

AColyte

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A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



It's complicated.

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

*Saint Valentine drove a red Continental
With a headlight out and a dent in the side
He swore it wasn't real, it was only mental
But he drove it every single night.*

--Joe Ely

*You can see those pictures
In the magazines
But what's the use of looking
If you don't know what they mean?
Somebody tell me 'bout the Mystery Dance
I want to know about the Mystery Dance
Somebody show me
'Cause I've tried and I've tried
But I'm still mystified
I can't do any anymore and I'm not satisfied.*

--Elvis Costello

*It was always the love songs every time
Made everybody feel something inside
With the fire down low held your girl real close
Made you wanna love the one you were with
Gave you the courage of that first kiss
It was the love songs always the love songs*

--Eli Young Band

You'd think the people would have had enough of silly love songs

--Paul McCartney

I've done a lot of thinking this month about romance and relationships and love songs.

I think Valentine's Day has feels a greeting card holiday that implies a certain sort of social pressure to suggest that, in order to be completely fulfilled, everybody ought to be part of a romantic couple.

But I also gave roses and cards to my wife on Valentine's Day.

It's complicated.

Although romantic couples continue to figure heavily in the propagation of our species, I think we can all agree that it is possible to live a full and productive life without being part of a romantic couple.

There's nothing wrong with being single.

But some of us aren't single.

And some of us who are currently single won't always be single.

There's nothing wrong with that either.

But coupling up brings its own set of complications.

Then I heard Dr. Toddie Peters deliver her fascinating Allen-Head Lecture entitled "Trust Women: From Justifying Abortion to Reproductive Justice." Her insights and suggestions led to an additional set of questions and reflections.

So, now – completely unbidden except by some Valentine's Day cards, some love songs, and a really good lecture – I give you the

***AColyte* Reflections about Sex, the Bible, and the Rest of Your Life**

*I know a little about love;
and, baby, I can guess the rest.*
--Lynyrd Skynyrd

I'm pretty sure that this sex stuff is gonna cross many of your minds whether I mention it or not. It's certainly worth thinking about.

I have some thoughts...

First, let's put our Liberal Arts hats on and think about

TWO CONSEQUENCES OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

I'm gonna paint with some broad strokes here, and I understand the limits to the two generalizations that I'm about to make, but I stand by them.

The first relevant consequence of the Industrial Revolution that's relevant to our sex lives has to do with **nutrition**.

For reasons that many of you understand more fully than I, the development in the last two centuries or so of the ability to mass-produce relatively nutritious food means that people in general are healthier than they used to be. We have regular access to more nutrition than our ancestors did.

Despite the real and serious inequalities that should be identified and addressed, people in general are healthier than we used to be. Most of us get more nutrition sooner and throughout our lives than our great grandparents did.

One of the many consequences of that general increase in nutrition is that babies and children are healthier than they used to be.

And one interesting consequence of that improvement in general health is that puberty comes sooner.

It is likely that your great grandparents were older when they went through puberty than you were when you did.

Your body got there faster.

Mark that. It will be relevant in a minute.

A second consequence of the industrial revolution is that the world is more complicated than it used to be. Specialization has been a hugely positive development in human societies and our economies in the last couple centuries. Most of us specializing has led to all of us being able to do more--economically and culturally.

But greater specialization requires increased **education** and training.

And that, in turn means that people are generally marrying at a later age than they used to.

To be sure, more people are not marrying at all.

Our categories and vocabulary for understanding what a fulfilled adult life might look like are vastly larger and more nuanced than they used to be.

But it remains true that many people continue to hope that coupling up will be part of their lives.

And many of those couples hope to have children as well.

And many of those people will wait to become parents until after they have reached a certain level of education and preparation and perceived security.

And that time – the time when a person thinks they are ready to “settle down,” embark on some sort of a career, and raise a family – is relatively later than it was for our great-grandparents.

