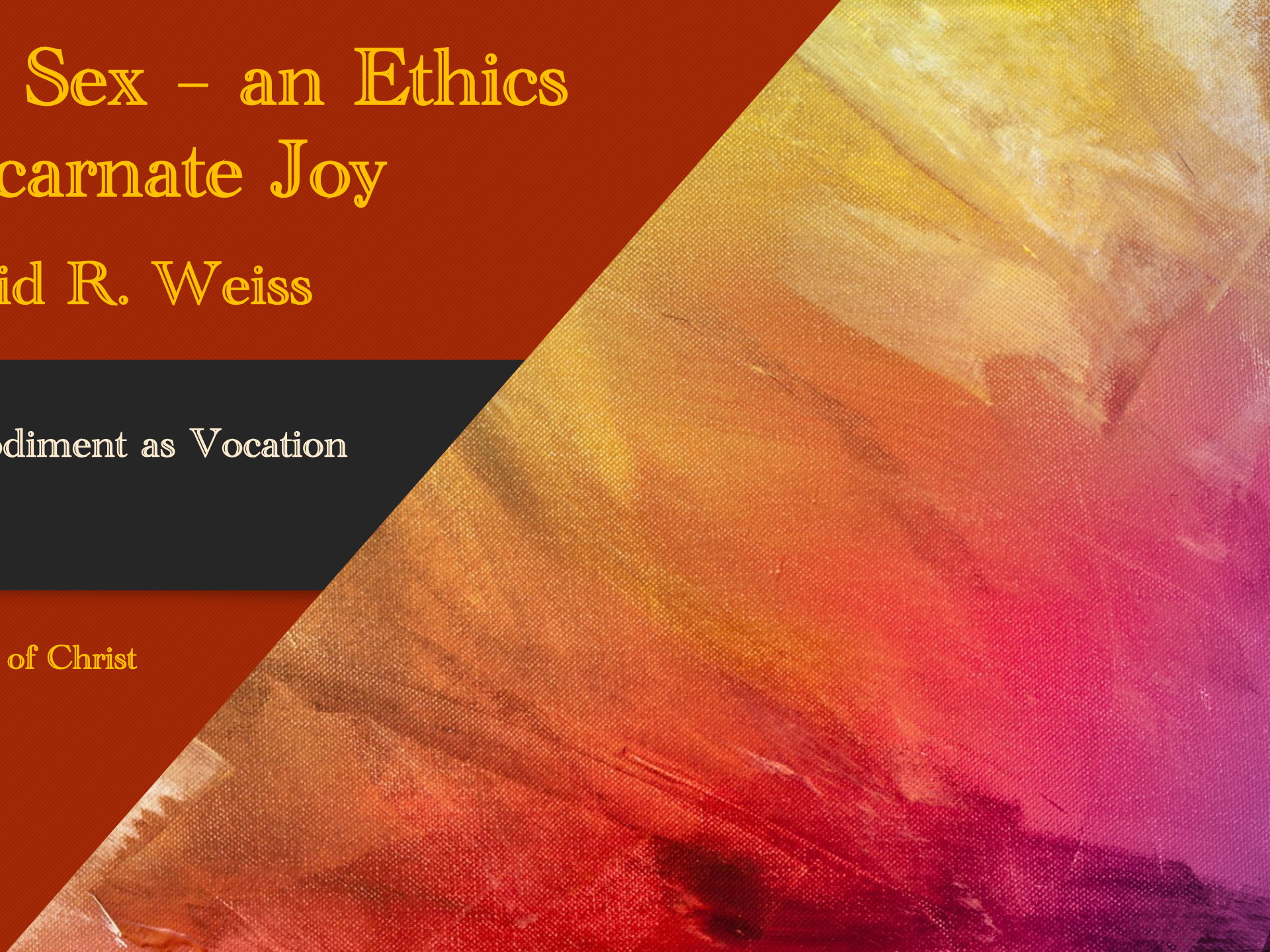


Just Good Sex – an Ethics of Incarnate Joy

David R. Weiss

Reflections on Embodiment as Vocation

St. Paul's United Church of Christ
Journey of Faith
February 9, 2022



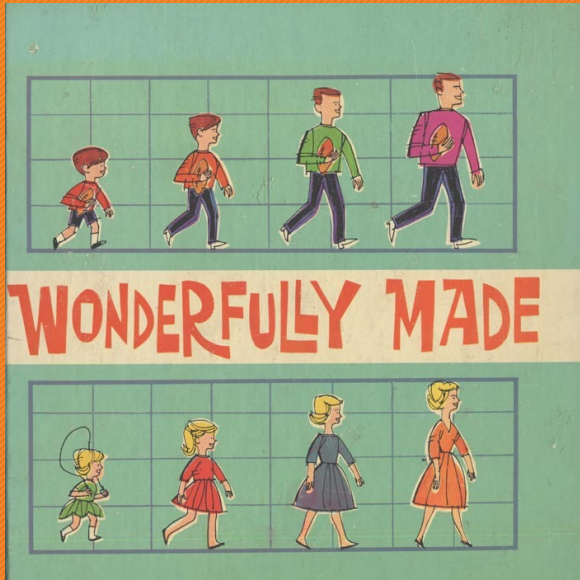
PAY ATTENTION!

