

Squirmin' Sermon
 Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9 and Song of Solomon 2:8-13
 Pentecost 15B

In the 3-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, today is the one and only day a passage from the Song of Solomon is ever included.

The Song of Solomon (sometimes also referred to as the "Song of Songs" or "Canticles") is an anomaly among books of the Hebrew Bible. "It shows no interest in Law or Covenant or Yahweh the God of Israel, nor does it teach or explore Wisdom like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes...; instead, it celebrates sexual love." (Wikipedia)

Over the centuries, Biblical scholars, rabbis, priests, and preachers, and Sunday School teachers have all tried to explain the meaning behind the Song of Solomon. Jews have interpreted the book, not as sexual in nature, but allegorically instead: demonstrating God's love for Israel. Similarly, Christians have ignored the blatant and obvious theme of sexual desire, and instead interpreted the Song of Solomon as a celebration of Christ's love for the Church.

(Hmmm...I think it may have missed their notice that the Song of Solomon was written at least 300 years before Jesus' birth. I'm pretty sure that particular theme was not on the mind of the writer.)

Trying to interpret Song of Solomon as some great theological statement is pointless. Why? Because it is not theological in any way. This is a poem about sex.

You know...I thought it might be difficult to preach about sex so I tried to find some synonyms for the word "sex." Apparently, I own the world's worst thesaurus! Not only is it terrible, it's terrible!

I also wasted at least a good 30 minutes looking for a good, clean joke about sex online in preparation for this sermon. I thought a fun joke might just break the ice a little. Guess what? There are none! There are no clean jokes about sex online. So, I don't have an amusing story for my sermon...but I did have a lot of laughs trying to find one!

So, since I couldn't find any synonyms, and I couldn't find any jokes, I just tried to be as upfront as possible with my sermon title: Squirmin' Sermon!

Sex, sexuality, sexual relationships...even more benign subjects like our bodies, romance, and attraction...these are all subjects that have traditionally been considered outside the domain of the church.

How many sermons have you heard preached on any of these subjects? I can tell you for sure: this is the first time I've ever preached one!

As Rev. Bryan Odeen, Associate Pastor of Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Osage, Iowa, states:

Generally, we [the Church] are concerned with sexuality only insofar as making sure we all conform to the same heteronormative relationship model. As a church, we are often guilty of repressing sexuality and romance than we are at uplifting it and seeing it as a way in which God has created us for love and

community and relationship. And this goes even deeper for people who are the victims of abuse, or who don't line up with the traditional gender stereotypes.

Yet here in the middle of the Hebrew Bible is the Song of Solomon. We can't deny it's part of our Biblical canon. What can we make of that?

Instead of forcing a complex, construed, theological allegory, analogy, or metaphor out of it, let's just interpret it for what it is: a celebration of God's gift of sexual love.

Yes, that's right. Sex and sexuality are a gift from God.

Last weekend at Bloomington's PrideFest, I had a conversation with a young man who identified himself as a Jehovah's Witness. He visited the booth that we shared with our friends from First Christian Church, Bloomington, at least five separate times before he finally engaged me in dialogue. He stated that he had never encountered a church that (in his opinion) "went against the Bible" in welcoming LGBTQ+ people.

I've had this conversation a million times over the years, so I was ready. But, because I have had this conversation a million times over the years, I knew there was no way I was ever going to persuade him to see things differently.

I just kept repeating, "if God created people to be gay, how can it be sin? If they are living as their true, authentic selves, as God created them, how can that be wrong?"

The thought that sexuality could be a gift from God was completely foreign to this young man. He could only think of persons in the LGBTQ+ community as persons who made a conscious choice to go against their God-given, hetero-cis nature. He could not conceive that, in fact, the opposite were true. Persons in the LGBTQ+ community have actually embraced who it is God has created them to be.

But because the Church has been silent, or has discouraged frank conversation, or has been condemning of anything outside the perceived "norm," the result has been confusion, isolation, misinformation, judgment, and exclusion. The Church, instead, needs to help open the doors to honest discussion about healthy sex and healthy sexual relationships.

