

“Separation of Church and Sex”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on June 12th, 2009

I had a feeling the title of my sermon might bring you all in today. Or maybe you sat down and just noticed the title and are looking around for the closest exit? Emergency exits are located at the front and back; please remain seated with your seatbelt fastened.

The fact is, we cannot escape the issue of sex and the church. All over the news this week, there has been the intersection of sex and politics and the church. There have been stories about Governor Sanford of South Carolina, and his very public affair, where he referred to the woman with whom he had the affair as his *soul mate*. Another story this week, which may not have been as visible, is the background behind the affair of Senator Ensign from the state of Nevada. Senator Ensign lives in a voluntary Christian enclave called *the family* along with our very own Senator Tom Coburn. It is a Christian fellowship home in Washington, D.C., where Ensign and several other powerful Washington figures live, in order to help them “re-enforce their conservative Christian values:” to help hold themselves to a “higher moral standard,” which is an interesting idea, in theory.

So following Ensign’s affair, Senator Coburn and *the family* required Ensign to write a letter to his mistress, to end the affair. They did not, however, trust him to mail it, so they accompanied him to the FEDEX office. After crafting the letter with Coburn, and mailing it under supervision, Ensign apparently snuck away and called the woman with whom he was having the affair. He told her they forced him to write it, and that the contents of the letter were not true. Coburn also told Ensign that such matters demanded financial consequences, and told Ensign that his mistress and her family needed to be given financial assistance – in the millions of dollars – to pay off their mortgage and move them to a new life, far away from Ensign. So Ensign asked his parents for the money (in installments of \$12,000 each so that it would not be taxable.) I think it is important to note here, that Governor Sanford and Senator Ensign were both receiving marital counseling from this conservative Christian group called *the family* at the time of their affairs.

Rev. Debra Haffner, a colleague of mine and the director of The Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, recently proposed that “every newly elected politician be required to come to the Religious Institute for a two-day sexuality education program.”

On the first day, [she suggested] we would cover the science that they need to know as policy makers: maternal and child health, contraception, HIV/AIDS, sexuality education, sexual orientation, gender identity, and stem cells... There's a lot of sexual science for policymakers to know so they can make informed decisions in

these areas. And on the second day, [she continued] I'd adapt my course for seminarians and clergy, [called] Sexual Attraction and Boundaries.

I'd give them the opportunity to examine their own values and commitments, and talk about the characteristics of a sexually healthy adult. I'd be sure to tell them that a sexually healthy adult distinguishes between sexual behaviors that are life enhancing and those that might be destructive to self and others.

And I would tell them that although great sex is one of the most wonderful blessings, it is never – repeat NEVER – worth losing your family, career, reputation, or elected office over.

I believe most adults, not just politicians, could benefit from factual sexual education and an exploration of what it means to be a healthy sexual adult. According to the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, “sexuality education is a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values about identity, relationships, and intimacy. It encompasses sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles. Sexuality education addresses the biological, socio-cultural, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality from the cognitive domain (information); the affective domain (feelings, values, and attitudes); and the behavioral domain (communication, decision-making and other relevant personal skills). Comprehensive sexuality education that is appropriate to age, development level, and cultural background is an important part of a religious education program for people of all ages.”

So sexuality education is a lifelong process, and because messages are coming from every direction, the question is: how do you filter through the cultural messages in order to make informed choices about sex, and intimacy, and your body? Our cultural messages in Oklahoma are greatly influenced by the Christian Church. The focus of the church, throughout history, has for the most part, been blanket proscriptions of behavior. Who can you marry and when? Who can have sex with whom? When is that appropriate? And no consideration is given to the context or the complexity of the individuals involved. The traditional church has offered us blanket statements promoting shame and fear, instead of celebrating God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift that is to be shared with intention. The general messages seem to suggest that at one extreme, sex is the devil, and at the other extreme, some hippie religious liberals see sex as a God.

I am here to tell you that there is indeed a dignified middle path. There is a middle path where the church can recognize sexuality as central to our humanity, even as integral to our spirituality. (It is in essence one of the most vulnerable experiences we have as human beings.)

There is a middle path for the church, where the message celebrates the goodness of creation, including our bodies and our sexuality, and promotes love, healing, and restored relationships, honoring the responsibility – and the accountability – that comes with an intimate relationship. A path where sexual sin is recognized to be when this sacred gift is abused or exploited.

Our “culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts. [Where] all adults have the right and responsibility to lead sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and pleasure. Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, [an] ethic [that] fosters physical, emotional, and spiritual health.”¹ So who is transmitting that message? Where can we learn this? Where will our children learn this, if not at home and not in the church?

