

## **Greeting**

Good afternoon. My name is Aubrey Spears, and I'm the senior pastor here at the Church of the Incarnation. I'm so glad that you're here.

Our structure will be: I'll teach for about 50 minutes, and then Mike Deaton is going to lead us in a Q&A that involves writing questions on some color coded cards. That time will last for about 20–30 minutes. In between we'll have a restroom break. We'll wrap up at 6pm.

If at any time you need the facilities, they are...

I'll start with a prayer.

Father, thank you for your great love for us. We are partakers of a gospel that You have brought to us through the Holy Spirit. We could not earn it. We could not achieve it. But you gave it. You gave it as a free gift. Before we were ever born you sent your Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross to deliver us from the powers, to forgive our sins. As always, we continue to need your grace. And as recipients of your amazing grace, help us to be the first to have a willing heart to extend that grace to other people where they are, as they are. Lord help me to be full of love, to be utterly free from condescension, to illumine rather than condemn, to present thoughtful understanding rather than lofty moralism. Help me to model both compassion and judgment. Help us all to see that you, the God revealed to us in the Scriptures, in the breaking of bread, in our Lord Jesus Christ, that you are a God of love, of judgment, and mercy. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

## **Introduction**

I want to start with the story of Elizabeth Smart.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years ago, in the early hours of June 5, 2002, a man by the name of Brian David Mitchell broke into the home of Edward and Lois Smart in Salt Lake City, Utah. He snuck into the bedroom where Elizabeth Smart, she was 14 years old, and her little sister, 9 year old Mary Katherine were sleeping. And at knifepoint, he kidnapped Elizabeth.

Over the following 9 months, “in a sick and twisted parody of marriage,” the kidnapper raped Elizabeth repeatedly, calling her his second wife. It's a terrible, tragic story. Thankfully, she was rescued. And as time went on, she went to college and then to graduate school, she got married, and had three children. She's written two books, and developed a foundation that focuses on child abduction, recovery programs, and legislation. She is a remarkable survivor.

One of my favorite theologians who writes about sex, and sexuality, and gender is Beth Felker-Jones. She's written a wonderful little book with the title, *Faithful: A Theology of Sex*. And in that book, she recounts Elizabeth Smart's story. And she points out that Elizabeth Smart was “raised in a religious Mormon family.” And as a result, “she absorbed a set of teachings about

sexual abstinence and purity—very “similar to what many Christians are taught at home and in church” throughout America. In fact, in her memoir, Smart makes this “painful connection between the way she was taught about sex and her reaction to being raped.”

Now she was very clear, “she knew her family loved her,” but she connected her virginity to her worth as a human being. And so there is this heart-wrenching section in her memoir where she writes that despite knowing that her family loved her, she can remember that during her ordeal:

A terrible idea seeped into my soul: If [my family] knew what the man had done to me, would they still want me? the question cut me to the core...Imagine you have a beautiful crystal vase. Then imagine that you accidentally knock it off the table and it shatters into pieces on the floor. We all understand it isn't the vase's fault it was pushed off the table and shattered. But still, it is broken. It is worthless...That is how I felt. It wasn't my fault. But I was broken. No one would want me anymore. So even though I knew the bearded man could kill me at any time, I had already reached a point where I no longer cared.<sup>2</sup>

So on top of the horrendous tragedy of being abducted and the “violence committed against her. Smart has been public about how the feeling that she had been ruined made her” incapable of leaving. It made her resist escaping. These feelings” of being broken, they line up with a certain way of thinking about sex and what's right and what's wrong, and unfortunately that way of thinking too often has been substituted in the church for a Christian view of sex. But this set of teachings “is false. It is heretical.”<sup>3</sup>

In the powerful words of Beth Felker-Jones, “People are not crystal vases.

- Women and girls are not crystal vases.
- People are not commodities.
- Women and girls are not commodities.
- Human beings and human bodies should never, never be bought or sold.
- Our value, our worth, our purpose in the world can never, never be attached to some supposed purity of body, as if we were merchandise instead of sons and daughters of the King.”

**This is where we need to start our series** on God, Sex, Gender, and Human Flourishing.

Sometimes **culture and the church** have spoken about sexual purity in a way that

- “makes virginity into a thing that” a person should “cling to in order to retain value.
- It tells the graceless lie that we are more valuable” people “if we have this thing.
- It tells the demonic lie that our market value is what makes us precious to God.”<sup>4</sup>

And “**of course there is much that is healthy and holy and happy** about the situation in which both spouses can come to a marriage without prior sexual experience, but” that in no way has anything to do with their value as marriage partners.<sup>5</sup>

So let’s start this series hearing together this fundamentally important truth:

- All men and women,
- teenagers, children,
- virgins and non-virgins,
- queer and trans\*,
- heterosexuals and sexual minorities,
- celibate and sexually active,

all humans are precious. And your “preciousness is **unconditional**...there is nothing...that can happen to us,” and nothing that we can do ourselves, “that can take away our status as free, [beautiful,] image-bearing children of the Creator.”<sup>6</sup> Your value, your worth, your purpose in the world can never, never be attached to some supposed purity of body.

