If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “A Modest Sermon Against Fornication.” When is the last time you heard a sermon against fornication? Well, I am going to give it a try. I call it a “modest” sermon because there is nothing groundbreaking here. I am simply trying to lift up the teaching of the Bible and of the long-standing tradition of the church. My sermon is mostly based on this morning’s Epistle Lesson. If there is anything distinctive about this sermon perhaps it is simply my intention to speak with love concerning my subject. I have sympathy for Christians wrestling with questions of sexual morality, and I hope to condemn no one, but rather to help us all along.

Let us begin, not yet with our Epistle Lesson, but with a verse from our Gospel Lesson. It is a verse about Nathanael, and it goes this way:

47Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47, RSV)

My theme about Nathanael, and indeed about all disciples, is that when Jesus calls a man, calls a woman, a boy, or a girl, he calls that person into a life of purity and decency, including purity and decency in matters of sex.

Judging by the Bible, Jesus was surrounded by women, and they were devoted to him. They did not abandon him. When Jesus was dying on the cross, women were there. St. Matthew mentions that these women had followed Jesus from Galilee:

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. (Matthew 27:55, NRSV)

In all their following, in some measure, these women had given their hearts to Jesus. I picture Jesus as a gentlemen with the women around him. He did not abuse them or exploit them or pressure them in unwanted ways. Rather, they seemed entirely glad to be near him, uplifted by him, and unwilling to abandon him even when the going was rough. The twelve apostles had forsaken Jesus and fled (Matthew 26:56), but the women remained with Jesus. Who was at the tomb on Easter morning? It was the women, including Mary Magdalene. The company of Jesus was precious to them. I imagine that they could talk honestly with him. They could open their hearts to him and be strengthened by him without fear that he would introduce sex where it does
not belong. At last, the women could deal with a man who struck them as both wise and innocent.

Likewise, when Jesus calls Nathanael to follow him, he thereby invites that man into Jesus’s own manner of life, including our Lord’s life of purity and decency in matters of sex. Jesus invites us modern-day disciples into such innocence too.

Martin Luther interprets the Sixth Commandment — the commandment that forbids adultery — by speaking of pureness of heart. Let me read his words for you:

“You shall not commit adultery.”
What does this mean?
Answer: We should fear and love God, and so we should lead a chaste and pure life in word and deed, each one loving and honoring his wife or her husband. (Luther, Small Catechism, Sixth Commandment, Tappert)

Luther insists that the Sixth Commandments applies to all Christians, not just those tempted toward adultery. Luther wants each of us to strive for purity in our deeds, our words, and the thoughts of our imaginations. Luther puts his point this way:

...this [Sixth] commandment is also directed against every form of unchastity, no matter what it is called. Not only is the outward act forbidden, but also every kind of cause, provocation, and means, so that your heart, your lips, and your entire body may be chaste and afford no occasion, aid, or encouragement to unchastity. (Luther, Large Catechism, Sixth Commandment, Kolb/Wengert)

Such decency and purity in matters of sexual morality can be found in many people in this world, including the people of our congregation. They are fighting the good fight of faith in matters of sex, and we can be proud of them, and know about them that they are trying to take good care of their neighbors and of themselves and their own souls. This is so for children, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged people, and elderly folk. We are trying to live good and honorable lives in matters of sex. We might fail and disappoint ourselves at times, but let us be encouraged to remember that with the Lord there is forgiveness and the chance to renew the life of piety. And God willing, there will also be a chance for forgiveness and reconciliation with anyone we might have hurt along the way.

And so, going back to Nathanael of old, when Jesus called Nathanael, he called him into a new life of purity and decency in matters of sexual morality. After all, such was the life that Jesus himself lived, still lives, and still believes in. The Bible recalls many false accusations against Jesus, calling him a
glutton, a drunkard, even someone who did his wonders by way of the devil. But never do we hear the opponents of Jesus charging him with fornication. We know that Jesus was tempted in every manner such as we are (Hebrews 4:15), and so I figure that that includes sexual temptation. But Jesus did not yield to sin, and he wants the same for those who are his disciples. No fornication, then.

That in fact is how St. Paul puts the matter in this morning’s epistle reading. He urges that there should be no fornication among Christians. Let me read his words aloud again.

