

"A Sexual Ethics for My Children." Cincinnati OH: Forward Movement Publications, 1993.

an address given at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Evanston IL, on October 4, 1992

=====
"Does Daddy use condoms?"

I put aside the coffee grinder and looked across the dark, winter-morning kitchen at my eight-year old son, who had set aside his raisin toast with peanut butter. The kitchen smelled of cinnamon and peanuts and partly-ground French roast.

"Mark says, if you don't use condoms then you could both get sick and die. So we want to know. Does he? Every time?"

I looked down from that level blue-eyed gaze, wishing I could eat coffee beans like peanuts, straight from the little bag. But I knew why he was so worried at six o'clock on a November morning. When a kid has totally uncool parents, when his parents were probably nerds when they were kids, a kid needs to ask these questions. A kid can't count on parents like that to know the important stuff.

And I wondered what was going on with my Mark, my older son. He was only ten, but he seemed well-established within adolescent introspection and uncertainty. Was he embarrassed or afraid to ask about condoms himself? I could easily imagine his sharing his fears about orphanages in that endless brotherly small talk after lights out. What other questions and fears were being prompted by Mark's new sex ed class?

When I had sex ed, we didn't worry about our parents dying. But otherwise, sex ed seems not to have changed all that much since I was in fifth grade, more than thirty years ago. In 1960, the curriculum as I remember it now seemed to center on sex and sin. Now that core is sex and death. I could assure my sons that Daddy does not need condoms, that they will not be left orphans. We are monogamous, and we don't use illegal drugs. The blood supply is safe now. But I didn't tell them about false negatives and latency periods and what that might mean for the blood supply. I didn't tell them about sticks from dirty needles and other hazards to health-care workers like their

father. Old Father O'Malley would have called those sins of omission, lying by failing to tell the whole truth to my son as his tears brimmed and splashed down onto the peanut butter. Worse yet, in what I said I heard myself suggesting that the basis of sexual fidelity is the fear of contagion. But what would that fear be worth when his passionate and gutsy kid discovered his own sexuality? The threat of eternal damnation hadn't stopped me, not for a minute. What's a mere virus in comparison with hell?

When at least I could return to grinding coffee, I was glad for the whirring distraction from the tears in my own eyes.

~ ~ ~

Such kitchen table-talk is probably not the hottest arena for the debate about sexual ethics in our times. Nobody much is wondering publicly or in print about what to say to his or her own kids over breakfast. But surely our children provide a crucially important jury for any sexual ethics. Will this or that vision of sexuality guide them wisely as they struggle with their own lives? My eight year-old son is ten now, and this fall he and his twin sister will have their own chance at fifth-grade sex ed. His older brother, now twelve, is more than an inch taller than I am and wears bigger shoes than his father does. I had to buy him a shaver several months ago. My daughter is poised at the edge of her menarche. At my house, the need to define a sexual ethics is growing less theoretical with every passing day. And so, in this last sweet interval of real childhood, I have worked hard to figure out what to say to them as we undertake the long conversation of adolescence. And my purpose here is to share the results of that work. I don't mean to say to you what I will say to them. Heaven only knows how I will find the right words for them. But I can certainly share my critical re-thinking of the conceptual framework surrounding discussions of Christian sexual ethics.

~ ~ ~

The most obvious, most plainly central fact about sex is that it involves desire. By "desire" I mean to name that particular sexual desire that one cannot adequately satisfy alone. I don't mean "appetite" in a general way, the sheer or essentially insignificant appetite that motivates any of us once in a while to buy snacks from a vending machine

or to feel a surge of pleasure when we spot a drinking fountain at an airport. Desire is different from such appetite.

The other most obvious fact about sexuality is that sex involved intimacy. Both literally and emotionally, we must "undress" in order most fully to meet or to satisfy our desire. The sexual acts, then, genuinely or philosophically symbolize our most risky or most dangerous needs, our keenest human vulnerabilities, our greatest daring with our own self-esteem. Yet because desire drives us to take such unreasonable risks--and even after decades of marriage, it can be an unreasonable risk--sexuality is also a physical enactment of the human need for community. We need one another . That need generates community in the most literal of ways: it draws us into highly charged and important connections with one another, and it is in addition or in some circumstances also the means whereby human communities are biologically propagated over time.

