

Body Ambivalence in the Body of Christ  
Central Baptist Church, Wayne PA  
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By the Rev Dr. Beverly Dale

*Isaiah 43:1-5*

Hello, Christians!

Hello, all you sexy Christians!

Whoa! Did I see a bit of a cringe there? How many thought this was a rather weird way for me to speak to you? Perhaps some of you have heard of my reputation and interest in sexuality and are wondering just what I am up to. Especially with the word “body” in the sermon title! What I am up to is helping Christians embrace the erotic, and in that process heal the many sexual wounds that are in the church and in the wider culture. We have lots of problems in our culture with the body and especially in the church. So I am not going to talk about “body ambivalence” in spite of the title because that is a given. I am instead going to address what we can do about it. I suggest that, of all people, Christians could be and should be the sexiest religious people out there.

Now you may wonder how I came to that conclusion since most people would come to the opposite conclusion. But we have an incarnational religion. Incarnation means God-in-human-form. The basic tenet of our faith is that God lived and dwelled among us and, unfortunately, we didn’t recognize it. And, I would suggest that we still do not. Oh, we might say that a person is a saint and something particularly godly about them but usually that is after they have been dead a while, (or martyred or assassinated!) But God in these bodies? Most of us would look a bit askance if we take that “too literally.”

But if God did become flesh as we say we believe, then surely being in the flesh as sensual and sexual people is not bad, it is not something to feel ashamed about, nor is something to denigrate. I take as my text the Creation story in Genesis that says “In the beginning God” and ends at the creation of the first humans with the words “It is good, it is very good.” (I shall return to that text at the conclusion of the sermon with the concluding piece of the one-woman show. The poem you will hear is called “I am Eros.”) But first we have to recover the word Eros.

When we let the wider, secular culture define sexuality the words Eros and the erotic become synonymous with the pornographic. And pornography is devoid of any aspects of spiritual. Pornography is reducing the human to only bodies, sex objects. Those who participate in this multi-million dollar industry do not acknowledge our minds, let alone our spirits. And, as long as the Church refuses to engage in positive conversations about sexuality and continues to fail to teach sexual ethics that are grounded in the freedom of God’s grace and affirms our physicality, then the porn industry will continue to crank out perversion and make lots of money.

The Business Of Smut: What Is It Worth? From Forbes.com by Dan Ackman, “How Big is Porn?”

Adult Video	\$500 million to \$1.8 billion
Internet	\$1 billion

Pay-Per-View	\$128 million
Magazines	\$1 billion
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2.6 billion to \$3.9 billion</b>

Sources: Adams Media Research, Forrester Research, Veronis Suhler Communications Industry Report, IVD

It is clear lots of people are making lots of money by perpetuating destructive, harmful sexual messages to our culture. Now I am sure you have heard a number of words in this sermon in the first three paragraphs that you have never heard in church before! ☺ So let's shift gears and talk about God as Passion, God as Eros.

### **God as Eros**

They have done research that shows our language not only reflects our reality but it also shapes it. If we do not have a special word for a particularly light and powdery snow, then we will be unable to differentiate it from other type of snow. In contrast, the Eskimos have many words for the single word of "snow." As I learned in seminary, the metaphors that we use for God reflect more about the god-talker than God herself. Yes, I said "Herself." Did that jar? The masculine and feminine genders we give to God says much about how we value males and says, by its jarring nature, much about our ambivalence, if not denigration, of females. While promoting gender inclusive language opens us up to see new things about the character of God, I instead am suggesting we move beyond gender altogether. Surely God transcends all our language systems.

The poet Jane Kenyon (1) writes of God as

"I am the blossom pressed in a book/found again after two hundred years... I am the maker, the lover, and the keeper... I am food on the prisoner's plate, I am the stone step, / the latch, and the working hinge/the longest hair, white before the rest..."

(You may say, "Ah but the Bible does not say that." But the Bible does speak of God as Midwife, Shepherd, Rock, Shield, as a Mother Hen, as Spirit, a River, as Light, as Love, as the Beginning and as the End.)

The poet concludes the poem, "I am the one whose love/overcomes you, already with you/when you think to call my name..."

And this is a lot like the Isaiah 43:1-5, "I love you." and "You are precious to me." God says to us over and over. God whispers it and shouts it. It is in the breath that we breathe.

*Blow through me Breath of God (2)*

### **The Beloved moves toward us**

Yes, God loves these bodies, these less-than-perfect vessels from which much goodness and righteousness can flow, and when it doesn't, God still loves us. We are good about saying "God is Love" but we rarely examine the physicality of that love or the characteristics of that love. I suggest this love is known by another word, passion or Eros.

If we view God as Love (or Passion), then God becomes our Beloved. God always moves toward us to embrace us, each one of us. This is the first characteristic of Eros I would like us to consider: Eros always moves outward toward the beloved, like a breeze that blows and blows and we can't stop it.

Love as Eros longs to reach out and hold us. Passion is about longing and desiring. In fact, one theologian, Roberta Bondi, has said, "God is besotted with us." (4)

Throughout the entire Hebrew Scriptures there is a continuous cry from our Beloved who says, "I love you. I will never abandon or forsake you." That sounds pretty besotted to me.

The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hosea God says to Ephraim "It was I who taught (you) to walk, I took (you) up in my arms;...I led (you) with cords of human kindness, with bands of love, I (am) to (you) like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to (you) and fed (you.)" That sounds pretty besotted to me.

Can we feel the passionate arms of God reaching for us when we huddle in the corner of our loneliness and are bowed low by our grief and our sorrows?

