

Lust

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

May 22, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

II Samuel 11, 12, selected verses

I Corinthians 13

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Given that we are here and the earth did not quake, at least not for me, [though I can see by the attendance that some in this congregation may have been taken up in the rapture] we might as well make the best of it and spend the morning doing business with the other current event de jure: lust. In particular, it was this week’s ubiquitous reports of sex and power having their way--not only Dominique’s and Arnold’s and John Ensign’s, but also the news of over 1000 Peace Corps workers sexually assaulted and silenced since the year 2000--that sent me to reread David’s bedding of Bathsheba.

There, in a story ripped from the headlines, it is the facts, just the facts, ma’am, that interest the ethically inclined Deuteronomist authors of II Samuel. Time of day: late afternoon. Place: the king’s palace. Alleged incident: king rises from the couch, walks outside on the roof, sees said woman purifying herself after her period. Description of victim [an objective observation, mind you]: beautiful. According to an unidentified source, the king asks after the particulars and then sends for the woman. She comes to him. He beds her. She leaves. Parenthetically, the woman’s biological time of the month is noted. She conceives. The rest, you might say, is history, a history that has repeated itself, ad nauseam, up to this very moment.

“Helping themselves to the help” read the tag line to Maureen Dowd’s column last Sunday about the charges against Dominique Strause-Kahn and the true confessions of Arnold Schwarzenegger. The same could be said of David. But what has the church had to say concerning this ancient sin known as lust--a besetting sin of the celibate, a sin defined succinctly on the side of my screen as “the strong physical desire to have sex with somebody, usually without associated feelings of love and affection”.

We begin this morning in the middle of the church’s conversation with Immanuel Kant, whose definition of love-as-opposed-to-lust could not be more relevant. For Kant, love is that which “wishes well, is amicably disposed, promotes the happiness of others and rejoices in it” whereas lust “objectifies the other person, using him or her as a mere means, a tool of one’s own purposes.” Moreover, says Kant, lust makes of the other person “an object of appetite; as soon as the other person is possessed and the appetite sated,” says Kant, “they are thrown away ‘as one throws away a lemon that is sucked dry.’” In sum said a friend to me, lust is all about me and love is all about the other.

But Kant simply represented the 18th century destination on a long road of theological reasoning, a road whose origin is usually located at a baptistery in Milan. There, around A.D. 387, the young Augustine was converted to Christianity. This is the saint who confessed, of his youth, that he “had been woefully at fault, particularly in early adolescence. I had prayed to you for chastity,” he wrote, “and said, ‘Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.’” Shortly after his conversion, his youthful prayer was answered. In obedient response, he banished the woman he

had loved and with whom he had lived since his teens, the woman who was the mother of his son. Like a man who mistook his wife for a hat rather than his hat for a wife, Augustine ironically mistook love for lust, fatefully willing the denial of his own sexuality.

Some have taken Augustine's guilt over that turn in his sex life as the psychological origin of the doctrine of original sin, a doctrine many blame for the demonization of sex in Western society. Later in his career, Augustine would remind his congregation "that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they had been 'ashamed'; they had covered their genitals with fig-leaves. That was enough for Augustine," said his biographer Peter Brown. "'*Ecce unde*. That's the place!'" said Augustine to his congregation. "'That's the place from which the first sin is passed on.' The shame at the uncontrollable stirring of the genitals was a fitting punishment for the crime of disobedience." Sexual feeling, in other words, was the punishment for disobedience, "a torture to the will." Therefore, said Augustine, it is the loss of control in the sexual act that seems to be the problem, the sin that became known as lust.

From Augustine, we turn to Thomas Aquinas who characterizes even marital intercourse in terms that include "filth...foulness... vileness...or disgrace." Here an understanding of natural law takes over in matters of human sexuality, making actions that accord with nature a virtue and actions that depart from nature a vice. At first glance, it would seem our "doing what comes naturally" would certainly leave room for sexual desire. But keep your pants on! For according to Aquinas, "Nature is not what we find by looking around us now. It is the way things would have been if Adam and Eve had not sinned, unleashing lust in the human world." After the fall, therefore, reason and restraint of the will must prevail over any human passion such that even within marriage, sexual intercourse should become no more than a handshake.

Given this history, it is not surprising that the ladder of virtue implicit in the writings of these ancient theologians still runs its tapes through our poor heads: "Virginity is best," they said. "After that, matrimony without sex is fine, and next best is matrimony plus pleasureless procreative activity. Procreative activity accompanied by pleasure is pretty regrettable; but worst of all, because it would turn your wife into a whore and your home into a brothel, is to act for the sake of pure sexual pleasure."