**Transition:** And with that on the table, I’m going to spend the rest of my time walking through six reasons that we are doing this series called “A Better Story: God, Sex, Gender and Human Flourishing.” six reasons that we are giving so much energy, so many resources to this teaching. Six reasons we up here on Sunday afternoons, in the middle of busy lives.

### **1. We are Talking about Sex and Gender because these Things Really Do Matter**

Number 1. We’re talking about sex and gender because these things really do matter. Sex, sexuality, gender...this is something that touches the core of our existence.<sup>7</sup>

Of the many important lessons the #MeToo movement has taught us, one is that sex “matters profoundly. [And] its violation leads to the deepest emotional and psychological damage, quite apart from the physical scars it leaves.”<sup>8</sup>

And this is something that Jesus taught us. Early on in one of his best known teachings, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus deals with sexual ethics. If you have a Bible, turn to **Matthew c5vv27–28**, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*”

Notice when Jesus says that “the man looking lustfully at a woman has broken the commandment against adultery just as surely as if he had physically slept with her,” Jesus is teaching something really beautiful and dignifying about this woman. This woman is not to be looked at lustfully, because, in the words of Sam Allberry her “**sexuality is precious and valuable...she has a sexual integrity to her which matters and should be honored by everyone...**

- He is saying that this sexual integrity is so precious that it must not be violated,
- **even in the privacy** of someone else’s mind.
- Even if she were never to find out about it, she would have been greatly wronged by being thought about lustfully.”<sup>9</sup>

Notice how much value Jesus gives this woman and her body. Notice that “Jesus is showing us that our [bodies, our] sexuality is far more precious than we might have realised,” and so Jesus is teaching a way to honor and dignify and protect this valuable part of us.<sup>10</sup>

“These are not the words of a prude...These are the words of someone who understands that... what happens in” our bodies “is intimate and personal.”<sup>11</sup>

The Christian sexual ethic is not legalism, it’s not some hyper-focus on arbitrary moral rules. Sexual ethics are “essential” to the gospel. They are part of the way that God changes our lives, helping us to become more and more fully human, more and more like Jesus, more and more faithful to bearing God’s image in the world.

In the Bible we are taught that sex matters because faithful sex testifies to the power and the character of a God who graciously saves. Sex and your soul are connected. And it’s the burden of this whole series to help us to see that, believe it, understand it, and grow in our ability to explain that to others for whom it doesn’t seem to be connected because they have a plausibility structure that points them in other directions.

So the first reason we need to spend this afternoon and the next 8 weeks talking about sex and gender and sexuality is because these things really, really matter.

## **2. We are talking about Sex and Gender again because our church needs to become a place where sexual minorities can flourish.**

The second reason for this series is that our church and our homes need to become places where LGBTQ+ people are safe, where they feel safe.

Now, I need to pause here and say something about language. When it comes to sex and sexuality and gender, language and labels are very complex.

### ***A Comment about Language***

The more I spend time with non-straight believers, the more I've grown convinced that they are very thoughtful and intentional about how they choose to describe their experience of their sexuality. And none of the labels are neutral. Every single label—gay, same-sex attracted, queer, bi, lesbian, homosexual—every single one of these labels has history, and baggage.

Some Christians I have been talking with have “perfectly good and valid reasons why they choose to describe themselves as **same-sex-attracted**.”<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, I have other friends who are Christians, and they use the label lesbian or gay or queer, and often add celibate. They'll say that they are a gay Christian, or a celibate queer Christian. And when I've asked them about what they mean by that term, and why they use it, they too have very good and valid reasons.<sup>13</sup>

And I have other friends who experience attraction to people of their same gender and they have very good reasons for rejecting all of these labels.

So here's the deal. After reading so many arguments in and around this issue, and going back and forth on this, I'm convinced of four things:

1. when someone is trying to identify their experience, the terms they use are very personal,
2. all of these terms are legitimate,
3. all of these terms have baggage that heterosexual Christians know very little about,
4. and, terminology is an area for Christian freedom.

Now, if you've followed our Province or our Diocese, you might know that **this is a different understanding** of **how to deal with the issue of sexuality and identity** than was

- recommended by the ACNA college of Bishops statement on sexuality and identity [[click here](#) for that document.]
- and it's different than the understanding **initially presented** by our own Bishop's pastoral letter to the clergy of our diocese. [[Click here](#) for that document. Permission to share this document was granted by Bishop Steve Breedlove to Aubrey Spears.]
- I've met several times with our Bishop about all of this.
- He's asked me to let you know that a few things:
  1. He understands that I am fully orthodox on these issues,
  2. and that I've come to this by wrestling with how to effectively lead our church in this area of sexuality,
  3. He's willing to wade into it with me, and we're committed to further conversation,

4. and at this point, he's given me **permission and freedom** along these lines.
- And at some point this week we'll provide you a link to the Statements by both the Provincial college of Bishops and the by our own Bishop.
  - Most likely what we'll do is post the manuscript of this lecture as a pdf on our website. And in that manuscript, at this exact point, you'll be able to click a link to those letters.