When the church does not discuss sex and sexuality, we have the problem of teenage pregnancy and rampant sexually transmitted infections.

When the church does not discuss sex and sexuality, we endanger thousands of victims of sexual misconduct by priests and pastors and others in positions of power and influence.

When the church does not discuss sex and sexuality, we exclude persons based on their nonconformity to heteronormative, cisgender cultural ideals.

When the church does not discuss sex and sexuality, we have a worldwide crisis of harassment, assault, and human trafficking,

When the church does not discuss sex and sexuality, we lose a disproportionate number of LGBTQ+ youth to suicide.

When the church does not discuss sex and sexuality, we lose relevance to the general public in the 21st century.

In our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), there is a program entitled “Just Say Know” (K-N-O-W) Ministry. It began in the early 1980s as a program that taught high school teenagers the facts about sex and sexuality. Over the years it has developed into a program that spans elementary children to adults, to give folks “factual knowledge, coupled with spiritual insights, [to] enable individuals to make the best decisions for their lives.” (justsayknowministry.com)

This is not an abstinence education program. This is a serious study of body parts and their functions, sexually transmitted infections and contraceptives, dating and sex. It “helps participants to clarify their values, build interpersonal skills and understand the social, emotional and spiritual aspects of sexuality.” (ucc.org)

I became familiar with this program when I worked for the Indiana Region, shepherding the camp and conference program. The camp version of the Just Say Know curriculum targets rising 9th graders and is called “Created to Be Me,” but is commonly referred to as “Sex Camp.”

Camp Directors and Counselors, alike, all reported that they had never seen such great sharing and conversation between campers, such enormous spiritual growth, or such deep friendships develop at any other week of camp they had ever experienced. It was noted by Regional staff and Youth Ministers across the region that those who had attended that fabulous and frank week of “Sex Camp” became strong local and regional leaders in their churches, schools, and extracurricular activities. In fact, one could even see a direct correlation between former attendees of Created to Be Me camp and leadership in the Indiana Youth Council.

Programs such as Just Say Know are vitally important in the Church because: “honest, accurate information about sexuality changes lives. It dismantles stereotypes and assumptions, builds self-acceptance and self-esteem, fosters healthy relationships, improves decision making, and has the potential to save lives.” (uaa.org)

North Christian Church is an Open and Affirming congregation. One would assume we have spent more time talking about sex and sexuality than most churches do. And that is probably true. But that doesn’t mean we are done talking about it. We can’t just declare we’ve completed that conversation and “we’re good.” We must continue to explore the topic in an honest and faithful manner.

A new book has just come out from Chalice Press entitled True Inclusion: Creating Communities of Radical Embrace. In it, Rev. Brandan Robertson, Lead Pastor of Missiongathering Christian Church in San Diego, challenges O&A churches, such as ourselves, to go deeper and examine ourselves even more closely: just how inclusive are we? Are there areas where we can expand our circle even wider? Are there folks that we are still reluctant to include? How can we follow Christ’s example of true inclusion even more perfectly?

I invite each of you to join me in discussing this new book. It is a short read: only 116 pages. The purpose of the book is to stretch us, to help us grow, to deepen our commitment to true inclusion.

Let’s talk about gender fluidity, gender nonconformity, and transgenderism. Let’s talk about polyamorous relationships. Let’s talk about all of the letters that start with LGBTQ and are included in the “+” that follows.

Let's talk about what all of those I've just mentioned even mean. Let's talk about sex and sexuality...in the church.

In my time at North Christian, I have often been asked "what more can we do to live out our Open and Affirming status? How can we live into that identity even more fully?"

Come to the book discussion, and together we can identify some ways to expand our circle ever wider.

Let's talk about it. Because it is important that the Church discusses such topics. And because sex and sexuality are a gift from God.

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Thank you, loving God, for all the gifts you give us...including the gift of sex and sexuality. Help us to learn to talk openly and honestly about these topics. And help us to expand our circle ever wider, and to fully embrace all, just as you have created them to be. Amen.