

Righteousness and Perversity: Does the Church know the Difference?  
Tabernacle United Church  
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Texts: Psalm 14, Ephesians 3:14-21 & II Samuel 11:1-15

Introduction

The biblical passage of Psalm 14 tells us that “All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no-one who does good, not even one. “ It asks the question <sup>4</sup>Will evildoers never learn— those who devour my people as men eat bread and who do not call on the LORD?” Then the Ephesian passage commends us to be “rooted and established in love,” To have the “power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge— that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Notice the contrast between the unrighteous with the lovers, the juxtaposition of those who seek evil and those who seek love, the evildoers who will never learn with those who seek to know a love that surpasses knowledge. Perversity and righteousness side by side.

I wonder if you have noticed that human beings are not always rational? In fact, sometimes we hold in tension two contradictory ideas that make no sense whatsoever and are in fact laughable. Here are a few examples I was thinking about that simply leave me mystified!

Mystified

I've heard “White is right” or so they say  
pow'r comes to the fairest in this land  
But lotions, creams and sprays are prepared  
to create the perfect shade of tan.

“I want ‘mo’ money, lots mo’ money,  
the good life, my own piece of the pie.”  
But we strip the earth of all that’s left.  
We’re content with garbage ten feet high

“Stop crying or I’ll hit you again.”  
She tells the children year after year,  
And with each blow she creates new pain  
They can’t begin to stifle their tears.

They say, “Stop or I will shoot you now”  
officers in blue will always cry.  
But the choice is never very clear  
Either way you really could just die.

Motherhood we exalt and adore  
It's next to sainthood or so we say.  
But we allow children to have kids  
And we celebrate it all in May.

"Let us halt the execution, friends  
until he is well enough to die."  
Use a gun to keep her for yourself  
Lift wifely status, perpetuate the lie.

Common sense has gone over the fence  
But it's the rational that's denied  
If these are the myst'ries of our lives  
Then I am completely mystified.

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Now what makes me sad is that the church does the same thing, so much so that I wonder sometimes if we know the difference between righteousness and perversion? If I do my job correctly, by the end of the sermon you will be as confused as I am.

#### How we got here

You see, we are part of a grand institution with a 2000 year history, the main thesis of which is that God "became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) We call it incarnation. And yet, we have 2000 years of preaching and teaching that the body is cursed, the flesh is carnal, that our bodily senses, especially as it relates to sexuality, are inferior to the spiritual life and indeed often, detrimental to the spiritual journey. We have been taught to be in constant battle with our flesh. The flesh is never an avenue for sacred experiences but a battleground between the spirit and the carnal. Isn't that a bit strange? How did we get this way? Listen to some of these views of the Western founders and key thinkers in Christianity's beginnings.

Aristotle's view was that "the female, is, as it were, a deformed male." Thomas Aquinas, Church Father and theologian said, "Woman is defective and misbegotten" while St. Augustine said that women are "not the image of God, but, as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself the image of God." Another church father and theologian, Tertullian, said that women were "the devil's gateway" while Martin Luther, priest and Christian reformer, said "Eloquence is not to be praised in women; it becomes them better to stammer and lisp."

While these are all quotes about the genetic and biological inferiority of women, the connection between the church's misogyny and the erotophobia, or the fear of the bodies' passions, is made clearer in the Catholic document that was used to ferret out witches. It said "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil." And for this reason one can begin to understand this statement, also from the same document "...All witchcraft comes from *carnal lust* which in women is insatiable." (Malleus Maleficarum, 1486). It is appalling to

read what Martin Luther (1486-1546) said of women; “If they (women) become tired or even die, that does not matter. Let them die in childbirth, that’s why they are there.” It is precisely this devaluing of the flesh, but *especially* female flesh, that leads to an abused woman being told by her male minister to return to her abuser because, in her forgiveness, she may win his soul. Is this righteousness or perversity?

### Where we are now

Now in our day and culture, we have a huge virginity movement that pushes abstinence-only sex education. Lest you missed it, the Southern Baptists approved a “True Love Waits pledge” that is now making the rounds and 2.4 million teenagers have repeated it since 1993. It says:

*"Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship."*

I am not sure what biblical marriage relationship we are talking about here. In biblical times they did not go to the local synagogue or head for the Temple with a marriage license to get married. Instead, it was the custom that once a man had physical relations with a woman they were considered married. She and her offspring were now his responsibility (and his property.) Abraham had Sarah and Hagar, Jacob had Rachel and Leah and two servants, Bilhah and Zilpah, David had 8 named wives and numerous other wives and concubines while his son Solomon had 700 plus 300 concubines. A “biblical marriage relationship” is polygamous.

