

I want to thank Pastor Andy for asking me to give the witness today. Since he isn't here to jump up and say, "No! Gary No! You've got it all wrong!" he'll have to depend on Lance or Jerry—or the rest of you—to stop me if I get out of line. My language will be clean, but the subject of the witness I have to give today may not be suited for young or tender ears—so here's your chance to make a graceful exit if you need to.

Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

I am going to talk today about the options for holy living as a sexual single person. I mean to examine some of the origins of the church's beliefs and attitudes about sexual behavior. I will attempt to characterize the attributes of sexual behaviors outside the marriage covenant that can be viewed as holy. Finally, I will ask some questions the church in my opinion must address if it is to speak authentically on matters of human sexuality and if it is to be in ministry to single persons.

First, some definitions. I use the word single to indicate a person who is not in a committed intimate relationship at the present time. So single to me can indicate a person:

- who is not in any relationship; or
- who has few or many casual relationships; or
- who is dating one partner; or
- who is dating one partner exclusively, but has not yet made a commitment to that partner.

We have heard read part of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. Listen again to what he says at Chapter 10 verses 7 and 8:

“Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.’ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.” Here Paul is referring to the covenant unfaithfulness of the Israelites in the wilderness. Paul reminds the church in Corinth of the story at Mt. Sinai, when Moses was up on the mountain with God, and the people, despairing of Moses' return, under Aaron's direction made a golden calf and worshipped it. In the NRSV at Exodus 32:5 the phrase is “the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel” and at verse 25 “Moses saw that the people were running wild.” Paul interprets this as promiscuous and presumably orgiastic activity. The moral lesson is: don't break the covenant; but the story behind it is about unrestrained sexual activity.

What do covenant faithfulness and sex have to do with each other? Both Hebrew and Christian scripture view the covenant between God and the people like a marriage covenant. This similarity is particularly vivid in story of the prophet Hosea where the people's unfaithfulness to God is mirrored in the unfaithfulness of Gomer, Hosea's wife, to Hosea. Now, the feminist perspective shows us there are problems with this story of Hosea and Gomer; I mention it only to show the linkage that ancient people made

between idolatry and sexual behavior. Later, in Christian tradition we have the new covenant image of the church as the bride and Christ the bridegroom.

We need to remember the world that the Israelites lived in. Life was hard. The earth might not give up its yield of crops. Surrounded by and mixed with other peoples in Canaan, Israel often mistrusted God would come through, so they participated in pagan fertility cults. These fertility cults involved human sexual rites to appease the fertility god Baal that was often imaged as a bull (notice any resemblance to the prior story?). These rites, they thought, would make the land fertile. So in this way too unrestrained sexuality became linked with idolatry.

Against this contamination by pagan beliefs, the prophets viewed God as calling out Israel to be a special people. Israel was to be holy, as God is holy. Israel was to be faithful to the covenant with God, and distinct from the pagans all around them. Torah, the teaching or law of Hebrew scripture, builds walls around all aspects of life. Within these rules we can live, work, and love safely. Rabbi Kenny Weiss reminded us of this when he gave the sermon here a few weeks ago. In the Torah there are strict limits on sexual activity. Marriage sets limits on human sexuality. The foundation of marriage is in mutual covenantal promises; and in this covenanted relationship, as in our relationship with God, blessings are received. The command of faithfulness within the marriage covenant is clear; it is part of the Ten Commandments. I affirm this.

As a reconciling congregation we believe GLBT people in covenanted relationships also find God's blessings and are likewise bound in faithfulness to each other. The question I propose to address is: apart from committed relationships, where else can we find God's blessings in our lives as sexual beings? How can I, a single person, respond to God's call to be holy in the wholeness of my nature that includes sexuality? The answer to this depends on how we interpret the role of sexuality in our lives.

Religion comes out of our struggle to understand the fundamental questions that arise out of the human condition. Where do we come from? Why are we here? What is good? Why do we suffer? What happens when we die? The power of eros, or erotic love, is one of those mysteries. Sex is the attraction that breaks down human barriers. Remember a time when you fell in love. Psychologists call that mental state limerence: it is the state of being in love or infatuation. You can't stop thinking about your loved one. When separated, the only thing that can ease the pain is to be reunited with the loved one. In that mental state of limerence, at the time of and by means of sexual union, somehow the boundaries between two collapse; they become one flesh; and for a brief moment they have ecstasy in breaking the isolation which otherwise always separates us. Dare we go further? As a Christian, I wonder whether in that union we glimpse dimly a foretaste of the communion of saints.

I am grateful to Troy Plummer for teaching me the traditional Hebrew, holistic view of the human soul as flesh animated by but inseparable from the spirit: I do not have a body, I am a body. The Greeks, especially in the Gnostic view, saw all flesh as bad and spirit good. Thus the familiar Bible passage is frequently misinterpreted: "the spirit is willing

but the flesh is weak.” This separation into good spirit/bad flesh takes a pessimistic view of our nature and our sexual lives in particular. This view, though formally rejected by the early church, nevertheless influenced early Christian communities. Set against the prevailing Roman culture that included temple prostitution and widespread slavery with its associated abusive sexuality, it’s not hard to see how sexual excesses would be condemned.

