

RE-SET: Love Life.

Song of Songs 2:3-7, 14, 16-17; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7; John 1:9, 14

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IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO TALK ABOUT.

If Jesus came to save us, and if the church is a community where God is at work to save us, and if being saved is a process where God heals us and makes us whole, then we have to talk about the sexual side of life. We can't avoid the topic. We can't wimp out. We can't pretend we all have this sexual thing figured out. How can the church be quiet about something this real, this important?

So here we.

This is the weekend.

Lore's vacation, somehow, ended up being this weekend. She's in Arizona. Nowhere near ground zero for this conversation.

When I told Sharon I was going to be the preacher of for this weekend, for this topic, I said, "I know I'm not an expert." She immediately replied, "Amen!" and planned a trip to Columbus to help with our granddaughters. She's about 200 miles south and east of here right now.

We're talking about this, we're listening to God's word in the Bible about sexuality, not because I am expert. The good news is we have the Bible to turn to as a resource. Today isn't about what I have to say to you, *but about what God has to say to all of us!*

So here we are.

CREATION.

In Genesis 1:27 we are told that we -human beings- are made in the image of God. That's something I want you to notice. Because some of us carry a kind of shame at even being sexual creatures. The Bible tells us, right from the beginning, that we are made in the image of God. And that means all that we are: the soul side, the intellectual side, the physical side, the sexual side.

The first man has everything. But the man needs a partner...a helper. God realizes that, Genesis says.

The Cokesbury Basic Bible Commentary points out the Hebrew word for *helper* comes from two root words. One word means "to surround" as in to protect and save. The other root word that is translated *helper* means to be strong. So God sees the man needs a helper. Someone who can surround him...protect him...save him. Someone strong.

Then, they become one flesh. The skin part of their relationship comes after they have already been united by their friendship, their affection, their concern and love for one another.

NAKED AND NOT ASHAMED – The Fall?

Verse 25 says: *The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*

When I was younger I was surprised, unsettled, that this kind of language would be in the Bible.

When I was younger I couldn't imagine two people walking around naked. In broad daylight. Like that was normal. When I was younger, I thought the stunning part of the story was that these two people would be walking around naked.

The amazing part of the story, though, isn't the fact they were naked, of course. What is amazing is that these two people loved each other so well, so completely, so honestly, so graciously, in a "no matter what" way, that they didn't need to hide anything from one another. They could be absolutely open and honest and vulnerable! No masks...no games of pretend!

When you are loved no matter what, all the way through, you don't need to struggle into the heavy overcoat we call shame. You are set free to be real...be who you were created to be.

If you look at the 3rd chapter of Genesis in the TNIV, you'll find the chapter heading *The Fall*. Most of the kids my age, if they grew up within shouting distance of Sunday School, were led to believe *The Fall* was a sexual thing.

The Sunday School teachers -or was it the adults in the family?- would get to this story in the Bible and their voices would lower. Their eyebrows would go up a notch. There were a few adults around who would tell the story and say, rather mysteriously, "I won't tell you what they did but they were together...on their own...no one else around."

People would talk about "forbidden fruit" and the eyebrows of the adults would arch. It -this "forbidden fruit"- sounded like something people got into at drive-in theaters or on the back seat of a Chevy Malibu or a Pontiac LeMans.

Somehow the story seemed to get all twisted up. God had told the man he could eat the fruit that came from every tree, but he couldn't eat the fruit from (2:17) tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And some of the adults hinted that this whole story was about sex.

But the story of *The Fall* wasn't about sex at all: it was about the man and woman's foolish attempt to play God. Which is the sin at the heart of every other sin. Thinking we know best, thinking we know it all, thinking the sun and the moon and the stars revolve around what we want and what we think: that is what *The Fall* is all about. That is how we wreck things.

What does the Bible have to say to us about our identity as sexual creatures? Well, the first two words God has for us today we've already talked about.

SEXUALITY IS A GOOD GIFT.

