

Sexuality, Health, and Integrity

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James, a recent seminary graduate, is serving as assistant pastor in a suburban congregation. In his last semester of seminary, he made a personal decision to be celibate after his fiancée cheated on him. As the assistant pastor, he hopes he will not be called upon to do any premarital counseling as the experience left him distrustful and damaged his self-esteem and body image. In his role supporting the youth minister, James is asked to lead the upcoming week's lesson on "Sexuality and Faith." James tries unsuccessfully to dodge the invitation. He hasn't yet figured out how he feels about dating or sexuality in general, and is hoping to avoid dealing with the issue for a while.

In a recent conversation with another local clergy friend, Maria complains about lack of free time adding to her stress and impeding her spiritual growth. At the same time, she avoids unstructured free time because she feels lonely. She admits that after her divorce, as a way of coping, she put all her energy into growing membership and programming in her small urban congregation. Her friend suggests she try online dating, but Maria is concerned about how her congregation would react. Many members of the congregation see her as a motherly figure who has devoted her life to the church. Furthermore, she dreads having to talk with the council members about guidelines for transparency and accountability if she were to become serious with someone.

Victor and his partner have been together for about ten years. Recently, they have been struggling to rekindle the "spark" in their relationship. They have taken a few extended vacations, which has given them time to re-connect, but little changes once they get home. They have also begun counseling. In their conversations, it has become clear that a lack of privacy is taking a toll on their relationship. They live in a parsonage on the church grounds and have always welcomed congregants to stop by at anytime. The house is located close to the church parking lot and gets a lot of traffic as folks come and go to meetings and programs. When asked to name what they enjoyed most about

vacation, they talked about daily moments of holding hands, exchanging kisses, and even snuggling while watching a movie.

The stories of Victor, Maria, and James represent only a few aspects of sexual health and wholeness with which ministers struggle. The general perception about ministers is that either we are above the worldly distractions of sexuality, or that if we are in a sexual relationship, it is perfect. These perceptions are compounded by the mixed messages we all receive about sexuality and relationships. Stuck between a hyper-sexualized culture and a church setting generally silent about sex, most ministerial leaders do not receive adequate sexuality education in their youth, in seminary training, or through continuing education. Required training for clergy is usually limited to abuse and harassment prevention, which is extremely necessary but not completely sufficient.

Too often, Christians continue to think that sexuality education is about telling people “what not to do” or withholding information, lest it lead one down a path of sinfulness—a myth popularized by abstinence-only education. In most cases, we fail adequately to address the struggles associated with marital strife, infertility, eating disorders, coming-out, gender violence, sexual abuse, serial dating, sexual dysfunction, and so on. Silence and discrimination mitigate against sexual health. As religious leaders, we need to understand our own sexual histories, values, and identity—for our own health and well-being, in addition to responsibly serving congregants.

DEFINING SEXUALITY

In the classroom, as well as in trainings I have conducted, many individuals treat sexuality as synonymous with sexual behaviors (usually penile-vaginal intercourse) or sexual orientation (usually homosexuality). James makes this mistake in the case study above. He concludes that celibacy will be a way to avoid dealing with his sexuality, instead of seeing sexuality as part of his everyday life, regardless of relationship status or sexual behaviors. Sexuality is so intrinsic to our being that we cannot understand ourselves apart from it. Sexuality “compels our emotional, affective, sensual, and spiritual relationships. Sexuality does not determine all our feelings, thoughts and interactions, but it certainly permeates and affects them.”¹ This is why it is difficult to describe

1. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 6.

sexuality: no single definition could be completely accurate in its comprehensiveness while still being truthful in its particularity.