The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body... Shun fornication! (1 Corinthians 6:13, 18, NRSV)

We need a definition. What is “fornication”? Let me begin with the teaching of the modern Catholic Catechism, 1992. At first, the definition sounds quite harsh, but I think that it ends up being rather gentle. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that...

Fornication is carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It 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. Moreover, it is a grave scandal when there is corruption of the young. (paragraph 2353)

The way in which I suggest this definition is gentle concerns the word “carnal.” Fornication is a “carnal” union between a man and a woman who are not yet married to one another. But I wonder how many Christians do that. I wonder how many Christians enter into carnal sexual relationships.

One thing is clear from St. Paul’s discussion of sexual morality in this morning’s Epistle reading: For St. Paul, sex is a BIG deal! Sex is not just a matter of the body, but also of the soul. For the apostle, our bodies have a halo of holiness about them. Our bodies are a chief offering we can give to Jesus. And so St. Paul says this:

The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord...

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1 The Catechism of the Catholic Church (Latin: Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae; commonly called the Catechism or the CCC) is a catechism promulgated for the Catholic Church by Pope John Paul II in 1992. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catechism_of_the_Catholic_Church
We should use our bodies in ways that we think will please Jesus. It is no
impiety to believe that Jesus approves of joyful sex in marriage. But the
subject before us this morning is not that. We are not talking about joyful sex
in marriage, but sex, even amazing sex, prior to marriage or apart from
marriage.

Let us ponder some more what the Catholic Catechism calls “carnal” sex.
Let us try a distinction. Let us imagine two groups of people. One group thinks
that sex is without spiritual meaning. The other group thinks that sex is filled
with spiritual meaning.

So, I have something to say to both groups of people. Or rather, I believe
Jesus has something important to say to both groups.

First, to the group that believes that sex is without spiritual meaning, Jesus
says, “You can do better than that. Shun fornication. Shun prostitution. Shun
adultery. Shun sex with colleagues and subordinates. When you make love to
someone, try to understand that both you and your beloved are entering into
a holy realm — a realm in which you might become co-creators with God of
life, a realm in which children become possible, and a realm in which your
entire surrendering of your bodies to one another calls out for the traditional
promises to love and cherish each other until you are parted by death.

So, that is what I say to the first group — the group that is casual about
sex.

But I especially want to speak to the second group — the folks who sense
and acknowledge that sex is full of spiritual meaning. I have great sympathy
for these folks, even if they are having sex but are not yet married. Indeed, in
this second group, there are people who believe that to make love to someone
means that you hope you can build a life together with that person. You hope
that things will move on toward holy marriage. And often it does. Still, I am
preaching a modest sermon against fornication, in accordance with the Bible
and the wisdom of the ages in the church’s moral tradition. And so I want to
gently raise the question, even for those who are having sex and hoping for
marriage: Could you not wait for marriage? Could you not suspend making
love for a while, until you are married?

These are hard questions to ask in this modern world. My heart goes out
to people who say, “But if I wait for sex, my beloved will think me odd, and I
could well lose that one!” To which I want to say, “But you are not odd. You
are following a noble path. You are in fact the best gift your beloved is likely
ever to receive!”

It is not insane to say, “I do not want to have, or I do not want to continue
having all these intense histories with people to whom I am not married -- all
these memories and comparisons and hurts. I want to give my self entirely to
my beloved in marriage and then for us to give ourselves entirely to one
another in sex in our marriage. I want to walk my own path.”

And so it is that I am trying to speak up for the traditional path of chastity.

Let me close by speaking of old Nathanael again. Jesus said something nice
about that man. Jesus said that he was someone who was guileless:
“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!”

An Israelite in whom is no guile. He was straightforward — not tricky or manipulative.

But recall that Israel himself – Jacob of old – was quite a man of guile. He was a clever, manipulative man. Now, Jesus is calling to himself a new kind of person – one who is without guile.³ Let it be so for us modern-day followers of Jesus too: that even in matters of sex, we are without guile, innocent, without manipulation, and of firm convictions and intentions to live a holy life, after our Master, Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

³ A nice point made by Leonard Klein in his Lectionary Commentary on John 1:43-51.