- TO YOUR EYEBROWS, NECK HAIR, HEARTBEAT, AND BREATHING.
- THESE THINGS WILL TELL YOU – AS MUCH AS YOUR MIND DOES – WHERE MY PRESENTATION INTRIGUES, UNSETTLES, RELIEVES, INSPIRES, OR EVEN THRILLS YOU.
- THERE WILL BE TIME FOR Q & A AT THE END. WE'LL START WITH QUESTIONS & COMMENTS FROM YOUR EYEBROWS, NECK HAIR, HEARTBEAT, AND BREATHING

A conversation with so many folds to it!

- A complex history: theological, social, personal.
- Seismic shifts: attitudes, behaviors, possibilities.
- Body theology: honoring the truths our (diverse!) bodies tell.
- Erotic poetry: inviting intimacy into voice.
- And TONIGHT'S CONVERSATION – ETHICS: discerning sexual behavior that is (at least) just good sex.





1965 -

“Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto thee, that we are **by nature sinful and unclean**, and that we have **sinned against thee by thought, by word, and by deed**, wherefore we flee for refuge to thine infinite mercy, seeking and imploring thy grace, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”

- Lutheran Church *Service Book & Hymnal*



Not merely ill-equipped: mis-equipped

January 1962 - “Oh, just don’t be like animals!” ☹️

The silencing privilege of being straight and male ... squeezing myself into unhealthy categories that never outright condemned me, but persistently shamed and stunted my healthy development.

**High School, College, Seminary ... Marriage #1, Ben, Divorce #1
... Marriage #2, Susanna, Notre Dame-Luther College, Divorce #2**

BREAKTHROUGH: 1999-2002

Reconnecting with Margaret – meeting the joy of my past in a very chastened, humbled, hoping-for-healing present.

Teaching GLBT Voices in Theology at Luther College – moving from gut-level Ally to companion-guide in literature that. I. Could. Not. Have. Imagined.

Learning to love Margaret with eyes wide open.

A whole cloud of witnesses – too many to name

- Karen Lebacqz: “Appropriate Vulnerability”
- Audre Lorde: “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”
- John Giles Milhaven: “Sleeping Like Spoons: A Question of Embodiment”
- Mary Pellauer: “The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm”

All in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, Westminster/John Know 1994 edition

- Carter Heyward: *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, Pilgrim 1989

Moment of calling

I'd helped a growing number of college students reclaim their sexuality as something positive – did I owe them any guidance beyond that?

October 2003

“Coming Out and other Holy Acts
of Human Sexuality”

Campus Keynote at Luther College



Unexpected Affirmation ...

- Bob (mid-50s) in January 2004, in tears: “THIS, YES THIS! I asked my pastor, when I came out in my mid-20s, for guidance on how to live with integrity as a gay man. He told me, **‘You can’t. There are no ethics for you. In the eyes of the church, you’re now an outlaw.’** I’ve been waiting my whole gay life to hear this!”
- Darlene (mid-70s) in February 2009, also with tears in her eyes and her husband at her side: “Oh, David, I wish I had heard some of this 50 years ago. My marriage would’ve been so different ... **Al and I missed out on so much ... joy.**”

Opening observations ...

Human sexuality is simply, profoundly, and mysteriously part of the fabric of who we are. It's far more complex than either the puritanical strands of Christianity or the mechanistic descriptions of science have suggested. We discuss sexual ethics *as participants in its mystery*.

If we're honest, sex (like light!) has a fundamentally paradoxical nature. For some persons sex has a sacred, creative, unitive character. For others, it's a deeply human, immensely satisfying, but entirely physical experience. For others, it offers pleasure that isn't necessarily tethered to marriage or monogamy. *For many it's more than one thing*. At the level of honest observation, sometimes sex is wave-like and sometimes it's particle-like. ***That's just the way it is.***

BUT: bread, wine, water! We know paradox. We know things can be glorious shy of "holy."

Laying the groundwork to think theologically...

“In the beginning was the Word – the Loving Wisdom of God. And all things were created through this Word. And not a single thing was made apart from the Word.” (John 1:1,3 freely rendered)

“And God said – by use of a Word, speaking with Loving Wisdom – let us make human beings in our image ... as a reflection of divine life, as an echo of communal love.” (Genesis 1:26a, freely rendered)

“And God formed an *adam* out of the *adamah*, that is, God fashioned an earth creature out of the moist earth, a human being out of the rich humus from which the green plants would grow. And God breathed into the humus and gave it life.” (Genesis 2:7, freely rendered)

We are called into our bodies by the Word, the Loving Wisdom of God.

