

I Kissed Waiting Goodbye Pt. 3

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Preacher: Daniel Dixon

[0 : 00] Please join me in opening up this with prayer. Creator God, you spoke the world into existence.

You formed the ocean and the trees and the soil. You spoke and you created the birds of the air, the orcas of the sea.

You created and you call it all good. Creator God, you created humanity and you called us good as well. We come to you with humility, seeking your grace, that we are your creation, made in your image.

In your name, amen. All right, so my name's Daniel. I am an elder here at the table and we are continuing our series today called I Kissed, Waiting, Goodbye.

It's a punny kind of derived version of the book by Joshua Harris, I Kissed, Dating, Goodbye. So earlier this year, Pastor Tonetta shared with a group of folks some potential sermon topics.

[1 : 16] She shared about possibilities like deconstruction. What could that look like for us to talk about deconstruction? Economic justice and racial justice, lamentations. All of those were topics that when I heard them, I felt really excited about the chance to come and talk about those.

I wanted to talk about them in this community, this faithful, authentic, thoughtful community. And then she said, we're going to do a series on sexuality and purity culture.

And my body tensed up immediately as soon as I heard those words. And there's an immediate, nope. Not that one.

Thankfully, I had some plans to be traveling during June. I was going to be gone in Canada for a bit and possibly in Oregon, so I wasn't going to be around for this series on sexuality and purity culture anyways.

As it turns out, I am around for this series. As evidenced by me standing here. And we are going to talk about purity culture today. So I share that because I want to just acknowledge that we're talking about something that has a really visceral, bodily, a felt piece to it.

[2 : 31] When I hear the words purity culture, my body responds to those in ways that I can't always put words to, in ways that I can't always conceptualize.

But my body has a reaction. When I hear the word sex, my body responds to that. It's laden with shame, with memories of repression, with a lack of teaching from family, from communities.

And so I just want to encourage you today to be gentle with your body. Whatever you're feeling, whatever you feel like you need, please take the space to do that.

There are restrooms over there. If you need to step out and just grab some water, or you feel like this is not what you need to hear right now, what your body is ready for, that is okay. Can we go to my first slide, please?

All right. These are sort of odd memes. I'm going to kind of unpack a bit about why we have them here. So over here on the right. My pronouns are none.

[3 : 40] Please do not refer to me. Even better, do not perceive me. For practical purposes, I don't exist. As I've explored what it means for me to be a human, a queer human in a body, I find that I often feel like that.

That many times, I just don't want to be seen with my imperfections. I have allergies. My left eye is very red right now. I don't want to be seen with one eye red and one eye not red.

I don't want to experience that. I don't want to be perceived. There's a really wonderful queer musician named Simler. If you haven't listened to their music, I recommend it.

They have a song called Ghosts. And one of the lyrics in that song says, I don't like the body you see me inside. I'd rather be a ghost. And I've often felt that way.

I'd rather just be a spiritual being, a spirit that floats around. On the right, we have the cycle of downloading and deleting dating apps.

[4 : 50] I don't know if anyone here has ever experienced that before. I did last year for the first time. I downloaded a dating app. First time ever. And found myself trapped in this vicious circle of download the app, ignore messages, delete the app, reinstall the app, and continue on and on and on we go.

And I began to realize that I had internalized certain messages about my body, my physical body, that were causing me to be unable to experience dating after prayer-daked culture, that were teaching me to hold on to shame, to hold on to some of the other things we're going to unpack here. You can go ahead and put those slides away for now. There's a story that I want to share that I feel like really encapsulates some of this struggle that I've had with purity culture and the impact it's had on me.

So a couple of years ago, I started working for a local church in the area. It was really no big deal. It was a church I had been going to. I had friends there, and I joined them on staff. At the time, I was also in a relationship with somebody.

We'd been dating for several months. And I found myself in a pretty challenging situation. You see, my partner and I came from very different backgrounds when it came to purity culture and sexuality. [6 : 17] As I've sort of alluded to already, I grew up in a background where we didn't talk about sex. And when we did, we talked about it in the context of shame and impurity. My partner didn't have that background.

She didn't have those same experiences, that same language that I did around sex and sexuality. And so we were having open and honest conversations with each other in our relationship about what we wanted and how we could navigate our pretty wide differences when it came to sexuality. We were emphasizing consent, pleasure, and care for each other and care for each other. Those were at the center of our conversations. Coming from the setting that I did, I didn't have a blueprint for that kind of conversation.

I didn't have a map. I didn't have a direction to go in except for listening to my partner and listening to my body and being open, honest, and curious. Those conversations were really scary.

They're also really freeing. There's something about them that made me feel grounded in my body in a way I hadn't felt before. But when I started working for that church, they required us to sign a contract that had several stipulations to it.

