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1 Samuel 3:1-10, Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:43-5

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday I preached about Holy Baptism, and I could just as well do so this time too. Such preaching would be right and fitting because our First Lesson and our Gospel Lesson are about the call into divine fellowship, and that call *you too* have received through your Baptism. They are marvelous stories — the stories of the call of young Samuel and of Philip and Nathanael — and it is an awesome thing to reflect that this same Lord who called his prophets and disciples in yesteryear has called you too: “Follow me,” said Jesus *to you*, just as surely as he said it to Philip and Nathanael of old.

But I find this morning’s Epistle Lesson beckoning to me too: First Corinthians 6. Here St. Paul is preaching a parochial sermon. He is not so much discussing the *call* to Baptism, but rather the Baptized *life*. He is not calling the Corinthians into fellowship with Christ, for they are already baptized, but rather, he is helping them to understand what life in Christ is like. It is as if we are invited into the Pastor study, into the apostle’s office, and there sits St. Paul at his desk or in his rocking chair, ready and willing to discuss with us something of the concrete details of the Christian life. Especially, he would have a word with us, if we will, about our bodies.

And so, this is my text for this morning:

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?(1 Cor. 6:19, NRS)

I think my heart is inclining toward this passage and toward this morning’s Psalm - Psalm 139 - partly because of the grief that many of us feel at the death of Fr. Richard John Neuhaus. Fr. Neuhaus used to be Pastoral Associate here at Immanuel. Richard John’s body has now been sown in weakness, and he has been laid in the grave. But his body is destined for glory, aye, to be hugged and embraced by Jesus Christ himself. We believe in the “resurrection of the body”! That is our creed. We will be confessing it again today when we receive Paul and Marilyn Thurston and their children Richard and Eva into membership here at Immanuel. No Sunday goes by when we fail to look temptation and death right in the face, with their horrible mien, and to declare nonetheless:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, *the resurrection of the body*, and the life everlasting. Amen!

And so I rush to embrace the words of St. Paul: “Why! Richard John, your body is the very temple of the Holy Spirit within you, and so your body shall live again, and I look forward to seeing you again, through the grace of God.”

And it is not just the body of Richard John Neuhaus that shines with Christian dignity. So does yours! Take the words from this morning’s Psalm and apply them to yourself:

¹²For you yourself created my inmost parts;*
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹³I will thank you because I am marvelously made;*
your works are wonderful, and I know it well.

You young ones among us are lovely and handsome, radiant with health and energy, and any of us looking at you can nod our head with Psalmist and say, "She is marvelously made! He is marvelously made."

But this is a Psalm for each of us, whether we are young and beautiful or whether we are aging and graying and declining. And if you have imagined that no one has ever loved your body in the past, or no one loves your body now, why, you are wrong and please do not be so discouraged. Again, take the words of the Psalm and apply them to yourself:

¹⁵Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb;
all of them were written in your book;*
they were fashioned day by day, when as yet there was none of them.

There is indeed Someone who loves and cherishes your body, and I mean the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They love every bone in you, every hair of your head, every muscle, every curve of your body. Your Maker loves and cherishes your body and wants all those who deal with you to likewise honor your body.

And that is the chief background for today's Epistle Reading about chastity. St. Paul would have us cherish the human body and to accord it full dignity. Indeed, St. Paul prays that we will see the human body through heaven's eyes and count it not only beautiful and delightful, but also precious and holy. That is why St. Paul praises and defends marriage.

In our particular passage, the apostle preaches against prostitution and fornication. Judging by this morning's Epistle Lesson, it is the will of the Church, including our Lutheran Church, that the ancient Christian tradition against prostitution and fornication should continue in our generation, and so the lectionary asks that Paul's preaching be proclaimed among us too. The embarrassing words "prostitution" and "fornication" are actually to be read aloud to the Christian congregation.

So, I mean to follow the apostle's lead here in this sermon, preaching about these matters. But I want to pause for a moment to say something else to you too. I want you to know that my heart also goes out to those of you for whom prostitution and fornication are not the issue. For you, the ache in your heart might be much more fundamental. I am thinking of widows and widowers and of single people who do not have someone to hold them and who might wonder whether they ever will. Such loneliness, with its sorrow for the body as well as for the soul, cries out for the consolation of the Gospel. And I mean to try it, someday. I mean to bend whatever grace God has entrusted to me to try to comfort those who suffer from loneliness. But not in this sermon. Our text this time leads simply to old-fashioned Christian sexual morality, and that is what I try to proclaim in this sermon.