Given life by divine breath, we are dirt deemed worthy to dance, soil sown with soul.

Incarnation – that miracle of divine breath embodied in a human frame that finds full expression in Jesus of Nazareth – began in the Garden of Eden.

We are bodied mud married to Holy Breath. Among our most primal vocations then is the vocation to be bodied selves.

As vocation
the task of
embodiment
is *not* about
avoiding temptation
but about
cultivating the
fullness of love
in our
fleshly frames.



Indeed, one might say that
our vocation is to be Holy Kindling,
to be burning bushes - *to find our own
limbs aflame with the presence of God.*

And the challenge
of a consistently *Christian* sexual ethic,
whether for straight or queer persons,
is to discern the conditions
under which our sexuality
is hospitable to the presence of God.

Lighting the Fire ...

In Hebrew, the same root word can mean either “to know” or “to make love to,” suggesting a Hebraic intuition that somehow love-making involved intimate knowing and that knowing well involved loving.

Thus, “Adam knew Eve and she conceived.”
(Genesis 4:1)

But listen as Jeremiah confronts one of Judah’s kings for his failure to honor God.

“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages; who says, ‘I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,’ and cuts out windows for it paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion ...

Knowing God ...

“Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. Your father judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him.

“Is not *this* to know me?’ says the LORD.”
(Jeremiah 22:13-16)

As Micah (6:8) asks, “What does the LORD require of you but that you do justice, and that you pursue mercy, walk humbly with your God?”

My proposed principles for an embodied sexuality that can host the presence of God:

- Justice
- Mercy
- Humility
- Procreative energy
- Joyful abandon

Justice

To know - and to be known - sexually in ways that welcome that presence of God, our actions *must pass the measure of justice*. When we exploit power differences, whether based in money, age, race, gender, or social role, we fail to image God who is known in relations that are just.

This makes clear why professional boundaries are so important for clergy, counselors, teachers, and the like — and why incest and spousal abuse are wrong. Relationships in which power is leveraged to secure or distort sexual activity do not image the God whose love is just.

Justice, however, stands as a principle; it offers very few absolute rules. Justice must be measured in every particular relationship. Yet it provides a crucial frame for any discussion of sexual ethics.

Mercy

Faithful sexuality involves the pursuit of mercy. It will evidence, toward both self and others, *respect and tenderness* – a genuine care for the other’s comfort, pleasure, and joy.

Minimally, mercy demands *mutual consent*.

But also ...

... Mercy

Because sexuality always involves some measure of self-revelation and vulnerability, fidelity (practiced faithfulness) is a corollary of mercy. Part of the power of sexual intimacy is its alchemy whereby vulnerability becomes transcendence. Absent either justice or mercy, such vulnerability is neither wise nor safe, *but in the midst of relational fidelity it is truly to stand on holy ground.*

Even fidelity is not an absolute rule: it's about promised faithfulness that is honest and clear. It may not always be life-long. It may not always be exclusive. But it ought to be honest and clear in its terms. This, too, will find unique expression in each particular relationship.

Humility

Humility is about the practice of patience. Sexual intimacy is an unfolding mystery better paced by our own deepest intuitions than by social pressures. So that we venture into it with reverence and wonder – at a pace that reflects our own readiness as well as our partner’s. (And with good humor, because sexuality involves the foibles and wobbly grace that mark any human activity.)

But more ...

... Humility

Humility also suggests that as we encounter persons
- whether in our intimate relations or in our public communities -
whose sexual practices and preferences differ markedly from our own,
we begin by listening for the truth of their experience.

We need not affirm everything for ourselves or for others,
but we are *obligated*, under a biblically grounded ethic of knowing,
to listen humbly and well to the truth that others may carry.

Procreative Energy

It seems more than mere coincidence that sexual intimacy *can* be biologically procreative. So, I suggest *that procreative energy* is one more dimension of faithful sexual relationships: that in our bodied knowing we reflect God's creative impulse to be about giving life. This *only incidentally - and only occasionally* - involves bearing children, but I use *this term* to reclaim it from the way it has been wielded as a weapon against the LGBTQ community.

Fundamentally to be procreative is to care for creation.

(This is a *human* vocation, quite apart from sexual activity. But sex is one powerful way we generate and share energy - and energy so deliciously brought forth between lovers *will long to spill outward into the world*, leading us to lovingly tend that corner of creation dear to us - whether children or other humans, animals or ecosystems, neighborhoods or civic communities, or simply gardens and recyclables.)