Well, where does this leave us after two thousand years of responding to the so-called sin of lust with will power, social control and, Freud notwithstanding, a massive effort to repress what just may be connected, by God's mercy, not only to the occasion of our fall from grace, but also the occasion of our salvation? We would do well to retrace our steps!

"When Eve bit into the apple, she gave us the world—beautiful, flawed, dangerous, full of being," writes Barbara Grizzuti Harrison

...and planted in my blood and bones and flesh a variable human love, the intoxication of the body. She (not Mary) is the mother of my children, born in travail to a world of suffering their presence may refresh...Even the alienation from God we feel as a direct consequence of her fall makes us beholden to her. The intense desire for God, never satisfied, arises from our separation from [God]....This mingling, melding, braiding of good and mischief in every human soul—the fusion of good and bad in intent and in act—is what makes us recognizable (and delicious) to one another; without it—without the genetically transmitted knowledge of good and evil that Eve's act of radical curiosity sowed in our marrow—we should not desire to know and to love

God, we should have no need of [God]. We should have no need of one another...of a one and perfect Other. Eve, the occasion of our fall from grace, is also the occasion of our salvation.

The desire at the center of all our desiring, according to Scripture, is the longing to know and be known. It is for such intimate knowledge, given and received, that we were made. It is the self-giving, self-emptying love within the Being of God that is God's image stamped upon your soul and mine. Augustine said as much in relation to God: our hearts are restless, he prayed, until we rest in thee. It is no coincidence that the biblical word for sexual intercourse is simply "to know." Yet the risk of being known through and through requires so much more of the human heart than the risk of using or being momentarily used and cast aside. It even requires more than living and loving by the strict letter of the law. To be known by another, to be subject to another's fears, dreams, hopes, failures, is to live in a vulnerability human beings best dare only in the context of a relationship of great trust and tenderness.

Yet we fool ourselves if we believe that such trust and tenderness can be secured for a lifetime in the bond of marriage. Take this week's headlines, not to mention the experience of many in this congregation: marriage can also be the relationship in which a person is most subject to being wounded, criticized, attacked, easily hurt or tempted. You will remember that marriage and sex within marriage alone was instituted late in history and not first to legitimate romance: it was to protect the rights of the most vulnerable.

What to do? "I will show you a more excellent way," the Corinthians read as they looked up to the acropolis where men and women were having at each other every which way they could. The love for which we were made is revealed supremely in Him who took upon himself our flesh and so our human frailty. It is a love that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful. Paul speaks not first of our love for one another, but of God's love for us in Christ. To believe you are loved by the God who has come to you in him, to trust your heart and mind and soul and strength into his keeping, is to live in relation to the love that abides, the love that never quits, the love in which all of our failed attempts at loving have been redeemed.

That is why "a Christian sexual ethic," writes theologian Paul Lehmann, "has another concern entirely than that of providing a check upon promiscuity and prostitution. This concern is to offer a context within which sexual intensity can be creatively related to sexual sensitivity because sexuality itself has been transformed from a biological to a human fact, from an elemental drive which [we] have in common with animals to a distinctively human relation, 'inwardly shaped and guided by what is specifically human in human nature and by what gives fundamental meaning to human life.'"

Of course that concern does not change the fact that, because of human sin, our capacity to hurt one another in matters of the heart and by way of the flesh is still enormous. Moreover, God's power to keep us from the hurtful risks of vulnerability is curiously circumscribed by the way in which God has loved us: not by coercion but in freedom. So it is, at the end of the day, when our defenses are down, "The course of faithfulness is not the course of safety through conformity but of the risk of obedience in faith and hope and love. When-- embarked on such a course--" says Lehmann finally, "faith is met by infidelity, hope by disillusionment, love by loneliness, and the risk of obedience by the haunting sense of disobedience, the point of renewal is discovered again to be where it has been from the beginning. It is the point of encounter with him who reigns in forgiveness and renewal over every human failure and defeat."

That point of encounter for David involved a parable, told to him by the prophet Nathan, a parable that prompted the king unknowingly to pronounce judgment upon himself: “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die,” he decrees. “You are the man!” rejoins Nathan, followed by an enumeration of God’s scathing rebuke of the Lord’s anointed. “I have sinned against the Lord,” David confesses. “Now the Lord has put away your sin,” says Nathan finally. Nevertheless, it was a sin whose deathly consequences were visited upon David’s children and upon his children’s children until the fullness of time, when the sin of our lost and restless human race was assumed, once for all, by the Son whose love for sinners will never end. The hope of even the most hopeless headliners is the point of encounter with him who reigns in forgiveness and renewal over every human failure and defeat; your hope and mine is that we are known by the One whose love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Thanks be to God! Amen.