

Sermon for Sunday, January 15, 2012 I Cor 6:12-20 "Sex"

We preachers are always looking for ways to get our parishioners' attention. Funny stories, references to things going on in the news, pop culture, whatever it takes to get you to listen to the message we want to share with you.

When in doubt, we've always got a go-to thing that guarantees you all will listen.

Sex.

Preaching about sex always makes folks in the pews sit up and take notice. So today, I'm going to talk about sex.

I know what you're thinking.

"What is she going to say? Should we make sure none of the children can hear this? Will I be embarrassed by what she says?"

And that's just fine. I want you to pay attention. I know you're going to pay attention when the subject is sex.

Now, I'm not unique in this. Preachers, as I said, can always rely on this topic to ensure that their parishioners will attend to their message.

The Apostle Paul, a good preacher to be sure, actually used the word "fornication" not once but three times in this brief passage from Corinthians. It's clear he wanted to get the attention of the faithful in Corinth. But like all things in Holy Scripture, there's more to this than meets the eye.

So what's going on in this R-rated passage from the epistle, and what does it mean to us today?

Let's start with location. Corinth was one of the churches that Paul founded. But as much as he loved them, as a pastor he was frustrated by their misbehavior, and this letter has a lot to do with trying to get them back on the right path. He was in the midst of giving them guidance on how to live the Christian life, after chiding them for tolerating a man living in sin with his father's wife. And now he jumped in to this discussion about fornication.

Fornication – that's a word we don't use too often these days. What does he mean by "fornication?" Paul uses the Greek word "porneia," which can be translated as fornication, but really is not just about the way we think of fornication, which is sexual congress outside of marriage, but also talks about using prostitutes, incest, relations with animals, relations with someone who is divorced, and metaphorically, the worship of idols. So it's all the nasty things one can do with one's private parts.

Now to the heart of the problem. Why was this fornication business a problem with the Corinthians?

The Corinthians had been fighting among themselves about the right way to follow Christ and about interpretations of what Christ and Paul taught. Even that close to when Jesus had been alive, folks were

already getting it wrong. Here's a partial list of what they were fighting about, according to scholar Frank Crouch:

"Various factions in the congregation label others as wise or foolish, weak or strong; fight over who was the best pastor before the current one; bring lawsuits against one another; argue over sexual morality, whether it's better to be married or single, what makes a healthy marriage, what constitutes grounds for divorce, what are appropriate dietary practices; what is the correct understanding of resurrection and the afterlife; and on and on."

Of course, we never argue about such things, do we?

So all these arguments were being going on, and what was the key misunderstanding that they arrived at?

They had heard from Paul that Christ set them free from their sins. And they, being human and wanting what they want when they want it, thought, "Wow! I can do anything, misbehave in any way, because Christ has set me free from my sins."

In other words, no accountability, since they were already forgiven.

So some of the Corinthians were getting all wild and crazy and doing things that they know were sinful, but they thought they'd get a free ride.

But Pastor Paul said, "Hey, wait a minute!"

He started out with their main argument: "All things are lawful for me." It is probably more accurate to translate that phrase as "all things are allowed for me." The Corinthians are thinking that this means "I am free to do whatever I want." But Paul says they've missed the point. They may be free to do whatever they want, but those things may not be beneficial. He starts to talk about the gift of the body, that beautiful creation of God, and how our bodies are part of an even more beautiful body, the Body of Christ. He uses this recurrent problem of sexual misconduct among the Corinthians to point out that when they are involved in inappropriate sex, they are uniting the beautiful Body of Christ to the body of someone or something that is not of God. When they do what they please, thinking that Christ's death has given them leave to do anything at all, they may have fleeting pleasure, but they are not giving God pleasure.

Here's the heart of the matter: Christ does not set us free so that we can do whatever we want to do; Christ sets us free so that we can do whatever God wants us to do.

Yes, Christ has set us free from our sins. He has redeemed us. But the proper response to that free gift is not as much self-indulgence as we can manage, it is grateful service to the One who has given us the gift. It is not misusing our bodies in sexual misconduct, it is using our bodies in God's service...and that also includes sex as the gift God intended, in a monogamous, faithful, committed relationship.

Rationally, we understand this. Practically, it can be easy for us to follow the same path that the Corinthians did. Do we say yes to temptations of all kinds – not just sexual ones, but things like overeating, drinking, smoking cigarettes, using illicit drugs? Do we then say “Oh, I was just weak, but Jesus loves me anyway?”

Yes, Jesus does love us. Jesus did die for our sins. But don't we have an obligation to try to live as He would want us to live? Don't we have an obligation to try to care for ourselves, for these members of the Body of Christ, as the gifts that we are?

For me, the battle to live as God would want us to live is not about sex. I'm happily married and feel no temptation to stray. Thanks be to God for that! But I am not immune to misusing my body, my part of the Body of Christ...I've got an ongoing battle with my weight, not because I want to look skinny, but because I want to be healthy in order to serve God.

Others of us have other ways in which we deny God by using our bodies in selfish ways. I've mentioned a few of them: smoking, using alcohol or drugs, sitting around all night watching silly television programs or playing video games rather than getting out and moving, rather than exercising our brains and bodies so we can serve God.

We must change. This is not about New Year's Resolutions so we look cuter. This is about living in our bodies, which have been called “temples of the Holy Spirit.” This is about recognizing that we don't get a free ride because we are Christians, we still have to work at living right.

Yes, Paul was talking about sex, and sex was an attention-getter back in his day as well as ours. Sex is one of the many ways that we can get confused about what God intends for us. But Paul was also talking about much more than sex. He was talking about the many gifts that God has given us. Gifts, like sex, like forgiveness, come with responsibilities. They are meant to be used as God intends.

We may all find different paths to understanding what God intends for us, how we are to use our gifts, but make no mistake, God does have plans for us. So now may we gratefully accept those gifts, all of them, and live into them, not as we choose, but as God has planned. That is how we are most truly and deeply part of the Body of Christ.

Amen.