At All Souls we are invited to bring our whole selves to church. Our whole soul. And that means our struggles, as well as our celebrations, regarding whom and how we love. What we do not find often enough in our churches, is age-appropriate and clear messages about sex that do not include fear and shame. Even for Unitarians.

When people ask me what I do for a living, part of the problem is that when I say “Minister” most people believe that they have to leave a part of themselves out of the conversation. They begin to apologize and check themselves. They try not to swear, or talk about parts of their lives that they think might be inappropriate, because they are ashamed of their disintegration. While facilitating pre-marital counseling I have experienced people’s discomfort and disintegration when talking about sex. Even more surprisingly, I have experienced reluctance in parents – even in this church – to have an age-appropriate conversation with their own children. It is as though we feel good supporting it in theory, while in practice, the reaction seems to be: *my little boy is too innocent; my little girl is too young to have that conversation.* But they will get messages from *everywhere* else. *Your* message is the most important and often the least supported.

It is as though we believe that if we don’t have the conversation with our children about sex, then *we* can stay innocent. And if we don’t have the conversation with our children *they* can stay innocent. But that view of innocence, or goodness, or purity, is dripping with irrational and unfounded religious guilt. And I want to tell you this morning, that it is not healthy to perpetuate that myth for yourself or your children.

Being sexual is part of being human. And we must begin to take that seriously, for the benefit of our own health, the health of our relationships, and for the benefit of our children. So let me give you an example of how I often broach the subject with couples. In premarital counseling sessions, I often use an assessment called *Prepare Enrich*, where we tackle the big issues before marriage, like money, conflict management, family issues, and sex. Couples of

every age are asked to separately answer on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree with statements like:

- I am comfortable talking with my partner about sexual issues.
- I am concerned that my partner's interest in sex might be different than mine.
- I am reluctant to be affectionate with my partner because he/she often interprets it as a sexual advance.
- I have concerns about my partner's faithfulness to me.
- My partner and I talk openly about our sexual expectations.
- My partner sometimes uses or refuses affection unfairly.
- I am comfortable with our current level of sexual activity.
- I am completely satisfied with the amount of affection my partner gives me.

These questions help create a dialogue that begins to identify each person's wants and needs.

I am not the first minister to suggest to a congregation that they increase their conversations about sex. You may have heard about the pastor of Relevant Church, a congregation in southwest Florida, who not too long ago asked married couples in the congregation to have sex for 30 days in a row and told singles to steer clear of sex for the same length of time. On the one hand, this man is a genius. He drew a lot of attention to the topic, increased the intimacy of those in a committed relationship, and encouraged his congregation to be mindful – and intentional – about their intimate relationships. On the other hand, *everything* is still couched in the concept of one particular definition of religious morality – that sex is only for married people and specifically between a man and a woman.

Well you can breathe easy, I am not going to ask you to do any 30-day experiment, but I *am* actually going to ask you to do something that I consider to be more difficult. I want to suggest this morning, if you are in a committed relationship, that you reopen the dialogue about sex. The best condition for this conversation, by the way, is not in the heat of the moment. ("That's not working" is not the best approach.) How about over dinner, in some public place, reopen the conversation about what you like, what you prefer, what your ideal frequency would be, and what other ways that you feel express intimacy besides intercourse? Because our wants and desires as adults change over time and with circumstance. Everyone has different needs and wants. It makes us the unique human beings that we are.

If you are in a relationship, have this conversation with your partner, and see what assumptions you might have been making. We have a tendency to believe that we know how our partner will respond. And yet, what if you gave your partner permission to change his or her mind? I want to give you permission to reopen the conversation about what a perfect experience would look like.

If you read *Oprah* magazine this month, you may have noticed an article about Unitarians talking about sex in church at all ages, even to adults. A colleague of mine, Michael Tino, was quoted in the article. He said:

You can have the best high school sexuality curriculum in the world, but a lot of critical issues are not going to be addressed in those classes: How do I enjoy my sexuality if I've lost a breast to cancer? How do I manage being a parent and a sexual person? Can I feel sexually satisfied if I don't have a life partner?

There's one simple reason those questions aren't tackled, teenagers don't have them yet. Most of what affects our sexuality happens in adulthood—long-term relationships, breakups, parenthood, illness, sheer exhaustion from managing life.²

And it may take a third party to help us have these conversations – someone like a therapist, counselor, or in some cases a minister.

