



REV. LISA HART

# Bringing our Whole Selves to God

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. **Genesis 1:27**

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## *Genesis 1:26-31*

Rev. Lisa Hart | Sermon for Sunday, January 30, 2022

Good morning. It is so good to be with you all, even in this virtual format. I bring greetings from the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, where I serve as the Associate Conference Minister for Faith Formation and Justice Ministries.

Many of us probably have a memory of a time when a parent, or other important adult in our lives, decided to have “the talk” with us. You know...the one where the adult may, or may not, give accurate information about being sexually active and then tells you why you should NOT engage in sexual activity. Perhaps this was a one-time occurrence or, it may have been an ongoing conversation. In my family, it was definitely more of an ongoing conversation, but one time, in particular, stands out in my memory.

Usually, my mom (a nurse) was the one to have these conversations with me and my younger sisters. But, on this particular occasion, my dad was driving me to some activity and decided we should talk. My dad is a UCC pastor, so I was having “the talk” with my dad and my pastor all at the same time. I distinctly remember contemplating what my chance of survival would be if I were to jump from a car that was moving at 55-60 mph. My chances weren’t good. So... with a great deal of

discomfort and embarrassment, I listened to my dad and assured him that I had no intention of having sex at any time before marriage. What mattered to me at that moment wasn't whether I was sincere in my assurances to my dad, what mattered was ending the conversation.

When I think about the level of discomfort I had with that conversation, I realize what made me uncomfortable was being seen as a sexual being and my belief, at the time, that sex was bad. Where did that embarrassment and shame come from? Where did my negative beliefs about sex come from?

When we are ashamed or embarrassed about some part of ourselves, we try our best to hide it. We desperately hope that others won't notice it and we may even go so far as to hide it from ourselves through the act of denial. In doing this, we also attempt to hide that part of ourselves from God.

This is especially problematic when we are ashamed or embarrassed by who God created us to be.

Listen as I read a portion of today's scripture passage...

**Genesis 1:26-27, 31**

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...

<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind<sup>[c]</sup> in God's image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female God created them.

<sup>31</sup> God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.

God created each one of us in God's image. The changes in our bodies as we develop, the ones that adolescents are often embarrassed by, were designed by God in God's image. God has created us to be sexual beings. And, God has called this creation "very good". God does not look at us and feel shame. God sees us as very good. We are God's beloved children. If we are to bring our whole selves to God, we need to release the shame, or embarrassment, we too often carry. We need to learn to see ourselves, our whole selves, as very good.

Too often, the negative messages about sex have had its roots in the Church. And, these negative messages often put the burden on women. We see this in the

“purity culture” messages of more conservative churches. Mainline churches may not embrace purity culture, preferring, instead, to just avoid talking about sex altogether. Scripture even gives us a glimpse at the way women hold the blame for sexual indiscretions. Two weeks ago, Chelsea preached about the woman caught in adultery. The focus at the beginning of the story is on the woman and how she is to be punished for what she has done wrong. You will note, the man involved in that relationship was not being dragged out into the street to be stoned. Jesus, as is often the case, steps in to reframe the conversation. Rather than agree to stoning the woman, he says, “Those who are without sin, cast the first stone.” One by one, the men walk away. (John 8:3-9)

The Church needs to reframe its conversation about sex and about our creation as sexual beings. In many cases, the church just needs to begin having the conversation. Since the time when a mere conversation about sex caused me to contemplate jumping from a moving vehicle, I’ve come to realize how important it is for us to be willing, and able, to talk about sex and sexuality in healthy ways, not only in our families and intimate circles, but also in our faith communities.

So...how do we do that? One important step is for the church to engage in comprehensive sexuality education.

In my ministry with the Wisconsin Conference UCC, one of my responsibilities is to encourage congregational leaders, both clergy and lay, to be trained to offer comprehensive sexuality education in their churches. I’m supported in this work by my friend and colleague, Amy Johnson, who serves as the United Church of Christ’s Minister for Sexuality Education and Justice. When asked about her work, Amy says, “Sexuality education & justice is way more about dismantling shame and stigma about bodies and relationships than it is about condoms and chlamydia.” That’s not to say that we don’t talk about contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases in developmentally appropriate ways, but our focus is more on who we are as embodied beings, living an embodied faith. It’s about intimacy & relationships, identity, health and sexualization...much more than it is about sexual behavior.