First, sexuality is a good gift. There is a lot of shame and embarrassment some of us carry around with us when it comes to the sexual part of who we are. (And, frankly, some of the shame and embarrassment is appropriate. We've done and said some shameful things. Expressed our sexuality selfishly...unfaithfully...and used other people.) But whatever shame and embarrassment there is associated with sexuality is our business: God made us and when God had made us -Genesis 1:31 says- God saw *all he had made, and it was very good*. God intended to bless us when God created us and made us sexual creatures.

This is one of the reasons why Song of Songs is included in the Bible. God's book includes this book! And this book is an unapologetic anthem, a song of praise that celebrates the love between two people.

In the 2nd chapter, we listen as the man speaks to his love:

My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

The woman answers:

My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills.

God intends for the sexual side of who we are, the male or female side of each one of us, to be a good and blessed gift.

SEXUAL INTIMACY OVERFLOWING OUT OF HEART INTIMACY.

Second, God intends for full sexual intimacy to be the result, the product, of the emotional and spiritual intimacy two people are experiencing together. Sex is not about trying to find something you don't have, it's not a way of finding love or intimacy or communion with another human being or passion or joy, but sex is a natural byproduct, the natural result, the natural next step, when two people are devoted to one another...loving one another with a "till death do us part" kind of love.

The relationship comes first...the sex comes second.

Get that out of order and nothing else may work right in the relationship!

I know a man in his late 20's who is racing from one relationship to another. He gives his heart and his body to one woman after another hoping she will be "the one." He is desperately lonely. He has been desperately wounded because his marriage, several years ago, ended in a divorce. Each new relationship, with each of these women, begins with sexual intimacy. He is trying to use his body, and the body of each of the women he dates, to break through the loneliness that seems to be swallowing him up. Hoping that the physical closeness will bring heart closeness, soul closeness, into his life.

Each relationship, each sexual partner, though, leaves him feeling more lonely and desperate and broken than he was before. Someone who loves him very much has told him, "Each time you go to bed with someone you give a part of yourself away, you give a piece of your heart away, and if you aren't careful you won't have anything left of you."

Sex isn't a way of searching for something you need or want.

Sex is a celebration of what two people are already experiencing in terms of God-given joy and intimacy and friendship and caring and respect and honesty.

Pastor Rob Bell says it this way (SexGod, pg 123): *Some women only know how to relate to men by making a series of transactions. They want to be wanted, and the man wants, well, the man wants what lots of men want. So they trade. Essentially they strike a deal with men, time and time again.*

I have what you want, and you have what I want, so let's make a deal. I need this, you need that.

Sex becomes a search. A search for something we're missing. A quest for the unconditional embrace.

But sex is not the search for something that's missing. It's the expression of something that's been found. It's designed to be the overflow, the culmination, of something that a man and a woman have found in each other. It's a celebration of this living, breathing thing that's happening between the two of them.

The word Paul uses for love, in Ephesians 5:25, is the Greek word *agape*. When someone in the first century used the word *agape* they were referring to a very special kind of love. It's the same word we find in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world. For God so agaped the world.* This kind of love is a giving kind of love. This kind of love isn't looking out for what it can get but what it can give.

Sex is the overflow, the result, of two people loving one another with an *agape* kind of love. It is a celebration of what God is already doing -not an attempt to find or get what we are missing.

What does all this mean for those of us who need to RE-SET our love life? It probably means that if we are having problems in our sexual relationship with our spouse it isn't a sexual problem: it is a relationship problem. It is an intimacy problem. It is a friendship problem. It is a heart problem. It is a soul problem. It may be an *agape* problem: are the people in this relationship loving one another with an *agape* kind of love? Or another kind of love...a kind of love that is all about the self and what I want instead of being rooted in the way God loves us? Do the people in this relationship love with a kind of love that is demanding, grasping, impatient and critical or a love that gives and honors and blesses?

Sexual intimacy is the natural overflow of a healthy, loving, affectionate, honest, trusting, intimate relationship. The heart and soul are connected to the body...and vice versa.

THE POWER OF FAITHFUL DEVOTION.