Our sexuality is informed by our sexual behaviors but is not limited to them. Sexuality is comprised of a variety of aspects, including the biology and physiology of our bodies and the sexual and reproductive systems, as well as how we care for our bodies. Sensuality (how our bodies respond to pleasure primarily through our senses) and intimacy (the experience of reciprocated emotional closeness to another person or higher power) are also aspects of sexuality. In addition, our sexual identity refers to sexual orientation along with sex, gender identity, and gender roles. Sexuality includes these aspects and more; however, at any given time, they are not all experienced or expressed.²

Sexuality develops in relationships (both personal and systemic) shaped by social, biological, psychological, cultural and spiritual forces. In our relationships with self, others, and God, we come to know our sexuality. We do not have complete control over interpretations of our sexuality; some definitions and understandings are forced upon us. In the stories above, for example, Maria struggles with how her congregation perceives her, while Victor and his partner have stopped showing physical affection publicly based on their perception of others' (dis)comfort. Messages from our culture, religion, and history construct for us many different, conflicting, and at times unhealthy ways to interpret our sexuality.³ Those messages change with age. They may differ based on our racial/ethnic background, gender identity, geographic location, or cultural and religious surroundings. In other words, our sexuality is shaped by the time and space in which we live. For example, we all have a body and thus an image of that body. How we relate to our bodies—the comfort or discomfort we feel—is shaped by what our culture values, by what friends and family say or look like, and by our faith. Unfortunately, the positive message that we are created in the image of God is often lost, an affirmation drowned in a sea of enhanced images of “perfect bodies” or comments that we are ugly, fat, too skinny, too hairy, too wimpy, the wrong color, and so on.

2. *Our Whole Lives* is a lifespan sexuality education program jointly published by the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association. The curriculum uses a pictorial definition of holistic sexuality that includes the four areas mentioned above—sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, and gender roles—as well as sexualization. The following paragraph describes sexualization more generally in the context of relational development. See United Church of Christ, *Our Whole Lives: Lifespan Sexuality Education Curriculum* (Cleveland: United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 1999–2000).

3. Sylvia Thorson-Smith, “Becoming ‘Possessed’: Toward Sexual health and Well-Being,” in *Body and Soul: Re-thinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003), 239.

It is impossible to experience our sexuality free of an evaluative lens or ethical framework. Integrally important to sexuality education and faith development, then, is creating the space for individuals to discover and define their sexuality in a way that is most consistent with whom they know themselves to be as God's beloved. As ministers, we need to create opportunities for such education and faith development by exploring our understanding of sexuality and the roots of our sexual ethics. Many of us did not have these opportunities in our seminary education and have even less time for them in our current ministries, leaving us to define, reflect upon, and set healthy boundaries on the fly or, worse, in response to a personal or professional crisis.

SEXUALITY AND CHRISTIANITY

Sexual self-knowledge is crucial to understanding how sexual integrity contributes to spiritual wholeness. In light of this, what might be the most helpful theological framework to use when considering professional sexual ethics for ministry? How do scripture and tradition contribute to defining and reflecting on sexuality and sexual health?

CREATION

We cannot exist apart from our bodies. They are part of how God created us to know and love the world, ourselves, and God (Gen. 1:26). Our bodies are not only part of God's creation, but were made in God's likeness and affirmed as "very good" (Gen. 1:31). The central teachings that flow from our creation as human beings call for a virtue of self-care and thankfulness related to our bodies. As Christians, we are to respect and steward our bodies as we would any part of creation. Affirming our bodies as part of the "very good" creation requires that we:

- Learn about and prepare for bodily changes across the lifespan, as well as the ways in which sexual feelings and thoughts are part of our body's biological and psychological response.
- Take care of our reproductive and sexual health needs, including checkups and using protection to prevent STDs or unintended pregnancy.
- Be comfortable as we grow, using accurate and age-appropriate sexuality language to talk about our body parts and bodily responses.
- Not use our body (or those of others) as an object, and appreciate the diversity of beauty in God's creation.

We are embodied creatures and sexuality is an integral part of that created nature. In that respect, we are sexual beings from birth to death; even as our sexuality changes over time with physical, emotional, psychological, and relationship developments, we never cease being sexual. James's story suggests he is reducing sexuality to relationships or behaviors to avoid dealing with the personal struggle he has with body image. Individuals who choose celibacy are still sexual. How we live in our skin affects not only our romantic relationships, but the confidence we have in all aspects of our lives, including our professional presence.