So here’s an interesting consequence of the Industrial Revolution:

The time between puberty and the completion of formal education necessary to begin a career has increased greatly in recent years.

Which means, among other things, that statements like "Don't have sex until you're married" have different ramifications for contemporary young adults than those of earlier generations.

Telling my great grandparents “Don’t have sex until you’re married” was relevant for the couple of years between puberty and marriage.

Saying that to young adults today is a completely different matter.

It’s a much longer time from puberty to readiness to begin a career, earn a livelihood, care for a family.

I know that’s not relevant for everybody. But it’s hugely relevant for a lot of us.

It just is.

I think about this stuff a lot.

I actually have a lot of conversations about this sort of thing with Austin College students and other young adults.

And I think I've arrived at a fairly concise, Biblically-based way for Christians, the Church, and other thoughtful people to think about sex.

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It starts with a History Lesson about Pigs in Scotland.

The most valuable possessions of ancient Scottish clans were their pigs. Pigs were very valuable for the ancient clans. They were good sources of meat. Their hides were very useful. They ate pretty much anything. So it was good for every family in the clan to keep some pigs.

The problem was that pigs can be a lot of trouble to keep up with. And there were all sorts of other things for the families in the clans to do: raise children, defend themselves from invaders, etc.

Eventually the clans figured out that—instead of every family having to take care of their own pigs--it would be more efficient to identify one clan member whose only job was to take care of everybody's pigs.

So that's what they did. Each clan identified one of their most responsible and trustworthy members and put that person in charge of everybody's pigs.

That way particular families could rest easy and take care of all their other business with full confidence that their trustworthy, responsible, true blue pig-keeper would be sure that everybody's pigs were fully and fairly cared for.

Those exemplary and faithful pig-keepers people were called "sty wardens". Get it? "Wardens" of the "sty."

Our modern terms "steward" and "stewardship" are derived from "sty warden".

Preachers like me and development officers like Gillian Locke talk about "stewardship" a lot. It means caring for gifts that ultimately don't belong to you.

A good "steward" is someone the whole clan could trust with their pigs.

Now let's jump to the Bible.

First Peter 4:10 says

*Like good **stewards** of the manifold grace of God,
serve one another
with whatever gift
each of you has received.*

So a "steward" is somebody who the whole clan could trust with their pigs – somebody who can be counted on to responsibly care for things that don't ultimately belong to them.

And, according to 1 Peter 4:10 and many other passages of scripture, we've all received gifts from God.

All of us.

So, like good sty wardens, we all need to try to take good care of the gifts we've been given.

That's an idea that's relevant in all sorts of contexts.

And I think it can provide a helpful way for us to think about sex and sexuality.

Here's what I think that I think:

RESPONSIBLE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR INVOLVES STEWARDSHIP OF FOUR GIFTS:

- 1) **Me**
- 2) **You**
- 3) **Fun**
- 4) **Gonads**

I'm pretty comfortable with that statement.

Let's unpack it, shall we?

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STEWARDSHIP OF THE GIFT OF OURSELVES

GRAMMAR LESSON #1: THE PASSIVE VOICE

Let's begin with a rare instance of enlightenment coming from the difficult and serious debates in our society about abortion.

There will be more time to talk about abortion later, but for now let us notice that one way to distinguish between the arguments and categories used by participants in debates about abortion may be seen in the different ways that participants answer the question:

When did our lives begin?

Some earnest and intelligent people say our lives began when we were conceived.

Other equally earnest and intelligent people would say that there is an important sense in which our lives began when we were born, or at least when we became capable of living outside our mother's womb.

We don't need to settle that argument right now, but I think it is important to notice that, in either case, we believe that the beginning of our lives was not something we did, it was something that was done to us.

We didn't conceive ourselves.

We didn't bear ourselves.

It is interesting and probably important for us to recognize that the beginning of our lives was essentially a *passive* experience.

In grammatical terms, we were objects before we were subjects.

