

“Lust - Getting all hot and bothered”

The one conversation that parents don't look forward to is *the* talk. And you know which one I'm thinking of, and I'm currently grateful that I have maybe 12 years before I need to broach this subject with Chloe.

In the spirit of full disclosure, this week's Sin was the one I wasn't looking forward to speaking on. I mean, really, how much wisdom do I, a relatively young man, married for less than 5 years, have to share on the subject of sex? Frankly, I'm a little uncomfortable mentioning it. And really, do I really need to talk to you about Lust? As I've learned this week, I probably do.

Lust is an inescapable vice. None of us are immune, and each and every one of us falls victim to its wiles and hollow desires. In the church, we have done a wonderful job of removing sexual desire from our public consciousness. But we have swept it under the carpet and we must deal with it privately. Except, the Bible doesn't shy away from it.

David

Perhaps one of the most famous bible stories about Lust is, of course, the story of David and Bathsheba.

Our story begins by telling us it was spring, “the time when the kings go out to battle.” But King David sent his commander Joab to fight his battles while he remained in Jerusalem. So David was not where he was supposed to be. At least 50% of resisting temptation is a matter of geography. When you are not in the right place, it's hard to make right choices. And David was not in the right place.

With great drama, the text tells us, “It happened late one afternoon.” David takes a walk on the roof of his palace and sees all the signs of his success. He has been firmly established as the king, and Jerusalem has been established as the capital. The nation has been united. Their enemies are on the run. And the boy who started out as a shepherd is now a middle-aged man living in a palace.

Maybe as he took that walk looking out at all he had accomplished, he remembered old Samuel's words when he anointed David so many years ago. "Thou art the one," the prophet said. "Yes," David must have thought as he walked, "I am the one. I am even number one."

While he was on the rooftop, David saw a woman bathing who we are told was very beautiful. He inquired about her and was told that her name was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. David doesn't care about that. And he doesn't even really care about Bathsheba. There is no courting or long, tender conversations. This is not a love story. It is a story of Lust. David's own story has shifted from receiving what God gives to taking what he wants.

The events unfold very quickly. David sends for her, she comes and lays with David and goes back the next morning. It was just supposed to be just a one-night stand. We aren't even given any dialogue except for Bathsheba's three words that come later, "I am pregnant." And thus the cover-up begins.

Sex

Now, before we get too far down the road here, I think that it's important to acknowledge the goodness of sex. We are created as sexual beings. The ability to be sexually aroused and desire sexual pleasure is a part of who we are, it's part of God's design. Our bodies, our sensations — these are all good gifts from God. Sexual desire and pleasure are meant to be a part of sex. Our sexual desires are not meant to be squelched or vaporized but satisfied in a way that respects each other's humanness. Sex should enhance our relationship with God and with each other.

Lust

Lust, on the other hand, is the misdirection of our sexual desires, to the extreme. Lust reduces sexual gratification to one's own individual self-gratification, it strips it down to only love's physical dimension, and even then, it's a shadow of itself. Lust pretends that sex and sexual pleasure are a party for one. There is no love or mutual self-giving. Lust strips off its social and personal meaning, the other person is instrumental only for me getting what I want. The partner's body is a pleasure delivery device used at will and then discarded, left behind.

Where sex has an interpersonal and social dimension, a dimension that brings us into connection and relationship with others, Lust cuts us off from this; it isolates us. Lust wants nothing to do with giving life or further commitments.

Lust doesn't want intimacy. Lust tries to substitute a narrow sensual and sexual pleasure seeking for a fully human love giving. Lust ultimately leaves us feeling empty. Lust shrinks the world into a narrowly self-serving vision — the pleasure of the flesh and nothing beyond the moment of gratification.

Lust is a vice because it does not honour the fullness of love and sex; it alienates people from each other, ironically in the midst of the most intimate of unions. Lust is one of the Seven Deadly Sins precisely because it undermines our abilities to live in the manner for which God created us, to love God, and to love our neighbour.

Not just sex

It should be noted, however, that Lust isn't exclusively a sexual Sin, though that's how it's most commonly manifested. Lust can also be understood more broadly to describe any obsessive desire that prevents an individual from flourishing. We can lust after things other than sex. We can lust after wealth, power, alcohol and drugs. To have an excessive desire for any of these, to have an addiction, in order to engineer our own salvation for our inadequacies is also lust. This is why Lust is also so closely tied to the other sins like Envy, Gluttony and Greed. All four of these Sins are self-serving, caring nothing for others, in the sole drive for empty satisfaction. We can crave, we can strive mightily to achieve, we can allow these good gifts to totally dominate our lives, but they too give empty rewards. We have a greater need within ourselves than they can fill. And yet, still we lust.

