

*Everyday Hope*  
***Sexual Ethics***  
**1 Thessalonians 4:1-8**

When the church ventures into people's bedrooms the result isn't typically good. Think of the religious leaders who brought to Jesus a woman caught in adultery. How did they catch her? Where were they and what were they doing there? No, religion and sex is usually a worse combination than religion and politics. So, if you're apprehensive about today's topic, I'm probably moreso!

I feel a bit like the pastor who served a church in a lake community, and during the summer attendance plummeted because people were water skiing. So the pastor told his wife he was going to preach about water skiing. Even though she tried to persuade him against, he persisted, so that Sunday she said, "I'm staying home today."

Well on the way to the church, the pastor had a change of heart. He thought, "The people who come to church don't deserve to hear me rail against the ones not there," so he reached in his satchel and pulled out an old sermon on sexual morality. He didn't have time to really prepare so his delivery was a bit awkward and clumsy.

A few days later a woman in the church was with the pastor's wife and asked her, "What did you think of you husband's sermon Sunday?" She said, "To be honest with you, I begged him not to preach it. The man just doesn't know what he's talking about. He's only tried it twice in his life, once before we were married, and one time since, and both times he fell off!"

So now you don't have to wait til the end of the sermon to decide if I should preach on this topic. But whether or not we are comfortable or not we don't have to look far to see how sexual ethics is something that needs to be talked about. As a society we struggle to understand and accept people's sexual identities. Sex crimes like we have seen in women's national gymnastics and major universities plague fill our headlines. Right here in St. Luke's we struggle with making sure our children are safe from sexual predators while at the same time evaluating how to help and be in ministry to former sex offenders. And all this in a world where the availability of pornographic material is at an all-time high. Or maybe I should say, low!

So perhaps we can take some lessons from Paul. Like what he says or not, Paul doesn't let fear of awkwardness or offense keep him from addressing sensitive topics. So this morning, I want us to look carefully at Paul's advice to the Thessalonians on sexual ethics and consider the relevance of his advice for our lives today. I believe we will find his counsel not only sensible and pragmatic, but relative and helpful.

Last Sunday we started a significant turn in First Thessalonians as Paul begins addressing issues of behavior. It starts in the first verse of chapter 4, "***Finally, my dear friends, since you belong to the Lord Jesus, we beg and urge you to live as we***

**taught you.**" (1 Thess. 4:1) Nearly all of Paul's letters contain practical advice for what it means to live as a Christian. Paul was being a pastor. He helped people understand how to apply their faith to everyday life. So he starts off with sexual ethics. Now was this because sexual misconduct was rampant in the church? Probably not. Paul is most likely responding to what he observed in the culture of Greek society and what he knew must have been a challenge to people coming into the church where different values were taught.

~~Paul was raised with a strong Jewish ethic when it came to family values. Though he was born in Tarsus outside of Israel, he was sent to study in Jerusalem while still a boy. Most of his upbringing would have been in the center of Judaism, surrounded by a culture that placed high value on sex within marriage. As Paul traveled outside the influence of Judaism and ventured into Europe which was dominated by Greek and Roman customs, his exposure to different values regarding sexuality was no doubt shocking.~~

Thessalonica, for instance, was influenced by what was known as mystery religions which were like secret knowledge societies. Some of these cults practiced sexual orgies. Remember too, that Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, which featured the renowned Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, which housed 1,000 male and female temple prostitutes, both men and women. These were people who were basically sex slaves, sometimes young teenagers and children.

This outraged Paul. And its also the reason why we have to be careful interpreting some of Paul's words in other letters where he appears to be condemning homosexuality. Remember, the word homosexuality didn't even come about in the English language until the mid 1800's. SO what we take as a fairly modern words describing same sex attraction is not necessarily what Paul is reacting against—grown men abusing young boys. When people today say Paul condemned homosexuality, they could be misreading what Paul is actually condemning. A few years ago I created a resource for the United Methodist Church called *Faithful and Inclusive* that looks carefully at these difficult passages in the Bible and how they do not shun homosexuality as has been portrayed by many in the church. And that resource is in our bookstore.