Psalm 100:3 says it like this:

*Know that the Lord is God!
It is **God that made us,**
and we are **God's.***

This is a theological statement that our very lives are gifts from God.

I think it's a theological assertion that I am – and you are – just right.

It means that God doesn't need or want me to be anyone other than who I am.

Recently when I read Psalm 100:3 I think of this song from the movie *The Greatest Showman*.

<https://youtu.be/wEJd2RyGm8Q>

*When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out
I am brave, I am bruised
I am who I'm meant to be, this is me
Look out 'cause here I come
And I'm marching on to the beat I drum
I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies, this is me*

Some of us think that it's interesting and important for us to see our whole lives as gifts to be cherished, cared for, and used intentionally and gratefully.

Stewardship of the gift of my life involves not doing anything to harm or abuse that gift.

In terms of sexuality, I think that means it is inappropriate for me to do anything which might harm, endanger, or demean myself.

Whatever else I am, I am a beloved, gifted, capable, and safe child of God.

It's **my** responsibility, first and foremost, to remember that.

In terms of my sexuality, as well as in all the other contexts of my life, I need always to be conscious and intentional about being a good steward of the gift of my imperfect, often-disappointing, but amazing and wonderful life.

And I firmly believe that applies to each of you as well.

Every time you look into a mirror, looking back at you is a beloved, gifted, capable, safe, and important child of God.

That's one of the truths involved in all your decisions and actions related to your sexuality.

You matter.

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STEWARDSHIP OF THE GIFT OF OTHERS

A WORD ABOUT LIVESTOCK:

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells this story:

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

*³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,*

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing,*

*I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me.'*

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^[a] you did it to me.'

One of the lessons of this famous New Testament story is that all people matter. Each person, no matter how vulnerable or at risk or in need they are, matters as much as Jesus himself.

They all matter.

Which suggests that ALL people are gifts from God.

Earlier, in Matthew 22, when Jesus is asked which commandment is greatest, he serves up a couple of relevant Old Testament quotes (although, for Jesus, it was the Only Testament):

³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

³⁷ 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.’

³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment.

³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

I think that means that, not only do you matter – which we established earlier – but everybody else matters too.

Including the other person who is, by definition, involved in almost all forms of your sexual behavior.

That other person is also a gift from God and should always be treated as such.

Listen to this song:

<https://youtu.be/CeJi34QeSjA>

Sorry about the George Jones stuff at the end. It’s extraneous.

And “Stranglehold” is a Ted Nugent song. Also extraneous.

But I like these words:

*You were pretty as can be, sittin' on the front seat
 Lookin' at me; telling me you love me
 And you're happy to be with me on the Fourth of July
 We sang "Stranglehold" to the stereo
 Couldn't take no more of that Rock & Roll
 So we turned on a little George Jones
 And just sang along.*

I've been that guy.

I've been driving down the road with a beautiful woman who lives at my house ON PURPOSE and thought to myself,

"I can't believe she's with me."

"This is so cool!"

"I sure don't want to mess this up."

"Thank you, God."

That's definitely a good context for a little theology. Because those times really matter.

If you haven't ever felt like that about anybody, but you want to, I hope you get to someday. It's awesome.

Now check this out:

<https://youtu.be/EYGWpBv-rLI>

*Birds can fly so high, or they can shit on your head
 Yeah they can almost fly into your eye and make you feel so scared
 But when you look at them, and you see that they're beautiful
 That's how I feel about you*

Doesn't that feel better than

"I'm puttin' out a Booty Call"

or "Honky Tonk Badonka-donk"

or "I tapped that"?

We need to cherish each other – to see the beauty – not treat each other as lifestyle accessories.

Back to the Gospel of Matthew:

*In everything do to others
as you would have them do to you;
for this is the law and the prophets.*

--Matthew 7:12

Why would you treat a sexual partner as anything less than a beautiful gift from God?

