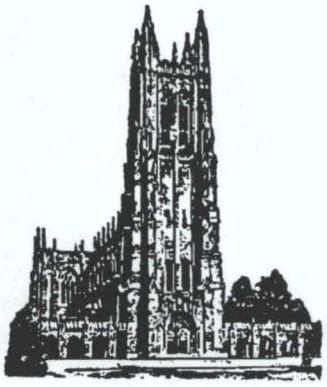

DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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"Public Sex"
October 6, 1991
Parents' Weekend
20th Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-16

"Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

While you were away over the summer, the Presbyterians (P.C.U.S.A.) discovered sex. They issued a big report on sex at their General Assembly, voted it down by a margin of 95 to 5, the report that is. But not before Presbyterians captured many headlines, so shocked was the media to see staid Presbyterians talking in public about a subject like sex.

The report advocated "justice-love" for Presbyterians who wondered what to think about sex. Justice-love. I couldn't figure out what they were talking about. Neither could their own church. A Duke student said it well: "Justice-love, I gotta remember that. Next time I'm in the back seat of a Chevrolet, I'll tell her, 'This is justice-love!' That's good! 'Justice-love!'"

The same sort of talk about sex has gone on in many of our churches. That which was once unmentionable among Christians is being discussed quite openly. Not long ago, a group of Catholic ethicists criticized the traditional Catholic view that sex should only be for the "procreation and education of children." Too legalistic, negative and narrow for today's Catholics. They urged instead that modern Catholics have sex for "creative growth toward integration" (Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought, N. Y. Paulist Press, 1977, p. 86). "Creative growth toward integration."

My own denomination (United Methodist) has spoken of the purpose of sex as part of "the fullness of our humanity." Not much help in the back seat of a Chevrolet.

I knew that TV evangelism was in big trouble when a TV evangelist confessed to having "a sexual encounter." Whatever happened to "fornication?" Now there's a good word: Fornication. You don't know what it is, but you know it's wrong!

What is sex for? And why should we be talking about it on Sunday, in public, in church, on Parents' Weekend? Well, the Bible talks about it, Jesus talks about it, in today's gospel (Mark 10:2-16). Early on, right at the first of creation, first book of the Bible, Genesis, there is talk of sex. In fact, no sooner has the human being been created (He's not yet a man, a "male.") than God takes a look and says, "Not quite right. Something else is needed. Oh, I have it. It's not good to be alone. I'll make another model, more complicated, more advanced." And in a stunning second act of creation, God makes woman. Now there is man and there is woman, male and female, meant for companionship.

"Be fruitful and multiply" God tells them. The very first (and I daresay most enjoyable) of God's commandments. "Be fruitful and multiply." That's why, says Genesis, a man leaves his Mom and Dad (I don't know why only men need to leave their parents.) and clings to his wife and they become "one flesh." Do you know how men and women become "one flesh," boys and girls?

Could it be...sex? Yes! God created sex. It's in the Bible, there at the first. God created male and female and told us to multiply, to let go of our loneliness and become one flesh. See? You thought I was going to come down hard on you, tell you "No!" Serve as your parents' enforcer. No, sex is a creation, a gift of a God who is opposed to loneliness and big into oneness. Be fruitful! Multiply! Become one flesh!

But a great deal happened between the playful exuberance of Genesis 2 and the grim questions behind Mark 10.

"Jesus, is it OK for a man to divorce his wife, write her a note of divorce and send her away? Is that OK? Moses said it was OK."

Jesus answers, "NO. From the beginning it was not so. Read Genesis 2. In the beginning, God created male and female, not for separation but for reunion. One and one = one flesh."

So what happened between Genesis 2 and Jesus, between this joyful divine invitation to become "one flesh" and the disintegration of so many of our marriages, the mess of our families, today's war between men and women? All I know is, in the beginning, it was not so.

I agree with Duke's Stanley Hauerwas who says that the greatest corruption Christian thinking about sex has suffered in our age is not that we think sex is fun, or dirty, or pointless, but that we have come to think of sex as <u>private</u>. Despite the Bible's up front talk of sex as early as Genesis 2, despite Jesus' willingness to buck the trend in his own society in regard to divorce, we have bought into the weird notion that sex is private, my own business, a secret exchange between me and (usually) one other person, nobody's business but my own, thank you. (We even hope to discuss abortion as a "right to privacy issue.")

I agree with those feminists who say that <u>sex is always about power.</u> When a professor who is in a position of power, tries to have sex with a student who is powerless, it's not only a moral issue, it's a political power issue. And I'm glad that many feminist thinkers are willing to talk about sex as a public act with public, political consequences for the subjugation of women in a society where men hold most of the power. Something social, political is at stake in sex.

One of the worst legacies of political liberalism is the unbiblical assumption that sex is a purely private, personal matter. "Who cares how he behaves in a bedroom as long as he votes right on the floor of the Senate?" That kind of thing.

Was this what the church was getting at back in the fifteenth century at the Council of Florence when it condemned "private marriage"? Marriage, the church said, must be public, "in front of witnesses." The church only condemned one kind of sex -- sex in private. In so doing the church declared sex in marriage to be a public, political matter, something with implications for the whole society.

In fact, it could be argued that the church never believed in the existence of "pre-marital sex," or "sex outside of marriage" because, in the church's view, <u>all</u> sex was marital, that is <u>public</u>. Nothing about the way men and women love was without power consequences, therefore sex was too dangerous to allow people to do it alone or without public promises. Therefore all sex is "marital," i.e. <u>public</u>.

