

Using Bible Stories to Address Adolescent Sexuality Issues

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In first century Palestine adolescence did not exist, females were undervalued making egalitarian relationships rare or non-existent, and sexual fulfillment, as we would define it, was not expected. But we can ask questions of some biblical stories and teachings to stimulate the thinking of young people that will help develop a positive, healthy sexual ethic that will empower them to act with self-confidence, enhance self-esteem, increase the ability to recognize and select trustworthy partners, and develop nurturing relationships.

Biblical Stories

The Hebrew Scriptures tell of love story of Delilah¹ who uses sexual seduction to trick her lover, Samson, into revealing his deepest secret. She then betrays him to his enemies. This seduction story can be mined for conversation about vulnerability and its abuse in a sexual context. What does trust look like in a sexual relationship? How does honesty fit into this story? What are the ways we abuse one another's trust in our intimate relationships?

In stark contrast, another seductress named Ruth² is never condemned, but is usually commended for her seduction of Boaz. This woman engages in premarital sex as a way to manipulate marriage for economic survival. So, is seduction ever appropriate in sexual relationships today? How does manipulation impact the couple's future? What are the power differentials in the relationship?

In the Christian scriptures³ Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well and asks for a drink in the middle of the day perhaps denoting she is avoiding the townspeople. Most likely she had a bad reputation for having had five husbands and currently is unmarried living with another leaving us to conjecture that she was a loose woman with a bad reputation. In which case, Jesus could easily have taken advantage of her sexually or, most certainly, would have condemned her. He did neither. Instead, he treated her as his equal (a radical departure of what one would expect of a man of his time and culture) and engaged in a deep conversation. It is only later in the story that her sexual history is revealed. How does serious conversation impact our ability to choose appropriate lovers? What needs to be talked about to really get to know

someone well? Why not take advantage of someone who is already marked as "easy"? What does Jesus' lack of condemnation say about sexual reputation in relationship-building?

The Bible also provides stories of deep relationships between people of the same sex. There was significant passion between David and Jonathan⁴ that was so profound that when locked in an ongoing battle David spared his enemy several times in large part because it was Jonathan's father and Jonathan, in turn, swore allegiance to his friend David rather than to his own family. Ruth and Naomi,⁵ though a generation apart, were so tightly bonded that when they undertook a long, difficult journey together they were willing to risk everything to either live or die with one another. The Bible says Jesus wept over the loss of his intimate friend, Lazarus,⁶ with whom he had lived for short periods of time. In addition, he had a special disciple who, though nameless, is simply known as the "one whom Jesus loved."⁷ What are the crucial factors that define a relationship as a committed one? What does friendship have to do with our intimate sexual relationships?

Biblical Teachings

The prime example of lust in the Bible is the story of King David and Bathsheba.⁸ David's lust caused him not only to rape her, but to lie to her husband, attempt to hide his actions, and, later, to set up her husband's murder to disguise the subsequent pregnancy. It is obvious why lust is soundly condemned in scripture. It is illustrated here as insatiable greed, so insatiable that one will stop at nothing. Lust is not to be confused with the natural physical hormonal rushes of sexual desire.

The juxtaposition of David's lusting with Jesus' teaching⁹ of lusting in the heart is most interesting. Jesus makes the connection between sexual attitudes toward others and despicable actions that may result. Thus, what are our attitudes toward our partner? Toward sex? Or, toward desired sexual outcomes? What kinds of thinking leads to despicable actions? Do fantasies feed lust or are they separate?

The Apostle Paul taught that the human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, a place where God

resides.¹⁰ If sexual behavior is considered a natural and sacred act where guilt and shame have no place, then this analogy suggests sexual behavior can be holy when it honors our bodies as consecrated space, set aside for special purposes and sacred pleasure. How does one care for one's body if the Sacred dwells therein? Who is allowed to touch and enter and under what circumstances is behavior sacred?

Since the definition of righteousness is right relations, the idea that the body is sacred means all that one says, does, or thinks impacts our ability to live in right relations. So, what are the relationship characteristics that would confirm we are in "right relation" with others and thus living righteous lives? The biblical teaching that we are to love ourselves as the criteria by which we can love others and our God¹¹ seems to be particularly applicable for those who struggle with low self-esteem or poor body image. Because we are bombarded with distorted messages that it is the physicality of looking sexy or "studly" that insures happiness, adulation, love, and an abundance of romance, we learn outward appearance determines our value and worth. But this detracts from the crucial questions of our inward and personal self-identity and of the quality of the relationship itself. How then can we learn to love and value ourselves from the inside? What do we need to learn to do to show respect for ourselves? How do we protect and love ourselves first and foremost in our intimate relationships?

I believe the key to addressing the questions about sexuality with young people is to stimulate questions that will help them identify what a healthy relationship looks like for themselves. Unfortunately, this conversation usually gets truncated to romantic love and sexual desire far too easily. Since a psychologically and relationally healthy relationship will also be a spiritually healthy one, our task as teachers and clergy is to tease out the crucial nuances in effective sexual decision-making. These include trust, self-love and self-care, vulnerability, justice, and mutuality and are an integral part of every spiritual and sexual journey.

The Reverend Dr. Beverly Dale is the Executive Director of the Christian Association, the ecumenical Protestant campus ministry at the University of Pennsylvania. She studied sexuality in her master's degree in sociology at Illinois State University and has continued an ongoing interest in the intersection of sexuality and religious culture through the cultural critiques of feminist and womanist theologians.

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Using Bible Studies to Address Adolescent Sexuality Issues

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Using her poetry and music she has led various workshops on spirituality and sexuality including, "The Erotic Empowerment of Women," "Liberating our Sexual Selves," and "God as Eros."

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References

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| 1 Judges 16:1-21 | 7 John 13:23 |
| 2 Ruth 3:1-18, 4:13 | 8 II Samuel 11:1-26:23 |
| 3 John 4:7-18, 27-29 | 9 Matthew 5:21-28 |
| 4 I Samuel 20:4-16, 41-42 | 10 I Corinthians 6:19 |
| 5 Ruth 1:1-19 | 11 Luke 10:25-27 |
| 6 John 11:1-37 | |