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STEWARDSHIP OF THE GIFT OF FUN

Name this text:

*How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!
You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
Oh, may your breasts be
like clusters of the vine,
and the scent of your breath like apples,
and your kisses like the best wine
that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth.*

That's Song of Solomon 7:6-9. From the **Bible**.

Throughout the history of the Church, lots of theologians have interpreted this text as pertaining to the relationship between Christ and the Church.

EWWWWW!

I think it's the biblical warrant for hooking up.

Not always.

Not cheaply or in a utilitarian way.

But not never.

The species depends on hooking up.

Genesis 1:28 says *Be fruitful and multiply.*

That leads to
AN IMPORTANT AND SOPHISTICATED
THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSION:

Anybody who tells you that it is always wrong to sit in a car (or the back row of a movie theaters, etc.) and passionately kiss another person:

1. may be at odds with scripture; and
- B. probably has just never done it correctly.

Bless their hearts.

*Wanna go for a walk,
Go for a ride,
Maybe just stand here and think
What we can do to each other
No, we don't have to dance
--Neil Sedaka*

It is great fun to couple up – to be together in ways that are not the same ways that we interact with everybody else.

CAUTION: Here comes an abrupt jump to Church History--ED

In the 13th Century, Saint Thomas Aquinas famously offered five proofs that God exists:

- The First Way: Argument from Motion
- The Second Way: Argument from Efficient Causes
- The Third Way: Argument from Possibility and Necessity
- The Fourth Way: Argument from Gradation of Being

The Fifth Way: Argument from Design

I had to learn about those in a Philosophy Class at Austin College in the early '80s.

But we don't need to think about them now. I just wanted to mention Anselm and his 5 proofs to set up my own

THREE PROOFS OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD:

1. Air Conditioning
2. Car Stereos
3. Chocolate Ice Cream

Those are three kinds of evidence that the world is better than it has to be.

We can talk about all the legitimate environmental issues related to air conditioning. But we'll probably do it in an air conditioned room.

And I am regularly and repeatedly grateful for the first person who ever had the idea to put a sound system **IN A CAR**. Cars don't need sound systems, but they're better when they have them.

There is plenty to eat. And not everybody likes chocolate ice cream. But lots of us do. In my theological argument, chocolate ice cream is meant to represent anything that we like to eat because it tastes good.

This all leads to
 SPIRITUAL BIOLOGY LESSON #1
 (WITH A BONUS HISTORY LESSON)

In John 10:10, Jesus says,
*I came that they may have life,
 and have it abundantly.*

Psalm 36:7-8 says
*How precious is your love, O God!
 All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
 They feast on the abundance of your house,
 and you give them drink
 from the river of your delights.*

The life that God intends for us involves something more than simply postponing death.

Everyone who drank water in the 19th century, anywhere in the world, has since died. Life is about more than simply, and at all costs, preserving and extending a series of biological functions. Life is clearly about more than just trying not to die (noble as that is).

Psalm 118:24 says:

***This** is the day which the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad **in it**.*

This suggests – and I believe – that we were all created for joy.

In this day.

Today.

And sex is part of that.

*Well, mama, you can stop lookin'
Stop all your hookin' and crookin'
You just found yourself the lovinest man
I'm gonna tell you lots of secrets
I'm gonna do some light bitin' and squeezin'
You're gonna find your feelings getting all out of hand
--Delbert McClinton*

There's nothing wrong with a little "light bitin' and squeezin'" as long as you're being a good steward of the gifts of yourself and your partner.

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But there's more.

We also need to think about

STEWARDSHIP OF THE GIFT OF OUR GONADS

Wikipedia says this:

A **gonad**, **sex gland**, or **reproductive gland**^[1] is a mixed gland that produces the **gametes** (sex cells) and sex hormones of an organism. In the **female** of the species the reproductive cells are the **egg cells**, and in the **male** the reproductive cells are the **sperm**.^[2] The male gonad, the **testicle**, produces sperm in the form of **spermatozoa**. The female gonad, the **ovary**, produces egg cells. Both of these gametes are **haploid** cells.

