

Sacramental sex: Divine love and human intimacy

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We were caught off guard, and so we stalled for time. It was a cold New England morning. We'd already finished breakfast, brushed teeth, pulled on boots, coats, hats and gloves and loaded our two children into the car for the ride to school, preschool and then work.

Mind you, we've done a decent job laying the groundwork. "The egg comes from the Mama," we'd say with good cheer over the dinner table or during a bath. "And the seed comes from the Dadda. And when the seed and the egg come together, they grow and grow in Mama's belly until one day a new baby is ready to come out."

We've kept it simple, of course, doing our best to stay open, calm and casual so that the broad topics of bodies and sexuality would not end up sounding taboo or embarrassing or wrong.

But on that fateful car ride, the questions wouldn't quit. "Mama, do your eggs look like those brown freckly ones in the fridge?" "Mama, where do you keep them?" "Dadda, where do you keep your seeds?" "How do they come out?"

As this impromptu catechism picked up speed, we traded glances, our smiles faintly beginning to resemble grimaces. And that's when our oldest delivered the doozy: "How do the egg and the seed come together?"

We stalled. We hemmed and hawed.

"When you become a grown-up," one of us eventually stammered, "you'll learn how to do that."

In the context of our conversation that morning, this was true, more or less—but in another sense, it wasn't. In fact, in the context of the wider, wintry world outside our car, the truth is that our kids will come to know "how to do that" long before they're grown-ups—which is to say, long before they're ready to do it.

Sometimes we wonder if, in its own way, something like this has been happening in many Christian churches when it comes to the topic of sex. As leaders, as institutions, as well-meaning disciples we do our best to lay down some decent groundwork, but when confronted with the more challenging questions about sexuality and Christian life we find ourselves unprepared—and so we freeze, and stammer, and stall.

When churches do talk about sex theologically, the spectrum of approaches to the subject can seem woefully narrow. On premarital sex, for example, some cast the discussion in terms of "purity," "chastity" and "saving oneself," while others frame the question primarily in terms of risk and street-smarts—that is, as chiefly a matter of avoiding unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

Meanwhile, according to the Center for Disease Control's 2009 data, nearly half of all high school students (46 percent) reported already having had sexual intercourse, and one third of them reported having had it in the previous three months. Likewise, a recent study by the Guttmacher Institute found that no less than nine out of ten Americans report having had sex before marriage, with similar rates among those who abstained from sex until age 20 or older.

In other words, by all accounts the world is full of sex before or otherwise apart from marriage. What do North American churches have to say about it? Some call for purity in the face of potential pollution; others for prudence in the face of potential pregnancy or disease. But more often than not, we stammer and stall. We change the subject.

For Christians, conversations about this topic (even and especially the ones in the car on the way to school) should take place, implicitly or explicitly, in light of Christian sacraments and sacramental life. Put another way, the whole topic of premarital sex cannot be conceived or evaluated properly apart from a broader discussion of the nature and purposes of marriage and the nature and purposes of sex. And these are, we insist, fundamentally sacramental subjects.

As Protestant ministers, we well understand why the 16th-century reformers simplified the prevailing sacramental system by reducing the number of sacraments from seven to two (baptism and communion). But if there was ever a "baby out with the bathwater" scenario in Christian theological history, this is it.

Too often, Protestants think of the church's sacraments as occasional, more or less meaningful episodes that take place in worship—and as little else. On the contrary, baptism and communion are meant to found and form the sensual, material basis of Christian lives, from our morning showers to our midnight snacks and everything in between.

Recall Martin Luther's famous line, for example: "Whenever you wash your face, remember your baptism." Or Calvin's claim that the Lord's table is meant among other things to remind us that all of our nourishment comes from God: our daily bread, yes, but also and especially our daily spiritual nourishment, for which Jesus himself is our "bread of life" (John 6:35). If it's difficult to imagine elements more mundane and everyday in human affairs than food and water—well, that's no accident. We are meant to live sacramental lives.

Though baptism and communion play special, paradigmatic roles in everyday lives, other important and equally sensual aspects of human existence—suffering, vocation, repentance, relationships—also have a sacramental character. They have the capacity to be, each in its own way, a visible, tangible sign of God's invisible grace.

Indeed, Protestants of all people should emphasize not only baptism and communion but also and decisively Jesus Christ as the one true sacrament, the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15). Here the sons and daughters of the European reformations might take a page from the Eastern Orthodox playbook. Insofar as all things are in and through Christ, everything has the potential to play a sacramental role—provided we have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts thrown wide open to a God who dwells with and within us.