We lust because it's easy. After all, it's something we can do in secret. We lust, because we're encouraged by our surrounding culture to lust. Like pride, lust is trying to slide its way out of the vice column and take up residence in the virtue column. And so, surrounded by seductive voices and visuals, what are we to do?

“Chastity - It’s not just celibacy”

So what is the virtue that stands in opposition to the vice of Lust? Commonly the virtue that is used to contrast Lust is Chastity. Now, I don’t know about you, but when I think Chastity. I get visions of metal chastity belts with chains and locks and keys from the middle ages. I imagine all kinds of controls on my life – which, by the way, I get almost phobic about. No, you can’t do this. No, that’s not good for you. You are not allowed... and then I think about Celibacy, and I think about how all this has been mixed up and blended together as a way of talking about sexual purity, or abstinence. And I’m not so sure that’s the case.

Ronald Rolheiser, theologian, author, and celibate priest, reflects on the relationship between chastity and celibacy. He writes:

“Something else needs to be said, something too little understood today: celibacy can also be generative,” that is to say something that can predictive, “because sexuality is about more than having sex. Just before creating the sexes, God said: It is not good for the man to be alone! That’s true for every person who will ever walk this earth. Sexuality is given to us to make us beyond our aloneness, but many things do that for us and full sexual intimacy is only one of them.

Perhaps the single biggest misunderstanding about sex today is the belief that deep friendship, warm companionship, faith community, and non-genital forms of intimacy are only a substitute, some second-best compensation for sex rather than a rich, life-giving means of sex itself. These aren’t the consolation prize for missing the real thing. They are, just as is having sex, one rich aspect of the real thing.”

I think Rolheiser is onto something here. For me to come to a place to affirm Rolheiser has been a long journey for me.

I’ll admit before marrying, living a chaste life, celibacy made for some tough seasons. Celibacy wasn’t always a friend, instead, it was possibly the hardest struggle for me. I can echo Rolheiser’s reflection that “There have been seasons - days, weeks, months, and sometimes many months — when most everything inside of me screamed against it”

And at the same time, I can also reflect, that because of the celibate life, I’ve learned what bounty is offered in the Chaste life. In as much as Lust isolates us in our own desire for self-

gratification, celibacy can also isolate us, if we only see intimacy expressed sexually. I would like to suggest that the virtue of Chastity isn't exclusively a directive on our own sexual expression, although that is a part of the chaste life. Chastity is also about directing our love in appropriate ways. Where Lust thrives in isolation, having good friends and a community helps us to be open and accountable and helps us confront ourselves when we go down paths that are too focused on ourselves.

I'd like to think that Chastity has more to do with loving one's neighbour as oneself and remembering that we are all created in the image of God.

In scripture, Jesus has but one comment to make about sexual impropriety — in the Sermon on the Mount he says that we are not to commit adultery. But it is not the physical act alone that he is referring to, but the looking at another with the intention to possess, that is considered sinful. All other cautions about sexual activity come from Paul and Old Testament writers. We must remember that Chastity is about putting love in its right place.

In the throws of Lust, we begin with the commandment to love thyself, but when we live a Chaste life, we live a life that is bound by the two greatest commandments. First, to love God.

“Love God, and do as you please,” has often been attributed to St. Augustine, the same Saint who coined the Seven Deadly Sins. Augustine reminds us that when we begin with Loving God, what we please, is doing what is loving in God's eyes.

And the second commandment is to love our neighbour as ourself. Love and chastity have become, for me, the ability to rely on people and exchange love with those with whom I am not in a romantic relationship. The more I think about this, the more I practice this, the more I see how important good relationships really are. In fact, it's in those close relationships, where we have our best chance at being and remaining faithful.

But we have to remember the whole of the second commandment, it's not love your neighbour at the expense of yourself, but love your neighbour and love yourself. We must also love ourselves, and we do this best by taking care of ourselves, not selfishly, but lovingly. This is why it's best to get ourselves into friendships and supportive groups that help us be the best people we can be. The best way to practice chastity is to have good friends where accountability is practiced and the love of God is experienced.

This is something that I think we all work on throughout our entire lives. I am continually reminded that good relationships are key to a happy and God pleasing life. When we are accepted and loved for being who we are, there is no greater gift. There is no greater opposition to the isolation of Lust, than the power of a supportive community.

In a world where chastity and celibacy are seen as naive and to be pitied, and where there is a general skepticism that anyone is actually living them out, I wonder if we're missing the point of chastity and celibacy. I think it's good to remember that chastity has just many gifts to offer, it can offer a life rich in friendship, rich in community, rich in family of every kind, and rich in opportunity to be present to others. It's not all about sex, it's about love.

Amen