

Pastoral Approaches – Human Sexuality
Friday, October 18, 2013

Presentation Part II (John Unger)

Thanks, John (Neufeld), for your words to us. Let me shift gears a bit, pick up this conversation in a slightly more personal tone. Think of it as a retired pastor sifting through the experiences of ministry and sorting some of the lessons learned.

I also speak as a father, because the focus of much of this study conference is deeply personal for our family. Here it is: Merrill and I have a lesbian daughter. She is married to a woman she met at church. They share custody of her children with the children's father. They have also wanted their own children, and a few weeks ago she gave birth to our 8th grandchild. Now our family is facing the significant challenge of learning, slowly and often painfully, how to still be a family – to love one another and welcome each other – despite great differences of opinion and conviction. We're only beginning that process.

I've struggled to know how much to tell you. Does it help you to know that her struggles with same-sex attraction began when she was a teenager? That she desperately prayed to be able to live the life she believed God wanted of her, including 16 years of marriage to a man? That at the "end of marriage" ceremony at their church, they stood together, weeping, as they extinguished the unity candle, but that the Christ candle remained lit?

This story involves many people, and we're all feeling pretty vulnerable. This is a family conversation, and I trust you will treat our story with care and respect.

I tell our story (as others have told theirs these days) because, unless we are ready and willing to speak honestly about "how it is with us", questions about sexuality will be debated as issues "out there" but will never touch home, where we live on the ground of our relationships. Our assignment this morning is to present pastoral responses, which always involve questions of how we live together as a church family amidst all the messiness and pain of our personal and family stories.

You should know that the Fort Garry church family has been aware of this story, as has the Seminary Board and the Canadian Conference Executive Board. I have been so grateful for their support and prayers.

One final thing, as it relates to our topic this morning. Since I began sharing this story, a stream of people has come to us, saying, "That's our story, too." And then they pause, lean forward and ask, "What should we do?"

Merrill and I are just finding our way. The only thing we can offer is, Make sure your children know you love them. Too often such stories end with misunderstanding

and distance. We want our story to have a better ending. It will require all the truth and grace, wisdom and courage we can muster.

Right about now I suspect some of you are thinking, “He’s got a lesbian daughter, I know where he’s going.” It is true, where we sit determines what we see, in life and in the text, but may I gently invite you to hold that thought and walk with me for a few moments?



When it comes to sexuality, I often wonder, what was God thinking? Imagine handing your 16-year-old the keys to a brand new Ferrari. “It’s all yours,” you say.



“Take it for a spin. Drive carefully.” Drive carefully? Right! 16 years old with 562 screaming hp, right from the factory, all revved up and raring to go! And we expect our kids not to crash?



Never mind the kids – we haven't escaped the damage either, and none of us can claim a clean driving record. And here we are at the crash site, trying to figure out how to respond as the faithful church of Christ.

What was God thinking?

Created in the image of God, male and female... (and sometimes not: ambiguous genital organs, XXY or both XX and XY – these births are infrequent, but they and their families are in our churches, silent in their secret, but wondering how they, too, are created in the image of God). Our sexuality is not the sum total of our identity, but our sexuality certainly lies at the core of our being. It is a beautiful, powerful gift. It is also where we find some of our most destructive sins, our most profound failures, our deepest wounding and our greatest shame.

In the next few minutes I want to zoom out to view this larger crash site, if you will, and conduct some sort of triage. Everyone has wounds and bruises, but some cases are critical. Who needs our help first? What cases are most urgent?

John gave you his top three; let me give you mine.

1. The first is sexual abuse and violence. Sexual assault ranges from unwanted sexual touching to rape to extreme sexual violence to murder. Statistics Canada has found that one in four girls and one in eight boys have been sexually abused by the time they are eighteen.
(http://www.assaultcare.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=49&Itemid=58)

For aboriginal women in Canada that number is 57% (and any ministry among First

Nations peoples has to take this into account). For disabled women it's worse; 83%.

- 80% of sexual assault incidents occur in the home
- 80% of assailants are friends and family of the victim

Source: SexAssaults.ca

While the numbers can never be 100% accurate, one thing is certain. The victims are everywhere. They are in our families and they are in our churches. And so are the assailants, the abusers.

Some churches have actively engaged this issue – counseling, seminars, support groups, and so on, but too often the church has responded in inadequate, inept or inappropriate ways that further traumatize the victims.

