might talk about it at denominational meetings, but we never speak of it from the pulpit.

We don’t talk about it because we have built a wall of separation between church and sex. I was talking with one of my Preacher Camp friends this week and was challenged to mention Playboy in my sermon—a scandalous thing! Cause you just don’t talk about that at church! I said I was wondering if I would say “intercourse, penis and vagina!” But of course, you can’t say that in church! Not in a sermon! We just don’t talk about that! We have taken that part of our lives and placed it in a closet. But more and more it won’t stay there. Sexuality is a part of every aspect of our lives. Have you watched TV recently? Seen any ads?

<https://vanierinstitute.ca/in-focus-2019-coupling-uncoupling-and-marital-status/>

³ <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/02/how-views-of-sex-have-changed-since-2005/462159/>

So what are we to do? How are we to live in this world, one so saturated by sexuality while at the same time being people of The Way? How are we to walk that razor thin line between being prudish and being pagans celebrating Lupercalia?

May I suggest that it begins in understanding the world in which this commandment was given. It was a different world from ours! In that world the family was the economic and social center of life. It was a patriarchal world where the man was the head of the clan. Women, children—they were not unlike the cow and the ox and the slave. They were property, something the man owned! Note that this commandment falls just before the prohibition of stealing, before coveting what your neighbor owns.

This commandment is about interfering sexually with another man's marriage. In that world you could only commit adultery against another man. It wasn't committing adultery **with** another man's wife, or **against** your own. A woman could not commit adultery. No, it was about taking something that belonged to another man.

That was a disruption, not only in the family, but in society! And they took it very seriously. The punishment was death! And not a private revenge, a shooting in the night. No, the guilty parties would be subject to a public stoning! Read Deuteronomy 22! So much for the inerrancy of scripture! I don't hear anyone calling for stoning for adultery, and I am definitely not, but it does stress that the health of the family was important—not only to them, but to all of society.

Too often we have fallen into a laissez-faire attitude that what happens between two consenting adults in the privacy of their home really doesn't affect the rest of us, and we shouldn't judge. A wonderful attitude, but it really has nothing to do with reality! What happens between people is never just between them! It always affects others! And in this regard the breakdown of family has been disastrous.

In 1992 the Vice President of the US came under fire when he took on Murphy Brown, a TV character. Murphy was a single mother raising her baby on her own. Everyone, and I mean pretty much everyone made fun of the vice president for his fight with a TV character.

The next year however, The Atlantic ran a cover story with the headline, "*Dan Quayle was right!*"⁴ In the years since we have seen the results. We are seeing an alarming rise in the number of young single mothers. While there are exceptions, children born to single mothers are more likely to live in poverty, fail in school, and have run ins with law enforcement. Those are not judgements, just the numbers.

What happens at home does not stay at home!

That is the truth.

But it is also the truth that we have moved a long long way from the belief that women and children are the property of a man! At least I want to think that!

But time and time again we see that belief still rears its head. We see it in a culture where rape is not uncommon. There are 460,000 sexual assaults in Canada ever year. 1 out

⁴ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1993/04/dan-quayle-was-right/307015/>

of every 3 Canadian woman will be the victim of a rape or attempted rape in her lifetime.⁵ This week the CBC did a report which stated that 15% of female teens reported being sexually assaulted; 9% of males.⁶ 39% of Canadian adult women reported having had at least one experience of sexual assault since the age of 16. And as a male, I just can't comprehend what that does! I don't look over my shoulder when walking through a parking lot.

We see it in a pornographic culture where women, and often men, are objectified, turned into objects for our pleasure. It was not that long ago when pornography was something you only saw when you found your father's Playboy. Now it is a mouse click away.

And it isn't only pictures. It is the music we hear, the shows we watch, the messages we give and receive. And many times we are completely oblivious.

It was by far the biggest fight Alison and I ever had. She was a sophomore in high school, on the dance team, and came home one day announcing that the team was going to be performing at the basketball game. They had been working on a dance to a new song by Nelly. "It's getting hot in hot in here!"

