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Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 222 + September 2018
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**INTIMATE COMPANIONSHIP:
SEPARATING SEX FROM MARRIAGE: PART ONE
21st Century Realities and Eschatological Prolepsis**

A Almost a decade ago, I wrote a letter to the present Pope. I attached a longer version of the document I post below.

B I had concluded that if anyone in recent Roman Catholic history would be open to hearing the argument I am making below, it would be Pope Francis. He seems to me to be a progressive spirit in Catholicism, surrounded to be sure by an unholy host of conservatives. He has his agenda laid out for him. His role in bringing his Church into the Twenty-First Century will not be easy.

C I never received a reply. I didn't hold out much hope that the Pope himself would answer my letter. But I did entertain the fleeting hope that perhaps my letter might end up on the desk of some minor Vatican official, who might answer me. Perhaps my document was simply lost in the mail. Maybe I should try again!

D In any case, here it is, for you to ponder. I break my document in two parts for ease of posting. This month, Part One. Next month, Part Two.

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1 One of my favourite party games these days, when a group of pastors has gathered, is to take a survey. I ask "At how many marriages have you officiated in recent months?" Then I go on to ask "And at how many of those marriages have bride and groom been living together already?" The number of couples – hetero and homo – cohabiting before marriage these days seems like almost 100 percent. You can hardly find a couple in these early years of the Twenty-First Century who have not been living together before their wedding.

2 You can scarcely find a virgin to marry these days. Of either sex.

3 This brings me to the substance of these paragraphs. For Lutheran Christians, ethics is always nothing but an imperfect human response to the prior grace of God in Christ. A divine agape impels us to try to mimic, to model that agape in our own lives.

4 And the passage of the three motions on human sexuality by the National Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada in July 2011 – allowing for the first time among us the possibility of blessing same-sex unions -- calls for spirited, and Spirit-filled, deliberation on the issues I suggest in my title.

5 So. I'm convinced what's needed today is a new sex ethic. It would be based not on Genesis 1 but rather on Genesis 2. See paragraphs 14, 15, and 16 below. First, however, let me lay out a couple of 21st Century realities you'll have a difficult time disputing:

6 Your teenagers have discovered sex. In spite of warnings and admonitions from their elders, they are simply not listening to us. What we used to call traditional Christian sex ethics is in shambles today.

7 There's no turning the clock back on that, either, in my view. I don't see how we can expect to return to an earlier, simpler age, when you could actually find a virgin or two. That innocence – if that's what it was – is now forever lost.

8 The chief cause of this change has been a New Thing, something we've never seen before in human history: Widely available, low cost, effective birth control technology. You could abbreviate that to simply The Pill. But there has been a veritable explosion in these technologies, including now not only condoms and diaphragms but also the so-called Morning After Pill. Trying to withhold these technologies from wide use is a fool's enterprise. There is no way to keep these technologies out of the hands of those who want them. You could even argue – I'd be willing to argue – that there is something immoral about trying to keep these technologies out of peoples' hands – particularly in an age of HIV-AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

9 Sex has already long since been separated from marriage. Big time.

10 For those of us with traditional understandings, the result is we are criminalizing our children. Your children, my grandchildren, are caught in a terrible dilemma. All around them their peers are freely enjoying sexual intimacies – sometimes with and sometimes without these technologies. And if – or more likely when – they do too, they feel guilty about it.

11 I for one do not want to criminalize your children, or my grandchildren. There must be a better way to deal with their dilemma than simple saying "Don't". So here's my proposal for a 21st Century Sex Ethic for Christians. I'm still somewhat ambivalent about this proposal. But just to stir the pot, let me lay it out, so to speak.

12 It's worth recalling that there was always a heavy dose of Natural Theology in the strictures that bound sexual intimacies to the marriage vow. In the old days, those strictures made some sense. In previous ages of unimaginably high infant mortality rates and the very real need to replenish the human species, every act of sexual intimacy was to result in at least the possibility of conception.

13 As a consequence of this assumption, according to some theologies, masturbation was an even more terrible transgression against morality than rape. At least rape offers the possibility of conception and a new human life, whereas masturbation represents a deliberate denial of that possibility. See the story of Onan in *Genesis* 38: 8-10. Use of contraceptive technologies fell under the same condemnation, for the same reasons. Ditto for gay sex, also for the same reasons: No possibility of conception.

14 Older Christian sex ethics thus were based on the command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...” of the so-called Priestly Account of Creation in *Genesis* 1:28. I think you could allow that the human species has done quite enough of that: being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth and subduing it. It is this Priestly Account of Creation – with its tenacious hold in popular imagination -- that has caused us no end of trouble, in my view.