The resource we use for this work is *Our Whole Lives* (otherwise known as OWL), which is a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum that spans our lifetime (from young children to older adults). *OWL*, which is co-produced by the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association, is widely regarded as

the gold standard for comprehensive sexuality education. It's based on criteria set by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. The program is appropriate for use in schools and community organizations in addition to faith-based organizations because the faith component, *Sexuality & Our Faith*, is a separate resource that can be incorporated throughout the curriculum.

While my experience of comprehensive sexuality education in the church is through the Our Whole Lives program, the values that are foundational to OWL can be used in any faith setting to foster healthy conversations and understanding of who God created us to be, including the understanding that we are sexual beings. These foundational values are: self-worth, sexual health, responsibility, and justice & inclusivity. Not only do these values foster an understanding of who we are as beloved children of God, but it helps us understand ourselves better and gives us the language to talk about who we are, what we like, what we don't like. It equips us to give and ask for consent. It helps us understand and respect boundaries... both our own and those of others. It allows us to make informed, healthy decisions based on our values. The content is always age-appropriate and the parent (or significant adult in a child's life) is always recognized as the child's primary sexuality educator.

One of the concerns I often hear from people who are uncomfortable about talking about sex and sexuality in the church is that providing information about sex and sexuality will encourage our youth to be sexually active. The opposite is actually true. Research has found that youth who have experienced comprehensive sexuality education are more likely to delay becoming sexually active. It's also been found to reduce the incidence of child sexual abuse and intimate partner violence among teens. This is not because the responsibility has been placed on the child or teen, but because they have an awareness and understanding of healthy boundaries and what is abusive, and they have the language to talk about it.

I want to highlight that comprehensive sexuality education is not just for children and youth. It is something that spans a lifetime. In working with adults in our churches, we have found that they often were not given accurate information to fully understand their bodies or the sexual experiences they were having. In many cases, adults (especially women) carry the negative messages about sex that they received as a child, with them through their adult relationships. Comprehensive sexuality education, with a faith component, can help dismantle those negative messages and create a fuller understanding of who God created them to be. It is

also an opportunity for adults to explore what it means to be a sexual being as their bodies age and life circumstances change.

When we think sex and sexuality, and about bringing our whole selves to God, there are other sensitive and painful topics that we need to consider in congregational life. My work with Amy Johnson also involves compiling resources around healthy congregational responses to sexual violence. Some of our work focuses on how congregations respond to survivors, but we also focus on how congregations respond to perpetrators. I often hesitate to talk about this topic when talking about sex and sexuality because sexual violence is really about power and control, not sex. But because of the sexual nature of this violence, the church often does not talk about it in the same way they are willing to address other forms of violence. So... it seems important to talk about it today.

At the time that I had the uncomfortable conversation with my dad, I was being sexually abused by a peer. My parents had no idea. I was ashamed. While I knew what was happening was wrong, I didn't seek help. I was afraid that I somehow deserved it. I must have done something to cause it. A faulty belief that too many women carry...

Years later, after extensive counseling, it was still something I held like a secret. It felt shameful. A few times, when I would "test the waters" by saying something, I could feel the discomfort in other people. I still remember being told in a church setting, "that is not something you want to talk about here...it's not appropriate." While the experience of my abuse does not define me, it played a role in shaping who I am today. If I can't talk about it, the message that I should be ashamed of who I am is reinforced. Shame is not a motivator for connection. It causes us to turn away... from God...and from others. It silences us. We try to hide the parts of us where we feel shame. It prevents us from bringing our whole selves to God.

It turns out I was not alone in this experience. Over a decade ago, through a colleague and friend, I was connected with a group of women who wanted to create a retreat for adult, female survivors of sexual violence. The Steps on the Journey Retreat was a labor of love and healing. This retreat, which continues today, was planned and facilitated by our group and was sponsored by one of our outdoor ministry sites. The purpose was to create an opportunity for women who had experienced sexual violence to come together in a faith-based setting. To be free to share as much of their story as they felt comfortable sharing, to be able to

celebrate our steps toward healing, and to feel welcomed, supported and loved...especially by God. Over the years, it has attracted women from across the country and from a variety of denominations and faith traditions. We know this retreat meets a need and we are exploring ways to offer this retreat for men and gender non-conforming individuals, recognizing that women are not the only people affected by sexual violence.

What does it look like for a local congregation to meet this need?

