

Renarrating the gospel of sex

A sermon on 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

David W. Boshart

Months ago, when I was invited to give this sermon, I responded with blithe enthusiasm: “Sure—that would be fun!” But as spring became summer, and summer became fall, and fall became winter, every time I sat down to think about this message I felt paralyzed. In the history of the church’s conversations on

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sexuality, our record of bringing hope is overshadowed by our record of contributing to confusion. I kept trying to focus on my intention to bring a word of hope for wholeness. But I kept wondering, did I want to risk adding more words to the church’s dubious record?

This question sent me to a deeper level of inquiry. If the church’s discourse on sexuality is perennially flawed, our failure must be rooted in a distorted ontology. That is, what we believe is real, or most fundamental,

about sexuality is something we have yet to grasp. So with this sermon I want to examine the basics about our sexuality and then pose some questions that might frame our further conversation, questions that we can carry with us as we consider how to embody sexual wholeness in a broken world.

Stuck in the story of the fall

Harry Huebner has aptly said, “What we say to one another on the way is the medium through which the world becomes the world to us. . . . When we tell a story or describe an event or preach a sermon or confess a creed, we are not describing facts; we are participating in a rendition . . . , a way of envisioning the world.”¹ Here’s where I think we go wrong in working with sexuality: on our way from creation to redemption, we get stuck in a

story of sexuality that is rooted in the fall. Our descriptions of sexuality take their cues more from a fallen narrative than from a redeemed one.

For example, when we hear the word *sex*, we tend to think “sexual act” more than “sexual being.” We fail to understand sexuality as something inherently human and instead think of sex as something applied from outside the human condition. In 1965, on the cusp of the so-called sexual revolution, Robert Farrar Capon wondered what reaction he would get if he were to write a book called “The Sexual Life of a Nun.” “How many would be able to see that, on the real meaning of the word *sexual*, it is a perfectly proper title?” he wondered. “For a nun’s life is utterly sexual. She thinks as a woman, prays as a woman, reacts as a woman and commits herself as a woman. No monk . . . ever embraced his life for her kind of reasons. He couldn’t if he wanted to. Of course she omits, as an offering to God, one particular expression of her sexuality; but it is only one out of a hundred.

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No,” Capon concludes, “the sexual congress she does not attend is not life’s most important meeting, all the marriage manuals to the contrary notwithstanding.”²

Another sure sign of the power we ascribe to the fall story is the persistence with which we interpret Genesis 3 as prescriptive rather than indicative, as a story about what should be rather than about what is. Nowhere in the first two creation accounts is there a hint of gender hierarchy; they describe a complementary, hip-to-hip mutuality between woman and man. Yet in our temptation to be like God, we trust the voice of the snake, who in myriad tantalizing ways tells us that the fallen narrative of sexuality—of male domination and female subordination—might be a faster way to get where we think we want to be.

A third sign of getting stuck in the fall is that we are afraid to trust the normative story of incarnation. Perhaps we are afraid it won’t stand up in the world. Perhaps Western rationalism’s skepticism has made us afraid to tell our story, for fear that others will ridicule our naïveté. Scientific ways of knowing have godlike powers in our culture. Because in Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection God has not made the case in scientifically verifiable

ways, we fear that we as God's diplomats have no case either. We let the story of fallen sexuality play out on the world's stage, until we see a flaw and then jump in with correction. But because our response is reactive, we tell only the parts of our story that fit the chink in the world's armor.

The fallen world insists on sexual liberty, and rather than offer our own version of sexual wholeness, the church has told a story of repression. To a world intrigued with provocative clothing that says, "I dare you to look," the church has told a story that repudiates the flesh.

To a world that tells its story of "friends with benefits," the church's story has been "Good girls don't." Good girls don't—until the wedding night, when all of a sudden those same good girls should.

To a world that tells a story of sexual frustration bursting at the fly to be set free, the church has settled for a flaccid story that each of us should deal with sexual frustration on our own. And we do—until it finally bursts forth in our victimization of the vulnerable one close at hand.

To a world that tells a story that men and women can only understand each other in competitive and adversarial terms, the church has gone back to the story of the fall, as though Genesis 3 is the best we can hope for in this life.

The bottom line is, we are afraid of the place in our story where spirituality intersects with sexuality. Let that be our first confession as we deal with this subject.

Risks of a reactionary posture

When our posture toward the world's story of sexuality is reactionary, we are quick to conform to two ways of thinking. The first is reductionism.

In our sex-saturated society, we are intrigued by things done in secret, mesmerized by mystery. But in the West, fascination with mystery is resolved through a reductionism that dissects any whole into its component parts and then claims to understand its secrets. Consider the cover of the February issue of a popular magazine: it promises to give you the mechanics necessary for a mind-blowing sexual experience in time for Valentine's Day. This approach to sexuality is hostile to a biblical epistemology, to scriptural ways of

knowing. If the biblical creation story is about anything, it is about completeness, about a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Rather than reducing this unfathomable reality to mechanics, a sexual wholeness informed by the scriptures reaches all the way up in mystery to the image of God.

