“VICES AND VIRTUES: LUST AND CHASTITY”

1 Corinthians 13:1-7

By REV. VICTOR KIM

Sex! There, I said it. How many sermons have you heard on sex? Probably not too many in a Presbyterian church, but I want to talk about sex because you can’t talk about lust without talking about sex. Today is the last of our summer sermon series on vices and virtues and our vice today is lust.

Before we get into a discussion about the vice of lust, let’s remember that a vice is always the product of something good gone wrong. Lust is sex gone wrong, so before we talk about lust, let’s talk about sex. It might be a good thing that this sermon is coming to you via the web because if this were a sermon delivered live in front of people, I can imagine some of you squirming in the pews with discomfort. Well, settle in because we are going to be blunt about a few things today.

I don’t think anyone needs to be told that we live in a highly sexualized culture today. The images all around us, from the advertising industry, which seems only calibrated to sell sex, no matter what the product, to the arts, movies, music, sports, and even our politics all revolve around sex. Sex sells, sex grabs our interest, sex permeates just about every facet of our lives. But the message is mixed and confusing. There’s so much in our culture that promotes a casual view of sex. If you don’t know what Tinder is, just ask a young person. As of July 2020, 3 of the top 10 most visited sites on the internet are pornography sites. But the issue far deeper than just the obvious. The top 5 sites are Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. All you have to do is spend a few minutes on any of those sites to understand how much sexual content, though not necessarily explicit, is on these platforms.

But if casual sex and sexuality is everywhere, our culture also tries to sell us on the notion of everlasting love as well. The wedding industry is bigger than ever. Movies, books and music weave the hope of true love, everlasting love, perfect love. E-Harmony, Match.com, even sites like Christian Mingle, promise love that lasts. No wonder we’re so confused!

And the church is hardly any better around the topic of sex, some would argue altogether worse. I ask the question again, how much do you hear about sex in a church setting? I grew up in a church environment where my understanding of sex was pretty much summed up in three words, just say no! I can’t remember how many youth group meetings I attended where the evils of premarital sex were drilled into us by teachers and preachers. I remember attending conferences where young people stood up and made vows of chastity, to refrain
from sex before they got married. Now, how you defined what sex was could be quite creative and a lot of people I knew who took those vows got married pretty quickly. One of the Bible Colleges in Calgary, which was quite popular with young people, had an unofficial motto, “A Ring before Spring.”

My point is we in the church haven’t been very good about speaking about sex, if we speak about it all. Some denominations have been very much consumed around issues of sexuality recently, including the PCC, but these discussions have largely been conflicted and divisive. And possibly the worst part about churches and sex is that we get called out on our hypocrisy. All you have to do is watch the news this past week to know what I speak of. The leader of the largest Christian University in America resigned because of a sex scandal. It wasn’t his racist tweets or the unabashed politicization of his faith that got him into trouble, it was sex. A woman was awarded almost $850,000 in damages stemming from sexual abuse by a priest at a Kamloops church, which was covered up for years. There’s an old cartoon that has Moses carrying the Ten Commandments and saying to the people, the good news is that we got them down to only ten; the bad news is that adultery is still in. Sex is not sin as the church too often has tried to portray it, but neither is it salvation, which aspects of our culture would have us believe.

We need to talk better about sex, because sex is a good thing; it’s a gift from God. God made us sexual beings for whom the physical act of sex brings pleasure and is the joining of two as one. And we are also creations of God for whom the act of procreation is tied to sex. So sex is central to our understanding of love and life, no wonder it’s such a big deal.

Rebecca DeYoung writes that lust is a vice because it is reductive in nature; it reduces the good gift of sex into merely pleasure seeking, individual gratification. Lust moves us from the relational aspect of love and sex, which is its origin, that God created us in the plural for relationships, to a purely physical dimension, which does not fully integrate us into our community. Lust is a problem with the heart above your belt before it’s a problem with the heat below it.¹

I remember seeing the birth of my children. I was overwhelmed. The thought that I, along with my wife Sophie, were now responsible for these miracles was overwhelming, but absolutely welcomed. We wanted children, we were ready for that commitment, at least that’s what we thought! That’s part of the joy of sexual relationships; it can lead to new life. But lust is hardly ever rooted in future commitment. I know of no one who is seeking only the gratification of their physical pleasure who is looking for long term future commitments like children. Too often the gratification of physical pleasure comes at the expense of what should

¹ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Glittering Vices, p.163
be long term commitments to the children that they already have. There is no intimacy is lust, there is no love and there is no commitment.