[7 : 35] If you can go on to the next slide, I have them up here. So they worked there. This is part of what I agreed to. Adhering to a biblical standard of sexuality, living a life of celibacy, until such a time as I enter into the covenant of marriage, avoiding the appearance of immodesty in dating relationships.

This includes sleeping over with significant others. Normally, that would not have been a problem. I would have signed that, gone on with my work, would have been fine. I spent some time as part of an organization called YWAM, Youth with a Mission.

It's a youth-focused mission organization, and I went to school at it in an evangelical college, so I was quite familiar with that kind of language. In addition, in those settings, we would sometimes take a spiritual gifts quiz or assessment.

The concept of it is a little bit silly, to be honest, but you basically answer some questions, and it tells you, what are your spiritual gifts? Some of those would have celibacy, because if you read 1 Corinthians 12, celibacy is listed as a spiritual gift.

I would always rank very high on celibacy, like one or two. Like, it was either the top one or the second one. And I was totally fine with that.

[8 : 57] That was not a problem for me. I had grown up in a missionary family. I had grown up idolizing missionaries. I had this idea that I was going to sacrifice my body for the gospel. I was going to not have a family, not have belongings, not have possessions, give everything up to preach the gospel.

Being celibate made that easier to say, I'm going to give everything up for this. Those settings of YWAM and my evangelical schools had similar principles around the appearance of immodesty. If you had two people of different genders in a room together, the door had to be open. If somebody is non-binary or if they are queer, you know, just kind of think about that or talk about that, but if you're people of two different genders, the door had to be open.

We also would coin cautionary phrases about physical contact, things like, back rubs in the front room lead to front rubs in the back room. Which is a legitimate, real phrase that I did not make up and that was taught in a class on sexuality.

It was prompted because a teacher saw a student giving another student a back massage. And I thought those were silly.

[10:17] We all kind of laughed at that phrase and I also sort of laughed at them too, even when I was in that environment. Because I was going to be celibate anyways, so it didn't really matter to me. But these stipulations were different in this context for me.

One, I realized that I was not called to celibacy. I was just scared of intimacy. I was scared of loving and being loved and I was disguising that as a calling to celibacy.

Which is not to knock or downgrade that as something that is a spiritual gift. But my motivation wasn't to live a life I was called to. My motivation was to run away from sexuality, from my physical body.

Secondly, my partner lived in Alexandria. I lived in Northwest DC. Apparently, that's a long distance relationship. I say that sort of jokingly, but when you don't have a car and when you're working from nine to five or nine till six, it can be a trek to get from Northwest DC to Alexandria to take the metro there.

At that time, I often would just ride my bike everywhere. I can't really cycle from Northwest DC to Alexandria and be there with energy. It's exhausting. And so it's pretty normal for us to spend the night with each other.

[11:38] It was more than just about convenience. It was also about having time together. We lived busy lives. And the ability to have her stay at my place or have me go and stay at her place was really vital for us to have the time we needed in our relationship.

relationship. Those stipulations became a consistent source of angst for me. They ended up impacting my relationship with my body.

They ended up impacting my relationship with that partner. And they played a role in that relationship eventually ending a few months later. I went from feeling grounded as I explored questions about sexuality to anxious and uncertain.

I was a little bit confused about how that had all happened because I had never read, I guess, *Dating Goodbye*. You know, Joshua Harris' teachings weren't taught in my youth group.

I didn't hear about the book until college. I never signed a purity contract or a purity ring. I had never heard of the True Love Waits movement. A lot of the kind of more institutional aspects of purity culture were things that I didn't know about.

[12:46] They weren't part of my life. And yet, when I found myself in a situation where purity culture reared up, I found myself feeling defenseless with nowhere to go, nothing to do except give in to its messages.

Purity culture draws from a pretty old and ancient teaching, something called Gnosticism. And so if you go to the next slide, Gnosticism was one of the very first theological heresies that the church faced.

The early church faced this idea of Gnosticism. One of the primary principles for Gnosticism is dualism, a separation between the spiritual and the physical.

The physical is bad. It's evil. At best, it's just of pretty much no value at all. There are still ranges with the Gnosticism of what the physical world was, going from evil to just worthless.

You have your spirit, your soul inside your body, which is immortal. It was called the spark of the divine. You have the spark of the divine inside of you.

[13:56] And the way that that spark grows is through spiritual knowledge. So your physical body is a temporary cage that the spirit is in. And the way that your spirit grows is by transcending, rejecting the physical world, pursuing spiritual knowledge.

Although I had never heard of Gnosticism until I went to college, I've heard things like that said my whole life. I've heard descriptions of my physical body, my flesh, being at worst evil, at best, something to just ignore, and that I'm really a soul, a spirit, and that the way that I can grow is by rejecting the flesh.

