

Called to Be Bodied: Sexual Ethics and the Vocation of Embodiment

David R. Weiss – Revised February 2019

Because no ideas exist apart from the stories of our lives, let me tell you this much about me, so that you have some inkling of the lengths and limits of my thinking about the challenge of sexual ethics. I am straight and very happily married, though also twice divorced. I am a survivor of a teenage sexual assault and two decades later of a years-long violent marriage. *I do not approach the promise or the peril of sexuality lightly.*

Additionally, I've been a vocal faith ally to LGBTQ persons for more than two decades. From 2000-2002 I led about 90 students at Luther College on a journey into the terrain of GLBT theology. My thought deepened beyond measure during those years, enriched by the insights, experiences, and trust of those students. Since then, I've published a collection of essays; given a couple hundred presentations on college campuses, in churches, and at community events; and released a CD of "welcoming" hymn texts.

Finally, if my thinking about the married mystery of sexuality and spirituality is marked by uncommon passion, conviction, and tenderness, it is also and exquisitely thanks to my wife, Margaret. What I first imagined to be true of the harmony between body and spirit, between sexuality and sacredness, I *discovered* to be true with her.

* * *

First, a couple of opening observations.

It's time we acknowledge that *human sexuality is simply, profoundly, and mysteriously part of the fabric of who we are.* It is not, as Christian tradition has often been tempted to regard it, some alien, untrustworthy force ever tempting us to sin. But it is (at least sometimes) much more than merely the psycho-biological means of attraction-mating-reproduction. Ultimately, human sexuality is far more complex than either the puritanical strands of Christianity or the mechanistic descriptions of science have suggested. There are some things sexual we can "measure" objectively, but sexuality itself is one facet of the human eco-system *in which we dwell.* We discuss sexual ethics from the same vantage point as which we study it, reflect on it, and experience it—as *participants in its mystery.*

Second, it's time to recognize, however uncomfortable it may be, that sex, like light, seems to be fundamentally paradoxical in nature. Light doesn't behave neatly as *either* a wave *or* a particle; instead, it *sometimes* acts like one and *sometimes* acts like the other. And it seems that *whether* it is wave-like or particle-like in any given setting is determined at least in part *by the expectations we bring to it* (that is, the experiment we use). Many of us find this bewildering and frustrating. We want light to be neatly one *or* the other. That's the way we like our world. But physicists (who find light's ambiguity more *intriguing* than

threatening) tell us that *light simply doesn't fit into the neat categories we'd prefer.* And, if we turn off our moral filters long enough to just listen to the voice of sexual experience, we hear something similar. For some persons sex has a sacred, creative, unitive character to it. For others, it is a deeply human, immensely satisfying, but not at all mystical experience. For others, it has a quality of ecstatic pleasure that is not necessarily tethered to marriage or monogamy. Bottom line: at the level of honest observation, of sincere listening to others, it simply doesn't matter whether I "approve" or not. Sometimes sex is wave-like. Sometimes it's particle-like. *That's just the way it is.*

This is not a huge leap for us. Sometimes bread and wine and water are holy for Christians – and sometimes not. But we don't consider them "sinful" whenever they're not holy. It's possible for something to be wonderfully mundane. And even mundane fresh-baked bread is a delicacy. Even a fine glass of wine by sunset or candlelight can be transcendent. Even a waterfall can be awe-inspiring. *And even sex that doesn't aspire to be sacred can be beautiful.* All of us stand to gain by speaking with clarity and conviction about the values that guide our sexual lives. Might we not be intrigued, like the physicist, by the rich and multifaceted ways that people testify to experiencing sexuality? That way, when we do turn to the task of making choices about what types of sexual expression are healthy and whole, we don't do so by first silencing a whole range of voices even before they speak.

A final prefatory remark. Thoughtful conversation about sexual ethics needs to happen in a whole bunch of places; I'm simply best-equipped and most invested in helping it happen well in churches. Also, because this conversation isn't likely to go far at the generic level, I'm offering reflections that I hope resonate with other church-going folks. I surely don't mean to suggest that "ethical" sex only happens among Christians! But I do I think *these* ideas and principles can help progressive *Christians* have thoughtful, respectful conversations about sexual ethics. Other communities may find other principles more helpful ... and that's okay.