One example is the Break the Silence Sunday liturgical resources which were developed for the United Church of Christ, but are used by congregations in multiple denominations. Break the Silence Sunday, or BTSS, was the vision of the Rev. Moira Finley, a survivor of sexual violence and a pastor in the Wisconsin Conference UCC. In 2015, she began writing and collaborating with others to create liturgical resources that lift up and name our support for the survivors of sexual violence. She wanted survivors to know they are welcome, in the fullness of their experience, in the church. She also wanted to provide a resource that helps prepare clergy and other congregational leaders to be able to provide appropriate support when an individual discloses to them that they are a survivor of sexual violence.

The first Break the Silence Sunday was observed in April of 2016. Since that time, the United Church of Christ has joined the Wisconsin Conference to observe Break the Silence Sunday as a denomination. While the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of April has been designated for BTSS, the liturgical resources are designed to be used at any time. Much like the preparation Charlie has done for this series, it is important for churches using the Break the Silence Sunday resources to prepare members and friends of the congregation for the content of those services.

Why might it be important for a congregation to think about how it welcomes and supports the survivors of sexual violence? Think about size of your congregation. Now, think about these statistics from the Wisconsin Department of Health... 1 out of 3 adult women and almost 1 out of 5 adult men report having experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. The statistics also show that, like me, a significant number of the survivors first experienced sexual violence as a child or a youth. When you look at the statistics, you realize that there are survivors in your congregation. Imagine sitting in worship and listening to the prayers for people who are experiencing pain, loss and grief, and feeling that your experience is too horrible

and inappropriate to even ask for prayers. Imagine feeling that your experience and your anger have made you unworthy of God's love. By holding space for survivors to share their stories without fear of being silenced or shamed, by regularly including prayers for those who have experienced sexual violence, by reminding survivors that they are seen, welcomed and supported in that faith community, congregations are sharing the good news with survivors that they are fully loved by God, that they are beautiful because they are created in the image of God and nothing can change that.

Just as there are survivors in our congregations, there are also perpetrators of sexual violence. How does a congregation welcome and support these individuals? This can be a sensitive topic for many, especially for survivors. There are usually two types of responses I hear:

The first being... they've committed a crime and we just can't risk having them in our church...we have to think about our children...we have to think about the survivors in our congregation.

The other response, especially if they are someone with a good history in that congregation, is... but they've always been such an important part of our church family...we've never known them to do anything that would have made us think they would hurt anyone...we need to support them and stand by them during this time.

All of these responses are valid, but it is important for the congregation to find ways to demonstrate the fullness of God's love and grace, while also faithfully creating boundaries that are appropriate and safe. This means having policies and procedures in place that outline when and how a perpetrator is able to be involved in the life of the congregation. In some circumstances, a perpetrator may be allowed to attend worship with a person assigned to supervise their time in the building, but in other circumstances, the faithful response may be to protect the perpetrator (and others) by not allowing them to be in situations that create temptation to re-offend. This is complicated and often painful work, but imagine the power of a congregation demonstrating to this individual, their understanding that, whether or not this individual is allowed to be present with the worshipping community, they are a beloved child of God.

Creating an environment in the church where sex and sexuality is addressed in

holistic, faithful and healthy ways is important work. While “Let’s Talk About Sex” may be a 6-week series, the work of talking about sex in the church is ongoing. It is the work of the church to dismantle the systems that create the shame and stigma around sex and sexuality, and it includes engaging in comprehensive sexuality education, creating a community of welcome and support for survivors of sexual violence and finding healthy and appropriate ways to demonstrate God’s love and grace to perpetrators of sexual violence.

As one of my clergy friends has stated, “This work allows people to come into sacred spaces with their whole selves... not cutting off any part of themselves... but just being who they are in the fullness of who God created them to be.”

Please pray with me:

*Creator God, we give thanks today that you have created us in your image. May we always remember that you know every part of our being and you have called it “very good”. Help us to share this good news with others, so that they, too, may know the joy of bringing their whole selves to you.*

*Amen.*

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**Resources:**

<https://breakthesilencesunday.org/> - Break the Silence Sunday resources

<https://castbox.fm/episode/Minister-Amy-Johnson-on-Sexuality-%26-the-Church%3A-Bringing-our-Whole-Selves-to-God-id2822784-id258983813?country=us> - Lady Preacher Podcast: Minister Amy Johnson on

Sexuality & the Church: Bringing our Whole Selves to God

<https://www.ucc.org/owl> - Our Whole Lives information from the United Church of Christ

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02763.pdf> - Statistics from WI Department of Health Services- August 2020