

The Right Things

You shall not make **Exodus**
for yourself an idol. **20:4**

LET'S TALK
ABOUT



Exodus 20:1-6

Charlie Berthoud | Sermon for Sunday, January 23, 2022

The pursuit of purity is not about the suppression of lust, but about the reorientation of one's life to a larger goal.—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

When I became a pastor 30 years ago, I was involved in churches with lots of hugging.

I knew that most pastors would greet parishioners with a handshake after worship, but at that point, it seemed like *everyone* was hugging. I knew one pastor who hugged every person in church on Sundays, even visitors. I went to a weeklong seminar on pastoral care with about 500 other church people from around the country, and before coffee breaks or lunch breaks the leaders would often say “hug five people.”

So I began my ministry following these examples and being a little more “huggy” than I was inclined to be.

But I started to sense that not everyone wanted a hug from the pastor or a stranger.

I heard more stories of clergy sexual abuse, and I learned more about power dynamics. Then I heard about a pastor at that same conference who refused to “hug five people” and she taped a drawing of a porcupine to her sweater, with the

words “NO HUGS” to get the message across.

So I scaled back the hugs. I felt like I was doing the right thing by not hugging people so much.

But then one Sunday at the church I served in Richmond Virginia, an elderly widow came up to me after worship. I offered a handshake as part of my relatively new hug-rarely policy. She said, “What, no hug? This is the only hug I get all week!”

I’ve thought about that moment a lot over the years. Human touch can be a beautiful thing. Some people are lonely and hurting—starving for appropriate human contact.

Other people don’t want to be touched—maybe because of abuse, or health concerns, or they just don’t want the contact.

We need to be discerning with our hugs, our understanding of sex and sexuality, with everything.

Two weeks ago, I suggested that we need some nuance as we wrestle with complicated issues that defy simplistic answers. Every situation is different.

Last week in her sermon Chelsea reminded us that “we have good hard thinking to do about our own sexual ethics.”

We are wrestling with complicated issues. We need to be alert and aware and awake to cultivate healthy sex lives and healthy attitudes about sexuality. From hugs and handshakes to everything else.

Life is filled with choices.

We need guidance to make good choices. And we reminders to stay on the right path.

In worship here at Covenant, on the first Sunday of every month, we recite a version of the Ten Commandments, the words that God gave Moses and the Hebrew people *after* saving them from Pharaoh. Remember: The Ten Commandments are NOT preconditions for God to save. God didn’t tell Moses: “Follow these rules and I will save you.” God acted first; this is grace.

This grace, these Ten Commandments are thus guidance for how to journey as free

people, as saved people, as loved people. We reflect on these words over and over with the hope that we will continue on the path of faithful discipleship.

So we share these words in worship as promises and hopes—more than prohibitions. The traditional reading is “thou shalt not have any idols” or “thou shalt not commit adultery.” But these words can also be read as hoped for outcomes, as intentions, as in “We will not have idols” or “We will not commit adultery.”

While the Ten Commandments might seem individualistic, but really they are about community life, about helping people live together in harmony. The commandments prohibit murder, adultery, stealing, coveting—all of which involve relations with other people.

And the first two commandments, our reading for today, are about making sure we have our priorities in order, that we’re not focused on the wrong things.

You heard the words earlier, what we consider commandments one and two:

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.

Right from the top, God is acknowledging that we have choices to make, gods to choose, options for what we worship.

Author David Foster Wallace famously said

"Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

The tenth and final commandment implicitly involves worship, choices, and idols.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:17)

The teachings are telling us to get our priorities straight, to focus and choose wisely.

Jesus did the same thing, encouraging his followers to get their priorities straight. When asked about the greatest of all the commandments, Jesus said: Love God and love neighbor.

So these core teachings of our tradition essentially are telling us to love the right things in the right way.

Here at Covenant, our calling is to Learn God's Love and to Live God's Love.

Two weeks ago, I focused on a verse in the little book of 1 John, reminding us that we are all beloved children of God. Most of the rest of this book encourages us to love one another. After five beautiful chapters mostly about God's love for us and the call to love one another, the book ends abruptly with

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” (1 John 5:21)

It's as if the author is bluntly reminding us that while it's easy to talk about love, we clearly need to be careful about idols, about things that might be harmful for us and for others.

While we certainly want to love the right things in the right ways, we want to avoid loving the wrong things in the wrong ways.

All of us struggle in various ways with loving the wrong things. For some people it's money. For some it's alcohol. For some it's work. For other, sports, or shopping, or social media.

And for some people, the false god that we worship is pornography.

I know some people make the case for ethical porn and consenting couples selectively choosing adult films, and that might work for some people, with lots of discussion and discernment.

But from what I've seen and heard, pornography is overwhelmingly problematic. And we humans are very good at justifying our behavior and deceiving ourselves.

I've heard from numerous church people over the years who struggle with pornography, and how it has hurt them and hurt their loved ones.

The commandment about not worshipping idols has that disturbing phrase about God punishing the children for the iniquity of the parents.

While we could argue about God's agency and the theology of divine punishment, it is clear that when parents make poor choices it impacts their children.

Decades ago, porn was mostly magazines. But the internet has changed everything.