For now, let's understand that Paul's offense toward society's view of sex had to do with the values of the Roman world. In Roman society it was accepted that privileged people had power over less socially honorable people. In a recent sermon by Adam Hamilton he referenced Kyle Harper, a University of Oklahoma professor of history and literature who said, "*Roman culture had an almost unbelievably callous set of attitudes towards those without social honor—slaves, prostitutes, the poor. Systemic exploitation was built into the social and moral order of the Roman world. The Roman order was constructed on the degradation of the bodies of 'non-persons.'*"

No wonder Paul said, "***For this is the will of God...that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things.***" (4:4-6)

Paul is reacting to exploitation and saying this is something that angers God. Sexual exploitation continues to plague our world. How do you think God might feel about some of these statistics...

- roughly 25 million people worldwide are trafficked for slavery
- Nearly 5 million are sexually exploited, 27% are children and 2/3 are girls.
- commercial sexual exploitation is a \$100 billion a year industry.

Many victims of trafficking are used in pornography. When people, and mainly men, say, “looking at pornography isn’t hurting anyone, think again. One study reported that in 9 countries half of people trafficked for sexual slavery were used for pornography.

- The porn industry annual revenue is more than the NFL, NBA and MLB combined.
- Over 40 million Americans regularly visit porn sites.
- 47% of families in US say pornography is a problem.

I remember driving through Missouri on I-70 years ago and stopping at a service station. An old station wagon pulled up beside me. A large, sort of gruff looking man got out and walked inside. The car was full of boxes and clothing and in the back seat was a girl who perhaps looked Hispanic. But what caught my attention was how frightened she looked. When I drove away I got the most peculiar feeling that that may have been a case of human trafficking. Since that time I have kept a card in my car...

Paul calls on the church to do something about such things. First, by participating in anything that allows our drives and desires to turn others into objects. This angers God and therefore should anger us, so we should do something about such things. If you are someone who struggles with pornography or might have a sex addiction, go to the resource page for this Sunday: [stlukesumc.com/everydayhope](http://stlukesumc.com/everydayhope).

But second, we are called to do something by resisting oppression. One way we can do this is by keeping this phone number handy. I have ever since my experience in Missouri that day. This is a national hotline to report anything that appears like human trafficking: 1-888-373-7888. I hope you’ll write that down. Keep it in your car, in your wallet. You never know when you might see something and need to report it.

But Paul says more about sexual ethics and it has to do with our personal behaviors. In fact, before even talking about exploitation, Paul said: **“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication...”** Sanctification is the process of becoming holy—not self-righteous, but transformed, transformed in a way in which our character reflects the character of God. Paul says this is God’s will for us, to reflect God’s character and one of the ways we do that is by abstaining from sex outside of marriage. And this is where the sermon really starts to sound preachy, and some say, “Mind your own business. If sex is consensual and not hurting anyone, then there is nothing wrong with it!” But let’s allow Paul to be heard and make his case for a Christian’s view of sexuality.

Certainly there’s a health benefit to this advice, it reduces sexually transmitted diseases. The Center for Disease Control, the CDC, reports that each year there are over 20

millions new cases of STDs reported in the US, over half are among young people ages 15-24. So someone will say, in that cases as long as I'm safe, it's not a problem, But Paul would argue that this issue is deeper than physical health. Its emotional and spiritual as well.

Again, Paul connects sexuality to God. God's nature is first and foremost defined by love. The Greek word that best captures this love is *agape*. Unlike *eros*, from which we get erotic love, and *phileo*, which is love of friend, which is why Philadelphia is called the city of brotherly love. Still, yet, there is another kind of love, *storge* that is love of family. *Agape* is a higher than all these. *Agape* is self-giving love, focused on the other. It places highest value on the need of the other and how to bless and strengthen the other.

Eric Fromm was a world renowned psychoanalyst who years ago wrote a book called *The Art of Loving*. He said, "*Most people see the problem of love as that of being loved, rather than that of loving, of one's capacity to love.*" Then he uses the example of Adam and Eve in the Bible. He says when they acted in self-interest and ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" their eyes were opened and they saw each other and were ashamed. He points out that our prudish way of treating this story is to say they suddenly saw each other without any clothes on and that was the cause of shame. But Fromm says this idea is silly because they had already seen each other this way. Rather, he points out that Adam and Eve now see each from God's perspective, from the viewpoint of *agape*. Their shame is that they had not yet learned to love each other. And this is what they were made for. They weren't simply made with animal impulses and drives, they are made with the capacity to love as God loves us. And their sexuality is a significant part of that. But when they acted in self-interest they lose their capacity to love in such a way.