INCARNATION

It is ironic that Christians have historically had a difficult time accepting and honoring the body when we are a people of an incarnate God (John 1:14). The incarnation—the life and death of Jesus as God in flesh, a central component of Christian teaching—“promotes the value and significance of the body, which is never to be disregarded or treated with contempt.”⁴ Jesus understood what it means to live in a body with all its limitations, as well as its beauty. He ate with his followers, washed with them, woke up with sleep in his eyes, and was dunked under water for his baptism. These are all things that require a body to be experienced. Jesus knew the pleasure of touch when his mother held him, when his friends greeted him, when Mary anointed him. He also experienced violence to his body when he was beaten and crucified.

We do not know definitively if Jesus was celibate or single, what sexual behaviors he engaged in, or romantic relationships he had. Some interpret this lack of facts to suggest Jesus was not sexual, thereby projecting internalized discomfort with sexuality onto Jesus. Maria feels a similar judgment from her congregation, even avoiding dating because it may mean the congregation would have to recognize her as a sexual person. The incarnation shows us that our bodies are wonderful and integral to how we experience and know the world and live in a variety of relationships.

Our sexuality is part of who we are as human bodies. It was the same for Jesus. We are relational and it is our bodies that open us not only to the potential for great harm, but also to life-enhancing connection. “Far from being a first line of defense against the world,” our bodies “are in fact the very field upon which the self is called daily to meet the world.”⁵ With embodiment

4. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010),

56. In Chapter Three, “Marking the Body of Jesus, the Body of Christ,” Copeland argues that we purposefully ignore the body in service of empire, marking particular bodies as less than human without acknowledging the systems we use to do so with regard to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and so on.

comes vulnerability experienced in and through relationship with self, others, and God.

LOVE COMMANDMENT

The great commandment gives us three very important guidelines for understanding sexuality as it relates to the formation of healthy relationships (Luke 10:27). First, it reinforces the creation message about love of self and positive affirmation of one's unique personhood. Second, Jesus reminds us that balancing our love for God, ourselves, and others is ultimately our Christian calling and that all other actions will flow from that. Third, loving our neighbor as ourselves calls us to support and care for our neighbor in promoting his or her sexual development and health.

Many of us know the grace of a basically positive, even if challenging, relationship with God and are able to affirm our sexuality as a good part of our humanity. In describing the spiritual dimension of our sexuality, Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler write:

Far from being an impediment to authentic spirituality, truly human sexuality and sexual acts, embraced and used as gifts of the creator God, can enhance, deepen, and develop one's spirituality. Christian spirituality is a person's foundational relationship with the triune God. . . . This foundational relationship shapes all other relationships, including sexual relationships.⁵

That is to say, through our spirituality we deepen and grow in our experience and understanding of our sexuality.

When we have such a relationship in our lives, the great commandment calls us to make it possible for others. For example, rather than hiding their affection, Victor and his partner might consider how their example could open space for others to express and affirm their love. Loving our neighbors as ourselves is an act of social justice that includes affirming the uniqueness of whom God created them to be as well as an equal opportunity for them to share and find love in relationships they choose. This means we have a moral

5. Thomas E. Breidenthal, "Sanctifying Nearness," in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Our Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, ed. Charles Heffling (Boston: Crowley Publications, 1996), 47.

6. Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 134; see 127–38 for a description of the five aspects of sexuality. See also Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *Sexual Ethics: A Theological Introduction* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 50–60.

obligation or commitment to create safe space for all individuals to be free from abuse, violence, and harm as they develop life-giving and life-enhancing relationships with God, themselves, and each other.

Jesus gives us the great love commandment to guide all our relationships. It has special significance to our sexual relationships, which require the following:

- Balance of commitments to God, self, and others, including friends, family, romantic partners, and those we are called to serve.
- Recognition that respecting and honoring self, neighbor, and God in sexual relationships means we can have sexual feelings without acting on them, and that we may never coerce someone into a sexual behavior they do not want.
- Understanding Jesus' call to create a world where each person has the ability and chance to live the love commandment by seeking life-giving relationships as an act of justice for herself and her neighbors.