In short, even as we privilege baptism and communion as the church's primary sacraments, we do well to continue developing our sense and appreciation for sacramentality throughout creation. Once this larger context is in view, we may fruitfully turn to consider the topic of sex and, in particular, sex outside of marriage.

In light of the sacraments, a much more compelling and rigorous approach to human sexuality becomes possible: a rich, candid, ongoing ecclesial conversation about sex as both an earthly pleasure and a heavenly treasure, a feast and a gift, a delight and an honor and therefore a breathtaking responsibility. Above all, reframing sexuality as a sacramental gift holds the promise of teaching young and old alike that, at its best and by the grace of God, sexual intimacy can be a vivid taste of the loving relationship that God desires to have with us.

Of course, this idea is by no means new. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" the poet sings, "For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you, let us make haste" (Song of Songs 1:1-3).

For centuries, the most prestigious text in the highest echelons of Christian spiritual formation was arguably the Song of Songs, a passionate poem of two lovers longing for each other. Utterly enthralled, each searches for language to describe and adore and adorn the beloved. Animals, plants, perfumes, spices—a dazzling range of creatures and senses are enlisted by both partners, all for the sake of singing of their love.

In reading Christian commentaries on the Song down through the ages, it can sometimes seem as though the church's smile begins to resemble a grimace. "Don't read too literally," some commentators seem to say. "This song isn't actually about sex or carnal appetite. That bag of myrrh lying between the woman's breasts—it isn't what it appears to be. In fact, the Song is an allegory, a figurative portrait of

the love between God and God's people, between Christ and his bride, the church."

But even the most consistently allegorical readers of the Song are doing something quite interesting: they are reading ancient erotic lyrics as an indispensable window into the deepest nature of reality, the innermost chamber, the truth about how things really are—and are meant to be—between God and humanity. Today's readers, then, do well to avoid falling into the "either figural or literal" trap, instead affirming both the Song's erotic, warm-blooded, fleshy celebration of sexual love and the ways in which these very things open up into an allegorical picture of a divine-human embrace.

In other words, the Song is a prime example of resources in Christian traditions for thinking about sex as sacramental—that is, as providing an experiential glimpse, taste and sense of God's love for us and our most fitting love for God. These forms of divine and human love are not disembodied, abstract or merely solemn, the Song seems to say. On the contrary, they are consummately embodied, particular, passionate and playful forms of love, full of hyperbole and longing and surprise, and therefore best evoked with the rhetoric of eros. At the same time, human eros itself is best described, finally and most fittingly, as a part of life that points toward God and in which God is present.

Our yearnings for each other, for physical and emotional intimacy, for the exhilaration of communion, for the tenderness of touch—all of these are real and valuable in their own right, as real and as valuable and as blessed as water and bread. At the same time, these are also yearnings for God and may be experienced as tangible tastes of God's yearning for us. In this sense, at its best, sex is sacramental.

And yet, God knows, sex is not always "at its best." In the Song's fifth chapter, the woman awakes in the middle of night and discovers that her beloved is gone. She searches anxiously for him, running out into the streets of the city, only to suffer unspeakable abuse from the city's guards. Despite the rhapsodic evocations of flowers, perfumes and beautiful gazelles, this is no Eden, but rather a broken, fallen world riddled with vulnerability and pain.

In the modern world no less than the ancient one, human bodies, human egos and human histories are fragile things, wonderfully and fearfully made. If sex is sacramental, it can actually be so only in the context of genuine love and care,

tenderness and fidelity—precisely because God is loving, tender, faithful and true. We count ourselves among the many Christians who want to counter Christianity's widespread reputation for being negative about sex. But a positive approach to sex cannot ignore the ways in which sex can demean and destroy: from incest to date rape, pornography to pedophilia.

At its best, then, and only at its best, sex is a taste of heaven on earth. And heaven is not to be trifled with. It needs to be treasured, shielded, nurtured and given room to thrive and grow. For these reasons, it needs "strings attached": strings that protect, limit and properly empower.

Like the couple in the Song of Songs, we do not reside in the Garden of Delight. Ask any pastor and she will tell you story after story of the pain and shame her people carry because of sexual abuse or demoralization. In order to flourish, sex needs a sanctuary. It needs a refuge, an ark against the storm, precisely so our wounds might better heal. It needs a fence around the playing field, we might say, precisely so delight might rule the day.

Marriage and life partnerships ideally aim to provide just this kind of sanctuary. It is no accident that Christian traditions are so full of covenantal language: God is a God of covenant, a God of committed relationships, a God of sacred and holy union.

