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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/25/2009, The Fourth Week of Lent, Midweek
Lust

APOSTOLIC GREETING

PRAYER OF THE DAY

P God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON 2 Samuel 11:1-4a, RSV

¹In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. ²It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking upon the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. ³And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" ⁴So David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her.

SECOND LESSON The Song of Songs 2:1-13, NRSV

(Note: the New Jerusalem Bible charmingly describes this passage as a "duo" or a duet -- not so much a conversation between a man and a woman, but rather a love song they sing in turn in their own voices.)

The woman ¹I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

The man ²As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens.

The woman ³As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. ⁴He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love. ⁵Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am faint with love. ⁶O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!

The man ⁷I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the wild does: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!

The woman ⁸The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. ⁹My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. ¹⁰My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; ¹¹for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. ¹²The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. ¹³The fig

tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

HOLY GOSPEL.....Matthew 5:27-28, KJV

²⁷Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:

²⁸But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

HYMN LBW 370

Blest Be the Tie that Binds

DENNIS

SERMON

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

Defining lust seems easy enough. I take the definition in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) as being sensible and fine: “Lust is disordered desire or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure.” (#2351) As with all coveting, both of thy neighbor’s house and of thy neighbor’s spouse, there are two ways in which we can go wrong: either by wanting something *too much* or by wanting that which we *ought not* to have. So it is with sexual pleasure: we can desire such pleasure overmuch, or we can desire pleasure with someone we ought not to be thinking about.

So, I think that the idea of lust is easy enough to grasp, but what to say about the place of lust in the life of Christian folk is uncertain in some ways, at least for me. My goal, then, in this sermon is to try to speak gently and sympathetically concerning those who suffer with lust.

Part of the puzzle when talking about lust is that there *does* seem to be such a thing as “holy lust” -- a lust that is God pleasing and within the bounds of Christian life. The heart is wild, you know, and feelings are no respecters of boundaries. They just fly wherever they will. But often they fly to a *proper* source: your spouse or that one who has captured your heart and you hope to marry. Then the desire for your beloved is good, even sacred. Indeed, I would suggest to those who are courting that if you *do not* desire the body of your beloved, then that is a problem and you should speak of that and reveal it, for it is natural and God-pleasing, in my opinion, to have sexual desire for your spouse.

As far as I can recall, the Bible does not have a whole lot to say about the passionate life of the believer. The great exception is the *Song of Songs* in the Old Testament. There we have moving love poetry. It is an odd book to be in the Bible, since it does not speak of the LORD, nor of faith, but simply of romance and of desire. I have read aloud some of it for you, above. There are certainly some sensual passages in that book. Yet it is an honored text of Holy Scripture. It almost feels as if the Bible could not rest content with speaking of brotherly love or parental love, but had to bring the passions, including desire for the beloved, into the sphere of the faith of Israel.

This seems important to me. Suppose you want to be Christ’s man, you want to be Christ’s woman, yet you also have a passionate streak in you. You know what it means to burn with desire. Naturally, you can listen to the preacher (as I try to listen to myself) and hear him say, “Seek to see others with the eyes of Christ’s compassion.”

Or a spiritual friend might say to you, “Interpose Jesus between yourself and others. See them by first seeing Jesus and seeking to see them as He does.” You can agree with all that. Yet, you still have a passionate streak. Does life in Christ lurch along by fits and starts, as if skipping over the times of passion, and picking up again when calmness returns?

I think not. Bonhoeffer was right: When Christ calls us, he calls us to die. He calls us entire. He calls us to surrender our lives to Him. He calls us to renounce everything that leads away from Christ. Ahh, but does he call us to renounce our passions and our desires for our beloved?

Again, I think not. Christ asks instead that our desires be for the right person, and that however strong and wild they might be, they be strong and wild *within Him*. And that seems to mean that our passions should honor, protect, and give joy to the beloved, and for all their energy and wildness, our passions should nonetheless maintain a kind of innocence about them. Within the context of holy marriage, a whole lot of passion and fun is possible and desirable.

Let’s look at a case of desire gone wrong: I mean David and Bathsheba. It is a case of lust on David’s part, a sin against chastity. And it is a sin that one day he will deeply regret and grieve over. Some of his sorrow for sin shows itself in Psalm 51.

Though the story is quickly told, I think we can detect within just a few lines two mistakes that David made -- two disciplines that he neglected, to the sorrow of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah and to the sorrow of David too.

David’s first mistake was a violation of boundaries. He was King of Israel. As king, he enjoyed much power, but also he lived under definite restraints and expectations. The Bible refers to one of those expectations in the very first line of the story:

¹In the spring of the year, *the time when kings go forth to battle*, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.(2 Samuel 11:1, RSV)

And so it is that David falls short of what was expected of him. The springtime is the time for going forth into battle, but David did not go into battle. He lounged at home. He neglected his professional responsibility. He seems to have been over-confident, as if he felt himself to be above the disciplines that kings live by. He stayed at home, and in staying, fell into trouble.

The Sixth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer asks that the Lord will “lead us not into temptation.” Does not integrity ask of the one who prays such a petition, that we not lead *ourselves* into temptation? Get out of there, David! Get off that roof of yours. Gather up your armor and your sword and get thee hence, to the place you ought to be, doing battle for Israel, not lounging on your roof.

The second mistake David made was that while he was lounging on his roof, he looked. He did not *look away*, but he looked:

he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful.(2 Samuel 11:2, RSV)

That is, David did not exercise the modesty that is becoming of faithful believers.

Now, here is an old-fashioned virtue: modesty. Modesty aims at respecting the body and the *mystery* of people. If David had been able to tear his eyes away from Bathsheba, he would not have seen her naked for so long and he would have paid her an initial honor that might have spared each of them tragedy in the long run. Modesty aims to leave space for people to be *unseen* by us, and to not be the object of our imaginations and fantasies. Likewise, modesty seeks space for ourselves, in which we are not inviting others to gaze at us, nor to imagine us or to fantasize about us. Modesty seeks to maintain privacy and mystery.

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus goes right after this matter of the heart and how we permit it to lust for others:

²⁷Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: ²⁸But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Matthew 5:27, KJV)

Now, I'm no genius about contending with lust in our hearts, but it does occur to me that one way of obeying Jesus when he forbids us to "looketh on a woman to lust after her," is to not "looketh on her" at all. That is, we do have some control over our eyes and our imaginations. And when we notice ourselves looking where we ought not to look, let us try to release such looks and imaginations, and to leave that one in peace.

Luther observed that the nature of temptation seems to shift as we go on in life. He noticed that young people are especially tempted by the desires of the flesh. Middle-aged folks are tempted by love of money. And elderly folk, he suggested, suffer perhaps the worst temptation of all: the temptation toward despair.

But reality does not sort itself out so neatly. Sexual temptations are wild and tend to overrun every boundary. Some of us seem never to outgrow the desires of the flesh. Luther is right, of course, that lust naturally tempts the young, but I fear it tempts the middle-aged and elderly folk too.

Therefore, let us strive in each stage of life for modesty and purity of heart, and to offer up such disciplines to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.