15 But there is a second, an earlier creation story, in *Genesis* 2. And the morality proposed in these paragraphs is based rather on this older story of Creation, the so-called Jahwist Creation Account. In *Genesis* 2:19, in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation, there is no mention of procreation. Instead, God is pictured saying, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner...” The more familiar *King James Version* speaks of “a helpmeet”, using a term common to Shakespeare but not to us. The NRSV translation is more transparent: Intimate companionship -- not mere animal breeding -- is what's at stake in sex and in marriage, according to these verses.

16 That's what's at stake too in the morality I am proposing here. In a too-easy shorthand, you could say that the moral system proposed in these paragraphs is not so much centred in pro-creation as in re-creation -- understanding “re-creation” in its root sense of “re-animating” and “re-vivifying”. Not *Genesis* 1, but rather *Genesis* 2, that is. Once again, our ethical response will always be a flawed and fractured thing, and always meant merely to reflect, to model, to picture, something of God's prior grace.

17 Suppose then we try not to think of what follows as simply capitulating to some current moral morass, but as a genuinely New Moment in human history. Suppose we are willing to grant that the Holy Spirit is actually doing a New Thing among us today. Suppose women are not to be thought of as simply Baby-Making Machines, but as companions in all ways worthy of their partners.

18 (“But can we change the Ten Commandments?” I hear you asking. Answer: Ethics for Lutheran Christians is always situational and contextual. Like theology and church order – and liturgy.)

19 I remember hearing a lecture by a top flight Lutheran Biblical scholar in his later years, as he commented on the passage in *Matthew* 22: 23 - 33, where Jesus is challenged by the Sadducees concerning the woman seven times widowed and seven times re-married. Jesus is asked by his Sadducee questioners: “In the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be?...”

20 (Our sly scholar pointed out that Sadducees did not believe in any resurrection. Hah!)

21 Then he went on something like this: Quoting Jesus in *Matthew 22: 30*: “In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels...” He interrupted his quote. Peering out over the top of his glasses, he said, “Does that mean free sex?...” It was a kind of throw-away line, and he went on to other matters in the text. But it set me thinking, you can be sure.

22 (He went on quoting: “...but are like the angels in heaven...” Our sly scholar pointed out that the Sadducees did not believe in angels, either. Again I say Hah!)

23 This was the same scholar, I should point out, whose major life-long mission has been to contend that Jesus was announcing a New Thing: “tomorrow’s bread” claimed today, not waiting for “heaven” but claiming God's future good gifts as our present inheritance in Christ. Eschatological prolepsis.

24 Suppose therefore that we think of what follows in terms of Eschatological Prolepsis. We do not have to wait for heaven. We can claim heaven’s gifts even today. “Give us tomorrow’s bread...today.” See the alternative translation of the Lord's Prayer in the NRSV footnote at *Matthew 6:11*: “Give us today our bread for tomorrow...”

25 “Free sex”? Today? Without guidelines or rules? Does anything go? Are we today totally without rules or guidance or standards? Almost anything would be better than the Church's traditional advice to young people: “Sex is God's great good gift. There's just one rule: Don't use it.”

26 I see three standards for a New Sex Ethic. They're inspired, I like to think, by a Biblical understanding of justice, and by *Genesis 2*. They're intended to reflect more perfectly the prior grace of God. The three dots at end of each principle means to suggest there's much more to be said on the subject. So: I propose that sexual intimacies between people should be:

27 **CONSENSUAL**: See *Matthew 7:12*, *I Corinthians 7:1-6*, *I Corinthians 7:7*. Sexual intimacy between people – hetero or homo – must be consensual. Both partners must acquiesce to any intimacies. This rules out rape. Rape even within marriage. Celibacy is certainly also an individual's option, a “gift” from God...

28 **SAFE**: *Matthew 7:12* again. Sexual intimacies between people must be safe. Birth control technologies must ensure there is no danger either of Sexually Transmitted Diseases – or of conception. Marriage – a committed relationship – is the place for conception. See paragraphs 35, 36, and 37 below. The female -- unfairly, alas! -- will always be the gatekeeper in almost any sexual encounter. The male must respect this reality -- and be aware of the dangers and risks inherent when partners are less than honest with each other...