Over and over in scripture, God's relationship with humanity is compared to a marriage, not because there aren't other metaphors available but rather because our covenants, our committed relationships, our unions, our marriages, our intimacy and our sex may illumine the character of divine love and what it means to be a human being.

Which brings us to the question of premarital sex. What is sex for? On one level, it's for bearing fruit and creating more life and liveliness in an often barren, death-dealing world. And on another level, it's for strengthening the love and communion between two faithful, caring partners.

But if sex is also fundamentally sacramental—that is, if its most basic purpose is to provide those two partners with a sensual, visceral opportunity to glimpse, taste and touch God's love and delight in them—then it must be truthful, tender, devoted, delightful sex. It may or may not include myrrh or cinnamon or the grace of gazelles—if it does, so much the better. For in such visible, tangible, earthly things, the love of God may be seen and felt anew.

To seek out someone with whom to share this kind of relationship, then, means seeking out a partner in a daring, delicate adventure of a lifetime. And once this goal is in view, it becomes quite clear, we argue, that fidelity and commitment are not optional features of a healthy sexual life; they are indispensable conditions of it. Why? Because sex is sacramental, and sacramental things require a sanctuary.

Think of it this way: marriages and other life partnerships are meant to be like so many nests in the windswept tree of human civilization. They are safe havens, homes, places of shelter and refuge in which precious, vulnerable eggs are protected. Sometimes such nests include children and sometimes not, but they always include dreams, and promises, and two fragile, yearning, healing hearts.

Or, to shift the metaphor, these partnerships are meant to be like flowerbeds where seeds wait deep in the cold, dark earth, growing little by little until that day they break through and bloom, filling the whole world with color and fragrance. Each flowerbed needs a gardener—a couple of gardeners, to be exact—and likewise, each nest needs two helpers, two partners to build it and then to look after it, continually making the small and important repairs.

For sooner or later, God knows, the winds will blow and the predators will come around. Even when the coast is clear, the nest is nonetheless necessary, since those are the days that divine love may most vividly come shining through.

"How do the egg and the seed come together?" The next time our children ask this question, we'll be ready—but not only to give them a standard age-appropriate anatomical answer. For our part, at least, we can envision something far better.

What if everything we teach our kids about sex were grounded, sometimes explicitly but always implicitly, in a larger vision of how God's love is glimpsed, tasted and touched in everyday, sensual, material life, even and especially in the best of human sexuality? What if we described sex not only as "a special way grown-ups express their love for each other" but also and primarily as "a special way grown-ups experience God's love for us"?

And better yet, what if there was a church community in which our kids could grow up hearing a hundred and one variations on this theme? What if they heard the idea articulated (and here's the crucial point) by adults other than their parents: educators, youth group leaders, pastors, elders and deacons? Indeed, what if churches became widely known as places where this kind of sacramental vision, this

kind of ongoing conversation, is alive and well?

That would be the proper crucible, we contend, for communal and personal discernment about whether or not premarital sex is ever appropriate, and if it is, precisely when it is.

For those who insist that sex always belongs within the sanctuaries of marriage or life partnership, the centerpiece of the case should be neither "purity" nor "prudence" but rather the love of God sacramentally available in and through the best of human intimacy. From this point of view, sex belongs within lifelong, faithful partnerships not for abstract moral reasons, but precisely because in and through sexuality we are meant to taste God's lifelong, faithful love for us.

For those who insist that under certain conditions sex may properly take place outside of marriage or life partnership, the sacramental dimensions of sexual life may help clarify those conditions. From this point of view, because God is faithful and sex is sacramental, human sexuality should take place within relational sanctuaries of fidelity and commitment. Because God is love, because God delights in us, because God knows us and calls us by name, human sexuality should always and only be loving, playful and kind—never casual, anonymous or cavalier.

Indeed, in the end, understanding sexuality sacramentally may help ground desperately needed discussions of sexuality within marriages and life partnerships. That is, the beneficiaries of this approach may be not only teens and singles but partnered people too, and perhaps them most of all. As so often happens in Christian life, what starts out as "good for the children" ends up being good for the whole human family.

Sex isn't for everyone, and neither is marriage. But for those called to these two great mysteries, a lifelong, life-giving challenge may be to live into them not simply as divine gifts but as sacramental divine gifts meant to incarnate God's redeeming love. This approach won't answer all of our questions, but it may well help us cast our conversations in the right terms: water and bread, cinnamon and myrrh, joy and discipline, for God's sake and for ours.