

“Hot Potato Texts: The Book of Ooh La La”

Song of Songs 4: 1-16

*The Message*

The introduction to the Song of Songs

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March 21, 2010

One of my favorite anecdotes tells of an old, old monk who was pouring over some of the original Greek texts of the Bible. Suddenly, he lets out a piercing, mournful cry that causes the other monks to come running. As they enter they see the old monk with his head buried deep in his hands, deeply shaken. “*What happened, our brother,*” they ask. The old monk raises his tear-stained face and explains, “The original text says, “*Celebrate, not celibate!*”

This was a hard week for me. It was hard because I wasn’t completely comfortable with my sermon title being up on the marquee of the church. I didn’t want families driving by thinking that children would never belong here because, like a movie rating, they thought the sermon would be at least PG-13 or even R-rated. And I didn’t want folks to think that the church is no better than the society around us that cheapens sex and treats it like disposable cameras—capture the moment then throw it away!

But, I finally decided that my discomfort was not mine alone. If anything I was carrying the discomfort that all of us feel about the place of sex in our culture. Because the fact of the matter is we are a very confused people. On the one hand, it would appear that we Americans are completely liberated. Sex is everywhere these days. Men are always surprised when they buy a new car that the scantily clad girl doesn’t come with it. I actually find PG-13 movies often more offensive than R-rated movies. R-rated movies certainly have their share of sex, but the sex is an important part of the story and the development of characters. PG-13 movies may not show as much skin, but the sex is often cheap, recreational, and about as fulfilling as a good sneeze. They say, “Sex Sells” and in America it may be our number one marketing tool from television programs, movies, advertisements and billboards. Sex is everywhere.

Except the church, that is! If churches were smart we would start with the deliciousness and the passion of the Song of Songs in place of Genesis. Then once we had people hooked, then we could reel them in to such un-sexy products like salvation, redemption, forgiveness and grace. Actually, it is not completely true that you never hear about sex in church. In fact, quite the opposite is true which is why I believe that we are so very confused about sex. When you do hear about sex in church it is because another priest has been accused of child sex abuse. Or a pastor got too friendly with the church secretary. Or a Jimmy Swaggert and a Ted Haggerty preached one thing about sex and lived something else.

I wonder, where in our society can people, especially young people, go to get some good guidance on understanding the place for sexual expression in their blossoming relationships? Because the fact of the matter is what society offers today’s young people are two unsatisfying alternatives. You either have the licentious, anything goes sexuality of our culture or you have the rigid repressed sexuality of the Church.

Let me explain. I already described the shallow sexuality of our media and culture. Let me be clear I am not blaming the media. If anything the media just reflects who we already are rather than being the cause of who we are. But, the other alternative is the Church and I believe that we have modeled what might be called a repressive sexuality. I believe there are two parts to this.

The first part is that we continue to maintain a sexual ethic that no longer serves people well. We continue to maintain that sexual expression is only permitted and healthy within the covenant of marriage. Our belief is that it is within the covenant of marriage where there is trust, commitment, and mutuality that sex is most sacred. I don't disagree with that. The problem is we continue to maintain a rigid stance while social patterns have changed dramatically. Are you aware that the average age for a woman marrying in ancient Israel was about aged 13? Marriage was the next and most immediate step for a woman shortly after reaching puberty. Are you aware that the average age of marriage in 1956 was 20.1 years of age? And are you aware that in 2008 the average age was 26.2 years old.

Again, I don't disagree that sexual expression is most sacred within the context of trusting, mutual, and committed relationships. The problem is life has changed dramatically and the Church has done almost nothing to offer guidance and support to today's people. We marry five years later than we did 50 years ago. 77% of people now live together prior to marriage. Older couples choose to live together to protect their social security and pensions. People like me end up divorced in mid-life and find ourselves having to wade through a whole new set of emotional, sexual and relationship questions. Gay and lesbian persons present another whole angle to the changing issues we now face.

The second part of this repression we have in the Church over sexuality is that we have a sort of split personality. Somewhere in our past we have allowed a Greek concept to seep into our theology. This Greek concept is the idea of dualism. That is that spirit is good and flesh is bad. This dualism also shows up in our preference for reason over passion. It shows up in how we pattern our lives more by cultural calendars than by the rhythm of nature. And one can see where we got this. The apostle Paul himself emphasized keeping our eyes on the things of the spirit rather than the desires of the flesh. I actually don't think he intended it to be an either/or choice, but we have taken it that way. But, the Bible promotes not a split personality that spirit is good and body is bad. Rather, it promotes a loving of God with all that we are—mind, body and spirit.