Alright, so here's where I am. I think we should resist the terminology wars. Too many well-intentioned Christian have pushed back against people for using sexual identity language, and I can guarantee that many of the recipients of that pushback have experienced those conversations as emotional abuse.

When I've asked people what they mean by the labels they've chosen, and then I've looked at what is being said by those who are attempting to promote or suppress various labels, I'm convinced that there is too much talking past each other going on.<sup>14</sup>

**Transition:** Now let's turn back to the second reason for this series, which is that our church and our homes need to become places where LGBTQ+ people are safe, where they feel safe.

Our church believes that the Bible teaches us to honor God **and** to generously love people.

So to be clear, our church "*will continue to embrace the Christian church's historic teaching on marriage and the household.* We are a Christian congregation whose identity is rooted in the Trinity, the Scriptures, and the historic teachings and practices of the Christian faith... The overwhelming Scriptural and historical teaching of the Christian church is"<sup>15</sup> that

God intends sexual intimacy to be enjoyed exclusively within a marriage covenant between a man and a woman, and any inward cultivation or outward expression of sexual desire apart from the one-flesh bond between husband and wife is out of accord with God's creational intent, and therefore against his good and gracious will.<sup>16</sup>

And so, outside of this kind of marriage, "all of us—whatever our gender and whatever the object of our sexual desire—[we are all]...to live lives of...chastity."<sup>17</sup> That's the clear, unambiguous, historic teaching of the Church.

And so what I'm saying is that **our church and our homes need to become places where sexual minorities and gender minorities feel safe while we continue to hold** the historic Christian doctrine of marriage and sexuality.

And this is going to be difficult, for a number of reasons:

First, the part of the church in North America that believes that sex is only appropriate in a marriage between a man and a woman, churches in North America who hold the position that we hold, which is the historic view of Christianity, churches who have committed to this Biblical

understanding have a history of mistreating sexual and gender minorities through acts of injustice, ignorance, and silence. We must acknowledge and come to terms with that history, because it gives shape to our place within the LGBTQ+ community.

Second, churches that hold to the biblical sexual ethic, including our church, by-in-large, we have not yet developed the skills, the wisdom, and the practices we need in order to love Lesbian and Gay and Bisexual and Trans\* and Queer people in the particular kinds of ways that they need to be loved. And so we've put barriers in place that effect sexual minorities. We must acknowledge this and find ways to center the experience of non-heterosexual people and the things important to them.<sup>18</sup>

One data point that illustrates this is the overwhelming number of stories coming from people who grow up Christian and have same-sex desires and simultaneously experienced significant shame and fear even as they are trying to bring their desires into submission to the church's teaching.

A woman I have been talking with recently, she's a very committed Christian, absolutely committed to the Church's teaching on sexuality. She grew up in a good Christian home. And her parents had lots of gay friends, that they regularly spent time with. And this woman, from an early age was same-sex attracted, and her thought growing up in a good Christian home, where she was around her parents gay friends—so we're not talking about a woman growing up in a rabidly homophobic, mean kind church. But this woman said to me on the phone just a few weeks ago, that her thought growing up was: "if you've experienced SSA then God has turned you over, you are beyond hope, God has turned you over to the destruction of the flesh and wants to have nothing to do with you."<sup>19</sup>

Another Christian woman, Eve Tushnet, I mentioned her earlier, she is steadfastly and solely attracted to women. She's a devout Christian. She's committed to following the Christian sexual ethic, so she's celibate. In her most recent book, she writes these tragic words: "it's typically easier for a gay person who grows up outside the Church to know God's love than for a gay person who had a [Christian]...upbringing. The children of the Church, who should be the *most* confident in God's love, the ones who know best what God is like, are instead the ones who grow up uncertain of God's love and afraid that there's no place for them in the Church."<sup>20</sup>

Over and over as I've developed deep relationships with LGBTQ+ people inside and outside the church, this experience comes up again and again.

Why?

Why is it that people who grow up in the church while experiencing same-sex-attraction or discomfort with their gender, and especially those who "always tried to do right and be good Christian kids," why is it that they often wake up one day in their twenties or thirties"—this is just so common—"and realize that they have never really believed that God cherished them"?



Over and over the testimonies are that

- “they have always felt, on some level, that God was **disgusted** by them and **did not delight** in them the way he delighted in people with more conventional” sexual temptations.