Being embodied and relational creatures deeply impacts how Christians understand sexuality. Having a clearer sense of what we mean by sexuality and sexual health is thus an important part of professional sexual ethics.

SEXUAL HEALTH AND WHOLENESS

Sexual health and wholeness rest on an ethical evaluation of how we ought to be sexual beings in this world. Our bodies change; our relationships grow, end, and begin; our self-understanding is shaped and altered by new life circumstances; and so on. Sexuality is affected by and changes with these experiences. Health and wholeness are not a finish line we can cross; they are a state of being that must be constantly evaluated, pursued and sustained.

Christians must respect the theological and ethical claims made above in relation to creation, incarnation, and the love commandment. For Christians, as for secular humanitarians, sexual health minimally requires the acknowledgement of the anthropological claims associated with our embodiment and relationality. Consent and safety are key components of sexual health when it comes to expressing attraction and engaging in behaviors. Additionally, there is also a social dynamic to sexual health; my own access to and opportunity for sexual health are tied to yours. The World Health Organization defines sexual health as:

A state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality, and not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and

respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all people must be respected, protected and fulfilled.⁷

Like other aspects of our health, our sexuality requires care and attention. Disease and unhealthy sexual expression and relationships arise when we deny our sexuality or limit it to only one dimension, such as physical/biological functioning.

Consider how James and Victor are affected by the compartmentalization of their sexuality. Victor's relationship is strained and his personal satisfaction is diminished. It is common for couples to get so stuck on sexual intercourse as the primary sexual behavior, both theologically and practically, and they stop engaging in a variety of sexual behaviors common during courtship and early partnerships, such as making out, mutual masturbation, holding hands, massaging, and so on. James, on the other hand, evades dealing with the pain of broken trust by cutting off all relational opportunities, to the point of avoiding talking about sexuality. This stark dichotomy is fed by our cultural denial of the sensual and intimate needs of single people, older adults, and those with physical and mental disabilities through forced celibacy,⁸ limited understandings of sexuality, and the perpetuation of the idea that sexual self-pleasure is sinful. In response, we need to open ourselves to "new visions of wholeness and holiness, health and healing" through practices that integrate and honor the various dimensions of our sexuality."⁹

Many may know well their tradition and its policies, and perhaps even advocate for sexual justice issues. However, as these vignettes make clear, many are uncomfortable discussing sexuality in the context of their faith community, and many church professionals struggle with sexual integrity. Maria has neglected self-care by consuming herself with work in order to avoid dealing with the personal (and social) loss that can accompany divorce. James is avoiding particular types of counseling and education in the congregational context because of his own sexuality experiences. Victor is struggling to set

7. World Health Organization, *Defining Sexual Health: Report of a Technical Consultation on Sexual Health, 28–31 January 2002, Geneva* (Geneva, Switzerland: WHO Press, 2006), 5, http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual_health/defining_sexual_health.pdf.

8. When celibacy is a choice, it can be life-enhancing and nurturing to various aspects of one's sexuality.

9. Thorson-Smith, "Becoming 'Possessed,'" 236.

personal limits that allow his relationship to flourish while offering a positive example to the faith community.

The combination of theological education, pastoral care training, and basic sexuality education can provide the means for most religious professionals to meet the goals and competencies outlined in the introduction to this volume. Yet, it is not simply a matter of knowledge or skill acquisition. Both self-evaluation and commitment toward one's sexual health are required. We know that "all forms of social health and well-being are intimately related to our personal experiences of sexual health and well-being."¹⁰ Professional sexual ethics calls us to work on our own sexual health as well as that of our faith community and larger society.