Periodiculture, even though it's primarily focused on sex, draws from those principles of dualism and has worked within that Gnostic framework that the physical is bad in order to make its statements about sex.

So last week, Pastor Toneta illustrated for us some of the facets of how purity culture works, talking about how psychology, especially psychology around disgust and purity, play into this.

She introduced us to Matthew 12, where we see Jesus saying this phrase that he desires mercy and not sacrifice, and how erotic connection flips the script of purity culture.

[15:22] So we're going to continue today with Matthew 12. We're going to kind of zoom out a bit from talking about the more like sexual aspects of purity culture and talk more about how purity culture has taught a view about the body and how that then translates into views about sexuality.

So if you have your Bibles, you can follow along. We're going to read from Matthew 12, 1 through 13. At that time, Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath.

His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of corn of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, look, your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath. Jesus answered, haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.

Or haven't you read in the law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.

[16:36] If you had known what these words mean, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent, for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

He said to them, if any of you have a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep?

Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Then he said to the man, stretch out your hand. So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.

This story in Matthew 12, the first story which Pastor Toneta focused on last week and the second one, they center on a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

[17:48] In the eyes of the Pharisees, Jesus is breaking the Sabbath with his actions. He's making himself and his disciples unclean by working on the Sabbath. In the first story, when they're over in the grain fields, we see that hunger is driving that narrative.

Disciples were hungry. They wanted to eat and so they did. Jesus defends them because in that first story, to put it simply, Jesus cared about the fact that they were hungry.

Jesus cared about their well-being. Similarly, in the second story, Jesus cared about the physical well-being of that man in the synagogue. In both stories, we see that Jesus cares so much about the physical well-being of the people around him that he does something that could be considered unlawful, something that could make him impure in order to meet the physical needs of his disciples and the man in the synagogue.

Now, when the Pharisees question Jesus, it's almost like they're taunting him. They're saying, you let your disciples eat on the Sabbath, are you going to also heal this man on the Sabbath?

There's a bit of a gotcha question there that they're trying to get at him. Before Jesus takes any action to heal the man, Jesus asks a question back to the Pharisees, and that question is just as important as the subsequent act of healing.

[19:18] Jesus asks them, you save a sheep on the Sabbath? Why won't you save a person? In an agrarian agriculture society like Israel was at that time, this reference to a sheep is an economic reference.

That sheep is the source of income for individuals and for families. That sheep is the source of milk, of wool, of meat. the Pharisees' well-being, the well-being of their families depends on that sheep. Of course they're going to save it even if it's the Sabbath. And that's kind of what Jesus is getting at with that question of of course you're going to save that sheep. You need it to survive. You depend on it.

Of course you'll save it on the Sabbath and of course that's okay for you to do. And our contemporary terms might say you would save your paycheck if it fell into the ditch.

You would save your laptop if it fell into the ditch. You would save your phone. You depend on them. You need them. So when Jesus asks if you'd save this sheep that you depend on isn't a person and their body more valuable?

[20 : 34] Jesus is calling attention here to a form of economic logic that is focused on devaluing human bodies and needs of being blind to what the human body needs.

the Pharisees would save the sheep because they depend on it for their well-being but they don't see that same value in the body and the well-being of the disciples and the man in the synagogue. Richard Beck if we can go on to the next slide with the quote from Richard Beck not that one that one's going to show up later it is a great one that one perfect thank you pretend you didn't see that last slide so Richard Beck in his book Unclean describes this as in short the problem with the Pharisees was not just their unwillingness to associate with the unclean the Pharisees were also blinded to signs of human need this seems to be due to the fact that the Pharisees were blind to their own needs the Pharisees did not notice their economic and biological vulnerability until Jesus points out that they would quickly pull their sheep from a ditch even if it was on the Sabbath the Pharisees could not see how needy they were how vulnerable they were as biological creatures and by denying this about themselves the Pharisees could not see need in others damning the hungry disciples when they fed themselves refusing healing to a man with useless hand the irony of purity culture is that it's so focused on purity that it doesn't see the bodies that it's talking about it's blind to the bodies that it's talking about we see this play out in so many different ways in our society that use this same logic think about work culture where sometimes we're encouraged to skip meals in order to work where we are not eating breakfast not eating lunch working through those times eating lunch at our desks working late and are at the evenings giving up sleep in order to do our jobs we're blind to our bodies and our needs and the fact that the more we do that the more unproductive we're going to be the less we'd be able to work we see this in expressions like diet culture that stipulate that health can only look one certain way and ignores the multitude of healthy ways that bodies can and do exist we see this in the way that we treat people with disabilities where we see the exclusion of disabled folks in society with structures and systems that are inaccessible that are blind to the bodies this blindness that purity culture gives us has had devastating effects and we're not going to spend a lot of time talking about the impact of purity culture but there are numerous studies that you can read online about how people who have grown up in purity culture how that has shaped their self-image how it has shaped the way they see their bodies how it has shaped their relationship with their bodies but just like