The same-sex attracted person raised in the church, not all the time, but too often, ends up saying that they “knew intellectually—they accepted [it on]...faith—that God loved them; but the” picture they had in mind, in the words of Eve Tushnet, was that God’s love for them was really

- more of “a dutiful love, colored by the familiar parental admixture of expectations and disappointment.

Gay people who grow up in good Christian homes and good Christian churches,” not all of them, definitely not all of them, but too many report this same experience.<sup>21</sup>

**And it doesn’t have to be this way.**

We can follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Jesus, who in the Sermon on the Mount, taught an extremely rigorous standard on all kinds of hot button topics, and in the very next chapters you find those very people who did not live according to his standards, the very people whose behavior Jesus publicly called sin, those very same people are eating with Jesus, and listening to him, and he’s listening to them, and they feel safe around him.

It is possible for the LGBTQ+ community to be safer, to feel safe in churches that believe gay marriage is wrong and sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman is wrong.<sup>22</sup>

The path to become a safe church, and safe homes, for sexual minorities, the path forward is **absolutely not**

- to revise what the Bible says,
- what the church has historically taught.
- The path forward is not a new sexual ethic.

In other words, I am saying that the more progressive church’s are letting themselves off the hook when they develop a new sexual ethic, a departure from what the church has always taught. They are letting themselves off the hook of the gospel.

And I’m also saying that the churches who hold to the traditional Christian view are also letting ourselves off the hook of the gospel, when we think that **THE** reason gay and queer and trans\* people do not feel safe among us is because of what we believe about sex. That’s not the reason. The reason is we haven’t understood the unique experience of the gay brother and sister among us. And we haven’t learned how to be really good and loving them.



The path forward is for us to learn specific ways to love our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, specific skills for loving this minority community with its particular struggles and graces. Jesus loves gay people, and so we do too.<sup>23</sup> We have to figure out the effective ways to express that love.

So I'm teaching this series because

- I long for our church and our homes to be a haven for sexual minorities and gender minorities, a place where LGBTQ+ human beings are visible and thriving, experiencing true belonging and genuine intimacy.
- I long for us to be a church where heterosexual Christians are living out the truth of **Galatians 6:2**, *“bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”* What I means is I long for us to make sacrifices to help bear the unique burdens of gay and trans\* people.
- I long for the day when leaders in our church, when clergy, parish council members, small group leaders, single college students and stay-at-home moms, can all talk about their same-sex attraction and not be viewed with suspicion or even anxiety.
- We need Christians who are same-sex-attracted to come out publicly while committing themselves to pursue the biblical sexual ethic.
- I long for our church to be a church that celebrates the unique opportunities that LGBTQ+ people have to serve the Kingdom of God.<sup>24</sup>

Over the course of this series, I'll point to resources in Scripture and Christian practice that can help our church and our homes both hold on to the Biblical view of sex and marriage while at the same time holding on to the Biblical command of love, the gift of safety.

Let us be a place where sexual and gender minorities can grow in trust in a God who loves us all, who shepherds us all with infinite mercy and tenderness.

I long for the day, when a young person grows up in our church and is same-sex-attracted or doesn't feel like they fit in their body...I long for the day when that young person says, with no idea that he's saying anything unusual, “Oh, I was raised Christian—so of course I've never doubted that God loved gay people.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***3. We need to have this series because when it comes to sex and gender...there are some very complex issues.***

Number three, we need to have this series because these are very complicated issues.

Many of us feel overwhelmed by the this issue and its implications for our own lives, our family, our friendships, our country, and our church.

And you're not wrong to be overwhelmed. And you're not wrong to be confused. **“This is as complicated an issue as most of us will face in our lifetimes.”**<sup>26</sup>

I can't tell you how many times I've been overcome by a rush of fear that I've interpreted the Bible incorrectly on this, and have hurt people by doing that. I cannot read what the Bible says about homosexuality or think about transgenderism from a distance. I see my friends, people I love, real people, beautiful faces, and complex stories whenever I read Scripture on these topics.<sup>27</sup>

And I know that some of you, you've talked to me, you're not persuaded by the logic of the Church's sexual ethic, and so it's something you take on trust rather than because you've been convinced by some argument about it.<sup>28</sup>

For many people, as the brilliant Eve Tushnet writes, yes the Church “is beauty and rescue, not a bunch of rules for good behavior. But [we] accept...the Church's own account of herself, in which...morality...is not separable from the beauty and the rescue.” As Christians, we trust “the Church as both mother and teacher: a mother who” will nourish us “with Jesus' Body and Blood, and a teacher who...[shows us] Jesus [who is] the Way—a way of life, which” we follow even when we don't understand.<sup>29</sup>

And yet I believe there is value in opening the Scriptures—yet again...reading them for insight and instruction.” It is helpful to return “to the Bible and interpret it afresh.”<sup>30</sup>

And so we are here, because on this subject no one is really helped by “quick and easy Tweetable answers.” We “want to know what the Bible actually says. And to do that we have to work hard and think deeply.”<sup>31</sup>

Alright so we need this series: (1) Because sex is important. (2) Because we need to become a safe place for sexual minorities. (3) Because this subject is so very complicated. And #4...

