

Made of Divine Substance  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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My favorite TV show is *Modern Family*, and one of their greatest episodes dealt with parents speaking to their children about sex. One of the families featured is a husband, wife, two daughters, and a son. The kids in this family attempt to surprise their parents on their anniversary by making them breakfast in bed. The three of them have the breakfast neatly piled up on a tray, head up the stairs, open the door to their parents' bedroom yelling, "Happy Anniversary!" and catch their parents in the act. They run away screaming with the two oldest daughters knowing exactly what they just interrupted and the son having no clue.

Once safely downstairs in the kitchen, the son asks, "What were mom and dad doing?" The middle daughter quickly responds, "Nothing!" To which the son thinks about it for a second and then says, "Whatever it was, it looked like dad was winning!"<sup>[1]</sup> The girls scream even louder and end up explaining to their brother what just happened as they dramatically wash their eyes out at the kitchen sink.

Now this is funny in and of itself, but what makes the episode so incredibly human is that the parents spend the rest of the day trying to figure out how to speak to their children about what they saw. The parents feel compelled to talk about it because they don't want their kids to have unhealthy views of the human body or sexuality. The episode ends with a family meeting—the kids just block out the conversation, smile and nod at everything their parents are trying to convey about sex and love, and then just move on with their lives.

Human sexuality, lust, romantic love—we haven't always excelled at speaking about these topics in our own families, let alone in the Church. In fact, we have inherited some incredibly unhealthy views of sexuality from some influential Christian thinkers. St. Augustine is notorious for his sexual issues—he's the saint who said, "God, grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." Augustine had a mistress and a child with her, and then later abandoned her and took their son away, very saintly behavior right there. In his *Confessions* he wrote, "At one time in adolescence I was burning to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures. I ran wild in the shadowy jungle of erotic adventures."<sup>[2]</sup> If there was one Deadly Sin Augustine struggled with, it was Lust. And because this was his most troublesome sin and he became such an influential theologian, the whole Church inherited his baggage in some ways and didn't question this for centuries.

Today's passage from *Colossians* is a great example of early Christianity's troubled sexual views in line with Augustine. *Colossians* is one of the disputed letters of Paul. Some scholars think Paul wrote it, others don't buy it—nevertheless, it gets to our Deadly Sin of Lust. The author of *Colossians* says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient."<sup>[3]</sup> The author is making the distinction between death and life, between earthly impulses and heavenly ones. Once you became a baptized Christian, you'd leave these old vices behind. The author encourages early believers to "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."<sup>[4]</sup>

If this view is taken to extremes, as it unfortunately was in the history of the Church, this should trouble us. The author presents this list of vices, most of them sexual in nature, and then eventually describes what it means to be living the good life. The implication is that once you become a true Christian, you will be able to overcome all these earthly, bodily, sinful vices. This was why many early Christians wouldn't get baptized until they were literally on their death

beds. Because you couldn't really sin that badly when you were nearing the end, and this would guarantee that you'd get to heaven!

Colossians also exemplifies the soul-body dualism present in early Christianity. As theologian Christine Gudorf describes it, "The self was identified with the soul-mind-will, and the body was understood to represent a lower animal nature that was to be possessed and controlled by the rational, spiritual will."<sup>[5]</sup> There's some sexism here—men were seen to be in the mind/soul category and women in the body/feelings category. Men controlled by the rational spiritual will naturally had to keep women in line since they were subject to their bodies and feelings, right? I almost choked on that last line. Are we seeing how dangerous this theology is? And I hate to tell you this; there are many who still think in these antiquated, dangerous, dualistic ways. Wives submit to your husbands and all that garbage.

These list of sexual vices found in Colossians, with the Deadly Sin of Lust being prominent among them, are common throughout the New Testament. The body is bad, sinful, supposed to be controlled at all times, while the soul is good and heavenly. One group of Christians, the Gnostics, took this dualistic thinking so far that they declared that Jesus never even had a body—he was some sort of Spirit person walking on earth! They were later declared heretics, so at least their theology wasn't affirmed by the Church, but that's where this way of seeing the soul in opposition to the body can lead us.

Needless to say, the Deadly Sin of Lust and our issues with sexuality in the Church were present from the beginning. I explored Colossians and Augustine a bit with you, but there's so much more to be said. It's no wonder it's still taking time to challenge these views. But there's hope on the horizon.

Sexuality is now understood by many modern theologians within the confines of human embodiment. Again, Christine Gudorf argues, "If our bodies are not possessions of our selves but are our selves, then the sexed nature of human bodies makes us sexual persons."<sup>[6]</sup> New questions are being asked—as opposed to whether or not sexual activity is between heterosexual persons, married to one another, for the purpose of pro-creation (as was deemed the only kind of sex acceptable in the Church's eyes for centuries), now modern theological questions are whether or not the relationship is caring, mutual, consensual, and responsible. We can thank many feminist theologians who affirmed that anti-sexual and misogynistic attitudes needed to be challenged.

We're living in a new era, and our own United Church of Christ is one of the denominations at the forefront of this theological shift. The UCC and the Unitarian Universalist Association partnered on a new sex ed. curriculum called Our Whole Lives (or OWL) several years ago. This curriculum helps people of all ages make decisions about relationships and behavior in the context of their own faith and beliefs. OWL "covers the areas of human development, relationships, personal skills, sexual behavior, sexual health, and society and culture."<sup>[7]</sup> I think Augustine would have been a big fan of OWL because it comes at sex and faith in a much healthier way than the either/or mentality he wrestled with his whole life.

In the end, Robin Meyers emphasizes that between the Deadly Sin of lust and the life denying charade of chastity, lies Holy Eros. The Greeks spoke of Eros as the magnetism that holds the whole universe together, human love merely draws from this ocean of cosmic desire. Marc Gafni, the spiritual teacher and scholar says, "Yes, eros is sexual, but it also transcends the sexual. Eros actually means all the places where I am fully present, on the inside, yearning and connected."<sup>[8]</sup> Maybe we can see the holiness present when two people covenant together and have mutuality about their relationship. Maybe we can see that our bodies are sacred and holy—we are somehow made of divine substance.<sup>[9]</sup> Meyers ends with the conviction that, "In

this sexually dysfunctional world, holy eros is the virtue we need, and it should be regarded, first and last, as a gift from God." [10] May it be so and thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Modern Family, Season 2, Episode 13 "Caught in the Act."

[2] St. Augustine, Oxford World Classics edition of Confessions, Book II (I and II), 24.

[3] Colossians 3:5-7.

[4] Colossians 3:2.

[5] Christine Gudorf, "Sexuality" in Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, Eds. New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology, 459.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Our Whole Lives, <http://www.ucc.org/justice/sexuality-education/our-whole-lives.html>

[8] Marc Gafni, The Mystery of Love, 49.

[9] Marc Gafni, The Mystery of Love, 309.

[10] Robin Meyers, The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins, 103.