There is a third word God has for us about RE-SETTING our love life: an unrestrained, wholehearted level of faithfulness and honesty to your life partner is essential if your spouse is to love you in a joyous, unrestrained, wholehearted physical way. Heart devotion to one another is an absolute must if there is to be physical joy and fulfillment.

The woman, in Song of Songs 2:3, says this: *Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men.* She is confident he is hers. All the way through. Later, in verse 16, the woman says with bold certainty: *My lover is mine and I am his.*

From the 2nd chapter of Genesis to Ephesians 5 the Bible says *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.*

If there is any legitimate doubt, in your spouse's mind and heart, about your devotion, your loyalty, your faithfulness, then they will give themselves to you tentatively if they give themselves to you at all. If they are not confident about your heart commitment to them, then they will not commit their bodies to you in a confident, unrestrained, wholehearted way.

Somehow -and I hope you don't find this too funny- when I think about the importance of faithfulness in a relationship I think of high wire trapeze artists. You may have seen one of the Cirque du Soleil's shows. What those people do up there, high above the stage, is breath-taking.

One of the things I noticed the last time we attended one of the shows is that there is a “catcher.” There is one person -usually a rather muscular man- who swings back and forth on one of the bars. And he waits to catch the other athlete who is on the other bar, swinging through the air, who will let go of her trapeze and fly his way. To let go of the bar she is holding onto, she has to be confident that he will be there to catch her. Every time. Every time.

She can only let herself go if she knows he will be there. Ready to catch her. Every time.

Never underestimate the power of doubt and mistrust and suspected unfaithfulness to pull the life and passion and joy and playfulness out of the physical relationship you have with your life partner.

I love the way Pastor Rob Bell puts it (pg 139): *What goes on between them is a profound mystery. The mystery of the mingling of souls. What goes on...belongs to that man and that woman. ...the power of their coming together is rooted in their choice to give themselves to each other and to no one else in this particular way.*

Out of six billion people on the planet, I choose you. And no one else. No one else gets this. No one else gets me in this specific, holy, sacred, emotional, spiritual, physical way. It's power is derived from its exclusivity.

*Is this between you and me,
or you, me, and your friends?*

*Because that is going to change how much I tell you,
how much I let you in,
how much I trust you with,
how much I give to you.*

How naked I get with you.

Is this quirky habit of mine something I let you see because I know you love me no matter what, or is this something you will entertain our friends with at a party?

How safe are you?

Jesus, in Matthew 19:5-6, talks about the man being united with his wife, *and the two will become one flesh.* Jesus goes on to say, *So they are no longer two, but one.*

A profound, wholehearted, unrestrained devotion to your partner is the foundation for a relationship where you both can give yourselves to one another in a profound, wholehearted, unrestrained physical way. Doubt about the heart will cripple what can happen in the flesh.

My lover is mine and I am his.

LOVE AND RESPECT.

There is a fifth word from God for us: at the heart of a healthy, satisfying, joy-filled relationship between a man and woman is the willingness of a woman to respect her husband and the man to love -cherish- the woman.

This is something deep. And true. And essential.

We see it in the Bible. In the 2nd chapter of Song of Songs the woman sings about her lover as a gazelle or a young stag. I don't know if you have seen a gazelle or an impala racing across the flatland, or a stag making his way up terrain that seems impossible to climb, but

these are the images that come to mind when the woman thinks about her lover. The man takes her breath away -she sees strength and competence in him. She *respects* him.

Look at the very last phrase in the last verse of Ephesians 5:33: *However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

I've said this before and I will say it again.

I believe every man, when he walks into the room, wants the woman who loves him to look his way with respect. To see him as some kind of a hero...a knight...who goes out every day to battle dragons. The dragons may be at CTS or Jayco or Lake City Bank or Elkhart General or Northridge High School or Barnes & Thornberg, but every man -this is what I see- wants to have the woman he loves look at him and see a hero.