Jesus interrupts the Pharisees and says you would value this sheep and you would save it while not a person Jesus also interrupts their blindness Jesus interrupts their blindness when he says that he desires mercy and not sacrifice because purity culture requires and it values sacrifice it's not a healthy kind of sacrifice we're not talking about a mutual healthy giving of yourself to another person purity culture asks that you break your connection with your body that you try to meet a specific certain ideal of what sex and sexuality are supposed to look like that you never ask yourself what is it that's good for me what is it that's good for others that you feel physical pleasure as a potential source of danger as a temptation this is a narrow view of sexuality one that goes back to these dualistic ideas of physicality and spirituality by saying that your physical experience of sexuality can only happen in one specific way for it to be pure and everyone is required to conform to these standards there's no room here for queer bodies there's no room here for asexual bodies there's no room here for different sexual libidos there's no room here for the different relationships that all kinds of people have with their bodies has no room for curiosity has no room for compassion and for care ultimately purity culture calls for sacrificing your body purity culture also relies on triggering disgust towards our bodies last week pastor

Tanetta shared about the psychology behind purity culture how some of the most powerful analogies are things that trigger disgust think about the analogy of a cup that's full of spit or a chewed up piece of gum even when I say those I feel something in my body I feel a sense of repulsion sense of uncleanness and purity culture wants us to associate those feelings of repulsion with our bodies but where purity culture values sacrifice Jesus values mercy mercy and these two stories from Matthew we see that mercy is Jesus' recognition of human neediness of the body as having physical needs it's the body as a place you can experience care compassion and love that's valuable to meet those physical bodily needs

[27 : 03] Richard Beck goes on to say Jesus connects with the refrain of I desire mercy not sacrifice this recognition of human need with his own ministry of table fellowship mercy for Jesus seems to be deeper than mere social affiliation and contact for Jesus mercy is implicated in the recognition of human neediness there's a bit of irony that these stories are happening on the

Sabbath the Sabbath is sometimes referred to as one of the very first or an early version of a labor law it was put in place to protect bodies the Sabbath was put in place so that workers could rest so that animals could rest the Sabbath recognized that we are physical beings that we have bodies with a human nature the Sabbath was a way for humanity to experience

God's mercy a recognition of our limitations as Jesus teaches us to view our bodies as places where we are intended to experience care compassion and love that frees us up to explore possibilities within sexuality and within the erotic that surpassed the narrow path that purity culture has forced us to walk down this extends beyond sexuality has implications for every area of our lives Jesus tells the Pharisees that you would save the sheep because you need it and how much more valuable than is it to care for physical bodies there are many different ways that we can experience physical pleasure to experience the mercy of being flesh of being human bodies we can go on to the surprise slide that was shown early so I really love this tweet deeply deeply love it on one level

I just kind of like poking fun at the idea that my body is a temple certainly don't treat it like a temple and I like poking fun at that concept because of the baggage that it has for me but on another level there's something deeply appealing and provocative about viewing my body as a spirit Halloween as a place where value systems that are focused on ignoring people and bodies go to die and get transformed by silliness and by joy of physically centered pleasure to return to the story that I shared at the beginning where I found myself trapped between a relationship that I cared about deeply and purity culture I found myself there caught between mercy and sacrifice on one hand I was experiencing mercy

I was viewing my body as a place where I could experience connection and pleasure on the other hand I was drawn away by the sacrifice mentality of purity culture triggering my fear of being unclean to be clear I'm not entirely sure where I stand on sexual ethics I grew up being taught a very specific version of what sex should and shouldn't be and it's hard for me to break free of that we are going to talk about sexual ethics it's going to be something that we will be getting to in the sermon but before we even began talking about sexual ethics what we believe about sex I know that for myself I needed to stop and pause and pull back say am I approaching this from the lens of purity culture am I approaching this from the dualistic perspective that my body is at worst evil at best just kind of there Jesus invites us to view our bodies through a lens of mercy to explore these questions about sexuality in a way that is grounded that is centered on care on consent on attentiveness earlier I shared a quote from similar so I want to end with another quote from one of similar songs it's called

Late Bloomer it's a really powerful song I really recommend listening to it it says I wonder what it must be like to grow up always knowing your face it took years to recognize myself but it was worth the wait and as we continue to explore what it means for us to have an embodied experience my prayer my hope my belief is that it will be worth the wait as we recognize ourselves as we recognize those around us as we choose mercy over sacrifice us amen Lord from One maybe nothing is ROB