***4. We need to have this series because we are all called to holiness, and there's a lot of unhelpful pathways for straight and non-straight people being offered today.***

The vision that God gives us for sex and relationships in Scripture is “as tough and demanding today as it ever has been.”<sup>32</sup>

“God calls all of his people to a life of holiness, and...it is the responsibility of every Christian to turn away from all illicit sexual desire, and to steward their sexuality in obedience to Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

Each one of us is complicated sexually. Each one of us has “complicated sexual desires and...the constraint of those desires is an act of agonizing self-denial for” many of us. Many Christians struggle to be faithful. For some it's a seasonal struggle, for others it's a daily struggle.

And for some, the struggle is significantly more difficult than others. Some people have to give up more than others. As one clever writer put it, “the Christian life is not democratic; some have one cross to bear and others ten.”<sup>34</sup>

Too often the church has not only failed to help people with this struggle, to its shame, we’ve often only made it more difficult for the LGBTQ+ community.

So we need to do this series, because we need to help one another—the married and the unmarried, the heterosexually attracted and the same-sex attracted, those who are comfortable in their bodies and those who are not—we need to help each other live into the Christian vision of sexual wholeness, holiness, and flourishing. Because “any life [that any of us]...create outside of God’s design only brings death.”<sup>35</sup>

And so we’re doing this series because we are committed to helping one another with grace, patience, and hope. Each one of us, with all of our complicated sexual experience and desire, all of us need to be both **welcomed** and **nurtured** into what God has called us to be.<sup>36</sup>

**Transition:** The fifth reason we are doing this series is because Christians, and the Christian vision of life no longer sit in the center of our Society. And so we need the church to equip us as a minority missionary society in this secular age.

***5. Christians, and the Christian vision of life no longer sits in the center of our Society. And so we need the church to equip us as a minority missionary society in this secular age.***

Look, we live in a secular age. And the developments in our society with regard to marriage and sex and gender and education are the latest and wholly predictable evidence of the fact that culture has shifted. We need to be deeply realistic about the nature of our society.<sup>37</sup>

The sociologist Peter Berger coined the term, “cognitive minorities.” He uses this term “to describe those whose views about the world differ...significantly from the mainstream of their surrounding culture.”<sup>38</sup> Christians are now one of the “cognitive minorities.”

And “Berger contends that...to survive as a minority you need to start acting like one.”<sup>39</sup>

“Christians...occupied the cultural mainstream [in America] for so long that [many Christians]... find the idea of being a minority difficult to stomach, never mind the thought of acting like [a minority]. But we need to make the adjustment, and soon, because in addition to having become a cognitive minority, [Christians] are now also viewed as an *immoral minority*. In other words, as well as having different beliefs from everybody else, we are now frequently cast as having inferior morals. This puts us in a social and psychological space that is fraught with danger.”<sup>40</sup>

“Christian beliefs are frequently viewed as morally dangerous and antithetical to human well-being...[the idea that our] beliefs cause harm.”<sup>41</sup>

As Greg Thompson wrote in a letter to his church a few years ago, “We are not representatives of a majority whose task it is to reclaim a Christian America. We are representatives of a minority whose task it is to re-evangelize a secular West.”<sup>42</sup>

So look, we are doing this series in order to equip our church intellectually, morally, spiritually, relationally, and strategically to live as missionary people. Because this is who we are.”<sup>43</sup>

We’re casting the Christian vision for sexuality so that we can all learn how to better communicate this beautiful picture in our own spheres of influence.

And obviously, “we don’t want to do this in a way that is overly muscular, ham-fisted, or insensitive. That won’t accomplish the outcomes we want. If [the Christian vision of sexuality]... will ever capture hearts and minds, we need to cast [the] vision for it with joy, tears, and hope.”<sup>44</sup>

I hope that this series will bring encouragement to you as you seek to communicate this glorious vision to your friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues.

And finally...

***6. We are doing this series because the Church has lost so much credibility on this issue, and when you combine this with all of the other dynamics I’ve been talking about, many of us are losing confidence.***

The sixth reason for this series is that the Church has lost so much credibility on these issues, and when you combine this with all of the other dynamics I’ve been talking about, many of us are losing confidence.

We need to take some criticism squarely on the chin. “The history of the church in the sphere of human sexuality is disfigured by shame and hypocrisy.”<sup>45</sup> The church doesn’t always act poorly, but serious mistakes are definitely in our history. And it’s very important that we own up to this.