* * *

I recall, at age 5 or 6, being eager as a new reader to join everyone else at my Lutheran church in the liturgy from the red Service Book and Hymnal. So it was that Sunday after Sunday, long before puberty, I confessed that I was "by nature sinful and unclean." I told myself – *I taught myself* – that my very embodiment set me in opposition to God. Were a parent to so intentionally undercut the self-esteem of a child we would call it emotional abuse; but that a church should do it, we called that "character formation."

Our difficulty as individuals and as a church at imagining a healthy relationship between sexuality and spirituality has roots far deeper and more complicated than my childhood recitation. But we have not come to be so alienated from our bodies by happenstance. We have *cultivated* this discomfort in ourselves quite carefully, even if we have not always done so knowingly. And while our church statements have grown very polished at calling sexuality one of God's good gifts, few of us really believe that. We have learned to instinctively associate sex with shame, and no simple church statement is going to undo that. We must mine the core images of our tradition and see if we can find there images with the power to reclaim the original unity between body and spirit. I begin in John's Gospel and then turn to Genesis.

"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, God shaped 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)

Thus, we are *called* into our bodies by the Word, the Loving Wisdom of God. And we are given life by divine breath, an unspoken Word, the spirit of life that moves silently in and out of us – from both our lungs and our souls. This is the Word in which we live and move, in which we breathe and have our being.

We are dirt deemed worthy to dance. We are 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, among the very first tasks given to us by God, is *the vocation to be bodied selves*. It is so primal that we often forget it altogether. But so far as we know, we alone among earth creatures face our embodiment *as a dilemma*. What does it mean to be suspended between instinct and eternity, to have a transcendent awareness – a capacity to imagine a Beyondness to our existence – and yet to have that awareness fixed within a very finite human frame?

Sexual ethics and the vocation of embodiment are thus intertwined, and our sexuality is both divine gift and divinely given task. Sexual ethics, then, might be seen as inquiring about *the rules* that guide sexuality among embodied selves. Or *the goals* that we ought to strive for in

our sexual relationships. Or *the character* that we hope to reflect in the narratives of our lives.

I suggest that we begin by remembering that it was Holy Breath that animated us. It was God who embodied us. We are *imago Dei*, the echo of Love now formed in flesh. And we are *not* so by accident or by mistake, *but by God's intent*. That this is our vocation does not imply that it is easy, but it hardly follows that it is impossible – or that it is best pursued by a pattern of disciplined avoidance. (The parable of the talents is instructive on this last option.)

If, as many of us learned, spirit and body are set eternally in antagonistic relationship, it makes sense to see sexual ethics focused on restraining the "sinful and unclean" impulses of our bodies. And clearly we *are* broken, distorted, misshapen by the cords of sin that entangle our lives. We are all too capable of investing our bodies – sexually and otherwise – in deeds and desires that are destructive to ourselves and others. We gain nothing and risk much by denying this.

But listen, because we have not heard *this other truth* very well: *our brokenness cannot tear us from the web of creation over which God continues to proclaim goodness*. Misshapen as we are, even in our rebellion, *we bear within our bodies the possibility of divine presence* – because incarnation is the song that God has chosen to sing in this universe, from first to last, from height to depth.

And here the questions of vocation and ethics find their real substance. What if I am *by nature* – by God's earthy creative impulse – soil sown with soul? What if I am dirt destined by God to dance – and sensually so? What if I am *by nature* bodied mud married to Holy Breath? *What then?* Well, then the task of embodiment is *not* about avoiding temptation but about cultivating the fullness of love in our fleshly frames.