And the rest of the Bible is full of examples of this reality. It tells very real stories of people who wound and are wounded by sexual encounters that happen without the commitment of *agape* kind of love.

And God wants life to be different for us. Look at what it says about God's creation of Adam and Eve. ***Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."*** (Genesis 2:18)

When I meet with brides and grooms to plan their wedding services and ask what scriptures they would like to have, often they, and by they I mean the brides! will say, "Pick anything except the one that talks about my being a helper! We are going to have equality in our marriage." And I use it as a chance to do a little Bible study. I explain that the word helper in Hebrew is *ezer*. Its translated helper but it really means to give strength. It speaks of one who is stronger helping another who is weaker. In this case it means Eve was a helper because Adam needed help. But really its bigger than that. It is mutual. Both parties commit to each other to bring their strengths so that they can help one another. So turn to someone around you and say, "You need help!"

This is how God made. You see God is the divine *Ezer*, Helper, who comes to give strength to us, because we all need help. And the goal of Christian marriage is that we

would be part of a covenant relationship in which God uses us like no other person to strengthen and fully love another.

This is what God wants for us says Paul. Paul's not being a killjoy about sex. He's watching how one of the most sacred, intimate parts of our being was causing so much hurt and emptiness in people's lives and speaking a word of hope. He is saying that God wants us to be happy. And this applies in every relationship whether straight or gay. The same value applies. God intends for our sexuality to be experienced in marriage, in a relationship in which we vow to be God's representatives in showing agape to the other.

So some people will say, "What do you do if you are in a marriage and you have tried that. You are the only one giving to the other and the other person just takes from you? How long do you go?" And that is not easily answered. Marriage is not easy or simple. It takes work. And we have to be committed, but committed to the other person's well being as much as our own. But I also don't believe God wants us to be unhappy and certainly not in danger for the sake of fidelity. Sometimes divorce is the most compassionate thing to do when people become perpetual wounding of each other.

When I first started out in ministry I served two small churches in a very rural area. I was single and nearly all the members were two generations older than me. I was terribly lonely. There was no office to go to. The office was in my house. I felt like if this is what ministry is like I can't do this the rest of my life.

In the county seat town was a wise, older pastor, Dr. George Thompson, at the First Methodist Church. I asked if he would meet me for lunch and I told him about my feelings and asked his thoughts. He said, "You know, my call to ministry is like my marriage. Some days I just don't feel like being married any more. But I don't act on that because my marriage is based on something deeper than the way I feel any given day." Then he said, "just like you give a lot of time deciding whether to enter ministry, you must give a lot of time deciding to leave. But the key is this, you're not in it by yourself. Just like marriage, you say the vows at the altar to remember that God is in it with you. That's why marriage is important. It's not just a piece of paper. Its too people who love each other enough to say, "Let's ask God now to help us." Ministry is like that too.

I believe that's what Paul was telling the Thessalonians...

Last week Susan and I celebrated our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Hard to believe we've been married that long. Most of the time I still feel like a novice when it comes to marriage, but this much I have learned. When I put my needs first, and focus on whether Susan is meeting them, I'm not just miserable, we both are. But when I focus on meeting her needs, and genuinely loving her as she needs, and Lord knows, I could always do better, she has even more desire to love me as I need.

Paul says that is what pleases God, and is what leads to pleasure for us.

So let me close in acknowledging a few things. You may be someone who has made mistakes in this area of your life. Maybe you were unfaithful in a marriage. Perhaps you

were sexual active in ways you now regret. And you fear that God forever holds this against you. That God won't forgive you.

Perhaps you've engaged in pornography and you have this pervasive sense of shame.

Or perhaps you've just struggled in your marriage to practice genuine agape love, and truly honor and seek to be a helper to your spouse.

Hear these words loud and clear: To all who desire to walk in newness of life and serve and please God and confess your sin, then in the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven!