

I Kissed Waiting Goodbye Pt. 5

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[0 : 0 0] God of all creation, Lord of life who changes everything, we come here again with our griefs and our joys, our brokenness and our beauty, inviting you to see us, to attend to us, to know that we are vulnerable, God, I pray this day that each one of us would be and feel ourselves held by this community, by the person beside us or across from us in every aspect of this time.

And I pray, Lord, as we move to the end of this sermon series about the power of the erotic, that you would bring healing in the deepest crevices of our hearts, and lives.

May we know you more in and through our bodies. May we know you more as the God of love.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. In the beginning was Christ, who would walk the earth as Jesus of Nazareth, the word made flesh, born to an unlikely young woman in an unimpressive way.

In the beginning was the word of God made flesh, who kept really impolite company, rank truck drivers, douchey hedge fund managers, anxiety-ridden sex workers, ambitious seminary professors, boring and unimpressive people, people who really loved, if you noticed, alcohol.

[2 : 0 5] In the beginning, the word was born and kept interesting company and said super confusing things that to this day, we are still trying to figure out.

The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Those who seek to find their life must lose it.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you. And of all things, your sins are forgiven.

In the beginning was the word made flesh, the living water who kept interesting company and taught some counterintuitive stuff and preached forgiveness of sins and also healed the sick and raised the dead and fed the hungry.

And that was more than we could bear. The word became flesh and made its home in the body of a human woman. The word became flesh and washed human feet and smelled luxurious perfume and tasted abundant wine.

[3 : 2 2] When Jesus wanted to heal the blind man, he didn't use good vibes or send positive energy. He used spit and dirt. Very real tears of salt ran down Jesus' face as he smelled the stink of Lazarus.

The one he called friend. Death could not contain the holy and defiant and pure love of God. And on the third day, Christ defeated death and rose from the grave and spent a really little time, spent a little time really freaking out his friends and devouring a lot of snacks before ascending to the Father.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we were given grace upon grace to become children of God.

And in so doing, dear people of God, you are now flesh become word. Now, some of you might have recognized it, that summary of the life of Jesus was from Reverend Nadia Bolts' Weber's Shameless, A Sexual Reformation.

I love Nadia, even as sometimes she scandalizes me a little bit. And I love her description of Jesus because with this witty language and wisdom, she reminds us of the human Jesus.

[4 : 58] She places the accent on his humanity and in so doing reminds us to place an accent on our own humanity.

I think sometimes the disciples who follow Jesus, James and John and Peter and all the rest of them, and I wonder to what extent they must have been baffled by this crying, laughing, bleeding man who claimed to be God.

I wonder what it felt like to understand that his crying and his laughing and bleeding meant that they were free to do the exact same.

Free to be fully human as they literally ate and washed and walked beside God. Not too long ago, I heard one of my favorite scholars and pastors, the Reverend Dr. Peter Choi, give a perspective that I had never considered on Isaiah 40, 30 through 31.

Those particular verses have become kind of like a bumper sticker platitude, which is why I was pretty surprised by the depth of perspective that he offered.

[6 : 26] The two verses say this, Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.

But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary.

They shall walk and not be faint. Dr. Choi pointed out that the trajectory here for those who put their faith in God is not toward flying.

It's not toward soaring among the heights. The trajectory in these verses actually moves from flying to running to walking.

The path of the faithful is to become more grounded, to become more present to the world and to your body, the human body.

[7 : 32] The invitation to discipleship seems at least as much about growing in humanity as it does about growing toward divinity.

And that's not an easy thing to kind of take in, to accept. We are people, and I'll say I am definitely a person, who is always tempted toward trying to be superhuman, which was really the weakness of Adam and Eve in their idolatry.

I try to squeeze more into my day than 24 hours can possibly contain. I try to know everything about everything.

I don't want to rest. I don't want to age. I would like to be seen as perfect and invulnerable. Or alternately, I think that we are tempted to be subhuman, which is the weakness of Cain who killed his brother Abel in an act of inhumanity, in the barrage of information and in the violence of anxiety that so many of us deal with.

We allow ourselves to disconnect from ethical and moral reflection. We take refuge in a sense that this is simply the way that things have to be and that we have to just make do.

[9 : 06] We dull our sensitivity. I dull my sensitivity in order to survive. Yet the invitation to discipleship is to resist the superhuman and the subhuman to become more fully human like Jesus.

So for a long time, I would say that as a Christian, I had the right words for the humanity of Jesus. I knew the formula for incarnation, but I didn't understand how that related to my own faith.

During about a decade of my life, I trained to be a missionary and we talked a lot, a lot about incarnational ministry, like the idea of you should dress like the people, you should eat the food and learn the language of the people and that idea of incarnational was thrown around a lot.

But it was mostly understood as living with people in ways that helped you convert them. It wasn't ever about my own conversion into being more fully embodied, to having my feet firmly on the ground in the land wherever I was.

It was never framed as about my own transformation. The church father, Irenaeus, he's famous for saying that the glory of God is the human being fully alive.

[10 : 49] But part of what it means to be fully alive is to experience desire and to know pleasure. It's to be engaged in the erotic impulse toward connection and acute feeling, which is a super strong antidote to the temptations of subhumanity and superhumanity.

And, and when we begin to move against those two temptations and toward the erotic, then and only then will we be able to make real strides against Christian theologies that are colonizing.

I just want to say that. In order to make real strides against Christian theologies that are colonizing, which is so much of what we are gathered here to do as a table church, we have to resist the pull to be superhuman and subhuman, but instead to embrace the erotic.

Now, I started with all of that because we're wrapping up the series, as I said, in the prayer, the series we've been in, I Kissed Waiting Goodbye. We've spent the past few weeks talking about sex and sexuality and the erotic as relates to our faith.

We've heard personal stories and explored the impact of purity culture, and we've reached for ways to consider our embodiment, as well as discussing the problematic binary between marriage and singleness.

[12 : 25] and the point of all this is pretty well summed up by scholar Carrie Ellen Walsh. If we want to understand ourselves, our lives, and any faith we muster, we must become literate about desire.

If we deny or giggle, we choke off the one avenue where God does speak in our longings.

See, we need the erotic as a means of spirituality and as a portal into the mysteries of our Christian faith. I've said that this erotic is about connection.

It's not limited to sexual desire, even though it includes it. It's about our capacity to feel and to come to life. And unfortunately, as a church historically, a broad church historically, we've done a pretty terrible job of making it a discipleship priority.

See, while many of us were taught that the glory of God is man fully alive or the human being fully alive, what we really saw lived out in the church at a deeper level is the idea that the glory of God is the human being fleeing fornication.

[14 : 05] The apostle Paul said this, right? Shun fornication. Every sin that a person commits is outside the body, but the fornicator sins against the body itself.

Or 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? For you were bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body.

Now, full disclosure, I was one of those judgy youth group kids, which I probably could have guessed. I was one of those judgy youth group kids, and if I didn't know anything else, I knew that fornication was the line between who was inside and who was outside.

Of course, I was inside. I was inside. And I was one of those youth group kids who actually used the word fornication in everyday teenage speech.

Yep. Which did not make me the life of the party. Okay. And I look back, and I now see myself and realize that I was this awkward teenager who got good grades and played a lot of sports and who was deeply attached to my Jesus and to my cross colors and who expended a lot of energy thinking about fornication, which probably meant I was an adolescent.

[15 : 41] Yeah. While I thought and used, I thought about and used that word a lot, I really didn't know what it truly meant. And that's not particularly surprising because the best biblical scholar struggle with what the word actually means.

The word is porneia in Greek, rendered sexual immorality in modern translations. Porneia could occur inside of marriage.

Think adultery and incest. Porneia also relates to what is outside of marriage, particularly in situations of coercion and violence and theft because women were considered property.

and prostitution. And what's particularly confusing is that what we consider premarital sex didn't really exist outside of situations of coercion and violence and theft and prostitution.

There was no vocabulary in the patriarchal context of the biblical writers for premarital sex that occurs in loving, consensual relationships. There wasn't a category for it.