To define sexuality, then, is to name the experience of desire. And it is to name the terrors and the rewards elicited by intimacy. Finally, to define sexuality is (or can be) to name an astounding and enormous domain of human experience that I have struggled to name properly. And the best, most precise name I have been able to find is blessing. Sexuality is or can be an extraordinary blessing.

~ ~ ~

This blessing has two dimension to which I will return over and over again in what follows. The blessing of sexuality follows from the reciprocity demanded by the intimate and mutual satisfaction of desire. That is, I can only satisfy my own deepest desires if I can also satisfy your desires. I'm not talking here about the release of simple biological sexual tension. In the fullest, richest human sense, our sexual desire for another person intimately involves the dangerous or deeply vulnerable fact that we hope also to be desired by that other person and to satisfy their desires in turn. Remember--if you dare--how much of the painful, awkward self-consciousness of adolescence arises from now naturally astounded these kids are when they discover the psychic power of this desire-to-be-desired. As that power ripples out into every corner of their lives, not having the right color socks to wear to gym class can become an absolutely genuine crisis. And

woe to the parent who fails to sympathize! (I hear doors slamming all over town, just thinking about it . . .)

The other dimension of sexuality's blessing is paradox. A good, intimate, reciprocally-satisfying sexual relationship leaves me stronger as a person and thus more independent. And yet the relationship also makes me more intensely vulnerable to my beloved--and thus apparently weaker or more dependent. Such paradox lies to the heart of community. In a healthy community, or in that tiny community called the family, people genuinely need each other. That need and the satisfaction of that need leaves each person stronger and yet all the more intimately related to all the others. All the recent talk in our culture about dysfunctional families and inner children underscores how easily or how often this paradoxical blessing fails to happen or falls apart in the core relationships of a family, to the pain of both parents and children.

To call the blessing paradoxical is to recognize that sex has an enormous symbolic dimension. Like all true and vital symbols, sex enacts or abides as a central part of some greater, more mysterious whole which it partially, momentarily illuminates or makes accessible for us. For human sexuality, that greater whole, that domain of mystery is the paradoxical, reciprocal human need to live in profound connection with other humans. And ultimately, I suggest, the paradoxical, reciprocal need to live in some intimate, vulnerable relationship with God.

~ ~ ~

The blessing of sex only follows if I am in a correct relationship to myself (conscious and willing desire) and if I am in a correct relationship to my partner (conscious and willing intimacy). And neither of these relationships can be correct on one side only: the desire and the intimacy must be so reciprocal as to engender richly paradoxical self-other boundaries of giving/ getting or power/ empowerment. To be in such a relationship to another person is surely a moment of grace. It is surely a human and finite repetition of the sacred and infinite act of Incarnation. Desire, intimacy, and blessing replicate within human relationships and within human consciousness the sacred realities named Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The Greek Fathers described the coinherence of the persons of the Trinity with the word perichoresis--literally, "dancing around." The

coinherence of intimacy, desire, and blessing within a fully human sexual union is also a dance, both spiritually and in a vivid, literal, physical way.

Such fully realized sexuality, then, is a sacrament. It is the sacrament called "matrimony," a sacrament on top of which churches have, for the last few centuries, also added the legal contract of marriage.

The contractual language states, "til death do us part." But the more humble, more realistic, more deeply Christian recognition is that this sacramental relationship will endure as long as openness to God's grace endures on both sides. It will endure only as long as the two people can remain blessings for one another. That will not always be forever. We all have had relationships--sexual or not--that were genuinely blessings in our lives but not genuinely forever. I have lots of memories that I know are blessed memories. The not-forever part was hard at the time, and it was scary; but by golly I also know that blessings often force me into new growth or into new knowledge about myself. My kids will learn this too, and I hope their faith will comfort them at such times.

~ ~ ~

So there you have my basic position: sexual morality depends upon the proper configuration of desire, intimacy, and blessing within a given relationship. I want now to challenge or test that position, to see how well it holds up under the pressures of the hard questions, the painful questions, that we all have in our hearts.