These are complicated situations. They can divide families and churches. They demand much time and emotional energy from pastors and church leaders. But that cannot scare us off. Inaction only emboldens the abuser and re-victimizes the abused. Nor should the church be silenced or paralyzed by that common disclaimer, “We can't say or do anything because it's before the courts”. According to Paul, the church, led by the Spirit, has its own wisdom and should not have to wait for the courts before making decisions and taking protective and redemptive action (1 Corinthians 6).

BTW, mediation is not an appropriate way to deal with the imbalance of power, the personal violation and injury, the fear, the shame, and the breach of trust between the abuser and the victim. Reconciliation may occur in time, but the first order of business is safety, full acknowledgement of harm done, and the assumption of responsibility by the perpetrator.

The abuse has to stop. Churches must be safe places to disclose abuse. We should believe the victims (false accusations comprise only 2-4% of all reports). Active support of the abused, resources for recovery of victims and restoration of perpetrators, are all possible and necessary, not only for the people within our churches, but for the larger communities we serve.

2. My second triage concern: What our youth and young adults are absorbing about sexuality through pornography.

Pornography is everywhere, and it has gone mainstream.

In 2009, researchers at the University of Montreal launched a study on the effects of pornography. They started by creating a control group for comparison, seeking men in their 20s who had never consumed pornography. They couldn't find any. The whole study had to be changed.

(http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/08/18/research-suggests-all-men-watch-pornography_n_930349.html)

We think it's not happening to our church kids? Think again. Depending on your situation, 50 – 95% of children in our care are exposed to pornography by the age of 10, when they are most sexually curious.

Let me add a few words about video games. Many of our young men are playing sexually abusive and violent video games without discernment or discretion. In many of these games, the player actually participates in the violence against and sexual abuse of women.

Couples watch porn together, hoping it will rekindle their romance. Women complain their husbands expect porn sex, because men have come to believe such behavior is normal.

More recently there has been a wave of erotic fiction in bookstores and in movies. I worry about bondage, even in role play. It is so far removed from what God intended, the freely offered gift of one's whole self to a marriage partner.

Our people are getting a thorough sex education, and it's coming from all the wrong places. This is a critical issue for the church.

I wish this conference had offered a series of workshops on what healthy sexual beliefs, attitudes and behaviors look like, for children, for teens, for engaged couples. What about singles? Couples who are married? People with developmental disabilities? Seniors? The church needs to have these conversations.

And when the minds and consciences of men and women have been seared by pornography and lustful erotic fantasies, will they find in the church a safe place for confession, a place for absolution – the assurance of sins forgiven – and the support they will need on the long journey back to purity? If not in the church, then where?

3. My third critical issue for the church is the profound alienation of the LGBTQ community from our churches and even from many of our families.

I'm not talking about same-sex orientation or behavior. We've spent a day on that, and we know what the Bible says. I'm speaking of the gulf of suspicion, anger and hurt that exists between many evangelical churches, including Mennonite Brethren, and the LGBTQ community. It seems we are standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon shouting at those standing on the other side, but the distance between us is so great no one can hear a word the others are saying.

There are certainly exceptions, but I have a hunch many of us are not aware of a single gay or lesbian person in our congregation. The reason may be quite simple –

they are not there. Those who identify as lesbian or gay, or bi or trans or questioning, are long gone. Sometimes they don't tell even their parents why they are leaving. If they do confide in parents, whom can the parents tell? If their pastor or church friends ever found out, they would be ostracized, so they hide their secret in isolation.

In leaving, some of our sons and daughters know they will never be allowed to return home, even for Christmas. Some take a destructive path. Some take their own lives. Then we say, Wait, we loved you, why did you go?

As Willard Krabill put it in our recommended reading, "Few other issues have caused so much suffering." (Willard S. Krabill, "The Gift and Same-Sex Orientation" in *Sexuality: God's Gift*, Anne Krabill Hershberger, Ed. Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1999)

If we are going to be helpful to our LGBTQ children, brothers, sisters, friends and neighbors in any way, we will have to find conversation spaces that aren't so far apart, spaces that are safe for honest talk for both sides, and where care and compassion are tangible.

To sum up my short triage assessment of the church, sexual abuse, porn, and the pain and alienation of those who identify as LGBTQ... these are my top three. You might have yours.

Let me offer some general suggestions of how the church might respond to these and other situations. Again, think of them as a retired pastor's sorting through some things he has learned.

1. Let's remember a pastoral response is never a response to an issue; it is always a response to a person who is dealing with an issue. The issue does not define their identity. A person has a face, a name, a story. A person is a son or daughter, brother or sister. A person is my brother or sister in Christ. At the very least, remembering the person changes the tone of the conversation. It may also change the substance.