SEXUAL INTEGRITY AS CORNERSTONE FOR MINISTRY

Sexual health and wholeness are a state of being that we reach toward, fall short of, and partially attain. Many of us have been taught that particular sexual behaviors and identities alone determine morality. Thus, how we evaluate a person's sexual fitness for ministry or any relationship often relies on hidden characteristics. As Mary Hunt defines it, "Integrity has a dynamic of its own, a sense of wholeness and certitude that is obvious, albeit only on careful examination. It has both an individual dimension—I feel whole—and a communal dimension—people tell me I seem whole."¹¹ Being whole requires us to be honest with ourselves about who we are and who God calls us to be.

Sexual integrity is not a "free pass" for any and all sexual behaviors or relationship configurations. Quite the contrary, sexual integrity calls us to honesty with and care for ourselves before God and in relationship with others. Christian values and norms follow from the virtue of sexual integrity as described by Marvin Ellison: "when we discern that a person is seeking to live with integrity, it is fair to assume that the person is invested in relationships based on honesty, fairness, commitment, mutual care, and respect—and, further, that he or she wants to contribute to the well-being of others and to the community at large."¹² These norms serve as a measuring stick—for example, to show that instances of an adult touching a minor, or forced intercourse on a date, or sexual innuendos made from a ministerial staff person to a congregant are violations of sexual integrity. These norms establish a higher standard for

10. Ibid., 244.

11. Mary E. Hunt, "Sexual Integrity," *WATERWheel* 7, no.3 (Fall 1994): 1–3.

12. Marvin M. Ellison, "Practicing Safer Spirituality," in *Out of the Shadows and Into the Light: Christianity and Homosexuality*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (St. Louis: Chalice, 2009), 9–10.

our relationships than past religious configurations which relied on gender, orientation, racial identity, or family construction to determine morality.

Sexual integrity as a cornerstone in one's professional ministry can positively affect the congregation. Because of lack of training and preparation, "responding to individuals who have sexual concerns is one of the most difficult circumstances that clergy face today. The intensity of feelings, including a pastor's own, can make it hard to provide the guidance about sexuality that is sought."¹³ Education and training will help religious professionals be better prepared. But there is also a personal journey toward self-knowledge that is needed. We have a moral obligation to God, ourselves, and our neighbor to be informed, responsible, and celebratory of our sexuality, a "very good" part of our embodied, relational being created by God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What Christian values guide your ministry related to sexuality issues?
2. Review the framework for sexually healthy religious professionals (discussed in the introduction). In what sexuality-related areas might you need more training? How will you seek out resources?
3. Draw your sexuality timeline, naming physical and emotional changes, behaviors, and relationships from your birth until now. How have various aspects of your sexuality been over or under developed at different stages of your life?
4. The daily practice of ministry teaches about sexuality even when we do not explicitly address it. For example, what does the "Kiss of Peace" or "greetings" in your liturgical context communicate about boundaries and aspects of sexuality mentioned above (for example, embodiment, relationality, sensuality, intimacy, and so on)?
5. Rate how comfortable you are talking about the following sexuality issues with various congregants—from 1 (*very uncomfortable*) to 3 (*I could do it, but I'm not actively volunteering*) to 5 (*very comfortable*). Where are areas for growth and training?

- Sexual abuse prevention with Sunday school children and teachers together?
 Separately?

13. Andrew Weaver, John D. Preston, and Charlene Hosenfeld, *Counseling on Sexual Issues: A Handbook for Pastors and Other Helping Professionals* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005), 5.

- Sexual-decision making with the youth group and their parents together?
- Separately?
- Sexual behaviors of a couple in pastoral care?
- Dating and/or cohabitation practices of the older adults in your congregation?
- Liturgical prayers for miscarriage, infertility and/or abortion?

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Ellison, Marvin M. *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics in Perplexing Times*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.
- Haffner, Debra W. *A Time to Build: Creating Sexually Healthy Faith Communities*. 2nd ed. Westport, CT: Religious Institute, 2012.
- Thornton-Smith, Sylvia. "Becoming 'Possessed': Toward Sexual health and Well-Being." In *Body and Soul: Re-thinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, edited by Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thornton-Smith, 232–50. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003.
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