

Purity Vs. Holiness

Selected verses from Song of Songs, Luke 7:36-50

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

(I want to give Nadia Bolz-Weber credit for many of the thoughts in this sermons. I read her recent book Shameless and it helped me put this in the context of purity vs. holiness.)

In 1993 the Southern Baptist Convention launched *True Love Waits* — a movement to try to address the ways that the commodifying of sex in our culture and premarital sex were endangering the lives of our teenagers. *True Love Waits* was part of a whole movement at the time. Youth group leaders around the country had very specific activities they did to encourage youth to wait. There was the rose exercise in which a rose was passed around a circle of teenagers. Each boy plucked off a petal until only the stem was left. The leader said, “This is what is left for a woman’s husband if she engages in sex before marriage.” Then there was the glass of water that was passed around the circle and every boy was invited to spit into the glass of water. The last boy was asked if he wanted to drink the glass of water that every other boy had already dirtied with their spit.

Teenagers and college students were invited to events in large arenas. Popular Christian rock groups played music and everyone was invited to chant, “Sex is great! Sex is great!” When everyone was at a fever pitch someone would stand up and say into the microphone, “Sex is great when you wait until you are married.” Basically, they used sex to sell the idea of waiting. Then they were all invited to take a virginity pledge. It went like this:

Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.

The federal government gave \$1 million to support the purity ring or chastity ring movement that went alongside *True Love Waits*. It was called the *Silver Ring Thing*. Teenagers who made a virginity pledge signified their commitment by wearing a ring that looked like a promise ring. The rings bore inscriptions like: “My true love will wait” or “My life. My decision. My path.”

This whole movement was born out of fear. The fear of the danger of sex in the hands of those who do not understand it as a gift of mutual love and connection. We all know that sex holds danger. We know that because we have either been victims of it or have loved ones who have been harmed. We also worry that our children will experience this level of intimacy before they are emotionally ready or they will get an STD or find themselves having to make a decision about becoming a parent. How do we deal with those things that make us afraid? We try to control them.

Joshua Harris, who grew up in a conservative evangelical home, penned a book, during this time period when he was just 21 years old called, "Why I Kissed Dating Goodbye." The basic premise of the book was the best way to avoid premarital sex was to stop dating altogether. He encouraged people not to kiss anyone until your wedding day. He promised teenagers that God would provide them a partner at the right time. He argued that dating ultimately leads to divorce. Harris' thinking was, "Skip dating and then move right to courtship with a future mate." But dating is the way we make those initial steps into the waters of love. In this model teenagers didn't have a chance to understand their own attractions or who might be a good life partner. They were forced into the box of heterosexual marriage before they had ever had a chance to understand their desires. Impressionable youth, their frightened parents and grandparents, and churches across America bought into this movement. Total abstinence from dating, Harris argued in all the life experience of a 21 year old, leads to the bliss of a great marriage filled with beautiful intimacy.

I know this stuff seems over the top but I want to make sure you understand that Joshua Harris or the *True Love Waits* movement are not solely responsible for the message of purity the church preaches. It has a long history with different iterations. Take the Prohibition movement in the United States in the 20s and 30s. It began because people saw a problem. Alcohol abuse was harming families. So the church stepped in to encourage people to curb their alcohol consumption. But it didn't feel strong enough for some and so a call for total abstinence began. That is where the idea of teetotaling originated. That is t-e-e not t-e-a. People were asked to make a pledge of Total with a capital T — tee-total — total abstinence from all drinking. The Total with a capital T movement was so successful that we even changed the US Constitution to prohibit all alcohol from the United States. Let me clarify. They were successful in changing the constitution but not in wiping all alcohol from the US. Alcohol was still rampantly available. Thirteen years later another amendment to the US Constitution repealed the prohibition of alcohol. For millennia, Christianity and Christian movements have wrongfully equated purity with holiness.

Last October I attended the Evolving Faith Conference in Denver, Colorado. I went because a couple people told me they had attended it in the past and told me I would love it. All I knew before I left was that the line up of keynote speakers consisted of authors I love to read. I went expecting that the majority of other attendees would be pastors of mainline progressive churches. But that was not who was represented at all. The place was packed with people who have left the church in pain and disillusionment and yet have refused to leave their faith. I think of them as expats of the church.

One of the recurring themes of the disillusioned in that arena was the harm brought to them by a message that equated sex to spit. Those who didn't wait spent years feeling dirty, as if God hated them because of their lack of "purity". There were those who waited and then found themselves in marriages in which the sexual intimacy they were promised was neither beautiful nor blissful. Learning to kiss and be sexually intimate all on their wedding day gave them no preparation for the emotional impact of that physical

connection all at once. Others who waited are still waiting for God to drop the perfect partner into their laps.