We don't tell you this, ladies. We don't want you to know what it means to us, how much it means to us, to have you say things to us about how cool we are or how smart or how strong or how generous. And we don't let you know what it does to us when you laugh at us, or when you see us as weak and foolish. I know...sometimes we do weak and foolish things. But many of us are heroes, we are warriors, we are knights, we go out there day after day and do things the right way, the best we can, and we need you to look at us with eyes that let us know you see it. *You see us.*

Whenever I hear a woman talking to her husband or boyfriend the way an irritated parent might talk to a child, I cringe. I know sometimes we can act like impulsive 8th graders, women, but when you talk to us as if we were fools...distracted 5th graders...it is never good. A regular pattern of that kind of communication almost never ends well.

Willard F. Harley, Jr., in his book *His Needs/Her Needs: Building an Affair Proof Marriage*, tells the story of Charles and Louise.

Charles was an artist. Just getting started. When he and Louise were dating, he would give her a painting and her eyes would light up with excitement. "What a wonderful painting!" she says. "No one ever gave me an original painting, before. You have so much talent!"

"I don't know about that," he'd say. "I have a long ways to go."

"You underestimate yourself," she'd say. "You are really good. I know enough about art to know that. You always do such fine work."

She let him know, every chance she had, how cool and good and creative he was.

After they were married the words of praise began to come less frequently. She thought Charles was too contented with his job in commercial design. He was too comfortable, not aggressive or ambitious enough, to suit her. She wanted him to become a famous artist. She worried he wasn't going to work to develop his potential.

Meanwhile, at the studio, Charles found himself working on projects with Linda. She had a gift for layout and graphics. Together they did some award-winning work. One day they were having lunch together and Charles began to talk about how things at home seemed tough. How Louise thought he was lazy and just not developing himself as an artist. Building a great name for himself.

"Lazy!" Linda almost shouted. "Does she know how tough this business is? Why I can't think of anyone your age who is doing so well. Your wife just doesn't understand what it takes. Besides, you are one of the nicest guys I have ever met. She's lucky to be married to you."

"It's kind of you to say that, Linda," Charles answered.

“It’s not just kindness,” she said. “I meant it. I’m just being honest.”

What Linda said, her compliment, hung with him all day. He just felt sort of warm. Everything seemed better knowing someone noticed. It felt good to live up to someone’s expectations, and not have someone pointing out what he wasn’t getting right.

It wasn’t long after that Charles and Linda began their affair. Charles and Louise ended up in counseling, putting their marriage back together, and she learned how to express the admiration she felt for her husband...instead of pressuring him to do more...to do better.

When a woman respects a man -and sometimes it is work finding things to respect when we mess up- the woman motivates the man to love her even more. That’s what Dr. Emerson Eggerichs points out in his book *Love & Respect: The Love She Most Desires and The Respect He Desperately Needs* (Integrity).

His love motivates her respect.

Her respect motivates his love.

And women need to know we love them. There are libraries full of books about all of this, but there are all sorts of ways we can communicate -to the woman we love- our affection and love and tenderness and commitment.

Words are good. Look at the reading from Song of Songs. The man sings: *My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.*

Now if you turned to your girlfriend or wife, while you are out at your favorite steakhouse or camping at Potato Creek State Park, and you began telling her she was your “dove in the clefts of the rock” it might provoke more giggles and suspicion than delight. But words are good.

Last week we were snowed in over at Columbus. We went to church with our kids. The preacher, Rich Nathan, talked about quiet, reserved, Upper Midwesterners who don’t express their feelings very easily. He talked about the man whose wife, after five years of marriage, wondered if he still loved her. The question stunned him. “Of course,” he said. “I told you I loved you the day we were married. If anything changes, I’ll let you know.”

So are small things you can do. Helping by changing a diaper or vacuuming the family room...or cleaning up the kitchen after supper...those can be very, very romantic things. They may say “I love you and I have some idea about your day” in a more powerful way than a dozen roses or a card.

Another powerful way is by acts of affection. Wrapping your arms around the woman you love as she stands looking out the window, or taking her hand as you head into Target, or just noticing her...giving her smile...in the middle of a crazy, busy moment.