Just for starts, it seems to me that the ideal moral unity of desire, intimacy, and blessing offers some insight into behavior that we all recognize as sexual immorality. If sex takes place not from desire but for pay, or from fear of embarrassment or boredom or violence or coercion at any level, or from bland and meaningless habit, then something is wrong. The wrong can be more or less serious. But something is wrong. Or if sex takes place not within intimacy but between strangers, or despite estrangement, or as an enactment of domination or manipulation, then, too, something is wrong. No blessing follows in such circumstances. And the opposite of blessing is not sin but curse. The sin may be lying; the sin may be violence; the sin may be covetousness. But the issue for sexual ethics is curse: to be isolated from relationship and community, estranged, and deeply, painfully alone.

Or what about homosexuality? There's a challenge to my theory. Lots of folks disagree both in our society and in our churches about the essential morality of homosexuality. And my kids have asked about homosexuality too, particularly after a "Star Trek" episode in which the Enterprise encounters a culture in which heterosexuality is regarded as a disease and a perversion. I felt once again that my own highly educated, deeply committed Christianity was not doing me much good, sitting there in my family room. Furthermore, I have never understood homophobia; the passions it arouses really scare me. And my kids were badly spooked too. I am not comfortable with exhibitionist or predatory or promiscuous gay people. But then again, I am not comfortable with exhibitionist or predatory or promiscuous straight people either. So what's the real issue about homosexuality? I went to bed that night feeling really confused.

But I have done some work since then. And I think I can offer some insight into this issue. Traditional Christian sexual ethics--the sort of stuff they still teach in Rome--says that moral sexual acts are pleasant, companionable, and procreative. Tradition demands all three: all sexual acts must be open to the possibility of making a baby. Any other kind of sex is innately depraved. That's why the white-male celibate Italian hierarchy condemns contraception: those boys have never faced the moral prospect of rearing a dozen children. Although the moral demand to make babies now seems incredible to us--and, in all honesty, to the vast majority of American Roman Catholics as well--that was the belief of Western Christianity from its very early centuries. Sex without baby-making is innately depraved.

And gay sex does not make babies. Neither does sex with contraception, after all; neither does all kinds of sex between all kinds of people. If sex has to make babies to make the grade morally, we are all in trouble. But I argue that babies are not the guarantee of sexual morality. The reality of blessing in the relationship forms that guarantee. And homosexuality can achieve that blessing in exactly the same ways and for exactly the same reasons as heterosexuality.

But in the tradition--let me repeat--babies are the only recognized dimension of the blessing that follows from the sexual union of intimacy and desire. Since homosexuality is inevitably infertile, homosexuality might seem necessarily to rip asunder the crucial

relationship between intimacy and desire. That is why so many people cannot distinguish their objection to homosexuality from their objection to promiscuous sexuality.

People confuse homosexuality with promiscuity only because our general understanding of sexuality has been inadequate. And because our emotions remain mired in ancient Greek doctrines from almost two thousands years ago, some people have refused to stand in witness to the full sacramental union of intimacy and desire within same-sex relationships. If homosexuals cannot marry--because we refuse to "let them" marry or we refuse to "see" their faithful, committed relationships as essentially matrimonial--then by the same odd emotional logic we cannot imagine that homosexuals do in fact achieve the same rich and risky and gracious sexual lives that we know (or at least glimpse) in our own lives. Our refusal to recognize those relationship sustains the illusion of promiscuity that feed our fear and bias. Bad sexual ethics create the very distortions that terrify us.

Let me say again that I need above all to understand my own sexuality and then to explain what I understand to my kids. It just turns out that I cannot understand my own experience in any reasonable way without simultaneously recognizing the full gracious sacramentality of faithful, reciprocal, intimately vulnerable sexual relationships between any two people, of whatever gender. Or of whatever age, or fertility, or handicap, or genetic make-up, or contraceptive status. Faithful, intimate, committed sexual relationships are extraordinary gifts to both to the partners involved and to their community: by what unspeakable hubris dare anyone revile any such union? To claim to do so in the name of Christ is not just hubris but blasphemy.