I've not always understood this. I remember one particular sermon – we know what the Bible says, so I went after the issue. But I forgot about the persons hearing my voice. I wish I could do that one over.

2. Prevention is so much better than rescue and restoration. A number of young men have come to me asking for mentors, but men of maturity and character willing to invest in the lives of younger men are hard to find. Building and modeling healthy relationships, offering teaching and resources that are both realistic and practical, all of these can help develop wholesome life patterns and godly lifestyles.

3. When it comes to restoration, we start at the cross. Forgiveness of sin, freedom from bondage, healing and transformation always begin here. At the cross we all stand on level ground. At the cross we lay down our false identities (and we all have them). At the cross we let go of our need to pretend. At the cross we let go of boundaries to trust, the borders we draw around what the Spirit may do in our lives. At the cross we experience death, patiently waiting for the power of God's resurrection. How and when it comes – that's in God's hands.

4. We focus on grace. If there is no grace for those places where we are most injured and broken (our sexual sins, failures, woundings and shame), then there really is no grace at all.

But what about truth? The truth is, we're lying at the side of the road bleeding to death. This is a time for rescue and healing, not judgment. James 2 says, "Mercy trumps judgment, so hold your fire." (Unger paraphrase!) In Christ, grace wins.

5. We remember the Spirit blows where it wills and works in ways and places we could never imagine.

Rosaria Butterfield was a lesbian activist and professor of English at Syracuse University in New York. She began reading the Bible as part of her research on the American Religious Right. She writes,

My friends from the gay community were on the alert... A transgendered woman, "J", a dear friend... came into the kitchen to help. She told me point-blank, that all this Bible reading was changing me, and she wanted to know... what was going on in my life. At first I denied it, but she pressed. Finally I said, "What would you say if I told you that I'm beginning to believe that Jesus is real, is a real and risen and loving and judging Lord, and that I am in big trouble?" She sat down at the kitchen stool, exhaled deeply, took my small hands in her large ones, and said, "Rosaria, I know that Jesus is a risen and living Lord. I was a Presbyterian minister for 15 years, and during that time, I prayed that the Lord would heal me. He didn't, but maybe he'll heal you. I'll pray for you." (*Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey Into Christian Faith*. Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2012)

One day the Apostle Peter had a vision in which the Lord told him, "Don't put limits on where and how you think the Spirit can work." Wait a minute, hadn't God directly commanded not to eat these unclean creatures? How were they now to be considered clean? Peter later explained his actions to the church. "The Spirit told

me not to worry about it... and when it became obvious that the Spirit had been given them, who was I to argue?" (Acts 10,11)

Where and how does the Spirit work? Everywhere, and in ways we could never imagine. So let's ask God to open our eyes to where the wind of the Spirit is blowing. We will be surprised. More often than not, we will be unsettled. Above all, let's not argue with the Spirit. We may discover a new creation in the making.

6. I've learned it's not enough to say, "The Bible says."

I have done this. I'd take a text, lay it out there, then shrug my shoulders, "The Bible says," so what can I do?

This is the kind of naïve biblicism that John Stackhouse mentioned the other night. It refuses to take responsibility for our role in discerning the word of God and selecting a text for this moment and this situation.

Think again about the woman caught in adultery in John 8, dragged into the temple court by a crowd of men ready and willing to stone her.

Indeed, the Scriptures specifically commanded that she should be killed (together with the man involved) – it is commanded twice, in Leviticus 20 and Deuteronomy 22.

"The Bible says stone her." Go ahead, says Jesus. If your life is perfect, you go first.

Wait a minute, the Bible doesn't say anything about having to live a perfect life before passing judgment on such obvious and blatant sin.

Yet Jesus does lay down this condition on those who want to do "what the Bible says". And when they all slink away in shame, Jesus, who by his perfect life is the only one who can legitimately cast that first stone, chooses not to do so.

We'll set "those" texts aside; we won't use Leviticus 20 or Deuteronomy 22 today. Judgment will come – go and sin no more – but today is a day for grace, not stoning.

Do you see how Jesus chose, or rather, chose not, to apply the direct command of God in Scripture to this situation?

Well, you say, Jesus could grant a reprieve because he himself would bear the penalty for her sin on the cross. Let me give you another example from the life of the early church. Acts 15 tells of the first ever study conference, a huge debate about what would be required of the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ.

In the end they decided not to lay any burdens or conditions on these new believers, except four: not to eat meat sacrificed to idols (later Paul would argue that it doesn't matter because an idol is just a block of stone, but here it seemed to matter to these new Christians, so it got included), to abstain from sexual sin, not to consume blood or eat meat from strangled animals. That's it.