Women need to know we love them. That we have this extraordinary feeling of tenderness towards them. That they are our safe place...that wherever they are is home to us. They need to know we would fly over the mountains to get to them, that we would crawl to the other side of the world to protect them, that we would turn the world upside-down if they were ever lost. They want to know we would do battle for them...

This is a simplification, but men need respect.

Women need to be loved.

When the woman respects the man, she feeds the love he has in his heart for her.
When the man loves the woman, when he lets her know about his delight in every breath she takes, in her very existence, that feeds the respect she has for him.

Gary Thomas, who was here at Trinity several years ago, has a book titled *Devotions for a Sacred Marriage* (Zondervan). In that book he tells about one average morning.

It started off as your average marriage morning. Lisa and I went out for an early walk, then stopped off at a Starbucks on our way to the grocery store to get some items for dinner later in the day. As Lisa walked up the steps, she turned and looked at me to say something. I remember the way the morning sun highlighted her hair, and I thought, "She is so beautiful to me."

Ten minutes later, I told Lisa what I had been thinking. "This has been a rather mundane marriage morning – going for a walk, getting a cup of coffee, stopping at a grocery store – but I just want you to know, when you paused on the steps I thought to myself, 'I am deliriously in love with that woman.'"

"Buuuutttt-," Lisa said.

"No 'but,' That's it."

"That's it?" she said.

"That's it."

"Oooh, baby, what do you want?"

"I don't want anything! I was just thinking I'm still deliriously in love with you after almost twenty years of marriage and thought I should share it with you."

"No, I mean it," Lisa said. "You name it, you've got it."

For the...curious, I kissed her on the forehead and left the room (not that it's any of your business), struck by the power of simply noticing my wife and telling her about it. It dawned on me this is what much of God's love is all about. He notices us. He doesn't take us for granted. (Pages 118-119).

MAKING GOD HAPPY.

Some of us here this are so blessed to be in a faithful, devoted, life-giving relationship. Where there is tenderness and playfulness and delight. What a great reason to praise God this morning...to thank God for his amazing blessing of this kind of intimacy and communion and friendship!

Some of us here are grieving the loss of our love...our partner in life...our lover. There has been a death or a divorce and we still feel lost. We feel so alone. We need God...and others...to help us bear this loss. This sadness.

Some of us here have been deeply wounded by a person or several persons...who have used us and abused us sexually. They've stolen something precious from us. We carry this deep sadness with us. Trusting anyone is a terrible struggle. Some of us have never told a soul...some of us have been working towards healing with the help of God and friends and a counselor. Maybe today is one more step towards healing. Invite the Holy Spirit to help you move towards freedom...so that incident or toxic relationship...will not continue to control your life. Tell someone you trust. Open up to God.

Some of us here are wrecking ourselves or someone else by our misuse of God's good gift of sexuality. We have made it all about us. We are involved in unfaithful or dangerous behavior. We may be tied up by some kind of sexual addiction. Today is a day to RE-SET. To turn around and head towards God...towards a life where God and genuine love begin to address the deep need...the brokenness in you. We need to turn...to repent...to be forgiven... and stop hurting ourselves and others.

Some of us here are just stuck. Things in our marriage aren't good. We're not sure whether to try again, or just give up. Just survive under the same roof. Pray, today, that God would show you both the first step you need to take. And give you're the courage to live into the changes that need to happen in your marriage...so there can be joy again, tenderness again, grace again, passion again.

Novelist Pat Conroy grew up in an abusive home. His mother and father fought off and on. It wasn't pretty.

When Pat was a student at VMI, he would spend time in the home of an older, married couple. The man and woman loved each other very much. Young Pat watched the way they interacted. The way they talked to one another and listened to one another. The way their hands would touch as they walked from the kitchen into the dining room. Conroy wrote, "It made me happy to see how much she loved him."

When we love well, when we love our partner tenderly and faithfully and playfully and passionately, it makes God happy. God is happy, all over again, for the gift he gave us so long ago. Is God smiling at the way we are using...living out...the gift?

My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.