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**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**October 9, 2011**  
**Matthew 5:27-30, 43-48**  
**“Pursuing Justice: Sexuality and the Sacred”**

Imagine that you are walking through a lovely neighborhood, when you come upon a small chapel with wonderful stained glass windows. The sun is out and you see depicted in the glass images of loving relationships of all types: families, couples, partners, parents with children, friendships that have lasted for decades. The pictures are designed to artistically express the love and physical attraction possible to be expressed between people. One section shows a young woman and a young man in an embrace, acting out a text inscribed in the window that says “O that his left hand were under my head and that his right hand embraced me!” If someone under the age of 13 is nearby as you glance at the windows, you may hear a giggle or a groan as the sexuality of the picture causes the young person to be uncomfortable, as our culture has trained them to react. But there’s nothing intentionally lascivious about these pictures; they seem so different from the normal way human sexuality is manifest in the media today. You want to go inside the chapel so you can see all the windows at once. As you circle the building, you see a small plaque identifying it as the Song of Solomon Chapel. Part of you wonders, “Can the church say something life-giving about sexuality? Is there a positive message I’ve been missing all these years?”

On around the building there’s a door that leads you into a small anteroom. You step inside and see two closed doors with a sign on one that says, “This way to Song of Solomon Chapel.” You open the door and then you gasp in surprise. The chapel with its stained glass windows is ahead of you, but the vestibule leading to it is a total mess. A large table in the center of the room is piled so high that things have spilled onto the floor; the stacks of papers, magazines, boxes, statues, and junk cover the area so completely that there is no way to get into the chapel. A sign on a wooden stand points down to the floor and says “Mosaic of Sexuality,” and at the edges of the piles of junk the borders of a colorful tiled mosaic can just be seen. But clearly so much stuff has piled up in this room dedicated to human sexuality that the path into the sacred chapel of the Song of Solomon is totally blocked.

What do you do? You approach the disarray and see if by rearranging a few things you might carve out a path to the other side. You see some books near busts of Plato and Aristotle. You move things around a bit, and recall how Plato spent a lot of time envisioning the ideal human society. He actually had a fairly egalitarian view of the roles of women and men, believing that women had the same capacity for learning and reason as men, provided they received the same training. His pupil Aristotle, though, was a biologist, and sadly was inclined to believe women were secondary and incomplete in some way. He believed that women were passive and receptive while men were active and productive; that

the seed of life came from the male and was planted in the receptiveness, the soil, of the female. This flawed, hierarchical model of men and women moved from Aristotle throughout the church in the Middle Ages, via Thomas Aquinas and others. It laid an unfortunate foundation of inequality in the architecture of church for generations and generations.<sup>1</sup> Despite the work of modern feminist theologians and other thinkers, this path of philosophy has not cleared a way through the mess in this sexuality vestibule.

You try a different section in the clutter, a place where there are ledger books, old cash registers, and legal documents piled up high. At first you were surprised to see a mosaic about sexuality covered up with documents related to finance, but after some consideration, it made a lot of sense. Economics and sexuality have always been linked. In a world unfairly biased towards men, in which women were treated as subordinates, as objects to be possessed, women as such had financial value. They bore children, who could work in fields and produce crops. They managed households that kept income steadily flowing in. So back in the first century AD, if a man committed adultery with another man's wife, he had devalued the other man's property. He has stolen something. Adultery was more an act of theft than of improper sexuality. It was forbidden as much to protect a male's wealth as it was to protect stable marriages.

If the economics of sexuality in ancient times treated women, slaves, and children as property in an estate, the overall economics of sexuality has not improved much in modern times. There are still ways in which both developed and developing nations treat women as possessions. And sexuality is routinely distorted for economic gain. We know products that are marketed using sex: sex appeal, super models, women and men whose images are computer-enhanced, distorted into unnatural depictions of idealized sexuality. We touch-up photos; we invest tremendous resources to enhance our appearance; we create a cult around youthful beauty. Even worse, we've created a multi-billion dollar industry out of pornography, the distorted blending of the visual with the psychological that nurtures unhealthy human relationships. This topic is nothing new, but it should be said that there will never be an economic way through this messiness around sexuality. The path that links profit to distorted depictions of what it means to be male and female will always mean bloated earnings in someone's bank accounts and no path forward into the chapel of the sacred.