Too often the Church has allowed “a deficient, sub-Christian view of sex to dominate our communities and shape our attitudes.” As a result, the Church has been harsh and judgmental, and many people have been “diminished and excluded. And rather than serving the vulnerable and poor,” the American evangelical church has, at times, used “our moral convictions... as weapons to beat” some people over the head.<sup>46</sup>

Too many of us have fallen into a culture war posture, we’ve been so “busy building our moral vision around what we [are]... against – impurity, fornication, pornography and the rest – that we forgot to ask what we were actually for. We need to come clean about that.”<sup>47</sup>

And then there is the heart-wrenching sexual abuse crisis going on in too many churches.<sup>48</sup>

When it comes to gender and sexuality, we must acknowledge that the Western Evangelical church has

- perpetrated awful persecution and mistreatment of the LGBTQ community,
- enforced restrictive and discriminatory gender roles,
- and nurtured marriage-centric and family-centric cultures that marginalize people who are single.

And so the 6th reason we need this series is because as an institution, the Christian church has lost enormous credibility when it comes to sexual ethics.<sup>49</sup> And we need to come to grips with this as we rediscover a confidence in the traditional Christian teaching on sex and marriage. It is good news for today. And as we'll see in the weeks ahead, the Christian vision of sex is a "story charged with hope, optimism and grace. A story told with inspiration and passion. A story told in words, yes, but also one put on display in our lives, real lives lived in real homes, in real families and real communities."<sup>50</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Alright. So there they are. Six reasons we need this series.

And yes, this is very challenging for the Church. But as Greg Johnson said when he was the pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, "This cultural moment...brings with it a wonderful grace. And that grace is this: for many of us, the experience of being stripped of the false consolations of being a majority—consolations of ease, power, acceptance, and affirmation—[this holds the potential of opening] us up to the possibility of the only true consolation that there is: delighted union with the Holy Trinity through Jesus Christ."<sup>51</sup>

Jesus "is

- the Source of our every good,
- the Presence in our every joy,
- our Keeper in every trial,
- and our Refuge in every moment—both now and forevermore.

Because of this, I want to urge you to greet these days not simply with alarm or even with resolve, but with joy. Christ is our Life. Christ is our Life. And our calling together is to live in such a way that this Life might, through us, become the Life of the world."<sup>52</sup>

Amen.

## **Road Ahead**

***Next Three Weeks:*** What is it about our **culturally** moment that makes the Christian vision of sexuality seem naive and unrealistic at best and downright repressive and immoral at worst? And furthermore, why does the Church's view of sex fail to resonate with so many contemporary believers?

***Then we'll spend 4 sessions*** on: What is the **Christian** vision of sexuality, gender, and relationships?

***Then we'll conclude*** with a session focused on some remaining issues that we need to cover if we are going to faithfully live out the Christian vision in our secular age.

## **O&A**

**Recommend** (each week, try to introduce you to helpful book or two focused on issues for that week's subject).

For tonight, I recommend...

- Beth Felker Jones, *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* (Zondervan, 2015)
- Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Zondervan, Reflective, 2021)
- Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith* (Ave Marie Press, 2014)
- Eve Tushnet, *Tenderness: A Gay Christian's Guide to Unlearning Rejection and Experiencing God's Extravagant Love* (Ave Marie Press, 2021)
- Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality: Rediscovering the Christian Vision of Sexuality*, (Zondervan, 2017.) **[Be sure to not miss the valuable appendix focusing on sexual abuse]**
- *Guiding Families of LGBT+ Loved Ones: For Every Pastor and Parent and All Who Care*, Expanded Edition (Posture Shift Books, 2020)

<sup>1</sup> The story of Elizabeth Smart can be found in many places. See especially her own account in Elizabeth Smart, *My Story* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013). My own telling of the story and the interpretation of her story that follows is nearly verbatim from Beth Felker Jones, *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 82–83. Where I have quoted Jones exactly from these pages there are quotation marks without a footnote.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Smart, *My Story* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 47–49. Quoted in Jones, *Faithful*, 83. In 2014, at a Tedx Talk at the University of Nevada, Mrs. Smart said that after the initial rape, “I will never ever forget how I felt. How broken I felt, how I was beyond all help, all hope that even if someone did find me what was the point. I was useless. I was disgusting. I wasn't worth saving...I fell asleep thinking those thoughts” (<https://www.elizabethsmart.com/media>).

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the heretical nature of this teaching, in a footnote, Jones writes: “Specifically, it is Pelagian and legalistic. Pelagianism is the name Christians give to the heresy that supposes that humans can—and should—do what we need to do in order to be in right relationship with God. Legalism is the heretical belief that we can earn our salvation through obedience to God and good works. In the false teaching about sexual ethics I'm critiquing here, Pelagianism and legalism assume we can and should make ourselves holy by means of sexual holiness and that this is what gives us value to God. Pelagianism and legalism obscure the gospel truth that salvation is by grace” (Jones, *Faithful*, 107-8 n31).