My point is this. Currently, today's people have the unsatisfying choice between the shallow sexual morality of our culture and the repressed sexuality of the Church. I don't know what the answer is. But, I do know it is time to start talking about it. I do know people out there are looking for some guidance on the place of sexual expression in their relationships. People are unsatisfied with the throw-away sex we see in the media. But, they also feel that the church is unwilling to take seriously the issues today's people face. People are marrying 10-15 years later than they did in ancient Israel. Modern people live twice as long. And sex today doesn't necessarily equate automatically with having children (as it did in our recent history).

I don't know exactly what the answer is but I do know that Bible gives us a healthier version of sexuality than that of either our current culture or the repression of the church. Just look at this Song of Songs. It is sensual and passionate. There is longing and desire. Listen again to these words and keep your fans handy: **“Your lips are jewel red, your mouth elegant and inviting, your veiled cheeks soft and radiant. The smooth, lithe lines of your neck command notice—all heads turn in awe and admiration! Your breasts are like fawns, twins of a gazelle, grazing among the first spring flowers. The sweet, fragrant curves of your body, the soft, spiced contours of your flesh invite me, and I come.”**

Wow...that is absolutely steamy, wouldn't you agree? That is a Biblical view of sexuality. And isn't it interesting that when we talk about Jesus we refer back to the prologue to the gospel of John and we have this, **“And the Word became flesh...”** What does that mean?

The church has one of our longest standing beliefs called the doctrine of incarnation. Literally, what that means is “in-flesh-ment.” We usually just translate that as “God became human” but the literal translation is that “God became flesh.” And I wonder if it is fair to say then, that God is not only known in our selfless acts of compassion, but that God is also known in our desire for each other. God is experienced in the sacred bond between two lovers. In the beginning, God created us in God’s image—male and female God created them. Isn’t that amazing to think of? That to reflect God’s image is to participate in the passion, the love, and the intimacy of two people. Put these three things together and you have doctrine of incarnation—“The Word became flesh,” God created us in God’s image—male and female God created them,” and the beautiful poetry of the Song of Songs that celebrates our bodies and our sexuality.

I was amazed by how difficult this sermon was for me. I struggled with my sermon title. I wrestled all week with what parts of the Song of Songs I would read. I was concerned that if it was too steamy it might be thought of as inappropriate for church. Whatever I said today I didn’t want it to become like the cheap shallow sex of our culture. But, I also didn’t want to play into the ongoing sexual repression of the Church by avoiding passages just because they made us uncomfortable. What I really wanted to do was to honor the Biblical understanding of passion, desire, sensuality and sexuality in our lives. Because the fact of the matter is sexuality was important enough that it got its own book of the Bible. One whole book just dedicated to the beauty of the sensual and intimate nature of our loving relationships.

I think I was confused by how to go about this today because our society is also confused about it. We unfortunately have two extremes of sexuality modeled for the people of today. And both of them are unhealthy and don’t honor the Biblical witness of sexual expression.

I don’t know exactly what the answer should be to find a healthier expression of sexuality. I do know, however, that it is time to talk about it. It’s time to quit passing over the Song of Songs just because it makes us nervous. I do think it is time for the church to reclaim its moral voice on matters related to our relationships and our sexual expression. Sex exclusively within marriage is the Biblical model. But, that model was predicated on young women marrying just after they entered puberty. Today, the average person marries at age 26.

We can continue to say that sex is only appropriate in marriage. But, if we do that don’t we also have an obligation then to make marriage available to our 13, 14, and 15 year olds? If we aren’t willing to truly honor the Biblical view of marriage and sexuality then it’s time to start asking some new questions. And that, I think, is what society is looking for. Young adults, divorced men and women, gays and lesbians, and even seniors are all waiting for the Church to take the lead on discovering a Biblical sexual ethic that honors the sacred nature of sexuality and our changing social patterns.

God created us to be sexual beings. I believe that sex shouldn’t be shallow form of entertainment. But, it also shouldn’t be repressed. Will you join me as we find a third way that celebrates our loving passion for each other? Will you join me as we honor the Bible’s view that sexuality should be in mutual, trusting and committed relationships? Will you join me as we honor God’s gift of sexuality for our own time and our own context?