As you poke around, one part of the room is less well-lit. It is over there, among the shadows, that the things that are piled up seem to entice all the more because they are partially hidden in the dark. Our inability to talk faithfully about sexuality has distorted the entire topic and layered it with emotions of shame and patterns of secrecy. Because we can't talk easily about human intimacy, we treat sexuality as if it only has to do with procreation, instead of seeing it as a God-given gift that involves love and nurturing human relationships, whether or not children are involved, and whether we're talking about teenagers or 30-year olds or 70-year olds. Because we can't talk easily about gender and sexuality, we

have little to offer either heterosexual or homosexual couples. We find it almost impossible to speak about how integrity, commitment, forgiveness, and trust are at the heart of all sexual morality—and not distinct from it. For a variety of reasons, we've shrouded the entire subject in secrecy, treating it as taboo for home and church. We've created arcane policies such as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and attempted to bar gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people from using their God-given gifts in church because such leadership would bring to light issues we've worked so hard never to discuss.

The chapel of the sacred appears unreachable when approached through the world's forechamber of sexual values. But we are not without other resources, scriptural resources. You see a copy of the bible and pick it up, turning to the Sermon on the Mount. You read the words of the Beatitudes, how we are called blessed in who we are now and who we will be, by God's grace in the Lord's future realm of glory. We are called to be salt and light. Next comes six statements, each of which uses the phrases, "You have heard it said... But I say to you." Jesus is not dismissing Jewish law here; he is using the venerable teaching methods of the rabbis of old. It was something called "Midrash." The rabbi would read scripture and say, You have heard these words and understood it this way, but I say to you, here is the full meaning of this law. Midrash invites dialogue and discussion. Jesus does this same thing, challenging conventional interpretations of the law in light of the glory of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus said, "You have heard it said 'Thou shalt not murder,' but I say to you that being angry with your brother or sister is as harmful as murder." Then he went further, "You have heard it said, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' but I say to you that if a man looks upon a woman with lust, it is as harmful as committing adultery." Here Jesus radically expands the law so that we are admonished not to treat women as objects to be possessed, as something to be coveted and desired in ways that are demeaning and objectifying. Intent is just as important as action; looking can be just as serious as taking. The law of God points to the realm of God, a place of full humanity and full justice. Lust has no place. Treating people as property or as sexual objects distorts what is best in life. Living in shadows of secrecy and shame means living away from life-giving light.

Jesus says, "You may have heard these things, but I call you to a fuller understanding of God's law. You were told to love your neighbor, which led to hating your enemy. But I call upon you to love your enemies and pray from them, to see a deeper, shared humanity that is part of God's design, just as God's rain falls on the just and unjust alike. Don't settle for half-truths. Don't clutter your souls with false priorities. Live in integrity as the heavenly One is full of integrity and goodness."

Then you notice something. As you say the words, "You have heard it said," the piles of clutter before began to shake and move slightly. As you go further, "But I say to you," the dusty volumes and debris shift and spread apart. You repeat

Jesus' words, "You have heard it said, ... but I say to you" and again the disarray adjusts enough so that you can now see a path through to the other side. What does this mean? There is no earthly pathway to integrity about sexuality, given our legacies of oppression, homophobia, pornographic profiteering, and secrecy. But Christ's vision of the realm of God, the way of the spirit, is what can lead us to the chapel where God's vision of humankind can be seen at last. Lift your eyes higher, be guided by scripture, so you can finally walk into the Chapel of the Song of Solomon, and see the Lord's banqueting house, the place of the One whose intention toward you is love, who has set you as a seal upon God's own heart (Song of Solomon 8:6). If that is where you desire to go, that place of wholeness, of genuine love and mutuality and intimacy and grace, pursue justice through the radical, liberating gospel teachings of Jesus Christ.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy*, 1994, pp. 92, 115-116.