<sup>4</sup> Jones, *Faithful*, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, *Faithful*, 108 n32.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, *Faithful*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> In an article for *The Atlantic*, the Pulitzer Prize nominated journalist, Caitlin Flanagan, wrote about the time, when she was a senior in high school, and she was severely depressed as a result of her painful home life, and then, in her words “a good-looking senior offered to drive me home one day. I was excited—I'd had my eye on him, and in the promise of this ride home I saw the solution to all my problems: my sadness, my loneliness, my inability to figure out how to go to the parties the other kids were always talking about in the hallways and before class started. He drove me home, looked around my empty house for a bit, and then suggested we drive to the beach. It was in his car, in the deserted parking lot of that beach, that he tried to rape me.” “We struggled against each other, and then—suddenly—he stopped. He started the car and drove me home in silence. I told no one. In my mind, it was **not** an example of male aggression used against a girl to extract sex from her. In my mind, it **was** an example of how undesirable I was. It was proof that I was not the kind of girl you took to parties, or the kind of girl you wanted to get to know. I was the kind of girl you took to a deserted parking lot and tried to make give you sex. Telling someone would not be revealing what he had done; it would be revealing how deserving I was of that kind of treatment. So her depression escalated, she made some friends who introduced her to acid, and then things got so low that she made plans to kill herself. Thankfully, she didn't. (Caitlin Flanagan, “I Believe Her: When I was in High School, I Faced My Own Brett Kavanaugh,” *The Atlantic*, 17 September 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/me-too/570520/>).

<sup>8</sup> Sam Allberry, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Gook Company, 2020), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Allberry, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Allberry, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?*, 18.



<sup>11</sup> Jones, *Faithful*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> They may not want to be associated with baggage that comes with the term *gay*. They may have built their identity on their gayness in the past and are trying to break free of that...Others...prefer the phrase because it seems more descriptive and less tied up in issues of personal identity. Some others use the phrase because their spouse could never live with the alternative. Still others may choose to identify as same-sex attracted because they inhabit conservative religious spaces in which calling themselves gay will be misunderstood or misrepresented. They choose to use a term that is best understood in their context. They...consider that the more loving option. [Other same-sex attracted Christians] want to avoid a naivete about the potential for LGBTQ narratives to exert an influence they don't want in their lives. There are lots of good reasons believers have for describing themselves as same-sex attracted" (Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Reflective, 2021], 192).

<sup>13</sup> "They may be speaking phenomenologically, using the term *gay* in its descriptive sense, not in a prescriptive or ontological sense. They may not be saying, 'This is who I am at core' but...merely... 'This describes my experience.'" Some celibate gay Christians I've been getting to know have pointed out to me that the phrase "same-sex-attracted" came out of the part of the Christian world that used reparative therapy. And they had "gone through reparative therapy and feel retraumatized by a label they were told to adopt under false pretense. If someone had been closeted and hiding behind a mask her entire life, her saying she is gay might be a healing step toward personal integration. Someone else may be thinking missiologically and therefore prefer to use the language of the culture they are trying to reach. They may be wanting to emphasize their commonality with secular LGBTQ people in order to build bridges for the gospel...[Or] they may prefer *gay* because it maps onto sexual orientation and not just attraction. A homosexual orientation includes more than just same-sex attraction. It also includes the lack of sexual attraction to members of the opposite sex, which for a Christian can be the far more painful half when we consider our human longing for a life partner. There are lots of good reasons believers describe themselves as gay and celibate" (Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 192–93). And "they may just be trying to speak modern English. The phrase *same-sex attraction* is" Christianese, it's unfamiliar to secular people" (Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 193).

<sup>14</sup> There is so much we need to learn about identity labels. For example, it's very popular among Christians to weaponize our identity in Christ. There is a deep flaw with flattening every part of my identity to only being "in Christ," because there are primary and secondary labels, and there is a difference between building your identity on something and identifying as something. Only majority communities get the luxury of not using secondary identity labels. Even the Apostle Paul identified himself with his sin, and in fact, the longer he lived, the more he did it. "He even identified himself as the chief of all sinners. Not the former chief. Not chief emeritus. Paul identified himself as the CEO of depravity." Identity in this secondary sense is complex. If you want to think more about this, I highly recommend Greg Johnson's book, *Still Time to Care*. He covers this in three primary areas: intro xxi–xxiii, 102, and 192–199.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, "Letter from Greg Thompson."

<sup>16</sup> Revoice, "Statement on Sexual Ethics and Christian Obedience," <https://revoice.us/about/our-beliefs/statements-of-conviction/statement-on-sexual-ethics-and-christian-obedience/>.

<sup>17</sup> Greg Thompson, "Letter from Greg Thompson Re Recent SCOTUS Decision," July 13, 2015. <https://www.trinityville.org/Letter-From-Greg-Thompson-Re-Recent-SCOTUS-Decision>

<sup>18</sup> Nate Collins, personal phone call, 9-6-22.