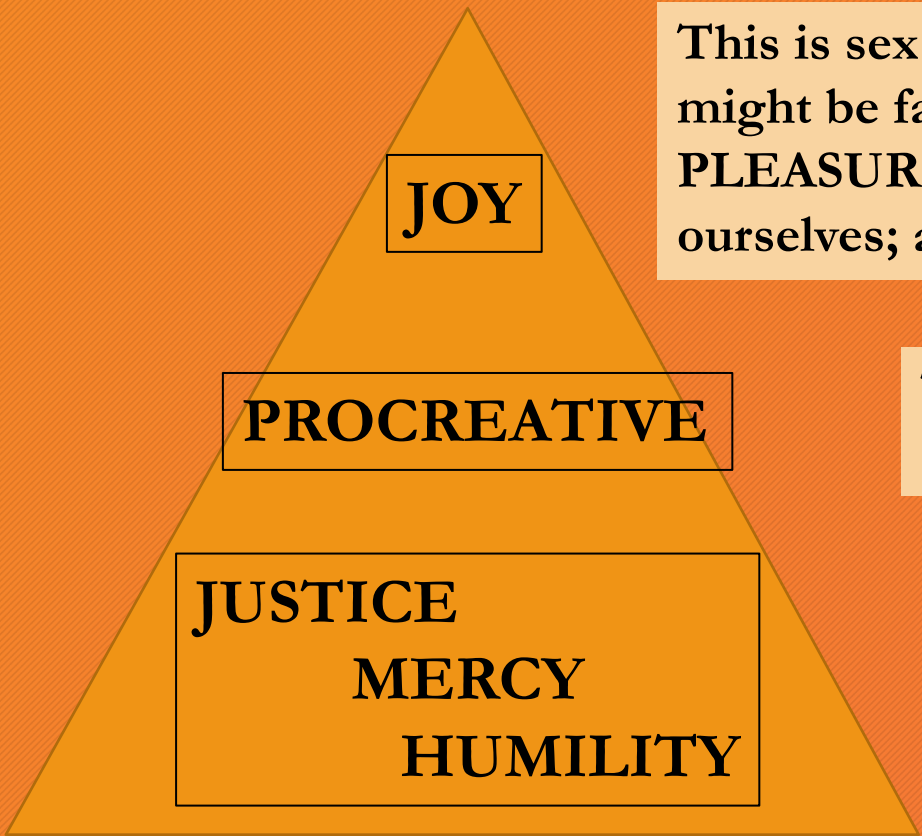
Joyful Abandon

Finally, good sex ought to be fun. And for Christians this “fun” can be a real challenge because many of us have been taught either that sex is the primal temptation that turns us from God or at least that it is deserving of near total discretion in polite conversation. *Good sex is neither. Where else in our lives are we so mistrusting or quiet about that which brings such joy?*

But there is something more to be said here.

When our love-making honors justice, pursues mercy, practices humility, and overflows in procreative energy, there are *moments* when, beyond mere pleasure or even ecstasy, our touching embodies the gospel, becoming a gift of tactile grace. In those moments we feel the full flame of God’s presence in our lovemaking. *And we know a measure of holy joy.*

This is sex on the cusp of the sacred. Words are clumsy and slippery, but it might be fair to say that “just good sex” produces (sometimes intense) PLEASURE; procreative sex evokes ECSTASY in carrying us beyond ourselves; and sex that bears gospel (which is hardly every day!) brings JOY.



This is “whole” sex; that is, sex that generates energy that spills beyond the lovers themselves and out into the world.

This is “safe” sex – “just good sex”; these principles are so inter-related they can’t really be prioritized.

ONE WAY TO IMAGINE IT WHOLE ...



In closing

I have suggested that an ethic for sexual activity that can host the presence of God will be marked by justice, mercy, humility, procreative energy, and joyful abandon.

Naming these principles hardly settles every ethical question in advance by producing a set of fixed rules. But that isn't how ethics works. It isn't how adults operate. It isn't how life is lived.

And it was never the original challenge of embodiment. The goal has always been **INTEGRITY: *improvisation grounded in creativity and character as we seek to image God while we fill our fleshly frames with love.***

In offering these principles, I hope not only to clarify our own ethical reflections, but also to foster conversations that can include family and friends in the church and in our wider communities.

Hardly the final word, these principles simply offer a place to begin. The integrity we seek is the fruit of good conversation, in which ideas and practices can be compassionately and appreciatively contested.

We have *much* to talk about. Best that we find words that carry both the wisdom of our tradition and the love of our lives as we meet the challenging questions of our day.

(THANK YOU! NOW, LET'S TALK!)

WHAT WOULD YOUR EYEBROWS, NECK HAIR,
HEARTBEAT, BREATHING
– OR ANY OTHER PART OF YOU 😊 –
LIKE TO COMMENT ON OR ASK ABOUT?

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