Can we feel the passionate Presence of God reaching for us when we are whirling through our over-crowded, over-scheduled lives?

Can we feel the passionate Comfort of God reaching for us when we are paralyzed in our fears?

*Blow through me Breath of God*

### **The Dance of Eros**

Besides moving outward toward the loved one, our passionate God of Eros is, in the words of the songwriter, the Lord of the Dance. (3) Let us not forget that if we are to follow Jesus we must be about going to parties and having a good time. (Teenagers, Be alert. Here is ammunition for you.) After all, this is the criticism his enemies had for him. He was having too much fun and disobeying too many of their rules. When we are in love we are often giddy and dancing because we feel so wonderful.

So how shall we, as Jesus' followers, convert a Passionate Love into a rhythm that calls us to dance? How can we shift the (Eros) Passionate Love of God into rhythmic patterns that lead us to start dancing instead of warring, sharing instead of accumulating, and living instead of dying? For, to live without Eros pulsing through our lives is to just (barely) survive. We need passion to live fully. To just survive is to quickly fall prey to a negativity that leads to despair and a sense of impotence about life. I have been on the dance floor with walking mannequins with no energy or sense of direction. And I remember shaking hands with someone who, though quite alive, seemed to barely have a pulse in his limp hand. I had to look a second time to see if he was breathing!

I remember the first time I met a couple whom I concluded are perfectly suited for one another; both are afraid of life. Although my mind raced to find some common interests with either of them, I discovered neither had much of a curiosity about anything. It was no surprise to learn they had few interests or hobbies, didn't travel or want to know anything beyond their world.

Of course, there are plenty of people who watch from the sidelines and, even if offered the invitation, refuse to get on the dance floor. Let us remember the songwriter who said for Jesus, "I danced for the (religious professionals) scribe & the Pharisee/But they would not dance & they wouldn't follow me." This is NOT good! Timidity about life will always stifle the spirit. Fearfulness will always hamper our movements whether it is on the dance floor or in the choice of the career or the dreams we pursue. There is no fear about love that is passionate. It is just so always out there, unashamed in its loving. That is the God of Eros. That is the Jesus I read about.

God's Eros is all around us and in us and in our relationships. But we are like the fish in the ocean who cannot describe water. However the fish surely know that without it

they will die. Like the water, God's passionate love is all around us, and so often we cannot see it. But when we open our eyes, we can't do anything but dance for joy! Attend the banquets and the feast prepared by God! Celebrate our bodies and the joys of our relationships! (Including those of our enemies!) *Dance then, wherever you may be. I am the Lord of the Dance, said He! And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be. And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said He!*

When we know we are loved beyond measure, we have to dance.

When we know God is besotted with us and will never abandon us, when we begin to believe a besotted God calls us "precious", then we have to celebrate life.

Can we, as people of faith, "feel" the Passionate Love of God calling us to dance the abundant life, the gift of our lives, in these bodies, in our intimate relationships, with one another?

For if we can, God's joy becomes visible. God's Eros for us is no longer hidden from view for we "embody" it. And, incarnation, God-in-the-flesh, happens again and again through us, in these bodies, these beautiful bodies.

Let us teach the world to dance instead of war,  
to share instead of accumulate,  
to live instead of just survive.

Let us celebrate as Christians and live the essence of Eros found in the Christ story that says; "Love is."

Let us celebrate the Presence of Love in the midst of every trial and apparent victory of greed, torture, evil, or war what is the summary of the Jesus' story; "Love Wins."

And let us celebrate that beyond death and beyond our deepest fears and our grief and disappointments the message of Christianity; "Love is Enough."

The drum beat calls us and the tempo of Eros, God's passionate Love is as fast and as slow as you can take it.

Love is.

Love Wins.

Love is enough. God is besotted with you. Can you imagine it! Can you feel it? This is why it is called Good news! Eros calls us to dance. Love is our dance partner.

God leads. We follow.

Eros leads. We respond. Listen...because a Passionate God is calling you by name.

Listen.

### *I am Eros*

In the beginning,

I am in the void. I am in the nothingness.

Moving, stirring, anticipating.

In the beginning,

I am in the potential. I'm birthing possibilities.

Moving, stirring, anticipating.

In the beginning,

I am the Hum of the Universe. I am the Musician of the Heart. I am the Composer. I am the Song

In the beginning,

I sing and the sun, and moon, and the stars begin to dance.

In the beginning,

I hum and the bubbling brooks and fragrant flowers come into being. In the beginning,  
I move and the birds and insects take flight.

In the beginning,

I stir the life force into the clay and humanity leaps forth.

birthing, exploding, multiplying exponentially.

Life begets life, music begets music, and dancing,

Dancing always leads to ecstasy.

I am ecstasy.

I am the quickened breath..in the silence ..... before creation.

Ecstatic union is my art form. Pleasure is my name.

You I desire. You I long to hold.

I long to pour myself through your body, and to make love to you.

Come to me. Come sing with me.

Come laugh with me. Come dance with me. Come be life with me.

We can be life together

I in you and you in me.

Come. Come. Come." (5)

The Beloved says to all of us, "Come."

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(1) "Briefly It enters, and Briefly Speaks" by Jane Kenyon page 120 in The Soul is Here For Its Own Joy edited by Robert Bly

(2) "Blow through me" is a song by Miriam Therese Winters. This was sung during the sermon.

(3) "Lord of the Dance" by Sydney Carter

(4) Roberta Bondi quote is found in a sermon entitled "The Character of God" by Marcus Borg

(5) "I am Eros" by Beverly Dale was published in DisciplesWorld. It was sung and performed at the conclusion of the sermon.