Genesis 1:27-29 says this:

*"So God created humankind **in his image**,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.
God blessed them, and God said to them,
'Be fruitful and multiply,
and fill the earth and subdue it'
God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed
that is upon the face of all the earth,
and every tree with seed in its fruit;
you shall have them for food.'"*

There are a thousand productive conversations we can have about the account of the creation of the world in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis.

This is the one I'd like to invite you into now:

Adam doesn't get created until Day Six.

According to the account of Creation in Genesis 1, God does not bring a human life into the world until God has created an environment in which the human can prosper.

God's bringing of the human is accompanied by God's commitment to watch over and care for the human. "Adam" means "human."

[“Adam” is also the Hebrew word for “dust”—ED]

Micah 6:8 says

*God has showed you, O human, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you
but to do **justice** . . .*

Justice is a complicated concept.

The Hebrew word translated as “justice” in English language Bibles is “Mishpat.” “Mishpat” is not about giving or getting what one deserves. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (what my tribe calls the “Old Testament”) Mishpat is interpreted to mean doing our best to treat other the way God has treated us.

There’s an echo of that idea in Ephesians 4:32

. . . and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

"Justice" means doing our best to treat others the way God has treated us.

SO, with regard to our gonads – our ability to participate in the creation of another human life – I want to suggest to you that it is our responsibility ONLY to engage in behavior which might create another human life (and we’re clear on what the behavior is and is not – right?) if we are prepared to endeavor to create an environment in which THAT human can prosper.

Sex is about more than procreation.

There’s nothing wrong with enjoying each other; with enjoying sex.

But when we’re engaging in sexual behavior that will create another human life, we have a responsibility to consider that life – that gift – and to do our best to create an environment in which *that* human life can be nourished and cherished and nurtured.

I THINK IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ARETHA FRANKLIN

<https://youtu.be/hsL9UL9qbv8>

"YOU BETTER THINK . . ."

Jesus takes away our sins, not our minds.

God gave us brains and expects us to use them.

While I sincerely do not intend to hetero-normative or to suggest that the only appropriate forms of sexual behavior are behaviors that could involve procreation, I believe that all forms of interpersonal behavior – and surely all forms of sexual behavior – involve proper stewardship of the gifts of ourselves, other people, and fun.

Furthermore [not a word that occurs very often in the AColyte], sexual behavior which *can* result in the creation of another human life also involves proper stewardship of our gonads – our ability to create life.

We know these things now, we need to think about them now.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FOUqQt3Kg0#action=share>

"R-E-S-P-E-C-T"

All our decisions about how we behave, sexually or otherwise, need to take into account the fact that we are all created in God's image and given gifts by God to be used for the good of all people.

Failure to respect these gifts leads us away from the abundant life which God intends for all people.

Thus endeth the reflection on Sex, the Bible and the Rest of Your Life.

I'd be happy to talk to any of you about any of this.

Just let me know.

Until Next Time, I Remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Happily Returned to the Chapel But Grateful for the Hospitality and Patience of
Andrea Restrepo and the Service Station Board,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

P.S. – I've been asked to leave you with

THE CHAPLAIN'S THREE SUGGESTED RULES FOR DATING

1. Don't lie to *anybody, ever*.
 - If you think you want – or need – to tell lies, it's not gonna turn out well.
 - Don't be that guy (in the generic sense – "guy" like "character").

2. Don't treat every date like a spouse audition.
 - Before I met Linnea, I had lots of good dates with people who I certainly didn't want to marry.
 - The key is to be sure you're being a good steward of the gifts of yourself, your date, and fun.
 - Bringing your gonads into play involves a whole nother set of issues.

3. Don't do anything that you wouldn't want your Mom to ever find out about.
 - It doesn't necessarily mean Mom has to know about everything right now, but it's never a good idea to do anything you're gonna be ashamed of.