So, in our particular passage, the apostle preaches against prostitution and fornication. He preaches against these things, he preaches negatives, but let us not imagine him to be dour or without understanding of the joys of the body. The reverse is

more likely. That is, it is better to imagine St. Paul leading us away from prostitution and fornication, not because he disapproves of sex, but because he approves of it very much and grieves for a world that does not enjoy sex enough because it does not honor marriage enough. Because of the particular parochial problems in Corinth, Paul has to preach *against* things — against factions within the congregation (1 Cor. 3), against the man sleeping with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5), against Christians suing one another (1 Cor. 6), against prostitution, against fornication (1 Cor. 6). But that is because he would lead us, if he can, to the joys of marriage sung about so sweetly in the Old Testament book called *The Song of Songs*. There we read of the passions of married love, of desire and longing and poetry and holy lust for the beloved. There we read of the joys of sexual unity within the framework of faithfulness illustrated for us in the faithfulness of Jesus toward the Church — a love and yearning and faithfulness so deep that Jesus does not hesitate to die for his beloved.

And so it is that married love is the blessed estate and the joy St. Paul commends to us. But in the process of praising and defending marriage, the apostle opposes sins against chastity and sins against the dignity of persons.

In our particular passage, St. Paul counts prostitution and fornication as unworthy of a Christian. Let's begin with prostitution. St. Paul raises the question and answers it with an exclamation mark:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!(1 Cor. 6:15, NRS)

So, no prostitution for us! Let those poor women be. Indeed, pray for them. Does it not occur to us sometimes that if we knew their circumstances — their upbringing, the responsibilities tugging on their hearts, the ways in which they might have been hurt in their childhood, the despair they might feel about any other way forward, their sense that they are fighting a losing battle — if we knew such things we might find ourselves repeating to ourselves the cry of humility, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” And we might wonder, if we knew everything about their lives, whether we would do better or even as well as they do. Do not despise them. Let us grant them dignity, along with their bodies, for they too are the marvelous creations of God!

And then there is St. Paul's startling line of reasoning about the resurrection of the body:

The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.

One day, you and the one you desire are going to stand before one another in the kingdom of Christ. Now, she might be a prostitute, and you have all the advantages. You have power and money and time on your hands, while she is a working girl, trying to get by in this world. Or she might simply be young and romantic and desires to be loved, while you stand there ready to take advantage of her, but not willing, perhaps not even able, to offer her your hand in marriage. But one day, you will stand there before her, under the lordship of Jesus, as free, equal persons. You will not have your present advantages of power, or wealth, or experience, but will stand there with this one you

desire as an equal, fully strong, both of you. So, do not live your life now in such a manner that you will be ashamed to stand before that one then.

And then there is St. Paul's conviction about the *inescapable* merging of the hearts along with the merging of the bodies. He says this:

¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!

¹⁶Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh."

Paul is deeply trouble at the idea of a Christian visiting a prostitute or engaging in fornication because of two key ideas: First, he wants the Christian to understand that we are united to Christ, and we should honor Christ within us. And second, he relies on the idea that when a man and woman make love, they thereby become one. And Paul forces the question: Is it right for you to bring Christ into this affair? Is this where Christ should be, in this motel room or in this affair with someone with whom you are not even married?

But the capstone of St. Paul's appeal to chastity is his teaching about the body as the "temple of the Holy Spirit within you." This is the teaching I find so comforting when I grieve that Richard John Neuhaus has died and fallen into the ground, as has Bishop Michael McDaniel before him, and Bishop William Lazareth, and me dear old pastor Raymond Shaheen, and as I will myself someday. And certainly this is a comforting teaching, but also it is one with moral meaning. It carries implications for life in Christ. St. Paul puts the matter this way:

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? ²⁰For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (1Cor. 6:19-20, RSV)

When I was a boy, the folks in my humble, Bible-believing church took rather seriously the capstone of St. Paul's reasoning here. That is, we took seriously his teaching about the body being the "temple of the Holy Spirit." That's why we tried not to get drunk, nor to visit prostitutes, and we tried not to get fat.

And to be honest, though I am much older now and more sophisticated in theology and in the ways of the world, I still see little reason to back off from my childhood notion about the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. What a high conception that is! What an awe-inspiring way of speaking of the dignity of the body. We are to be the very dwelling place of the Spirit. With good cause we might hope to dwell in heavenly mansions someday, but meanwhile, the Holy Spirit hopes to dwell in us, in *our* bodies.

