

SERMON ON SEXUALITY: GIFT AND TRUST
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In my first congregation, I asked my 8th grade confirmation students what they thought the 6th commandment, “Thou shall not commit adultery” meant. One boy answered, “God thinks sex is bad.” I replied, “Who do you think invented it?” He looked at me in utter amazement – it had never occurred to him that God had anything to do with sexuality. Yet God does have something “to do” with, and something “to say” about human sexuality.

In a few weeks, the ELCA will vote on a social statement called: Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust. I’ve written about it, invited you to read it, held an in depth three-week class on it and have asked you all to be part of the 50 days of prayer, as the church prepares to meet in Assembly.

Today we need to have a really important conversation.

So, first an introduction, then our Gospel reading, and then a reflection on the document and how it affects you and our congregation.

So, what is a social statement? A social statement is grounded in key Lutheran principles that inform the way we discern how to life faithfully in a complex world.

But first a few facts:

- Every other year the ELCA meets in a Churchwide Assembly. It is the “highest legislative authority of the ELCA.”
- This assembly will meet in Minneapolis from August 16 – 23.
- The theme of the Assembly is “God’s work. Our hands.”
- In addition to the Social Statement and ministry recommendations, voting members (delegates) will address malaria, HIV/Aids and Full Communion with the United Methodists.
- Members will hear about all the many and various ways that the ELCA is sharing the Gospel through ministry and mission throughout the world.
- The meeting will have 1,045 voting members from 65 synods. Of those voting – per the ELCA’s constitution, 60% shall be lay members and 40% clergy.

Since its inception in 1988, past ELCA assemblies have voted on social statements regarding:

- Abortion
- Church in Society
- Death Penalty
- Economic Life
- Education
- Environment
- Health and Healthcare
- Peace
- Race, Ethnicity and Culture

Needless to say, people have agreed to disagree on these issues, but still have stood together as the ELCA. Let me ask you, do you think we could get an agreement from everyone here at Holy Cross on Abortion? The Death Penalty? The Economy? Education? Environment? Healthcare? Peace/War? Race? I don't think so either. Yet, we have continued to live as a community of faith, both as the ELCA and as a congregation – because our unity is not based on our personal opinions regarding social issues, but our unity is in Jesus Christ.

But sometimes social issues do cause division because we can get caught up on what divides us, rather than what unites us. I'm guessing this is why congregations don't usually discuss social statements – because it “may” cause conflict. Before my time (I've been here almost 4 years – can you believe it?) I understand some people, 3 or 4 families or so, left Holy Cross because the ELCA was going to talk about talking about sexuality issues – especially homosexuality. And in the 50 plus years of this congregation's life I'm guessing it hasn't been a widely discussed topic.

Yet we are created by God as sexual beings as a gift. Our sexuality can create the greatest joys or the deepest pain plus, we live in a culture that bombards us with sexual messages. In an article from the American Academy of Pediatrics I share the following:

- The average American adolescent will view nearly 14,000 sexual references per year, yet only 165 of these references deal with birth control, self-control, abstinence, or the risk of pregnancy or STDs.
- Too often, these messages contain unrealistic, inaccurate, and misleading information that young people accept as fact.
- Sadly, adolescents have ranked the media second, only to school sex education programs as a leading source of information about sex.

To be sure, criticism happens. People have gotten upset about the portrayal of a gay couple in a committed monogamous relationship on TV yet the promiscuous escapades of a heterosexual character in an evening sitcom or cable go unchallenged.

If teens are getting their primary information from school and the media don't you think the church that worships the Creator of all things should weigh in on the subject? So the ELCA is weighing in on the matter and it's been a twenty-year conversation.

After a draft of this statement was released (we chose not to deal with it in the midst of staff transitions) last year the 15 member committee comprised of pastors, lay people, biblical scholars and theologians who crafted this document received :

- over 2000 written responses to a draft of the document.
- 222 reports from synod hearings
- 800 pieces of direct correspondence from individuals and groups of varying lengths

So they listened to the church. And just like it is difficult to satisfy everyone's opinions here at Holy Cross, no document will ever satisfy everyone in the church-wide expression of the ELCA, the national church.