~ ~ ~

So how far have we gotten? On the one hand, my theory gives us a way to name or to understand incontrovertible instances of sexual immorality--behaviors like rape, behaviors like manipulative or predatory sex. And on the other hand, my theory also defines the clear and absolute morality of homosexual union between individuals who are fully responsible to their moral obligation to the coinherence of intimacy, desire, and blessing. My theory provides or states in ethical terms what the medical and psychiatric

communities have been saying in their particular ways for quite some time:
homosexuality is a fully human, fully normal aspect of human sexuality generally. It is
both subject to and fully capable of achieving the same ethical norms.

~ ~ ~

But there are questions in sexual ethics for which no such theoretical or abstract clarity
will ever prove possible. The best any formal sexual ethics can hope to do is provide
clear spiritual guidance or suppose to those facing such situations. A good or subtle or
solid sexual ethics can help us think more clearly about such controversial topics as
abortion, for instance. It is only common sense to admit that there are situations in
which pregnancy is not a blessing but a terrible biological accident. As Christians, we
inherit a rich and subtle tradition of stories--some scriptural, some communal, some
personal--that tell us, first, that troubles can turn out to be blessings in disguise and,
second, that our God is a God who suffers, a God who stands by our grief and our
suffering when troubles are not disguises, when troubles are trouble. Christian faith is
not a set of rose-colored glasses.

And so, if my own daughter is ever faced an unexpected pregnancy, I will urge her to
pray. One can pray alone and wordlessly. One can pray with scripture. One can break
bread within a supportive community. And in all of those prayers, in different ways, one
can ask, "Is this pregnancy one of those blessings in life that I do not want to face? Or is
this pregnancy a terrible accident that I must end and mourn--and then turn to God for
comfort in my grief?" As Christians, we have a rich traditional wisdom to offer to a
woman facing such agony. And every inch of that wisdom also cautions us, in the
sternest possible ways, that God speaks to each person uniquely and individually. God
has an immediate personal relationship to each one of us. I will not tell my daughter
"what God wants."

The real tragedy of abortion, it seems to me, is that so many women cannot find, in our
society, even the most rudimentary economic and personal support for their lives and
their life-bearing. Yes, I find abortion unthinkable. But I fear that fact is above all else a
terrible indictment of how well I have insulated myself from the impoverished, suffering,
marginalized people whom Jesus embraced as his first disciples. Yes, I have prayed

about abortion during the writing of this paper. But that prayer has called me to repent and not to judge. I have not had an abortion, but neither am I innocent of all that abortions declare.

~ ~ ~

Divorce is another instance where sexual ethics can provide spiritual guidance but not specific advice. In the terms I have outlined, the sacramental marital union has ended when the relationship has ceased being a blessing for its partners. And I want to insist yet again that we inherit a welath of life-giving paradox in our traditions surrounding how difficult it is to distinguish God's witty, unscrupulous tendencies to turn trouble into growth, from God's gentle, consoling, rescuing presence from situations that offer us not growth but death. Some people should divorce. Some people should stay married and work it out. Only they can know what to do, and they can only know by praying, by that difficult, sustained openness to the sacred depths within us and beyond us.

~ ~ ~

"Premarital sex" is yet another such topic--or do I call it "nonmarital sex"? We don't even have a coherent name for the fact that the vast majority of marriages these days are preceded by some period of what the dean of my undergraduate college sternly denounced as "cohabitation." (As if, I thought, the problem were hampsters escaping into the dorms from those new plastic-tube cages.) Furthermore, not every such "cohabitation" ends in marriage, no matter how honestly or with what fine and fragile hopes that sexual relationship began. But in my days as an English professor, I counseled several young women who felt terribly pressured to consummate sexually every single good date they ever had. Into such murk we need to shine some ethical light.

We believe that the sacramental blessing of matrimony is conferred by the partners upon one another. The rest of us merely stand in witness. I dare say, then, that none of us can know when that blessing first actually took place in any of the relationships for which we have stood witness. So the morality of beginning to have sex within any particular relationship can only be judged by the people involved, and by them only through we as Christians call prayer. Since my kids already know about contraception

and AIDS, if they turn to me for counsel concerning a relationship, I will talk to them about intimacy, desire, and blessings--and prayer. (And I will undoubtedly pray myself.)