I know that some of you waited and found absolute joy and mutual connection. I know that some of you do not feel the need to have a partner to find wholeness. I know that some of you do to carry shame in your back pocket like others. We are all different. I am preaching this sermon because for some reason I feel absolutely compelled to share with you the pain I witnessed in that arena of expats. If that space was so filled with wounded people how many members of our congregation sit in pain or humiliation?

Joshua Harris has now apologized for the harm of his words. The young man who didn't kiss his wife until their wedding day, has left the church and his faith and his wife. He participated in a documentary a couple years ago called, "I Survived I Kissed Dating Good-bye" in which he interviews those who were hurt by his book.

I think most all of us has been a victim of the church's obsession with purity. I met a boy at the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference in St. Petersburg, Florida when I was a fifth grader. We exchanged addresses and began a pen pal relationship that deepened as time went on. When I was in 9th grade, Annual Conference was in Dayton, Ohio. I was so excited to see this boy who I was writing long letters to but hadn't seen for a whole year. As soon as we saw each other we went outside to sit on the sidewalk, lean against the wall of the convention center and talk. We were talking about school and interests when two adult males walked past us. One of them turned around and called out to us, "The Bible says that fornication is a sin."

I remember turning red and feeling instant shame. We weren't doing anything that should illicit that kind of response but perhaps he knew the budding emotions that were welling up in each of us. I think most of us, if not all of us, have been shamed some time in our life for our sexual nature; and when it happens in God's name it is a double whammy.

Friends, on behalf of the church, I want to apologize to you for the harm that has been done to you regarding the gift of your body....for the ways you have been made to feel impure....like spit.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her new book Shameless, writes about the difference between holiness and purity:

Holiness is the union we experience with one another and with God. Holiness is when more than one become one, when what is fractured is made whole. Singing in harmony. Breastfeeding a baby. Collective bargaining. Dancing. Admitting our pain to someone, and hearing them say, "Me, too." Holiness happens when we are integrated as physical, spiritual, sexual, emotional, and political beings...Holiness is the thing I never saw coming that makes me catch my breath because I know the sacred has interrupted my isolation...holiness is about union with, and purity is about separation from.

We fail whenever our litmus test is purity. We fail when we tell people they can work their way up the ladder of holiness into the presence of God by their stainlessness. Holiness is a gift. We can't make something holy. We can't earn holiness. We can only experience it...witness it...fall back into the arms of the sacred gift.

The purity/holiness struggle is obvious in the scripture that Josiah read to us today. Right in the middle of a dinner party, a woman bursts into the room and kneels at Jesus' feet. Her eyes are on him. He is the object of her worship. She has brought with her a most prized possession...costly ointment meant for her burial. She anoints Jesus' feet with expensive myrrh. Then, not having planned ahead well on how she would execute this anointing, she unbinds her hair and wipes Jesus' feet with her hair...and her tears....and her kisses.

The good, respectable people in the room are aghast. Simon, the host is mortified. Imagine how you would have reacted if you were in that room. Simon thinks to himself, "There is no way Jesus is a prophet or he would know that this woman touching him isn't pure." Just her touching Jesus like that rendered him impure in Simon's sight. "She is a sinner," Simon thought....as if he wasn't. As if we aren't all sinners in need of God's grace. All those at the dinner party turned their back on the holiness displayed in front of them...the holiness of that union...when the fractured is healed and we are connected and seen and whole....heart, soul, mind and yes, body.

The other scripture that you heard this morning is from Song of Songs. It is unique in the Hebrew Bible. It does not speak of law or God. It does not give history or explain wisdom. It celebrates the intimacy between two lovers. This book gets its name from the opening verse, the Song of Songs, a construction commonly used to depict something that is most beautiful, the greatest in its class — like the Holy of Holies — the Song of Songs.

Arise, my love, my fair one,
And come away.
Let me see your face,
Let me hear your voice;
For your voice is sweet,
And your face is lovely.
Set me as a seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm;
For love is strong as death,
Passion is as fierce as the grave.

Song of Songs is scripture that celebrates passion, love, mutual respect, desire. While God is not mentioned I believe that it portrays that the Creator, in whose image we were made, loves us so much God created the joy of deep and profound connection to another.

Children of the Living God, you have been blessed with hearts that can overflow with love; souls that find wholeness when two become one; minds that search for mutual

connection; the courage to trust; and bodies that were gifted with the potential for passion. These are God-given gifts to be used wisely. You are not spit. You are God's beloved. Amen.