Wait a minute! Whatever happened to circumcision, the sign of God's everlasting covenant, required of all Jews and all foreigners in God's covenant community, also required of all who would be delivered in the Exodus (Genesis 17, Exodus 12)? Or what about the Sabbath, a permanent sign of God's covenant? Violation of the Sabbath, by the way, also warranted the death penalty (Exodus 31:15). That's how important and significant it was. How could the church just lay these aside? Nothing Jesus said before or after the resurrection indicated in any way that circumcision or Sabbath could be abolished or ignored.

But on this day, in Acts 15, the church, led by the Spirit of God, chose not to choose those texts. They laid those Scriptures aside.

Ah, you say, I know where you're going. "The Bible says", but we don't have to pay attention to it.

That's not what I'm saying at all. Of course we pay attention, to all of Scripture. But, led by the Spirit, the church as a discerning community makes choices about which Scriptures to apply to which situations. As Jesus said, we have the authority and the responsibility to bind and to loose. Astoundingly, decisions made on earth are recognized in heaven. (Matthew 16:19, 18:18)

So when you see a remarried couple come to church with their kids, what do you see:

- There go 2 adulterers, living in sin, who will never inherit the kingdom of God?
- Or, there go Jim and Debby, their sins are forgiven, they are living faithfully in their new marriage under the grace and blessing of God?

Do you notice how you have chosen which texts to apply?

So in our conversations, let's be aware that when someone says, "The Bible says...", that represents a choice. And then we can have a legitimate conversation, without raising our voices and without making it a test of faith, about whether this is the right choice and right application of the right text for this situation.

And so, when I offer James 2:13 as a guiding principle, to hold our fire because mercy trumps judgment, I am aware that this is a choice. Now you have to decide, is this the right choice for our conversation of these days?

I don't have time (or wisdom) to outline all the various sexual issues with pastoral implications. Let me share with you two personal commitments, based on how I see Jesus in the Gospels.

1. My first observation is how available and how safe Jesus was to all sorts of people – religious leaders, children, those who were blind, lame, bleeding, paralyzed, or grieving, everyone including tax collectors and blatant sinners. The disciples often encouraged Jesus to send them all away – we know that temptation, don't we? Especially as our churches get larger, we pastors have people around us to screen our calls, limit access to our office doors and our schedules. Of course, nobody can do everything. Even Jesus sent out the 70 to heal and to preach. But Jesus never withdrew from front-line engagement with needy and hurting people. He was, more often than not, available.

And Jesus always seemed safe – people seemed free to approach and engage him.

My personal commitment has been to become a person who is available and safe. Safe enough to have lunch. Safe enough to touch. Safe enough to speak honestly. Safe to confess sin. Safe to take a step of faith.

There is a risk to this. Other, more religious folks may misunderstand. You may be accused of being a friend of sinners, or soft on sin. So be it, then. You'll have good company.

2. My second commitment, to be a person of blessing. I've often wondered about Isaac who, having blessed Jacob, the chosen son, had only curses left for the unchosen Esau. Of course we understand the privileges and responsibilities of the first-born in ancient cultures, but is blessing a zero-sum game? There's only so much pie; if your brother gets there first, you're out of luck?

This comes up again in Matthew 15. A Canaanite woman pleads with Jesus for her daughter. Jesus says, "I didn't come to help people like you; I came to help the lost sheep of Israel." "Come on!" she says. "Even the dogs get crumbs. Throw me something!"

In that moment, Jesus demonstrates that, having blessed the insiders, there was still enough blessing in reserve to share with those on the outside.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says, "Your Father in heaven gives sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust, too."

God blesses everybody, and wants us to do the same! "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."

In response to this text, I have committed to blessing others without hesitation and without reservation. Those on the inside, those on the outside. This may actually be

a key to unlocking our impasse with the LGBTQ community. What if we could find practical ways to bless them?

These are personal commitments. Stepping back to survey the larger scene, the church lives in the sexual crash zone of our culture. Too much gas pedal, not enough brake, too little wisdom in the turns, too many off-road choices.

In this crash zone we call for emergency care, we bind wounds, we stay with and comfort the dying. Sins are forgiven, relationships are restored. We rejoice with those whose prayers for transformation are answered, and wait and walk with those whose prayers are not. We watch for the breath of the Spirit at work. And sometimes we are able to prevent a crash in the first place, preserving the beauty and grace of this marvelous gift, our sexuality.

God help us.