In its reductive nature, lust cannot honour the full goodness that God intends for the gift of sex. Rather than bringing people together in intimacy, it alienates people. And like gluttony lust leaves us empty because physical satisfaction is always temporary, it doesn’t last. Studies show that the highest level of sexual satisfaction is found in faithful monogamous marriages, not in those whose lives are promiscuous. Why? Because in these faithful marriages the sexual pleasure is the fruit of love. Lust leads to a blindness of the mind, which is an inability to recognize and appreciate goods higher than the pleasure of the flesh or beyond the moment of gratification.

So what to do? If lust is a vice that stems from the goodness of love and sex gone bad, what’s the corresponding virtue? Chastity. There’s a word that’s almost as loaded as lust. But chastity isn’t simply about just saying no. It’s not only about avoiding the act. We often think of chastity as completely refraining from sex until marriage but it’s about far more than the act of sex, it’s about relationships rooted in love.

It’s a gift of the spirit that is pro-love and something that is needed whether you’re single, married, old or young. It’s not only a guide for dating or surfing the internet, it’s a quality of one’s character, evident in all areas of life.

DeYoung writes that chastity allows a person to selflessly appreciate good and attractive things, most especially bodies and the pleasures they afford, by keeping those goods things ordered to the good of the whole person and his or her vocation to love. It’s not only about how far I should go on a date without crossing some invisible line of sin, but rather how can my life, my thoughts, my choices, my emotional responses, my conversation and my behaviour, make me a person who is best prepared to give and receive love in relationship with others.

Chastity is about love, it’s a gift about how to truly love. The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, speaks about spiritual gifts, many of them. Some teach, some speak, some heal, but there is still a more excellent way, says Paul and by that he means love. If lust is reductive and reduces the intention of love to just the physical act of sex, true love, love guided by chastity, is additive and grows us in the relational intimacy of which sex is an important part. True love, love as intended by God, must be anchored in our relationship to God. C.S. Lewis said that what we call being in love is a glorious state...and helps to make us generous and courageous, it opens our eyes not only to the beauty of the beloved, but to all.

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2 Ibid, p.169
3 Thomas Aquinas, On Evil
4 Glittering Vices, p.178
beauty... When Jesus gives his command to love one another as I have loved you, this is rooted in an understanding of chastity, which shapes the way we view others. Paul writes in his famous chapter about love, love never ends, but lust has no lasting quality. Love endures all things, but lust endures very little, it’s always seeking something new. Love is about running marathons while lust is about a 10 yard burst. Love is all about commitment while lust is all about desire. Love starts in the heart but lust begins in the loins. Scripture’s depiction of love is rarely grounded in a physical act, but far more often in a relationship between people. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians about love, the more excellent way, but it is rooted in relationships and the behaviour we are to express is those relationships. All my knowledge, all my faith, all my boasting means nothing without love.

Patience, kindness, humility, generosity, truth-telling, belief, hope, endurance, all these things are about how we truly love others, how we see others for far more than just their ability to satisfy us physically. But why do we use this text so often at weddings? Because when love is known in this way, in this way of chastity, in this way of appreciating the other for all that they are, all that they bring into the relationship, it also brings the most satisfaction when it comes to the physical act of sex. Resisting the vice of lust is rooted in love, love for others, for friends, for genuine relationships where the virtue of chastity guides us in appreciating others for the wholeness of who they are, not just the reductiveness of the pleasure that they can bring us.

Sex is good; it is after all, from God. It’s the way God made us, to be sexual creatures. This may sound somewhat ironic, but the best way for us to enjoy the good gift of sex is to be guided by the virtue of chastity. It is to be guided by the appreciation of the wholeness of the relationships we have with others, rooted in the relationship we have in God. When we are in committed, faithful, monogamous marriages, when we willingly accept and embrace the commitment and responsibility that comes with loving the whole person, when we love in ways that don’t insist on our way, when we are not irritable or resentful and rejoice in the truth, then sex is a fruit of that love and brings amazing joy and incredible pleasure.

May we rejoice in that good gift of God, always guided by God’s love for us.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

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5 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.108