29 BALANCED: See *Matthew* 18: 6-7, *Mark* 10:35-45. Sexual intimacies between people must be balanced. (Is there a better term? Egalitarian? Of equal power status? These seem awkward to me. I'm open to suggestions...) What I mean is: No adult - child intimacies. No teacher - student intimacies. No therapist - client intimacies. No pastor - parishioner intimacies. No doctor - patient intimacies. No commanding officer - enlisted private intimacies. You get my meaning. Status inequalities, power inequalities, authority inequalities, age inequalities -- would all be unacceptable in this New Ethic. As in the old...

30 Are there other standards? I can think of only these three as of paramount importance. Can you add to these? Note that these three principles (paragraphs 27, 28, and 29 above) make no mention of any necessity for either a) commitment to a monogamous relationship, b) marriage vows, or c) heterosexual orientation.

31 Further: There is always the issue of emotional and psychological maturity in dealing with human sexuality, particularly with the young, but not excluding older adults. Questions of age-appropriateness -- relative to what you might think of as an ascending hierarchy of intimacies -- must also be considered: from manual, to oral, to genital. It's a scary new world: Each person will have to establish limits as to the sexual intimacies appropriate in their own context, and appropriate to their level of emotional and psychological maturity, and the emotional and psychological maturity of their partner. Keeping in mind 27, 28, and 29 above, what limits are appropriate to intimacies at your age, in your own situation?

32 I am aware that there are tremendous pressures on young people today, from their peers and from their surrounding media, to "go all the way" at emotionally inappropriate stages of relationship. Young people and their parents and elders should discuss these pressures frankly and openly. And leave final decisions in the matter to the "conscience captive to the word of God" (Luther).

33 Now to the marriage rite. If we are to allow – tolerate? celebrate? – sex without commitment, sex outside of marriage, sex separated from marriage, then what of the rite of marriage? I see marriage as belonging at the Left Hand of God – also an insight from Luther – and therefore properly administered by governments, not by the church. The church should not marry; the church should bless. See paragraph 35 below.

34 Marriage, as I see it, is a place:

35 For life long commitment. In sickness and in health, in good times and in bad. I would be unwilling to marry couples unwilling to make a life-long commitment. If we no longer consider sexual intimacy as a kind of prize for submitting to a marriage rite, then we are free to think of marriage in new ways. Commitment like that, in a marriage like that, is a picture of a godlike *agape*: (ah-GAH-pay = Greek for God's steadfast love, which we see in Christ, that does not give up.) See paragraph 39 below...

36 For the conception, bearing, and rearing of children. My wife Kathy, a marriage and family educator all her professional life, used to maintain that we should require a license to conceive and bear children, with courses in parenting demanded before a license is issued. She was only partly serious. But it bears thought. As pastor, I'd require couples – hetero and homo – to take courses in marriage and child-rearing. And: Married same-sex partners might seriously consider adopting and rearing an infant. There's a near-crisis, as I understand it, in most Western societies, in providing stable couples as adoptive parents. Too many babies, too few adoptive parents...

37 Where true *agape* – unconditional, unqualified, lasting love -- may be learned and practised. To be sure, marriage is not the only place where you can learn *agape*. Friendship and communal life – as in monastic communities -- come to my mind as two other places where *agape* can be learned and necessarily practised. It's the love we see acted out in Jesus.

38 The Great Problem of our Day with regard to sex and marriage, in my view, lies precisely here: distinguishing love as *agape* from love as *eros*. Hollywood and popular culture have exercised enormous and unwholesome influence in blurring this crucial distinction.

39 *Eros* love is glandular, hormonal: It is a love centred in my needs, my wants, and my desires. *Eros* is certainly a gift from God. But *Agape* love, as I understand it, is centred not in me but in the other. It is not necessarily “romantic”, as we currently understand that word. It is a love that often amounts to an act of will. It is a love, further, that never gives up. Hence paragraph 35 above. *Agape* is a model, a picture, a type of an unwavering divine love, an Ultimate Love.

40 “Free sex?” Despite my own present and persistent fears and misgivings, the concept nevertheless lingers stubbornly in my psyche – as perhaps in yours. Can it be that this is what the future holds for us? A future opened to us by God's Spirit, a future promised even now, in our present? Can we understand “free sex” in terms of a Spirit-directed prolepsis? I don't think I'd dare to touch the subject with a confirmation class of twelve-year-olds. But the proposal is provocative, to say the least, and demands a response.

41 Bottom line: The jury is still out, on all of this, for me...

42 And I haven't even broached here a host of thorny questions. I'll leave them to my next posting.

43 I'm aware also that all the above represents a male's perspective. And “men are from Mars; women are from Venus”. Women may well approach this whole issue from a completely different perspective. I welcome a female response to this posting, and to its extension in Part Two.

44 In any case, I sign off now and intend to complete this exploration in Part Two.

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