In contrast, the world shows us again and again that its story of reductionism is fatally flawed and leads to the madness of mutually assured destruction. Philip Yancey recalls a great scene from the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. The brilliant but socially inept mathematician approaches an attractive woman in a bar. “Listen,” he tells her, “I don’t have the words to say whatever it is that’s necessary to get you into bed, so can we just pretend I said those

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things and skip to the part where we exchange bodily fluids?” The slap she administers to his face is an invitation to learn the limits of reductionism.³

The second substitute for our faith’s story is a gnostic dualism that divides spirit and flesh, seeing spirit as good and matter as corrupt. In his brilliant article, “Berry’s Vindication of the Flesh,” Jason Peters describes how Wendell Berry skillfully speaks the normative story into a world that has accommodated this dualism. “Jayber Crow, the town barber, sees people who love ‘good crops, good gardens, good livestock,’ sitting through ‘world-condemning sermons’; he hears ‘the wickedness of the flesh . . . preached from the pulpit’ while ‘young husbands and wives and courting couples’ sit ‘thigh to thigh, full of yearning and joy’; he puzzles over a religion that scorns ‘the beauty and goodness of this world.’ He asks whether ‘Jesus put on our flesh so that we might despise it.’”⁴ Jesus’s incarnation of the fullness of God—God in flesh—has as much to do with our sexual nature as with our spiritual nature. The embodied truth of the redeemed is that wholeness has come in all things as all is reconciled through Jesus.

A story of new creation

Today the church faces an opportune moment. As postmodernity rejects the overreaching claims of science and positivist philosophy, a renewed hunger for the wisdom of story emerges. People display a growing readiness to hear a storied message that contrasts

with the emptiness, isolation, and fragmented sexual exchange of a consumerist society. We need only be prepared to tell the truth of our story—our whole story. But if we are to be heard, we must

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We have been given words that express our understanding of the way the world really is. The apostle Paul tells us that God created a good world and that the kingdom of God is the fulfillment of that world: “From now on . . . , we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from

a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation [that is more basic and more real than the fallen creation]: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:16–18).

We could interpret this passage to mean that because we no longer view Christ from a human point of view, his humanity is unimportant. Then we make Jesus androgynous, neither male nor female. We desexualize and dehumanize him; in effect, we disincarnate him. But “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” This statement in the present tense suggests that the new creation is taking place in the flesh, that it is restoring God’s people, redeeming us from the fall that also took place in the flesh. This story of flesh-and-blood redemption is our normative story.

Questions for moving toward a redeemed sexuality

The way the truth of that story is now seen is in those who embody it, make the case for it, and live as ambassadors communicating it as a message from a foreign land. As we enter this time of reflecting on sexuality, I want to pose some questions to move us beyond being stuck in the fall story, so that we can embrace a sexuality that is redeemed in the flesh.

First, how is it that we in the church say so much about sexuality and gender from the perspective of circumstantial rather than

foundational biblical material? How is it that where gender is concerned, the church has sometimes been satisfied to take every thought captive to Paul? Why have we allowed Paul's good theologizing to carry an authority unscreened by the incarnation? Or how is it that we read a fallen reality as prescriptive rather than as indicative of the fall—and then assume we can't do any better this side of heaven?

Second, how is it that we are so well versed in the politics and social science theories of sexuality but have so little to say about a

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view of gender and sexuality that emphasizes partnership, mutuality, and reconciliation?

Almost every major popular movement that gets society-wide attention frames issues of gender in moralistic, adversarial, or competitive terms. The superior sensibility of women and the relational incompetence of males is the dominant fare on our television and movie screens. How is it that the church doesn't ask the media to stop portraying us that way?

Third, how is it that in practice Christians embody a story of sexual fidelity that looks more like the fallen world than like new

creation? According to current studies, 70 percent of evangelicals in the U.S. say they have had premarital sex. Divorce rates are similar among evangelicals and in the population at large; in fact, the rate among evangelicals is a bit higher. Consumption of pornography is purportedly no different among Christians than in the rest of the population, and 40 percent of clergy responding to a national survey report that they struggle with pornography. In the Christian world, plenty of evidence indicates that we have some distance to go toward embodying the new-creation story.

Renarrating a story of sexual wholeness

So what does this reintegrated new-creation story sound like? The church needs to have much more conversation on this question. It will require courage and humility. If the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus, then Jesus is our way of knowing what is real. For sexuality to be Christian, all our understandings about

sexuality must be taken captive to Christ, God in flesh. Is it possible to renarrate a new-creation wholeness? That is *the* challenge the world's story poses to our story.

In closing I offer an example of what this normative story renarrated may sound like. In her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston wrote the following description using words that are at once earthy and otherworldly: "She couldn't make him look like just any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. He was a glance from God."⁵

To imagine a sexuality that reflects the image of God, our eyes need to be watching God more than our ears listen to the snake. The mark of the faithful church is the defiant refusal to live by the terms the fall has set for humanity. The church is called to be a people whose words and message make a case for the possibility of redemption on the way to new creation. Then we will be people who look deep into the eyes of the other until we see there a glance from God.

Notes

¹ Harry J. Huebner, *Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005), 1.

² Robert Farrar Capon, *Bed and Board: Plain Talk about Marriage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 49.

³ Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World: What on Earth Are We Missing?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 76.

⁴ Jason Peters, "Wendell Berry's Vindication of the Flesh," *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 317–32; quoting Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 161.

⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1937), 101.

About the author

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