

Beloved Children of God

See what love the Father has given
us, that we should be called children
of God; and that is what we are.

1 John 3:1

LET'S TALK
ABOUT



Luke 3:21-22 and 1 John 3:1

Pastor Charlie Berthoud | Sermon for Sunday, January 9, 2022

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ—described in John's gospel as the word made flesh. In Jesus, God became one of us.

The Christian church has come to understand Jesus paradoxically, as fully human and fully divine. God was embodied in human form, and Jesus was born, in the flesh.

Our religion is centered on God becoming human and dwelling among us.

God knows what it's like to have a body.

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, when we remember the baptism of Jesus. Our gospel reading helps us remember that Jesus was a human being, with a body.

Listen for God's word

Luke 3:21-22

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the

Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. ²²And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

On this Sunday each year, as we remember the baptism of Jesus, we remember our own baptisms, and in particular we here at Covenant remember those baptized over the past year.

With every baptism, I include the words of 1 John 3:1, which has been part of Presbyterian liturgy for a long time. While the baptized person is still wet, we affirm the truth of Scripture:

1 John 3:1

¹See what love God should have for us,
that we should be called children of God,
and that is what we are.

Much of that little letter of 1 John is filled with affirmations of God’s love, reminding us that we are beloved.

As we launch our six-week series on sex and sexuality, we need to hear that truth, the core of the good news of the gospel, that we ALL are beloved children of God.

All of us.

- Heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual
- Cisgender, transgender, non-binary, female, male
- Married, divorced, single, partnered, and those in the “it’s complicated” category

Whoever you are, you are a beloved child of God. This is our primary identity.

My spiritual director often asks me: “Charlie do you know at the core of your being that you are a beloved child of God?”

We are beloved children of God—this is the good news of the gospel.

- That message doesn’t always come through in the hyper-sexualized culture in which we live.

- That message certainly doesn't come through when we experience harassment, abuse, and assault.
- That message doesn't always come through, even in the church, where shame and guilt, rigidity and fear, hypocrisy and abuse are too common.

Part of our tasks as Christians is to claim and reclaim our identities—the gospel truth, the baptismal truth, that we are all beloved children of God. With that identity, we are able to live with focus and strength and purpose. With that identity, we're able to genuinely love our neighbors.

But too many of us have internalized other messages.

I grew up in Connecticut and attended a big junior high school, now called a middle school, for 7th, 8th, and 9th grades—my early teenage years. The principal of our school was apparently a very good administrator. But if he were alive today and did the things he did in the 1970s and 80s, he'd be out of a job and probably in jail.

He liked to invite a bunch of us boys to the church gym on Friday nights, to play floor hockey, and we loved the chance to play without all the drills and exercises of gym class. That was fine, but after we were done, we were all led to the big shower room, with the principal, because as he used to say “we're a clean group.”

I have vague and uncomfortable memories of being naked in that shower, with 15 or 20 other boys, with the principal walking up and down, chatting with everyone.

And then on my birthday in 9th grade, he brought me into a supply closet. He gave me a school t-shirt, a six pack of soda, and a kiss on the cheek.

I never said anything to anyone about those experiences until I was in my thirties. Not a word with my parents, or friends, or other trusted adults. And certainly not with anyone at the church where I grew up because “we don't talk about those things in church.”

It wasn't until I was in my 30s that I learned that my best friend was called to that principal's office, where he was groped. And since then, I've heard much worse stories about boys who went on weekend ski trips with the

principal.

Looking back, I now realize how his actions were wrong, even criminal, and with that I realize that those experiences negatively impacted my social, psychological, and sexual development, and certainly didn't help me feel like a beloved child of God.

I also realize that at the same time, many people, including many in this congregation, have experienced much worse. We've probably all had awkward experiences, and too many of us have had traumatic and painful experiences.

We are having this series for several reasons. I hope this series will provide some time and space for us to reflect on our stories of sex and sexuality, with the hope that we can seek support if needed.

At the same time, I hope that we can affirm and discuss that sex and sexuality are gifts to be treasured and nurtured in healthy and wonderful ways.

As a congregation, as a community of Christians, I hope this series will help us reflect on the God-given gift of our bodies and on how we can really love one another—in both the sense of *agape* love, as in caring and sacrificial love, and *eros* love, as in romantic and intimate love.

Sermons are just one aspect of this series.

We have adult education classes going at 10:00am every Sunday, via zoom. We have a sermon talk back via zoom at noon.

We have several recommended books in our library, and I listed several in the CARAVAN newsletter and CONNECTIONS email.

Perhaps best of all, this church has an abundance of good and caring people who are ready to listen and support each other and learn together. We need to support each other on this journey.

As we begin this journey, I have five theological words to help us frame the discussion and move forward.

GOODNESS: For too long, Christians have been told flesh is evil and spirit is good.

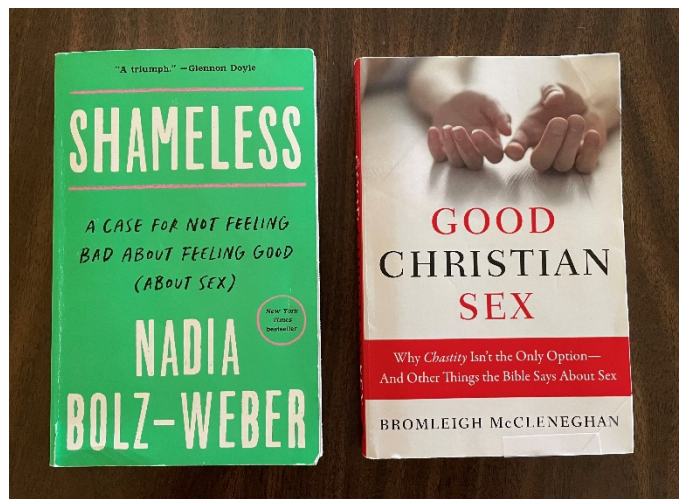
But the Bible begins with the goodness of creation, and the goodness of humanity, created in the image of God.