Yet clearly, sex is necessary for the continuance of our human species. So ancient church scholars assigned the value of sex according to what they saw as “natural law”: sexual activity in the context of marriage for the purpose of procreation makes sex holy. Much later Roman Catholic interpretation sees sex as holy in the context of marriage as a means of companionship after childbearing years have passed.

For the rest of us, the church has historically said that celibacy or abstinence is the only choice. This goes back to the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15 where Gentiles were welcomed into the church without being circumcised and without the need to observe other aspects of Jewish law, provided they (at verse 20) “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood (NRSV).”

Honoring Paul, I affirm the choice of celibacy for those who choose it. But I do not think celibacy or abstinence is the only choice for unmarried Christians.

I am grateful to my friend David K. Johnson for many things, not the least of which is what he has shared with me in his study of doctrine. He showed me that church people put into practice their beliefs before these beliefs are formally structured and endorsed by the church. This is important. Doctrine follows praxis. It jibes perfectly with our Methodist heritage: that our experiences inform our understanding of who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. God’s people are ahead of the church. God’s people lead the church as we discern the new things God is doing.

If this is so, outside marriage, what might be the attributes of holy sexual relationships? John Shelby Spong in his book of 1998 titled *Living In Sin?* suggests some possibilities. Such relationships are:

- sensitive, showing concern for the other;
- nonabusive, showing responsibility for the other;
- mutually decided; and
- mutually vulnerable.

I suggest that, using an analogy *apropos* of our rodeo season, eros must be bridled by agape. Together, eros and agape can gallop to the ends of the earth. Without the bridle of agape, eros is just another wild bronco eager to throw you off as quickly as possible. Yet God is found in our sexual relationships when our hunger for the touch of another is salted by our concern for the other as a beloved child of God, too.

At the same time we reject relationships that see other people merely as objects for our own gratification or that deny another person’s humanity or value. We reject abusive

relationships, married or not. We reject coercive relationships. We reject relationships that control another.

Here are a few examples to consider:

- A young couple, contemplating marriage and recognizing the high divorce rate, decide to live together in intimate betrothed relationship for a year on a trial basis before committing to marriage. They love and honor each other. Is this a holy relationship?
- A man meets another man on a patio of a bar after work one Friday, and he invites him to attend a special service of music at his church that evening. Later, they enjoy each other's bodies and talk about what they heard at the service. Is this a holy relationship?
- A graduate student meets an older woman at a party and they go home together to connect sexually. The younger woman loves to hear the stories the older woman tells, and sees her as a mentor. The older woman loves the energy and enthusiasm of the younger. They get together for sex and companionship now and then. Is this a holy relationship?
- A woman who lost her spouse two years ago after a 20-year relationship is struggling to move on. She and a man she met enjoy sex and are developing increased intimacy, trust, and concern for each other. Is this a holy relationship?
- A man moves to a new city. He joins a bowling league to meet people. Over the next year he enjoys at different times casual sexual relations with men he meets through the league. Their fun-filled, affectionate relationships with each other enhance the camaraderie of the league. Are these holy relationships?

I believe these are holy relationships. They are animated by love and concern for each other—and this is a gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Holy relationships are marked by self-control and by knowing who we are and whose we are. They show living by relationship, not by a set of rules. The Bible witness calls us ahead.

- In Genesis 2:18 God says, It is not good for human to be alone. I interpret that to mean, God wants us to be relationships of all types with others. Such a relationship might be sexual, depending on where we are on the path of life.
- In 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul asserts, “you are God’s temple and... God’s Spirit dwells in you.” God is pleased to dwell in us in our enfleshed nature. God enjoys us as physical, sexual beings. We must always govern ourselves with this insight.
- Jesus commands us, in Luke 10: 27 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandment is greater than this.

Bering Memorial United Methodist Church affirmed in Church Conference November 2005:

“We people of all sexual orientations and gender identities experience the goodness of creation in our lives as sexual beings. Our sexuality is an innate part of our created being, and this is a good gift from God. We cannot separate our

sexual orientation or gender identity from the expression of our whole created nature, and in loving relationships this is a blessing from God.”

Yet we acknowledge there is risk of sin, particularly outside of monogamy, celibacy or abstinence, those safe harbors. We must examine our hearts and our actions in the light of Jesus’ commandment that we love one another. We are responsible for each other. We must care for each other. In our human condition we need to remember the ease with which we deceive ourselves. Sexual behavior becomes idolatrous when as with all sin we become self-centered and prideful, when we forget who we are and whose we are. As Paul says also in our reading from 1 Corinthians 10:12 today: “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

The questions I see for the church are:

- Will the church affirm loving sexual relationships of people who live outside the walls of marriage, celibacy, and abstinence?
- How will the church evaluate these relationships?
- How will the church nurture its members in their sexual lives?
- How can the church be in ministry at the same time to people with different relationships and different relationship needs and interests?

I ask you as part of this congregation at Bering Memorial United Methodist Church to lead the church forward in new Christian understandings of our lives as sexual beings. We need new voices to speak the gospel message to people who yearn for wholeness-seeking, life-affirming, sex-celebrating, faith-forming relationships. Do you hear God’s call to be part of this witness?

Thanks be to God! AMEN.