And the Spirit, you know, has important work to do in this world. The Spirit is the very hope of goodness and refreshment for our cities and for our neighbors. When I speak of "the Holy Spirit," most concretely I mean the Spirit of Jesus, and that was a beautiful spirit. Jesus was kind, forgiving, full of peace and charity, never wearying of trying to change sinners into saints. He is the same way *still*, but, mercy, he needs a body to work with! He needs *your* body, he needs *my* body. He needs your hands, your tongue, your feet, and he needs mine. So, when we are joined to Christ in Baptism, he sets up his Spirit in us! We become his physical presence in this world, so that he can continue his ministry of compassion to the world. And are we, then, to take this body of ours, his home! and

join it to a prostitute or drug it with pot or whatever or render it lethargic and prone to illness through gluttony. Never!

The case against prostitution is easy enough to understand. But what of fornication? That is, what shall we say about sex that might lead to marriage, but is not yet marriage?

David Yeago, who teaches Systematic Theology in our Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, once mentioned to me that in medieval Europe, the Church would steadfastly preach a certain sequence of romantic steps¹. The recommended sequence went like this: marriage, sex, pregnancy. But many of the peasants preferred a different sequence - one that went rather like this: sex, pregnancy, marriage. So the Church preached one thing and the people often did something else.

However, this never really disrupted the preaching of the Church. The Church went on preaching her traditional morality, the people went on sinning against that morality, and the Church loved them all, lock, stock, and barrel, nonetheless. The parish priests nurtured and comforted the people, welcomed them into the parish churches, grew old with them, baptized the babies even of those who had married after pregnancy, preached the faith, performed the marriages of the next generation, shared the sacraments, and tended the dying. The Church loved her people, and yet she did not consider the fact that her preaching was out of step with her people to mean that she should change her preaching.

It has always been this way. Consider this little passage from Martin Luther:

My dear boy, do not be ashamed of the fact that you desire a girl and that a girl desires a boy. Only let the desire result in marriage, not in fornication; then it is no more a shame to you than eating and drinking are. (*What Luther Said*, “Chasteness,” #397)

And the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is just as steadfast in opposing fornication. Its tone is somber. It seems to be reproducing St. Paul’s opposition to fornication:

[Fornication] is gravely contrary to the dignity of persons and of human sexuality which is naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, Part Three, Life in Christ, #2353)

But there is an uncertainty about this ruling in the modern Catechism — at least for me. My hesitation is that earlier, the Catechism defines “fornication” in a harsh way as “a carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman.” But I wonder whether all premarital sex is that way, is “carnal.” It seems to me that quite often premarital sex is leading to marriage, and the man and the woman already participate, in some true measure, in holy love for another, and that if they should sense that marriage is not right for them after all, they mean to stop their relationship and to free each other for marriage to someone else.

¹ I referred to Yeago’s point in a speech to the Metro New York Synod Assembly, June 16, 2000.

And this leads me to an observation about the Church's long tradition of preaching about Christian sexual morality. As far as I can tell, the actual proclamation of the Church about sexual matters tends to be humble and gentle and most confident of itself when it is simply praising and defending marriage. That is how I want to end this sermon: with praise of the holy estate of marriage.

And so I join my testimony to so many other grey-haired Christians who are so very grateful for their marriage and for the wonders, including the passions, of married love. I mentioned this in my Christmas Eve sermon and I speak of it again now, it is such a powerful conviction for me: Love was never so holy, and holding my Carol was never so thrilling, as when she was pregnant and we were expecting our children. Of course, in theory, there were other beautiful women out there, but my eyes were not on them. My eyes were on my beloved. I do believe that marriage has that power: it has the power to permit you to see that your beloved is precious and that her body is holy, as well as delightful. That is, marriage has the power to let you see the truth of things: that your beloved and your making love with her is the highest blessing you are going to know on this earth.

I do not think I would have lost much by practicing chastity. Perhaps all I would have lost would be regrets and the need some of us feel to pray even all these years later for sins of our youth. And most important of all, I would not have lost that blessing that means most to me in this world: my wife Carol.

Well, I finish as often I want to finish: with words from St. John Chrysostom, whose way of putting things I could never match, but which I admire very much and am glad to share with you:

Considering these things therefore, reverence thou Him that dwelleth within. For the Paraclete [the Holy Spirit] is He. Thrill before Him that is enfolded and cleaves unto thee; for Christ is He. Hast thou indeed made thyself members of Christ? Think thus, and continue chaste. (*Homilies on First Corinthians*, on our passage, Chapter 6)

Yes, think of Him, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.