But, back to our teenagers and young adults who are pledging a “lifetime of purity.” The research shows they do not remain abstinent any longer than non-pledgers. But unfortunately, they will be less prepared and engage in riskier behaviors than those who have had comprehensive sex education. In fact the scenario goes like this according to the author of “*The Purity Myth, How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young women.*” Jessica Valenti, "Teaching sex as a moral, responsible act -- not to be taken lightly, but also not to be used as fodder for criticism -- has the potential to create real change in young women's lives.... for example, think of the common excuse that young people use when they had unprotected sex: ‘it just happened.’ In these instances, sex is framed not as a deliberate choice, but rather as something that just occurred, thus freeing young people -- especially young women -- from the judgment that's heaped upon those who actively choose sex. The lack of protection, in fact, ‘proves’ that the encounter wasn't premeditated: This allows participants to absolve themselves of guilt. But if having sex is morally neutral -- or positive -- act, young women will start making better and healthier decisions, because they'll feel justified in making them.” (Page 194)

Oh my, consider for a moment, “better and healthier decisions.” Those would be decisions that are made ethically, thoughtfully, and intentionally. Is that perverse behavior? Or is that righteous behavior?

## Biblical Reflection II Samuel 11

This brings us to the Hebrew Scripture of David and Bathsheba, a fascinating story even as it is a most difficult one to read. Now because many have read the Bible through the lens of misogyny and erotophobia, down through the centuries Bathsheba has been portrayed as a beautiful seductress and a conniving woman. In the simple act of bathing on her own rooftop in the early evening she was able to seduce David, entice him to do that which was clearly wrong, and bring down the wrath of God!

Even those who would read this story in a more enlightened way tend to focus upon adultery, as if this was the issue. And indeed, it *is* the issue if we are supportive of the patriarchy. The patriarchal mandate found in the 7<sup>th</sup> of the 10 commandments is that you cannot steal another man's property. Adultery is stealing. The Hebrew commandment against adultery was based solely on the male prerogative that he had a right to own slaves, cattle, and wives. Wives were valued because they were the source of one's heirs and heirs were a sign of one's wealth. An honorable man does not steal from his neighbors. And, if he did, he was to be put to death along with the woman. It is interesting to note that King David avoided that punishment although that was the law. So either this was a commandment they did not follow faithfully or the rich and powerful could always find a way to bend the rules in their favor.

Now, a sidebar about adultery:

Adultery for the Hebrews was not how we understand it today. We define it as two people (who may or may not love each other), who are physically intimate (in a way that may or may not threaten their primary relationships) but who do so secretly and in violation of their primary committed relationships. I am not suggesting adultery is not a sin or that there should not be sexual boundaries. I am saying that we are not let off the hook as a church or as Christians to do some serious moral discernment about this issue. But we cannot simply mouth the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment as if that somehow explains an inviolable rule. It does not.

So let's look at this story from the viewpoint not from the Law or the patriarchal customs, but through Bathsheba's experience. We have every reason to believe that she lived a comfortable existence. Her husband was a high-ranking officer in the king's army. She lived on the "right side of town" (next door to the palace.) She had the status and honor of a position of a well-placed woman. But, as is true today, all these privileges could not protect her when the long arm of abusive power reaches out to claim and violate her. It destroys any illusions that wealth, status, or prestige could protect her from the reality of being a woman, a woman who is ultimately, property.

Bathsheba is summoned to the palace. One never says no to the king, especially the king who employs and oversees the safety of your husband. Your husband was valued, not necessarily because you loved him, but because he was a woman's sole security for survival. She obeyed, was raped, and then sent home.

Now if we believe women are deformed men and defective, if we assume women are automatically, because of their gender somehow more capable of thinking evil, then we could conclude as one recent theologian did (Lillian Klein, "*Deborah to Esther, Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*") that Bathsheba wanted to be seduced in order to have a child. Childbearing gave status in the community to women. Indeed, if this were the case then we could say Bathsheba's behavior was as perverse as David's. But if we shift the focus from adultery to coercion, abuse of power, and rape, the onus of unethical and immoral behavior sits squarely on the shoulders of King David where it belongs.

I suspect some of these ideas are new. Why is that? Is it because the Church does not always know the difference between what is righteous and what is perverse or how to decide?

### Theological Reflection

We currently live in an age in which the Christian church has an obsession with purity, most especially sexual purity, and most especially the sexual purity of young people, specifically white, middle income girls. I am deeply concerned about this obsession, not just because of what it does to our young people. First, it teaches something is wrong with pleasure and with their sexuality. It also creates expectations that living in some "pure" state is simple, and expected and even possible. It distorts just where our moral compass actually is! And all this is enforced with the threat of God's disapproval or wrath and disapproval and censure from the community. Further, this obsession with purity applies to anyone who is not currently or ever been married, making marriage a requirement for everyone, and mandating celibacy for adults and for everyone in the sexual minority communities.

But, mostly, the vision of *purity* is problematic (sexual purity or not) because it is simply unbiblical. In my reading of the Scripture, particularly in looking at Jesus, his relationships and teachings, I find no expectation that humanity will become perfect or is expected to become as angels or god like. It is true that the Hebrew Scriptures say God commands us to be holy as God is holy. However, being holy does not mean being perfect. It means being righteous. Righteousness is equated with holiness but never with perfection. So I asked the question again, does the church know the difference between righteousness and perversity?

