

Let's Talk About Sex, Baby

There is a story that Bishop Tom Wright tells of when he was teaching at a university and he ran across advertising posters around the campus that read in big large type bold letters “SEX.” The posters caught pretty much anyone’s eye that wandered past them and underneath the large bold letters was a note in small print “Now you’re interested, how about joining the university rowing club.” I don’t think that the person who designed the posters was suggesting that rowing had anything to do with sex, but rather they were simply taking advantage of the fact that in Western culture people are so fascinated, fixated with sex that even mention of the word attracts people’s attention. Sex sells as the advertising and entertainment industry know well. Whether you turn on the TV, walk down the street, read magazines or turn on your computer it is obvious that our culture markets and takes advantage of sex. Products which have no association with sexuality or sex are advertised by scantily clad men and women. Advertisers don’t use sex lightly, they know it will help them sell their product, they know more than most how obsessed our culture is with sex – and they take advantage of it. Take for example our culture’s celebration of Halloween: When I was a child the best costumes were homemade, were those costumes that your mother helped to piece together from pieces around the house or that you would make out of cardboard, plastic bags and the like. Today more and more as our costumes are store bought there is a trend, particularly for women, for costumes to be more sexualized, a trend that sadly is even seeping into children’s and teenage costumes. Western culture’s obsession with sex, has essentially made it a commodity, has made it something to be bought and sold, but are culture has also elevated sex and sexuality it has elevated so much that one could argue that our culture at large worships sex: we have made sex into a cultural “idol.”

Idolatry is something that I believe we in the Church are keenly aware of but only when we think of the Biblical story. After all throughout the Old Testament we hear stories of the Gentiles worshipping idols and false Gods like Baal or Moloch. Or we remember the stories of the Israelites turning from God to worship and follow idols, for example in the book of Exodus there is the well-known story of the Israelites who had been saved by God from slavery in Egypt and as soon as they faced hardship in the desert they melted all of their gold to form the Golden Calf and began worshipping it as a God. I think it is easy for us to understand idolatry back in Biblical times, idolatry is something they did when they worshipped pieces of gold or silver, or statues or whatever else they did in ancient days. Idolatry for the Israelites in the biblical world was obvious: there was Yaweh the Creator and Lord of the world and other false Gods worshipped by other peoples and those in error. In our own day we can safely assume very few people in our society worship other Gods such as Moloch or Baal, and I’d imagine very few of us pray to idols made of gold or silver. While we might not worship idols in these ways, I would suggest, that we are just a likely to worship idols in our modern world and we’re not very good at recognizing it.

For the Ephesians of Paul’s day, sex and money represented powerful temptations towards idolatry. They represented avenues that would bring the new Christians in Ephesus away from the light of Christ as Paul puts it, that would have pulled them away from fellowship with God. While sex and money remain powerful temptations today they are not the only idols which threaten to pull us away from the divine life we are offered to participate in Christ.

Tim Keller in his book Counterfeit Gods writes: “What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, “If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.”

An idol is anything – anything – that takes the place of God in your life. An idol can be something as complex as money, as sex, as power or something as simple as our family, as our reputation or the latest and greatest gadget. Something that becomes an idol, such as our family, is not inherently bad – in fact

families and family love are some of the greatest gifts God has given us – but family can become an idol when we begin to worship it as sacred, when our lives are entirely shaped and directed by our view of family, or our view of money or our desire for power that we no longer recognize God’s Lordship over our life, we no longer recognize the love and mercy of God as the source and purpose of life.

The Church can fall into idolatry too. Whether it is Church growth, or a specific worship style, or preaching or charismatic leader the Church, and individual churches can fall prey to the temptations of idolatry. Churches can be so consumed with the famous and charismatic personality of their leader that they turn towards worshipping their leaders. Churches can be so consumed with growing their numbers that they will do anything to achieve the goal, even things which do not belong in the Kingdom of God.

Paul’s challenge to the Christians in Ephesus, a challenge which resonates in our day, is that the Church is a place where idolatry needs to be challenged, a place where our lives are renewed in the love and worship of God. The Church is marked by a rejection of idols, a rejection of other things, people or ideas taking the place of God in our lives. The Church is marked by the rejection of allowing things to get in the way of our relationship with God. Now to be clear, the Church does not reject these things outright. We do not reject money, we do not reject family or entertainment or even sex but rather we reject the worship of these things, we reject them when they become the ultimate purpose of our lives. The challenge of the Church, the challenge faced by individual Christians on a daily basis is to ensure that we celebrate all of these things in the context of God’s Lordship, in the context of God’s overflowing love and grace poured out for us and for the whole world. There is a place in our lives and in our world to enjoy the well-earned fruits of our labours, there is a place in our lives to celebrate the entertainment we get from the world around us, there is a place even in the Christian life to celebrate and enjoy sex (as shocking as that may seem). This is the driving force behind Paul’s words from the passage in Ephesians today: that idolatry can and does pervade the Church, and that through the power of Christ, and in imitating Christ we can begin the transformation and practice of Christian virtue, we can begin to as Paul wrote in Ephesians 4, to grow up in the full stature of Christ.

So how does the Church lived out this renewed life? How does the church reject the idols of our own lives and culture? First and foremost by the grace of God, through Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross, in his glorious resurrection, and by the power of Holy Spirit working in us. Our renewed life is primarily the work of God, we can only respond to his invitation and power working in our lives. The role of the Church in the renewed life in Christ is to continually expose the idols of our day to the light of Christ. The Church is strengthened in this as we read the Bible together, as we pray together, as we worship together, as we share the Eucharistic feast together and as we go out into the world in mission and outreach together. While we need to shed the light of Christ on the idols of the world, we need to constantly self-examine our own lives, our own life together as Church, to ensure that our worship and our lives are directed towards God, and not to other things. For this we must be willing to hold things lightly, to not become devoted to a specific way of thinking or a specific way of doing something. Each week as we say the confession together we have a chance to offer up to God the idols we as individuals and as the Church are holding on to, we have an opportunity to hand them over to forgiveness and loving mercy of God. As God works in us, through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can challenge the idols of our day, and live out the renewed life in Christ! And for that I say thanks be to God!