And Jesus himself said he came that we might have life in all its fullness, life in abundance (John 10:10).

This abundant life, this goodness of life includes our bodies and our sexuality.

In *Good Christian Sex*, Pastor Bromleigh McCleneghan opens with the affirmation of the goodness of sex. She writes:

“Humans are wired to experience sexual pleasure. Wired to experience, and enjoy, sexual pleasure. (p. 17)



Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber makes it even clearer, in her book *Shameless*, with her typically direct language:

Consider if you will the humble clitoris, that magical bundle of nerve endings whose only biological function is to provide sexual pleasure for women. Unlike the penis, which is a multitasker, the clitoris literally has no other function but pleasure. (p. 137)

We need to acknowledge that life is good, God is good, our bodies are good, and sex is good. Sex is a good gift, but as with any gift, we need to learn how to utilize it in appropriate and healthy ways.

REFORMATION: We are part of the Reformed branch of the Christian church, and a Presbyterian motto is that we are a reformed church, always reforming, according to the word of God. Always reforming.

In other words, we keep learning things. We've learned that the earth isn't flat. We've learned that blacks aren't 3/5 human. We've learned that men

aren't the only ones who should be voting.

All of these positions were at one time held by the vast majority of Christians. Fortunately, we keep learning.

In the last few decades, we've learned to humanize and value lesbian and gay people.

And in the past few years, we are collectively learning about what it means to be transgender and non-binary, and about other varieties of sexual orientation and gender identity.

I'll be the first to admit as a 58 year-old cisgender heterosexual white male, that I have a lot to learn. I'm trying to listen. And I'm glad to be at a church that values learning and living God's love.

NUANCE: As we discuss sex and sexuality, I find there are few absolutes.

For instance, there are various opinions about sex outside of marriage. I would have a hard time with saying it's never good, or always good.

There is a big difference between two 14 year-olds who just met and have spontaneous unprotected sex and two 44 year-olds in a committed relationship who decide to have sex.

As for pornography, there is also a spectrum of opinion. There is a big difference between someone ignoring their partner and engaging with violent and degrading internet porn all hours of the night with a couple that makes an intentional choice to watch adult films to enhance their relationship and sex life, although even that scenario is problematic on some levels.

We need to be careful about simple generalizations, moral absolutes, and about pointing fingers. That doesn't mean "anything goes." Far from it.

It does mean we need humility and honesty and openness to the variety of human experiences. It means we need to talk with each other. Nuance is a good word, but a more theological word is **GRACE**. Grace for others, and grace for ourselves.

JUSTICE: Years ago, I was driving late at night, listening to a Christian talk

radio call-in show, hosted by two men. A woman called, in tears, saying that her husband was beating her regularly. Instead of telling her to call the police or get to a shelter or seek a divorce, one of the hosts asked her: “What do you think it is you’re doing that making him respond like that?”

For too long the church has tolerated marital rape and violence against women, while also demonizing any non-heterosexual people. But Jesus came with good news of great joy for ALL the people.

The Presbyterian Church’s “A Brief Statement of Faith” urges us to “hear the voices of people long silenced.”

Jesus made a point of reaching out to people who were ignored, exploited, and oppressed. His followers should follow his example.

The good news of God’s love is for everyone.

LOVE: The Bible is a diverse collection of texts, taken together as God’s word for us, offering us wisdom, guidance, and hope. We study the Bible. We treasure the inspiration of the Bible.

There are numerous biblical passages related to sex and sexuality, many of which you’ll be hearing in the weeks ahead. Some of these passages have been used to justify hatred, violence, misogyny, and oppression.

So as we read these passages, we need to remember that the bottom line is love.

“The Second Helvetic Confession” is part of our *Book of Confessions*, our theological foundation. Written in the 16th century in the middle of a plague, this statement makes the wonderful and ground-breaking affirmation that the Bible must be interpreted through the lens of love.

A section called “the true interpretation of scripture” argues that we must listen to the full message of the Bible, not isolated texts and concludes by saying:

We hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man’s salvation.

More succinctly, if your interpretation of the Bible is leading you toward oppression, violence, or hate, then you're reading it wrong.

The core of Christian faith is about love.

The life and teachings of Jesus are about love.

Covenant Presbyterian Church is about love—learning God's love and living God's love.

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So we begin our reflections on sex and sexuality in a spirit of GOODNESS, REFORMATION, NUANCE/GRACE, JUSTICE, and LOVE.

I wish we could have our worship, our classes, and our conversations face to face. But we have to be careful with our 21st century plague.

Over the next six weeks, I invite you to pray and ponder. Discuss and debate. Listen and learn. Speak the truth in love.

Please be mindful of people around you who might be struggling or hurting.

And remember that you are a beloved child of God.

Let us pray....

Thank you God for the gift of life and the gift of bodies. Thank you for being in relationship with us in the person of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit. Help us to treasure these gifts and to nurture healthy and strong relationships. Amen.