We live in a state where the most prevalent message is that anything outside of married sex for procreation is shameful. We live in a state where the contradiction of media and Oklahoma culture clash and create a dynamic of shame. We live in a state where sexuality education begins in middle school (which is already way too late) and then focuses only on biology and abstinence. We live in a nation where, of the approximately 750,000 teen pregnancies that occur each year, 82 percent are unintended. More than one-quarter of those teen pregnancies end in abortion. We have a problem.

I was recently on a panel discussing what to tell our kids about sex in the age of social networking. Watching educated, open-hearted, and involved parents struggle with this question made me realize the importance of tackling sex from the pulpit. Messages about sex are *everywhere*. And I want us all to shape our own values – and shape the messages our children receive – with intention. We must help them wade through the sea of confusion with clear, age-appropriate messages about the threats, the dangers, the consequences, as well as help them (and us) to identify what healthy and responsible choices about sexuality throughout life look like.

We live in a world where sexually explicit material and inaccurate information is just a click away. I don't know about you, but my life would have been considerably different if I had been given truthful information about sexual orientation, and the emotional and spiritual consequences of being sexually involved. Like for example, if someone had explained to me the Kinsey scale. The Kinsey scale illustrates that sexual orientation is not an either/or, but rather, a continuum. There is significant data that we actually can move somewhat along that continuum over the course of a lifetime. Sexual education was very different when we were children. How many of

us had a sex talk when we were young? Now how many of us actually learned what we needed to know from your parents?

Part of what I see my role to be as a religious leader with regards to this topic, is to push you to examine your own experience: what you were taught, and when, what you experienced and how it changed your attitude toward intimacy, what you would have changed or done differently. After looking at these questions and answers, you can then make a choice about how you want to relate to your own sexuality at *this* stage in your life and how you would like to educate our next generation about sex and their bodies.

Unfortunately, too many of us have also experienced suffering related to sexuality rather than experiencing it as a life-fulfilling gift. Nearly one half of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended. There are 12 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases each year. As many as 900,000 Americans are infected with HIV, with approximately 40,000 new HIV infections occurring every year. 43 percent of American women and 34 percent of American men report that they have experienced a sexual dysfunction. One in ten men and one in six women were sexually abused as children. An estimated 104,000 children are sexually abused each year. Eight in ten gay people have been harassed because of their sexual orientation. Anti-homosexual attitudes are associated with psychological distress, including a greater incidence of depression and suicide. A recent study in Tulsa suggests an alarming number of our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender youth – the majority of those surveyed – have considered suicide.

So for some, sending messages that are not guilt-ridden, and presenting truthful, age-appropriate information, creating a culture of responsibility and acceptance, is a matter of life and death. Talk to your own kids. Get involved in abstinence plus sexual education. Planned Parenthood would love to have you as a volunteer. Our own Shannon Boston would love to talk to you about our programming here at the church. There are enormous benefits to children having another adult whom they can ask and get supportive and factual information.

Where will our children take their cues about what is appropriate and what is not, if not from you? The family, however *you* define it, is the primary educational unit of values. Whose family values do you want them to learn? And the church is here to help support. So on the one hand, I am for *more* separation of church and sex. I am for separation from what has been the traditional church's message that degrades the human experience and makes God petty and small. And on the other hand, I am for shrinking the wall between church and sex, if it means reinforcing that my goodness is not based on what God supposedly likes and doesn't like. If it

means reinforcing that I have inherent worth, and that my goodness and health is related to how I treat myself, my body and how I treat others.

It is important to note the paradox of my topic today. On the one hand I am not standing before you to tell you how to live. And yet, I am. But you get to decide what to do with it; I will not follow you to FEDEX. With the freedom of the pulpit comes the freedom of the pew. You wouldn't be here if you didn't want to know. And you have the gift of sifting through the complexities to see what fits your life. Theologically this sermon could not come from a priest's mouth and likely wouldn't come from most Oklahoma Protestant ministers. That is the gift of our theology. Our faith is crafted in a dialogue between our personal experience and the messages we get from the world.

So if you haven't already, begin the dialogue about sex. Begin it with your partner, and with your children. We have resources; talk to the ministers or Kathy Keith, Kate Starr, Shannon Boston, or the Billings who have been teaching Sex Ed in this church for many years.

Begin also, the dialogue with yourself. Examine your life's experience. Seek help if you need it. And if you believe that we should have comprehensive Sex Ed or abstinence plus Sex Ed in the schools, then get involved. Someone's life may depend on it. Please don't sit back and let the culture alone define this generation's values about sex and their bodies.

Amen.

¹ Haffner, Debra, Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing <http://www.religioustheology.org>

² <http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200907-omag-adult-sex-education>