<sup>19</sup> Bekah Mason, person zoom call with me, Nate Collins, and Steve Breedlove on September 2, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Eve Tushnet, *Tenderness: A Gay Christian's Guide to Unlearning Rejection and Experiencing God's Extravagant Love* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Marie Press, 2021), xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Tushnet, *Tenderness*, xiii–xiv.

<sup>22</sup> I believe this for two reasons: First, when I look at Jesus, I see that this is what people, all people, experienced when they were around him. Second, I have found churches that are pulling this off. I have found gay men and women, and trans\* individuals who are committed to the Biblical sexual ethic, and they have found churches that refuse to affirm gay marriage or gay sex, and these churches have figured out how to offer genuinely safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community, both those who agree with the church and those who disagree with them. Because the Church is filled with God's spirit, it's an outpost of God's Kingdom, because of that sexual and gender minorities can find *more* ways to give and receive love in the church than in the secular world. I have come to believe this because that is what happened to people when they came around Jesus.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 243–44.

<sup>24</sup> Last few sentences from Revoice vision and values.

<sup>25</sup> Tushnet, *Tenderness*, xxi.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, "Letter from Greg Thompson."

<sup>27</sup> Preston Sprinkle, *People to be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2015), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Tushnet, *Tenderness*, xi.

<sup>29</sup> Tushnet, *Tenderness*, xii.

<sup>30</sup> Wesley Hill, "Foreword," to Preston Sprinkle, *People to be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2015), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Preston Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 24. Shallow answers to complex questions are offensive to our God-given minds and they fail to shape our hearts into being more like Jesus." So over the course of this series, I will try my hardest to avoid "thin answers to thick questions...If you want quick, easy answers, or if you just want me to affirm all of your assumptions—whatever they may be—then this [series]...isn't for you." Over the course of the next couple of months, "we're going to think. We're going to study. We're going to listen to the pain and the joy of real people who are gay" and trans\*. "We're going to hold our views with a humble heart and an open hand—inviting God to correct us where we have been wrong. We are going to do our best to lay aside our assumptions and genuinely seek to know what the Bible... says about" about sex, sexuality, and gender.

<sup>32</sup> Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex & Human Flourishing* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2017), 180–82.

<sup>33</sup> Revoice, “Values,” <https://revoice.us/about/our-beliefs/statements-of-conviction/statement-on-sexual-ethics-and-christian-obedience/>.

<sup>34</sup> Rosario Butterfield, “Can a Practicing Homosexual be a Practicing Christian?,” <https://rosariabutterfield.com/new-blog/2018/2/14/can-a-practicing-homosexual-be-a-practicing-christian>.

<sup>35</sup> Laurie Krieg and Matt Krieg, *An Impossible Marriage: What Our Mixed-Orientation Marriage has Taught us About Love and the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2020), 128.

<sup>36</sup> Greg Thompson, “Letter from Greg Thompson Re Recent SCOTUS Decision,” July 13, 2015. <https://www.trinityville.org/Letter-From-Greg-Thompson-Re-Recent-SCOTUS-Decision>.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, “Letter from Greg Thompson.”

<sup>38</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 68–69.

<sup>39</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 69.

<sup>40</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 69.

<sup>41</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, “Letter from Greg Thompson.”

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, “Letter from Greg Thompson.”

<sup>44</sup> Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality: Rediscovering the Christian Vision of Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 16.

<sup>45</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 81.

<sup>46</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 85.

<sup>47</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, xviii.

<sup>48</sup> In his book, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?*, Sam Allberry points out an important fact on this point: “Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of Christianity, was known for his care for the marginalised, for the overlooked and for the vulnerable. It was said of him,” in [Matthew 12:20](#), “*a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.*” In other words, Jesus “was someone who was naturally tender towards the wounded and hurting. [And so,] there is something particularly [appalling]...about those who purport to follow Jesus who contradict his teaching and example on this point” (Allberry, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With*, 14). And furthermore, “Jesus himself was the victim of unimaginable abuse...The historical record shows us that he was publicly executed by the Roman authorities on the orders of Pontius Pilate. We know he was killed by crucifixion. We also know that this followed a grueling process of humiliation and torture...[He] was stripped, flogged, beaten and mocked. He was sexually exposed, physically abused, and repeatedly ridiculed. His own companions betrayed him, denied him or deserted him. The emotional, psychological and physical suffering is not something we can easily quantify. All this was before he even arrived at the point of crucifixion” (Allberry, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With*, 14–15). This is who “we follow and worship. And that tells us that Christians should have an inbuilt sensitivity towards those who are victims. Because Jesus himself embodied and experienced some of the most intense forms of victimisation and rejection, an awareness of pain and brutality is baked into Christianity. Christians should be the last people on earth to show indifference to abuse, let alone enabling or perpetrating it in any way” (Allberry, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With*, 15).

<sup>49</sup> Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 27.

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<sup>50</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, xix.

<sup>51</sup> Thompson, "Letter from Greg Thompson."

<sup>52</sup> Thompson, "Letter from Greg Thompson."