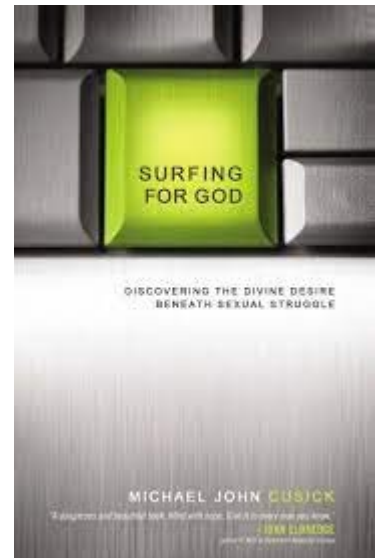
According to internet security firm webroot:

40 million American people regularly visit porn sites. 35% of all internet downloads are related to pornography. 34% of internet users have experienced unwanted exposure to pornographic content through ads, pop up ads, misdirected links or emails. One-third of porn viewers are women.

I've also read about a disturbing trend where growing numbers of young men who have used porn extensively are unable to be sexually active with a real live human being.

Several years ago, when I learned about several families in this church struggling with porn, I asked a pastor colleague for help. He recommended: *Surfing for God: Discovering the Divine Desire Beneath Sexual Struggle*.

Author Michael John Cusick shares his own tragic journey of childhood abuse, slow descent into pornography, prostitution, being arrested, and almost losing his marriage. With the help of friends and family and faith, he turned his life around and for 20 years has been helping other men in their struggles with pornography.



He notes early in the book: “No matter how we may justify or rationalize it, in two decades of counseling, not one man has told me that pornography made him a better man, husband, father, employee, minister, or friend.” (p. xiv)

He goes on to talk about how porn rewires the brain:

Every thought, feeling, habit, skill, or behavior in your life has a corresponding neuropathway that fires in your brain...as your brain's reward circuitry gets entangled in a tug-of-war, the brain rewires itself for addiction and new neuropathways are created...Whether learning to ski, learning to speak a foreign language, or looking at porn, the more we use a neural pathway, the more our brain changes, making the pathway stronger." P. 130

This is why we encourage you to read your Bibles and pray and find ways to strengthen your connection to God.

Cusack shares about a visit he made to a counselor where he confessed how he was still struggling with urges to use pornography. The counselor surprised him by saying, “If what you *really* want to do is to look at porn, then go ahead and look at porn.”

Cusick was surprised to hear this, and that led to a deeper conversation about what he really wanted to do with his time, his energy, and his life.

He writes as a Christian, and while I don’t recall him using the term idolatry, it seems like pornography can be a form of idolatry, loving the wrong things in the wrong way.

He invites us as Christians to think about what is most important to us, to think about our ultimate purpose in life.

The author is inviting us to love the right things in the right way.

Every day we make choices about what to say and do, how to spend our time and money, where to focus our energy and what is important to us.

We live in a world filled with choices. We need to be vigilant to make good choices. Are we loving the right things in the right way?

There is a quote I value. Some attribute it to Viktor Frankl and others attribute it to Steven Covey. Regardless of who said it, the sentiment is true:

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

We need to pause in that space and respond carefully and prayerfully, so that we can make good choices.

Jesus Christ has come offering us a choice.

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” (Mark 1:15-17)

The Bible tells us he came to proclaim good news, about the Kingdom of God, the realm of God—a new reality of love and justice and hope and people fully alive.

Jesus calls people like you and me to repent: to turn around, to change their minds, to change direction. And he invites people like you and me to fish for people, to live with purpose of caring for others, of helping others, of making this world a better place.

Jesus calls us to make a choice, for life and love. But it's a choice we make every day, in little ways and big ways.

When we affirm our Christian faith and join the church, we are making a choice, we are responding to a stimulus, a call.

The first membership and baptism question in the Presbyterian Church makes it clear that we make choices and that we need to be careful about loving the wrong things.

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

The third question leads us into a life of choosing to love the right things in the right way:

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love and will you be a faithful member of his church?

We are imperfect people, and we are prone to wander, prone to turn from God's love.

The good news is that when we wander away from the path and make poor choices and chase after the wrong things, God is merciful and forgiving, even to the thousandth generation, and God continually reaches out to call us and help us get back on track.

Plus we need to remember that we are on this journey together, and we can help each other move forward.

If you're struggling with porn, or if you're in an unhealthy place sexually, or if you're struggling in general, I encourage you to

- Talk with a loved one, a trusted friend. The staff and members of Covenant are ready to listen and support you.
- Consider professional help if you need it. There are counselors who specialize in helping people with pornography.
- Spend some time thinking and praying about what is really important to you in life, about your priorities. Ponder what might have become an idol, a distraction, a wrong focus. Visualize the good and move in that direction, one day at a time.

Wherever you are, whatever you've done, remember that you are a beloved child of God, and you are here for a life of love and purpose and meaning, of faith hope and love.

Let us pray:

God we thank you for the gift of life, for the freedom of choices in what to say and do. Grant us wisdom and courage, help us to support each other, so we can love the right things in the right way. Hear our prayers O God. Amen.