(For those of you who are worried about how much money the ELCA spent on the process – it was around the same amount that was spent on the 2007 Education and 2003 Health Care Statements, a small fraction of what the ELCA spends on world hunger and mission.)

The title of the Statement reflects its content: Sexuality as Gift and Sexuality as Trust. The statement is grounded in our Lutheran understanding of:

- scripture as the living Word of God,
- justification by grace through faith on account of Christ,
- and the Lutheran vocation to serve neighbor in the midst of daily life.

The key scriptural understanding that undergirds the document is the greatest commandment that we hear echoed in all of our texts today.

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew 22:34-40:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Invited to answer the question, “Teacher which commandment is the law is the greatest?” Jesus answered “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:36-40

So then, this social statement addresses the question of how do we understand human sexuality within the context of Jesus’ invitation to love God and love our neighbor.

The document lifts up the differentiation of a right relationship from a wrong relationship. Our model of right relationship is God’s absolute faithfulness to God’s promises and God’s people. In order to have a right relationship you have to have trust. Trust is a critical element that holds together couples and relationships, households and families, social structures and institutions. But it is more than just our personal relationships. Social trust is the foundation of a healthy society.

- Trust is grounded in mutual respect for the dignity of all people.
- The stronger the trust, the stronger the community.
- The stronger the community, the better able we are to discuss issues that we might disagree on, reflecting mutual respect and regard for the opinions of others.

I believe Holy Cross is a Church Community where we continue to grow in faith and trust. It is important that you realize then, that it is in trust that I share these words with you. My goal is to share what the document is about – it is not about taking this side or that or convincing anyone to change their mind. What most concerns me is not a community that agrees to disagree with one another, but a community that becomes divisive over inaccurate information. Our intention as a faith community is to educate with accurate information and respect one another’s opinions.

I know when it comes to the Packers and the Vikings or the Brewers and the Cubs it can get ugly, but maybe we can do better as church on something that is so critical to people's daily life.

Human sexuality is not limited to what is private or individual, but is profoundly shaped by cultural forces and practices. The document says, "Part of the calling of this church is to evaluate social forces and social structures in light of what is good for the neighbor. This church must be a leader in refocusing attention on practices and attitudes that build social trust." As a church we reflect on God's love for and continuing involvement in creation, on the saving work of Jesus Christ. This statement affirms the role of God's law in the world to reveal sin, constrain wrong behavior and point the way for all to serve the neighbor. God's law instructs us how to protect and nurture relationships and build up the community.

I can't review the entire document, but I encourage you to read it in its entirety in the Executive Summary available at the back table or log on at elca.org or our webpage under links. Topics that are discussed are:

- Marriage
- Fidelity
- Divorce
- Loving families who are formed in many ways: natural and adoptive families, foster families, blended families, families where children are raised by Grandparents, families where parents are the same gender and families headed by a single parent. Families, whatever their form, are indispensable.
- Protecting children and youth in and for trusting relationships
- Gender and friendships
- Commitment and sexuality – including references that gift and trust cannot possibly be a part of casual sexual activity
- Adult cohabitation
- The abuse of God's gift of sexuality – rape – pornography – and other abuse

The document says, "Therefore all human relationships are to be considered in light of trust, faithfulness, and commitment. In relation to sexuality, both human behavior and social structures we create are worthy when they foster trust, commitment and protection."

The topic that will, however, overshadow all discussions on these topics is that of same gender relationships. Of a 33-page document, 2 pages discuss same gender relationships.

The statement acknowledges that consensus does not exist in the church regarding same gender relationships, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful and faithful study and conversation. The document states that while Lutherans hold various convictions regarding same gender relationships we agree on opposing all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation. We support legislation and policies to protect civil rights and prohibit discrimination.