[16 : 55] But we do have a few stories here and there in scripture that celebrate, that praise women taking the sexual initiative outside of marriage for the good of the family, for their personal and their communal thriving.

Think Tamar in Genesis 38, covertly sleeping with her father-in-law, Judah, to protect her family. But despite its lack of clarity in the modern world, we need the word pornea.

We need to remember that there is something called sexual immorality. And while I would not advise and I would not be telling my children to do at all what I did, which was to obsess about this dividing line and this word, it is a necessary area for moral reflection.

If we feel the desire to engage the erotic through sexual expression, then we have to discern some rules and some principles. And I should say this clearly, that discernment is going to come from bottom up and not top down, okay?

I think that that's one of the things to say here, that it is communal, but it is not top down by one or a few people. We do need hard rules around things like consent.

[18 : 21] And we do need principles around things like care and concern. because, and here's where we get controversial and I'm going to use Nadia again to support me here, sex is a little bit like fire.

So check this out. Here's what she says. Fire, abstinence proponents tell kids, can be safe and warm and comforting, but only when you contain it.

Take fire outside of the fireplace and it will consume everything around it. Here's the thing. I can't say sex is unlike fire. It is an apt metaphor.

However, fire is an essential part of existence. Sex can bring warmth, but it can also be chilling. Sex can bring connection and also alienation.

Sex can provide insight and sometimes bring confusion. sex can empower, but sometimes humiliate. Sex shines and flickers and it rages, lights, warms, and burns.

[19 : 36] In other words, sex requires our attentive and reflective stewardship, just like most other areas of our discipleship.

So, to consider this stewardship and to draw this sermon series to a close, we're going to look at this book of the Bible that I started with, the Song of Songs.

This is where we started the series. And it's an incredible book. I hope, if nothing else, from this series that you go home and you read those eight chapters. It'll take you about 15 minutes. But I'm just going to read a few portions and talk through some ideas that might help us consider our own ethics.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. For your love is better than wine. Your anointing oils are fragrant.

Your name is perfume poured out. Therefore, the maidens love you. Draw me after you. Let us make haste. The king has brought me into his chambers.

[20 : 43] We will exult and rejoice in you. We will extol your love more than wine. Rightly do they love you. While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.

My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En Gedi.

Ah, you are beautiful, my love. You are beautiful. Your eyes are doves. Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved. Truly lovely.

Our couch is green. The beams of our house are cedar. Our rafters are pine. I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens.

As an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight, I sat in his shadow and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

[21 : 48] He brought me to the banqueting house and his intention towards me was love. Now, I'm somebody who's enamored by this poem, this erotic poem, The Song of Songs.

I've spent a decent amount of time studying it. It fascinates me in the way that it unashamedly centers a woman's desire. In fact, it's pretty unrelenting in the way that it allows its female protagonist to voice her desire.

She will not be silenced even as this song mentions that she is policed by her brothers and by the guardians of the city at the city walls.

The book is really this one long erotic flirtation between lovers and it takes place in this landscape that is bursting with fruitfulness.

and even as the book centers desire, it de-centers procreation and it de-centers marriage. Sex is never in the book connected to procreation and it is unclear, deeply unclear, that the woman is married.

[23 : 07] She's not married. She's not married. Okay. Scholars debate it. It's hard to make a case that she's married. The song assumes that there will be obstacles to erotic connection, but at the same time it assumes that healthy erotic connection is that which calls us out of hiding into vulnerability and intimate knowing.

So when we talk about the stewardship of the sexual aspects of the erotic, we need these rules and principles and you can see some of them, at least the edges of some of them in the song of songs.

If you want to keep thinking about them, Margaret Farley, who's an ethicist and Miguel de la Torre, who's a liberation theologian, have really been helpful for me in thinking about sexual ethics.

They're good places to start. There are some obvious ones, right? Consent. A quality of power such that consent can be genuine, which gets really problematic in a patriarchal society, which we still have, but I won't go there.

No unjust harm. Those are foundational. They're baselines. They require hard and fast rules. But a sexual ethic that is genuinely Christian goes further than that to some other less obvious things, things that lead to principles that in some ways, again, are communally discerned.