We must read the passages in the Hebrew Scriptures against adultery through the lens of property ownership. If we wish to take stances against adultery and we certainly should, we cannot do so on the basis of the 7th commandment.

In addition, if we wish to commend our young people to delay physical intimacy until they or we believe they are more ready to accept the consequences in their lives, whatever they may be, and we certainly should, we cannot do so on the basis of some nonexistent command to be pure. Purity implies a perfection that is simply not biblical.

Now there is, of course, one verse in the New Testament, Matthew 5:48, which says “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.” That verse seems to be a complete denial of my point. However, that verse is mistranslated. The Greek word that we translate into English as “perfect” does not have an English equivalent. Its meaning is complete, whole, or authentic. In other words, as God is most fully, completely, authentically God, so we are to be holy, fully and completely who we are made to be. The Amplified Bible translates it “growing into complete <sup>[a]</sup>maturity of godliness in mind and character, <sup>[b]</sup>having reached the proper height of virtue and integrity.” Notice there is no mention of purity in that definition.

We become wiser and more righteous when we are open to God's voice and direction and are willing to take the risky steps of faith. Notice, I did not say a perfect people! The story of King David is that in spite of this incredible abuse of power that included besides rape, cold, manipulative, premeditated murder of Bathsheba's husband, he is still loved by God. David can become for us an example of how we are *not* expected to be perfect.

But because Christians do not know the difference between righteousness and “purity” we have allowed the virginity movement, according to Jessica Valenti, to become “the new authority on sexuality. It's in our schools, telling our children what sex is (dirty, wrong, and dangerous), and in our homes, creating legislation that violates women's privacy and bodies.” (Page 31) Since our theology has a big void where teachings about the body should be, Christians, as a rule, cannot and do not embrace a healthy sexuality without apology. I believe that as a result of our inability to tell the difference between righteousness and perversity, “nearly every form of media” ...offers ‘ample evidence of the sexualization of women,’ and that most sexualization” focuses “on young women.” according to a 2007 study by the American Psychological Association. (Valenti, page 64) This is beginning to sound a bit like the obsessions of those Church Fathers, is it not?

Did you know that, as a result, of this obsession with sexual purity, vaginal rejuvenation has become the fastest-growing plastic surgery in the US? We are now obsessed, not just with being young, but with being virgins. Let's be clear the virginity movement is primarily concerned with protecting the “purity” of young white girls. (Those girls of color or who are poor are of less interest or concern when we hold sexist and racist stereotypes.) In the meantime while we are mouthing bad theology and wallowing in our erotophobia, “approximately 200,000 to 300,000 adolescents are sexually exploited -- to prostitution, trafficking, child sex tourism, or pornography -- annually in the United States.” (Valenti, page 76) And, I was told that Philadelphia is one of the main ports where this occurs. Where is the outrage about that in the church? This is a body justice issue.

Where is the outrage that 18 to 22-year-old young adults have no forum in the church or in the culture to learn to negotiate what has become a sexual jungle? That is what the Penn students tell me. They want to talk about this. They want to learn. They want to have healthier, better quality relationships. Where do they go? What are their options? This is a body justice issue.

Where is the outrage that one in four college women will be sexually assaulted before she graduates? That is what the statistics are. This is a body justice issue.

How much of this sexual jungle is the result of the churches' silence about healthy sexual ethics and the lack of clearly articulated ethical guidelines? How much of this is because the church is deeply conflicted about the place of pleasure in the spiritual experience? Can God be accessed through our bodies? Can the Sacred be known through our physically intimate relationships? Are there limits to love and loving expression? If so, what are they? What should they be? Where are the physical sexual boundaries that are consistent with our understanding of who Jesus was and is? What does the Jesus who disobeyed religious customs and violated sexual norms model for us today on this topic? And just what does God-in-the-flesh mean in our own physically intimate relationships? The word gospel means good news, so is there any good news for us as sexual and sensual people? Do we have a clue?

Traditional Christianity has, for 2000 years, sidestepped these questions for the most part, by simply thinking in dichotomous ways. If it is of the flesh, it's sin. Period. Now, while that is not the position of most mainline Protestants in Christendom, we have failed to counter the strident anti-sexual, anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-pleasure voices that purport to speak for the church. Do we know the difference between what is perverse and what is righteous because we routinely ignore the beautiful intimacy and ecstatic pleasure of our bodily experiences as somehow not Christian! I am mystified. Not only has common sense gone over the fence, but how can we preach a God-in-the-flesh and not appreciate our own? I am completely mystified.

But the Ephesian letter tells us to be "rooted and established in love," and that we might begin "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." And when we do this we might be "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

Love is not to be feared. Our bodies are not the enemy.  
We are loved as we are. Purity has nothing to do with it.  
God became flesh. Let us rejoice in our own.  
Amen.

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