

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Mark 14:3-9

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Lust: The Pleasure of Christ

Mark 14:3-9 Common English Bible (CEB)

³ Jesus was at Bethany visiting the house of Simon, who had a skin disease. During dinner, a woman came in with a vase made of alabaster and containing very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke open the vase and poured the perfume on his head. ⁴ Some grew angry. They said to each other, “Why waste the perfume? ⁵ This perfume could have been sold for almost a year’s pay and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her.

⁶ Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. ⁷ You always have the poor with you; and whenever you want, you can do something good for them. But you won’t always have me. ⁸ She has done what she could. She has anointed my body ahead of time for burial. ⁹ I tell you the truth that, wherever in the whole world the good news is announced, what she’s done will also be told in memory of her.”

The season before Easter is known as Lent in the Christian church. In popular culture Christians are known to give up something for Lent. At some point giving up chocolate for Lent was the thing to do. What we need to remember is that this season was when in the ancient early church people prepared for their baptism on Easter. They learned the spiritual practices of the faith. Practices that would help them live a new life in connection with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. These practices became what we know as disciplines and later many would become sacraments to be practiced to maintain an ordered relationship with God.

As Christians practiced these disciplines of the faith a few became driven to go out into the desert or wilderness and practice each of them deeply. During their time of practicing away from others they developed an understanding around the 4th century in the Common Era(CE) that there were certain sins that humans committed with regularity that disordered their love with God. At some point these were codified and even popularized as “The Seven Deadly Sins.” Sometimes it is 8 depending on who you ask. The sins can be seen tied into our movies of today, and reach back to the works of Plato and Aristotle.

Today we are talking about lust, and let me stop here for a moment. My favorite preachers get almost silly when they start talking about his particular challenge. I have watched middle aged men, revered preachers come apart trying to walk their way to explaining the appropriate Christian response to lust. Female preachers do a much better job keeping it together on this topic. Here is what I want to share as we begin this.

Churches should talk about this more about lust, and specifically one area we will address today: sexual desire. Why you ask? Because every human faces the challenges associated with lust. We all generally have some experience of shame around sexual desire and deep satisfaction and everything in between.

The other thing I want to say is that if 4th century Christian thinkers and revered modern day pastors can’t adequately address this issue. Then I probably won’t accomplish everything you hope around this challenge today. Let’s keep talking after this one message. The challenges we face are what the church needs to address, create safe dialogue and most importantly seek prayerful direction for our community around lustful desire.

First a parable:

How to Catch a Monkey by Margaret Silf

If you ever need to catch a monkey there is a simple solution. Just place a piece of scrumptious fruit inside the cage. Then wait until the monkey comes by. If you watch you will see the monkey puts its hand through the bars of the cage, and grasp the fruit.

You have surely caught the monkey at this point. He will not let go of the fruit, even at the cost of his own freedom. All he needs to do is let go of the fruit. But what we cling to can rob us of our freedom.

What a blessing we are not monkeys!

Today our scripture finds us with the disciples and Jesus eating at Simon's house in Bethany. During the meal a woman comes up to Jesus, breaks a bottle and pours pure nard on his head. We don't often spend a lot of time on this passage in church for a couple reasons.

We don't really have an equivalent practice to this in our culture. We don't have a custom whereby someone we honor and who is near death receives the blessing of pouring a sacred substance over their head. I guess perhaps the closest we have is giving money to relieve medical debt of someone who is ill, or making sure to pay as much as we can to help someone receive medical care to hopefully avoid death. However, we need to recognize the sacrifice this woman made. She took probably the equivalent of a year's wages or more and bought this bottle for this purpose of honoring Jesus.

The second reason we avoid this passage, is because we don't often know what to do with the intimacy shown here between the woman and Jesus, the disciples response, and Jesus' rebuffing of the disciples demands. The disciples response is legitimate based on what we know of Jesus. He would have consistently sought out ways to see the poor fed and clothed. Why then does he get mad at the disciples for rebuking the woman?

I think it is because he is making sure they know the danger of lusting after something.

You may ask what are they lusting after, they are displaying sexual desire here. The reality I believe lust is more than just sex it is an intense appetite for something that we will pursue at any cost.