In a weird way, our modern society seems to have recognized this. Sex has come out of the closet only to be hauled into the courtroom with palimony suits, sexual harassment suits, rules about sex in the workplace. It's as if we have found out that sex is too dangerous, too risky, too potentially damaging to leave it to private individuals. So now we do it with help from the

government. Personally, I can't imagine anything worse than governmentally supervised and sanctioned sex, but at least give modern Americans credit for realizing that they can't handle it alone.

The church agrees. Sex is a public, political, power-laden act too important to be kept private. We may be skeptical that sex is better managed by the modern bureaucratic state, but Christians agree that the questions raised by our sexual mess are inherently political, namely, how can our sex give life to one another rather than destroy one another?

That is why we say that, whether people know it or not, all sex is marital. The issue for Christians is not, How to do sex. It is, How to be faithful disciples. Look at the Service of Marriage in most churches. Note that the pastor or priest never asks, "John, Susan, have you had sex?" Not one time have I ever asked a couple at the wedding, "Are you virgins? " At weddings, we don't say that much about sex or love. Rather, we talk about promises, faithfulness.

As Paul Ramsey said, "Because the words, 'I love you' can mean 'I love me and want to use you to love me even more,' we do well to test our love by the promises of marriage." Can our declarations of love endure the demands of fidelity?

So that's why Christians don't get that excited about questions like, "Should I have sex with this person or not?" Who knows? That question is impertinent without first asking, "Well, who do you hope to be at 64?" or "How capable are you of deceiving yourself about the real motives behind your actions?" So it's not so much a question of sex but rather one of fidelity, faithfulness. We've found that there isn't much way to be faithful, to get real close to someone sexually without destroying them, other than through public promises. We don't have sex with people to whom we have not yet gone public with our promises.

Interestingly, in Mark 10, about the only time they ever got Jesus off on a discussion of sex, he seems interested only in discussing sex as a promise issue. He doesn't say (though he probably would) "Don't have sex with people you're not married to." Jesus says, "Disciples of mine don't break promises to someone, especially promises about sex." Look up the context of Jesus' words about divorce in Mark 10. He has been talking, not about sex or marriage (two subjects of little interest to Jesus), but about discipleship (Mark 8:27-10:52), about the public cost of following him down a narrow way not taken by most ruthlessly privatized Americans. Sex is only interesting to us as a discipleship issue, as our way of fulfilling our public responsibility as disciples to witness to the faithfulness of Christ in all that we do. We've gotten hung up on talk about sex because it's easier to talk about than discipleship.

So I should not have been conducting classes for the youth in my last church on "Sex and Dating From a Christian Perspective." ("Look Mommy, even the preacher can talk about sex!") I should have been teaching the kids about how to be faithful. How do you keep promises to someone even when you're having sex with them, raising children with them, making car payments with them? That's the question. Fidelity. How can we be as faithful to the people we sleep with as Jesus has been to us?

Frankly, I don't think you can do it by yourself, sex or discipleship. You need somebody to back you up. There are just too many corrosive acids in modern life, eating away at our ability to be faithful to our commitments. We name them individuality or autonomy, hedonism, or the old who-cares-so-long-as-nobody-gets-hurt? You have been so schooled in the notion that your genitals are your own private, personal business that it is tough for you to sustain a public commitment to another human being. The modern corporation needs mobile people who are

always ready to break ties, leave spouse and family behind and move on. It's not a good environment for good sex. Our capitalistic, consumer economy is better at the politics of severing oneness than in joining together as one flesh and being faithful.

But Jesus reminds us. We are not our own. We are not called to be free but to be faithful. You now need the church, more than ever, to give you something significant to do with sex, to enjoy sex as a gift of God, used in the service of God, rather than as a personal possession to be expended in self-gratification. Don't just have safe sex, have faithful sex. Jesus didn't promise his disciples safety. He promised us adventure. A chaotic, superficial society has made even sex among Christians interesting once again.

I worry about you in a world that has given you nothing more important to do with your sex than personal pleasure. Such use of sex does not defeat our loneliness, it intensifies it and as Genesis says, God thinks it is not good for us to be alone. I worry about a church which offers no better help to you in your struggles to be faithful disciples than to tell you to think for yourself. I disagree with Professor Marvin Ellison of Bangor Theological Seminary who cries, "Our pews are emptying and our outdated attitude about sex has a great deal to do with it." I love the young adult who stood up at the Presbyterian General Assembly and pled with her church to give her the means to resist what the world was doing to both sex and to disciples. She knew. Rather than affirming her, her church was pulling the rug out from under her in her struggle to be faithful.

A few years ago I talked with a Duke student (a Presbyterian!) who had given a semester to go work with Habitat for Humanity in Americus, Georgia, to spend a semester volunteering to help build homes for the poor. I had lunch with her when she returned to Duke.

"Americus, Georgia is really small," she said. "There's nothing to do there at night except to go to a gospel sing at some little church. The college students who are there with Habitat do a lot of sitting on the porch in the evenings. We just have a beer and sit and talk."

"Millard Fuller doesn't mind if you have a beer?" I asked.

"Well, I guess he sort of looks the other way. But you can't sleep with each other," she said.

"Really? Is that because Millard is a Presbyterian?" I asked. "Doesn't want people to have a good time?"

"No. I don't think so," she said. "Millard says that there are just too many poor people without adequate housing for us to be wasting time."

I love that. That's putting sex in its place! Sex is a good gift of God. Like money (Mark 10:17-31), power, knowledge, the goodness of sex is for us relative to our attempt to be faithful disciples of Jesus. It makes all the difference in the world how and for whom we do it.

Thanks to Duke's Stanley Hauerwas for many of the insights here. See Hauerwas' new book, After Constantinianism (Abingdon). Lamar Williamson's commentary on Mark (John Knox) was also helpful.