Well, being the over-protective, authoritarian, prudish, mean father that I am, I looked up the song, read the words. *"Its gettin hot in here (so hot) So take off all your clothes. I am gettin so hot, I wanna take my clothes off."*⁷ I read the words, and told Alison that she wasn't going to be doing that. She said, "But we are doing the dance."

I reminded her of the importance of pronouns. **They** might be, but **she** was not.

This argument went on for several days, including a call to the faculty advisor explaining why my teenage daughter was not going to be dancing at halftime of a basketball game in front of hormone laden teenage boys to a song that said *I wanna take off my clothes*.

I was not popular! But at times that is what we have to do! Parents, there are times when we have to decide what message we want to give our children about their bodies! There are times when as a church we have to be clear about how we act. We have to remind ourselves that we don't commit adultery—we *don't break our marriage vows*. We have to say to our children, our teenagers, *"We don't sext, we don't send naked pictures of ourselves to others on our phone."* Never thought I'd have to say that in a sermon, but many times we don't say it! And we have to!

But it isn't just about what we don't do! It's about what we do!

Let me be very clear. Our sexuality is a gift from God. It is the very first gift that we were given. It is very good! I believe it is the most powerful gift that we have been given, for when used appropriately it has the power to take us to the gates of heaven. When misused it will take us to the very gates of hell!

⁵ <http://sacha.ca/resources/statistics>

⁶ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/marketplace-school-violence-sexual-violence-1.5329520>

⁷ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/nelly/hotinherre.html>

So with anything that powerful, we need some principals by which to live. What is needed is for the church, our church, us, to have a clear sexual ethic by which we can guide our lives, our actions.

It needs to be a flat ethic, one that pertains to everyone. Part of our confusion has been this idea that we have one ethic for teenagers and another for 30 year olds; one ethic for married adults and another for single adults; one for heterosexual individuals and another for gays and lesbians. We need an ethic that works for everyone. Especially in a world where children are becoming sexually mature earlier and earlier yet delaying marriage later and later. What is the word for them? How do they, how do we make decisions?

We need an ethic that recognizes that we are sexual beings. We don't just have bodies, we are bodies. It is through our bodies that we experience the world. And it is through our bodies that we communicate to our world. Our sexuality is one way we communicate. What we say...that is what matters.

In a wonderful dissertation that sits on my shelf,⁸ I suggest that every relationship will have some physical expression. It may be shaking hands, hugging, kissing. But the physical expression of the relationship should never exceed the commitment, the communication, the trust, the responsibility in the relationship.

We see that all the time. Last week I took Anita and our friend Amy Butler to the airport. Amy was in for a quick visit and returning home, Anita was off to visit her mother and our children. As I said goodbye to them I gave Anita a kiss. A good kiss, right there on the sidewalk. Totally appropriate!

But when I said goodbye to Amy.... I gave her a hug. If I had given her a kiss....well THAT would have something totally different!

The physical expression of the relationship should never exceed the commitment: is this a permanent relationship or just some body for right now?

The communication: What do you talk about? Can you share what's on your heart and soul, can you talk about what you are doing, how it feels? Have you prayed about what you are doing?

The trust—do you trust this person? Do you trust them to be around in the tough times?

The responsibility: do you feel responsible for the other mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually?

It's not just about intercourse! It is Friday night Tonsil Hockey, about how we treat or mistreat our friends. It is what we are saying with our bodies, with ourselves.

Our world is telling us a story about sex and love—many times confusing the two. The world is telling us a story about bodies and persons—as if they are not connected. The world tells us that what is important is the wedding, but the marriage not so much!

⁸ William Donald Flowers, Jr. *Sexual Ethic for Parents: Constructing an Educational Conversation*. Dissertation. Candler School of Theology, Emory University, 2000. 208.

But our story? Our story is different!
Our story says that people like us don't commit adultery;
we don't take relationships lightly;
 we don't misuse our bodies or those of others;
 we love, but we love appropriately!
May that be the story we tell, even more the story we live.