One particularly evocative way to name this is to say we are called . . . to be *Holy Kindling*. Few biblical theophanies, few manifestations of God, are so memorable as God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush. It is memorable for more than its botanical novelty and its Hollywood special effects. Through these flames, God offers a name that links God's own identity with the promise of liberation, saying, "My name is YHWH, the One who will be whatever must be to bring freedom." And, lest we forget what *we* are capable of, we see that a mere bush can host the presence of God *without being consumed*, that creation is not in perpetual rebellion against its creator, but is capable of hosting the sacred in its own limbs.

So 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 gay persons, is to discern the conditions under which our sexuality is hospitable to the presence of God.

We *do* catch glimpses in the biblical narrative of what it might mean to host the very presence of God in the practice of our sexuality. To see them, however, we must look past the handful of red-flagged texts so often raised without reference to their cultural-historical setting and without appreciation for the deep complexity of scholarly opinion surrounding them. There are more promising biblical themes with clear relevance to sexuality, but for the most part we have been so convinced that the sacred and the sexual are at worst mortal enemies and at best partners in an uneasy and watchful truce that we miss these glimpses even when they are set right before us.

To begin with, I find it telling that the same Hebrew verb can mean both “to know” and “to make love to,” as though the language itself intuited that knowing and loving are somehow overlapping realities. Thus, the challenge of sexual ethics, the vocation of bodily loving, involves discerning what it means to *know well*.

For Jesus and for the prophets there is no ambiguity at all about what it means for finite, embodied creatures to know God well. Indeed, if we let the evocative fullness of the word come through, Jesus and the prophets offer powerful insight into *what it means to make love to God*. It is *not* a matter of philosophical contemplation. It is *not* a matter of hidden esoteric mysteries available only to a select few. Knowing God is a very specific activity. Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all declare that it means to pursue justice for the least members of our community. Micah sums it up memorably: knowing God means doing justice, pursuing mercy, and walking with humility. Jesus’ ministry embodies this same truth from the lives he heals, to the meals he shares, to the world-changing tales he tells.

Knowing God is earthly stuff; making loving to God is a matter of attending to the quality of our human relationships.

So what does this suggest for sexual ethics? Several things at least. When it comes to ethical principles, less is more. A well-chosen few will carry us further than a whole bunch that function more and more like rules. I’ll name just five, including three that echo Micah’s wisdom mentioned above. Here’s my suggestion for principles that mark **five ethical aspects** of an embodied sexuality that can host the presence of God: **justice, mercy, humility, procreative energy, and joyful abandon**.

First, to know – and to be known – sexually in ways that welcome that presence of God, *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 suggests why prostitution (sex work), pornography, and sex that eroticizes the dynamic of domination is at least morally problematic (complicated) for Christians. It also allows us to articulate clearly 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 to distort sexual activity do not image the God whose love is just. This does not produce an absolute rule, however, because justice must be measured in every particular relationship. Yet it does offer us a biblically grounded way to frame our discussion of sexual ethics.

Second, to know – and to be known – sexually in ways that honor the invitation to be dirt that dances – *will involve the pursuit of mercy*. That is, our sexuality will evidence toward both self and others *respect and tenderness* – a genuine care for the other’s comfort, pleasure, and joy. Again, what this means in any given relationship will vary as much as humans themselves vary, but it gives us another biblically grounded place to begin our discussions.

Minimally, mercy means that sexual expression between persons ought *always* be matters of *mutual consent*. Sexuality always involves some measure of self-revelation and vulnerability – to some extent we are physically, emotionally, psychically, and spiritual naked to the other. I believe this implies *fidelity* (practiced faithfulness) as a corollary of mercy. Part of the power of sexual intimacy is its capacity – 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.

Yet even this reference to fidelity is not an absolute rigid rule: fidelity is about promised faithfulness that is honest and clear. We are surely not bound to strict fidelity from our first interest in another person. But as the physical and emotional intimacy in a relationship rises, it should be met with an equal increase in professed and practiced fidelity. Such fidelity 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. Fidelity is not a single cookie-cutter; I suspect it is a tin full of different patterns. Nonetheless the patterns ought to be recognizable *as* faithfulness by those who hold them and (ideally) by the wider community as well.