- [24 : 38] They're things you have to think through for yourself and with people that you trust. I'm going to name a few of these. Mutuality. In the Song of Songs, over and over, the lovers mirror one another in their admiration.
- The woman says, ah, you are beautiful, my love. You are beautiful. And then the man mirrors her. You are beautiful, my beloved. Truly lovely. And over and over throughout the book, one of the most consistent themes is this shared respect and adoration.
- They are uniquely themselves because the language changes a little bit. And yet they can over and over play out this deep interconnection.
- There's also this ethic of vulnerability to consider. The lovers in this book are very, very naked and they are very, very, very unashamed.
- The song contains these multiple long, you'll see these when you read this book, these multiple long descriptions of the lovers gazing at each other's bodies and they name these intimate details about the other's body.
- [25 : 56] It's like the lights are completely on in their lovemaking. But what keeps it from being pornographic is the depth at which the lovers in their descriptions, they're involved, they're attached.
- There is a vulnerability that is received and supported. Fruitfulness. This one is perhaps very, it's one of the most constant ones in the book even though it's in the background.
- Everything in the world is blossoming and flourishing and coming to life. The winter is past. The rain is over and gone.
- The flowers appear on the earth. The time of singing has come and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in the land. While the book never connects sex to procreation, the relationship of the lovers is deeply connected to bringing forth fruit.
- new life is inextricable to their coupling even though that has nothing to do with producing children. But rather everything to do with the beauty they are able to produce beyond themselves.
- [27 : 14] Justice. This is my absolute favorite thing about the song or songs. The relationship of the couple returns the world to justice and shalom.
- In chapter 7 verse 10 it's probably one of my favorite verses in the entire Bible. The woman says to her lover I am my beloved's and his desire is for me.
- The only other time that same Hebrew word is used for desire is in the early chapters of Genesis when the actions of Adam and Eve are understood to corrupt desire.
- In the song we get to go back to Eden before the corruption of desire before the domination and constraints so endemic to relationships.
- Here this is a world of justice where no one and nothing is being ruled over. in a book I've been recently reading *Pleasure Activism* by Adrienne Marie Brown she describes briefly the work of black feminist Toni Cade Bambara.
- [28 : 30] Toni Cade explains that if you want to have a revolution we have to craft revolutionary relationships in action not simply in rhetoric.
- she explains that a revolution cannot be created by conforming to existing roles in relationships already defined by the systems we want to overthrow.
- We have to practice creating new relationships and that's what's happening in the song a new way of relating that is essential to the vibrancy of love making and the flourishing of the world.
- Justice making as Miguel de la Torre says is connected to love making and love making is always connected to justice making. The final one commitment the intent to know means.

If we are going to talk about consent and equality of power and no unjust harm and mutuality and vulnerability and fruitfulness and justice then we have to talk about what a commitment to know means.

[29 : 59] What are the limits of that? That is a hard and real conversation. What is required in knowing? What are the limits of that? How do we map out the boundaries of the intent to love?

And what I mean by that is to love as you would love yourself. How do we talk about intent to know as commitment? Now all of this is imperfect.

These are just some ideas to end this series and for me that's okay because what I really really want is for this to start small conversations and large conversations.

In Christianity the individual is not the highest unit of ethical meaning. The community is. The church is. The people in this room are.

So I hope that this sermon series starts conversations that are honest. Not forced at your own pace but honest about sex and sexuality and the erotic.

[31 : 17] We do need the erotic as a means of spirituality. We need the erotic to give us insight into the mysteries of our faith.

touching the truth with our minds alone is not enough as Barbara Brown Taylor says. We are made to touch it with our bodies.

I think this is why Christian tradition clings to the reality of resurrection even when no one can explain it to anyone's satisfaction. Friends, the erotic, the ability to connect, to feel acutely is a gift from God.

Even in moments when it feels like God is absent, our ability to remain alert to our senses can help us connect to the God that is hidden in creation.

And the best news is that Jesus is the ultimate example of full humanity lived in erotic creativity and orienting our lives around him.

[32 : 29] We are brought down ironically into ourselves. Flesh become word. Amen.