But the most specific advice I can hope to offer is still very general: one must not become physically intimate without a substantial, mutual, deeply considered commitment to hope for permanence in the relationship. The psychological intimacies or vulnerabilities involved set before us both life and death: there is simply no such thing as "casual sex." As Christians, we believe that all sex is ultimately serious--ultimately sacramental, at least potentially or ideally. This claim is not merely formal or doctrinal: it is part of a complex and freely-chosen vision of what I think it means to be human.

~ ~ ~

What then should be the role of the churches concerning abortion, divorce, or premarital sex? The role of the church is to pray, to teach people to pray, and to help people discern the Spirit of God moving in their prayers. We need take no public, objective, graven-image stands on any of these issues. All we need to say is that we strive to the people of God in our prayers, in our study, and in our communal lives. We judge not, that we be not judged. Instead we pray, and we gather together to pray, and to learn to pray, and we gather into the circle of our praying all who suffer and all who struggle to love. And before we disperse again, we see what practical help we can be for each other and for the world around us. Our prayers may not make any clear and objective difference to which we can point, because true prayer is both very hard and very mysterious. But neither do we substitute anything else for the effort to pray. Least of all do we substitute policy for praying.

But I am not "The Church." I don't make policy on anything. I'm not even a theologian: my PhD is in English. I'm a housewife; I'm a poet. What matters most to me is devising a sexual ethics that will let me talk to my own kids, not just now but also later--no matter what ethical quandaries their sexual lives entail and no matter how their orientations develop.

My kids know a lot about vulnerability and fidelity. Every kid does: grade school playgrounds are tough places on many days. The loyalty manifest between eleven-year olds may be as fully an Incarnational presence as ever described by theologians. And

so, as physical sexual desire begins to dawn in our kids' lives, we can name that desire to them as an intimate, vulnerable, paradoxical gift. And we can make a connection between their experience of loyal friends and this more complex matter of sexual fidelity. And who knows: maybe we can make some first-try introductions between their proud new adolescent autonomy and the terrible vulnerabilities of paradoxically dependent intimacy with God.

Our kids know about change and growth. We may have forgotten the emotional impact of discovering our wrists dangling below the cuffs of a beloved jacket, or finding ourselves now taller than The Mother Almighty herself. But our kids live amidst that reality. And we can call on that reality in their lives to argue that in fidelity we nurture and support the beloved in his or her own evolving needs. Growth is scary and disorienting and sometimes painful, and thus to grow freely we need faithful relationships. As one grows or evolves into sexual needs or desires, one ideally grows into the capacity for sexual fidelity as well. The courage to grow rests upon the courage to need, and nowhere is that courage so fully enacted as within sexual desire.

Our kids also know about loneliness and fear. They know so much about loneliness and fear that I think too often we are ourselves afraid to listen to them and to their stories about their own lives. But we can explain to them that "courage" comes from "heart," and that relationships are some of the bravest things people have ever achieved. Marriages are not places to hide, although some people try to do that. Marriages are not strong-walled fortresses, although some people try to make their marriages into monuments of hunkered-down safety in a dangerous world. Neither is sexuality an escape from loneliness and fear. Sexuality is a domain of human experience in which we most courageously face our own loneliness and fear, and in which we most humbly recognize the beloved's reciprocal vulnerability to us.

In short, if we understand our sexuality in flexible, precise ways, then when we talk to our kids about sexuality we are talking to them about being human and not about making or not-making babies or about avoiding venereal diseases. As they evolve into mature sexuality, they will see for themselves how this new, disconcerting experience of

sexual desire reveals in a highly focused or concentrated way certain familiar truths about every friendship they have ever known.

We need our friends and our lovers. Our needs and the mutual satisfactions of our needs render us stronger and yet paradoxically more closely bound into human community--where we discover our vulnerability to needs that might otherwise have remained invisible to us. And in recognizing that all of this has always and already been true about their own lives, our kids may also begin or continue to learn that Christ calls all of us to a vulnerable, paradoxical presence to each other's needs through God's own intimate, paradoxical, vulnerable desire to love us and to be loved in return.