Third, to know – and to be known – sexually so as to stand in awe before the presence of God and another human person – *will involve genuine humility*. In our intimate relationships this suggests the practice of patience. Sexual intimacy is an unfolding mystery better paced by our own deepest intuitions than by the messages of the marketplace. To say that sexuality can host the burning presence of God is *not* to encourage people to go out and start a bonfire the first chance they get. The erotic energy harbored in human touch is the spark of divine presence. The human body *is* holy ground. That doesn’t mark it as off limits; it does mean that we venture onto it with reverence and wonder – and at a pace that honestly reflects our own readiness for intimacy as well as our partner’s. And with a measure of humor, because

sexuality involves the foibles and clumsiness, the false starts and the wobbly grace, that mark any human activity.

Additionally, humility 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. The narrative of our tradition is at pains to remind us of the freedom of God over against the temptation to confine that freedom to human buildings, human traditions, and human biases. This insight alone would make a world of difference in how conversations about sexuality play out in the church (and in our homes and among our neighbors).

Fourth, it seems more than mere coincidence that sexual intimacy *can* be biologically procreative. So I suggest that *the presence of procreative energy* is one more dimension that God hopes for in sexual relationships, that in our bodied knowing we, too, reflect God's creative impulse to be about giving life.

This procreative aspect of sexuality only incidentally – and only occasionally – has to do with bearing children, but I intentionally use *this* term to reclaim it from the way it has been wielded as a weapon against the LGBTQ community. Far more fundamentally to be procreative is to *care for this world*. Indeed, we were first embodied – in Eden – to tend the Garden, to guide creation's bounty and tend its scarcity in ways that promote the flourishing of all. This is a *human* vocation, quite independent of sexual activity. But given that sex is one powerful way we generate and share energy, it seems fair to expect that energy so deliciously brought forth between lovers should also spill outward into the world, leading us to lovingly tend that corner of creation around us – whether children or other humans, animals or ecosystems, neighborhoods or civic communities, or simply gardens and recyclables.

Lastly, to be blunt, good sex ought to be fun. And if it's clouded by shame, disgust, obligation, fear, etc., *for either person* that's pretty good evidence that the sex in question is somehow less than healthy and whole. For Christians this “fun” might 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?

So, I suggest that if we aspire to know – and to be known – sexually, to be bodied selves in which the full flame of God's presence bursts forth in our lovemaking, then we will make love with *joyful abandon*. Because God said of our original embodiment, that it was “very good.” Because the Song of Songs makes exquisitely clear

that our bodies are capable of celebrating sexuality such that we become gracious gifts one to another. Because it is *possible* for there to be moments still today when we find ourselves naked in the Garden and not ashamed. Moments when our touching embodies the gospel, when this tactile grace grants us what might truly be called a sacramental awareness of an unconditional love that has always held us, but which we (all) have largely forgotten on account of the brokenness into which we are born. Such a gift is not mere icing on the cake – it is the wafer itself, the body offered to make us whole.

* * *

Let me re-cap. I have suggested that we are bodied selves as the expression of God's good wisdom. Our sexuality is a matter of Christian vocation, because God *calls* us into embodiment. One particularly evocative image for this vocational task is to suggest that our bodies can burn with the presence of God no less than the burning bush before which Moses stood. Finally, drawing on the prophetic and gospel traditions, as well as on the wider biblical narrative, I have suggested that an ethic for sexual relationships 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 this biblically grounded set of values and principles, I hope not only to clarify our own ethical reflections but also to foster conversations that can be 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.

David R. Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, committed to doing “public theology” around issues of climate change, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. He is the author of *When God Was a Little Girl*, a playfully profound and slyly subversive children's picture book (2013, Beaver's Pond Press; St. Mary's Press; www.WhenGodWasALittleGirl.com) as well as *To the Tune of a Welcoming God: Lyrical reflections on sexuality, spirituality and the wideness of God's welcome* (2008 – out of print). He lives in St. Paul and speaks at churches and colleges, and for community events. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com and read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” Support his work at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.