As the ELCA, we proclaim that by virtue of our Baptism, where we are claimed and marked with the Cross of Christ forever, God claims and loves us as God's precious children. Here at Holy Cross we don't need banners or slogans to welcome gay and lesbian sisters and brothers because God welcomes and claims us all in our baptism. And in our welcome it is not "those people" it is our sons and daughters, our fathers and mothers, our nephews and nieces, brothers and sisters,

aunts and uncles, neighbors and our friendswe are welcoming our brothers and sisters marked with the cross of Christ.

The document states that we in the ELCA recognize that many of our sisters and brothers in same-gender relationships sincerely desire the support of other Christians for living faithfully in all aspect of their lives, including their sexual fidelity. The document acknowledges that we don't all agree on these issues but essentially asks can we agree to disagree on this issue and still be the church of Christ?

The document continues, "This church calls for mutual respect in relationships and for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community. Regarding our life together as we live with disagreement, the people in this church will continue to accompany one another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect."

It continues, "This church acknowledges with regret the way in which the misuse of historical teachings of sexuality has harmed individuals and torn families apart. This includes actions that abandon or shun people for unwed pregnancy or same sex orientation. Hate crimes and violence against those regarded different sometimes have been perpetrated in the name of Christ – these actions are not only denounced but we must work toward greater understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity."

The Task Force proposes that both heterosexual and homosexual persons are expected to express sexual intimacy within publicly accountable, lifelong, and monogamous relationships.

In summary, this social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* says the following:

- It witnesses to the goodness of human sexuality as a gift from God.
- It looks to Scripture and the traditions of the Lutheran church for guidance in this important area of our lives, recognizing that each new generation must determine how to apply those principles.
- It lifts up trust, faithfulness and commitment as foundations for healthy relationships.
- It underscores the importance of the lifelong and legal aspects of heterosexual marriage.
- It is honest about the complexities of human sexuality as well as its negative aspects and our sinful use of this gift from God.
- It recognizes the need to affirm our gay and lesbian sisters and brothers as well as same-gender oriented persons in their quest for lifelong relationships.
- It urges caution when developing physical intimacy, reminding partners that it must be matched with growing affection and commitment.

After the vote is taken on this social statement, the Assembly will be asked how they believe this should be put into ministry practices within the church. Presently in the ELCA gay and lesbian persons can serve as clergy and other rostered leaders, providing they remain celibate. The question now comes before the assembly whether this church commits itself to finding a way for people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church? Should the ELCA consider structured flexibility in decision-making to allow, in appropriate situations, people in publicly accountable, monogamous, lifelong, same-gender relationships to be approved for the rosters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? Meaning for those congregations or institutions – if this passed – they would be able to call a pastor in a publicly accountable, monogamous, lifelong – same-gender relationship as their pastor, AIM or administrator.

Let me remind you that in the ELCA we call our pastors and other rostered leaders. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church and other faith traditions staff are not 'placed' by the Bishop. ELCA congregations have autonomy and each congregation calls the pastor that they feel will be a good fit for their congregation. So what do you think? 4 years later – I think it was a good fit – don't you?

This vote will not impose but will allow flexibility for congregations who want to do so. For instance, a congregation in Atlanta loved their pastor who wanted a publicly accountable, monogamous, lifelong same gender relationship. Their bishop, per our current rules, made him resign. Under this vote, it would have allowed them to keep the pastor who had walked with them for a number of years– and allow other congregations to acknowledge it wouldn't be the best fit for their situation.

Whether these resolutions are passed or not I assume that the press will sensationalize the topic and its coverage. I'm guessing that on August 20 or 21 it will be a front-page headline. And I'm guessing they won't get it right, so again please turn to our website or elca.org for the latest press releases for accurate information. And, please feel free to come in and speak to me directly if you have any concerns.

As the ELCA and as a congregation, we don't agree on many things when it comes to social issues – so why should this time be any different?

Will this be THE issue that leads individuals or congregations to leave the ELCA?

One pastor I know said, "I just wish when people threaten to leave the church it would be because they were upset that we aren't doing a good enough job of feeding the hungry or sheltering the homeless!" It's always about sexuality!

Here at Holy Cross I pray that we may continue to agree to disagree and concentrate on what unites us.

For the unity of this church is based on one Lord, one faith, and one baptism!

Amen.