

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

Dr. Kate Ott

“The Facts of Life and Love”

March 30, 2014

I want to start off with a poem today from which the title of the sermon is taken and that offers a bit more detailed look at the theme of love. “The Facts of Life” by Pádraig Ó Tuama

(Hear Ó Tuama read the poem here - <http://padraigotuama.bandcamp.com/track/the-facts-of-life>. Poem not reprinted here due to copyright issues)

In church we don't talk about sexuality.

Definitely not in the pulpit, but usually not in the classrooms, community spaces, or other places either. In church, **do we talk** about sexuality?

How babies are made

How boys and girls, men and women should behave?

What sexuality intercourse is; when and when not to engage in it?

How our bodies will change at puberty?

When to get married; and for some people who should or should not get married?

Those are “the Facts of Life,” right?

Those are indeed important facts. However, they only reflect a very small portion of what “sexuality” is all about. Focusing on the “facts” or information that I've just stated reduces sexuality to sex, gender or orientation.

Sexuality is much more than behaviors or orientation. We are all sexual beings from birth to death. Sexuality is like our personality; unique to us, but shared in its features with others. Sexuality includes 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.

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. Messages from our culture, religion, and history construct for us many different, conflicting, and at times unhealthy ways to interpret our sexuality. 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.<sup>1</sup>

Healthy sexuality is a cornerstone for all our relationships, even with God. In other words, in order to love our selves, love our neighbor and love God - to live the love commandment - we are calling upon our sexuality. Our sexuality is part of who we are and how we come to know God. Hear the Psalmist today:

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,<sup>\*</sup>  
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips  
<sup>6</sup> when I think of you on my bed,  
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;  
<sup>7</sup> for you have been my help,  
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.  
<sup>8</sup> My soul clings to you;  
your right hand upholds me. (NRSV text)

That sounds a lot like how we might talk about a beloved in a sexual relationship. Similar emotions, desire, and even actions are described. Mystics and saints often spoke of their relationship with god in this way.

(10am service) Consider the ritual of baptism,

- the water poured over the child invokes sensuality
- the holding of a child invokes intimacy and models positive, supportive touch

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a description of sexuality found in my chapter “Sexual Health and Integrity” in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* eds. Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens, (Fortress Press: December 2013).

- the child is emblematic of the fruitfulness that comes from a sexual relationship, it is co-creative with God
- the child is brought into relationship with the community and with God, by physically joining and parading around

MOST OF US might find this connection a bit off-putting or even creepy. I think that is a primary failing of our Christian history. Somewhere along the way, we got suspicious of bodies and very suspicious of sexual desire. So considering how our relationship with God feeds, informs, and shapes our sexuality is a comfort we need to retrieve in our tradition.

This expanded view of sexuality compels us to broaden the “Facts of Life” related to sexuality.

We need to add:

- Our bodies change throughout our lifetimes and that will affect intimate relationships as well as our sense of self.
- Any relationship takes hardwork, communication, and patience.
- Desire and pleasure connect us to God as readily as they do to each other.
- The greatest commandment cautions us against myopia – such as giving away our sense of self, or using another as an object, forgetting about god, or cutting off all other relationships for the sake of one.
- There is not just one sexual behavior that deserves all our attention. God created our bodies as good and they are to be enjoyed.
- We will be hurt and harmed by others, even by ourselves.

Those are “facts of Life” that need to be shared as well.

When Jesus reduces all the laws to the love commandment, he isn't creating an easy out. To live the love commandment to its fullest, requires what Cristina Traina, a Christian Ethicist calls Erotic Attunement. Attunement, Traina says, is "perceptive attention and adjustment to feelings, needs, and desires—both one's own and others'." It is a "habit of acknowledging or desires." Unlike popular culture's perception of sexual desire, erotic love in the Christian tradition "desires the person not as we fantasize her to be but as she is—incomplete and quirky, bumps, warts, and all. It enjoys and celebrates her gifts and strengths, but is also concerned for her holistic welfare. Nor does genuine erotic love overestimate itself. Rather than attempting to be the source of everything good for the beloved, it often stands back to let that person receive what she needs to grow in other ways."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, loving our neighbors as ourselves is an act of social justice that includes affirming the uniqueness of who God created him to be **as** he is NOT as we wish he were. This means we have a moral 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. In the messy, new, old, confusing, friendly, familial, and mundane relationships in our everyday lives, we are called to love in a way that enables others to love.

Talking about sexuality in church makes this possible.

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<sup>2</sup> Cristina Traina, "Erotic Attunement" in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* eds. Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens (Fortress, December 2013), p 44, 45, 47.

Imagine!

What would the world look like if every girl and boy knew exactly how their body worked?

What would the world look like if every girl's and woman's body was respected **and** her enjoyment of sexual behaviors was as important as that of her partner?

What would the world look like if every person could choose their partner freely?

What would the world look like if every pregnancy was intended and planned?<sup>3</sup>

That would be a world that understood sexuality as sacred and advocated for values like honesty, respect, mutuality, and love as what constituted sexual integrity and morality.

That would be the world God intended.

You might as well love

Love God, your neighbor and yourself

You might as well Love.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from my chapter, "Created for Pleasure" in *Talking Taboo: American Christian Women Get Frank About Faith* eds. Erin Lane and Enuma Okoro (White Cloud Press, October 2013).