The other awkward reason we don't hear this scripture preached on, is because we struggle with the intimacy of a woman with Jesus. We have become so convinced of sexuality being a sin itself that when someone becomes intimate with Jesus, we step away and ignore the passage.

This is an intimate moment with Christ, and part of the disciples response is a lust they have for as intimate a moment as this woman gets with Jesus. Jesus' counter rebuke of the disciples is a defense of the shame the disciples throw at her. A shame grounded in their deep desire, something they will do anything to have, a moment of deep connection with the one they believe to be God incarnate. A moment of connection, and the pleasure of being intimate with God.

Theresa of Avila was a brilliant Christian writer in the 14th century. A nun who was afflicted by bouts of debilitating pain, who found in other moments deep connection to God. Moments that she describes as more intimate than most romance novels out there.

In her writings she warns that people can have such an intense experience of connection and pleasure of a connection to God that they can begin to lust after God too. Driven with a singular desire for even a fleeting moment in the presence of God again. It was such a problem for some of the converts to the monastery she lived in that she had to institute a practice where once people had had a deep experience with God, they be relegated to mundane human tasks like cleaning the latrines or doing dishes. It was also instructed that people not share their experiences for as to make other people envious of their experiences. People needed to be careful to share the deep connection with God, not because others shouldn't have it, but because as humans it is an experience of connection by which we would long for. Just for a fleeting moment of connection with the divine.

When I was a student at Rocky Mountain College for just my Freshman year of college. Speaking of lust and love, I left Rocky to pursue a young woman named Crystal and the power of these human desires got me to change schools. Anyway, back to my time at Rocky. The local conservative Christian organization had a speaker come one night to talk about sexual desire and how to avoid the temptation. I got assigned as a student staff person to work the event as an usher. Standing in the back I heard the man speaking say, “The writers in the Bible knew the power of sexuality, to manipulate, and control. That is why they believed it should be in the confines of marriage.”

While the rest of the night focused on avoiding and repressing sex until marriage. This statement he shared was not far off of what we are talking about today. The early Christian writers on sexuality, and in most cases when they identified lust it was sexuality they were talking about, struggled whether humans should be in family relationships or not. Early Christian writers from Augustine, to Pelagius, and Jerome debated this publicly with treatises and writings. Should Christians be in sexual relationships at all, were marriage sexual relationships still sinful, and what was appropriate sexual desire.

The piece I ponder, is I have not come across one of them grappling with our text we read today. It is as if they missed the intimacy and the reminder that even Jesus reminded his disciples that some intimate connection is important for all humans, even God in human form, and to lust after what you cannot have is the thing that separates us from God. Lust will drive us to madness in the pursuit of a pleasure at the cost of our very freedom and in some cases the lives and freedom of others.

And this is why lust is tied to sexual desire. It is tied to it because it is such a powerful pleasure. The ancients described it as a hunger beyond even food, and for them food was powerful enough. The thing that ancient thinkers and that the Apostle Paul and Jesus point to is to have right relationship with our desires. In other words...they ask us to have radical moderation, a third way to look at these desires.

To help talk about this I want to enlist a short video from a movie made in 1999 about a robot, an android who was over the course of time becoming more human. And was given the opportunity to experience eating and sexual pleasure. His understanding of this and the response of the scientist helping him I believe point to how potent sexuality is for us. Both in a healthy way and a not so healthy way.

Biccentennial man - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8UgHNjPYZM>

I love the scientist at the end...I want that too.

Friends God designed us for pleasure and even in a broken world the experiences of Theresa of Avila and others before us tell us that pleasure is not bad.

The pursuit of pleasure at all costs is what begins to draw division between us and God and others. Which is the law and only law that Jesus warned us to be wary of breaking.

One author I read compared Lust to a fire. A fire burning safely in a fire ring or in a stove can warm us, cook our food, and bring us great joy. The candle lit in prayer can remind us of the power of God's Holy Spirit around us. But take a pile of logs and soak it in gasoline and light it, or watch a forest fire and you know that anything without boundaries can cause damage.

This is why sexual lust can be so dangerous to relationships. It is why the ancients began to name the need for sexual relationships to be in the constraints of a covenantal relationship like marriage. The desire will be strong and consensual discussed relationship is the hearth to place that flame in. A relationship based on shared respect and understanding where people share their mutual desires and work together to meet those.

Interesting this week I talked with my friend who is the Student Rabbi in town and different classes of Jewish people in the Talmud were instructed to meet in sexual relationship with their partner a certain number of times, depending on their chosen profession. Sailors getting the most time between visits, and for those who studied Torah, Torah

took more precedence than the covenantal relationship. Though there are stories of those who studied Torah dying strange deaths because they were not paying attention to their surrounding after staying away from the partner too long.

We go on a tangent though.

The important thing to remember about Lust for Christians is right relationship to it. Placing it in the context of a covenantal relationship if the fire is needed, so it is contained in a safe place.

The greeks had two words I think that are helpful here:

Melida and Merida

Melida are limbs or non-replaceable parts and Merida are replaceable parts. The danger of lust is making humans replaceable parts.

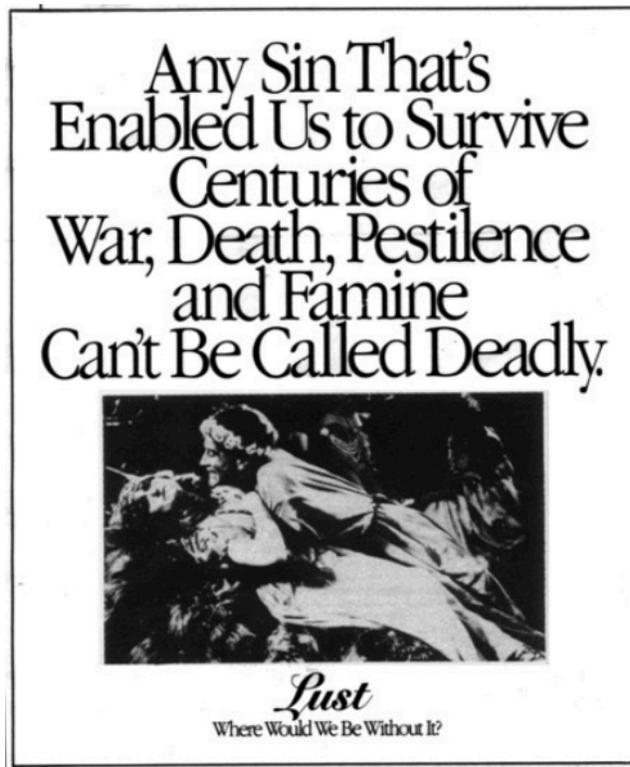
Let me use sex trafficking and uncontrolled pornography here as an example. The danger of Lust is that to achieve our desires we make humans objects to be used and bought and sold. Pornography use is the most frequent reality around this. The quick fix of using porn to achieve sexual fulfillment has been shown to be addictive and leads to other sexual behaviors outside of healthy relationship.

The same plays out in lust for power, using people's lives to meet your desires and goals. Lust for money is a deeper form of greed.

Unhealthy because it usually leads to objectifying people as objects for our pleasure only.

The Apostle Paul and Christ have a good balance in this reality. Paul talks about humans being a part of the body of Christ and that without certain parts of the body of Christ we lose out on Christ. Jesus talks about pruning. Reminding us that the balance in Christianity is reminding that people are sacred and that as humans we act as objects in the physical world if we start to treat people as objects we should recognize those actions and relationship are unhealthy. And likewise if we are treated like objects...we need to prune those relationships as Christ instructs his disciples to do.

Harper's magazine did an ad on Lust that I think speaks truth to the need for us to balance our understanding of lust:



As Christians we are called to seek the right relationship Jesus calls us to. Of making sure people are not replaceable parts we use to achieve our pleasure, however at the same time we need to also seek relationships that bring us deeper connection to God and each other. A deeper connection in the confines of healthy, discussed and relationships free of shame.

Jesus knew the need for this as God in human form. I pray we all can find this right relationship with our lusts. That God can help us do this and we can live the full life Jesus speaks of as we work with God and those who journey with us, that our desires might work toward the kingdom of God.

On a final note, if you are struggling with any of the sermons we preach this Lent, or if one of these messages triggers a challenge in your life. Let me or another trusted person know, so we might help you find

connection to resources to support you finding your direction, in God's love.