

Protagonist Corner

Prostitution in the Pulpit

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I bring to you in this article information on a subject not often discussed from the pulpit: prostitution. This is the case in spite of the fact that the vast majority of women mentioned in scripture are “bad” women, that is, whores, concubines, slaves, mistresses and unfaithful, scheming wives. A quick review of the geneology of Jesus in Matt. 1:1-17 reveals four women. Tamar and Rahab are prostitutes; Ruth, a Moabitess, has a history of questionable activity on a threshing room floor; and Mary, a virgin, who marries Joseph, and gives birth to Jesus . . . such is the foundation of our faith!

The subject of prostitution may not be one on which you particularly care to preach, but it is my contention that until we as the church begin to talk frequently and openly about human sexuality, about prostitution, about incest and homosexuality, about violence against women and children and the role that the church plays in perpetuating such activity, we will never see an end to these problems. Perhaps even more important than open discussion and frequent mention is the de-bunking of many “myths” which surround these issues.

Let me tell you a bit of what I have learned during the past five years as the Director of the Mary Magdalene Project, a rehabilitation program for adult, female prostitutes. For many of you, as it has been for me, this will be a new reality. Welcome to it!

NEW REALITY # 1: Prostitution as we know it today (and as it probably always has been) is a manifestation of dysfunctional families. One hundred percent of the women with whom I have worked were victims of child abuse and/or neglect. There is no exception! All but one of these women were raised in a church family—were baptized, attended Sunday School and/or a parochial school, and went to youth group meetings as well as worship. Several have fathers who are ministers. Seventy-five to eighty-five percent of these women were victims of incest. Those not incestuously involved were quite often the victims of rape or molestation as children. All had been sexually active before “hitting the street.”

NEW REALITY # 2: Incest and spouse abuse are both greater in church-related families than in non-churched families.¹ The history behind this is both shocking and revealing. When the church began to sanction marriage as a monogamous entity and began to disallow sexual contact outside of marriage, the attitude became: “Well, if I can’t have sex outside my marriage, then I’ll just keep it in the family.” Certainly that is not what was intended, but it is what happened just the same. Almost simultaneously with the monogamous sexual/marriage sanction came the concept of the family as being sacred: What goes on inside that unit of mother, father, 2.3 kids, station wagon and family pet is

none of our business. If you find a ten-year-old child today who is a victim of incest it is not uncommon to trace that same or similar behavior back two to four generations in the mother's family and as many as five to seven generations in the perpetrator's family.

NEW REALITY # 3: Prostitution is a sociological problem and not a law enforcement issue although we elect to treat it as such. It is much "worse" (more illegal) to be a prostitute than to be a "trick" (client) or a pimp. Prostitution to prostitutes is not degrading. The most embarrassing part of this line of work is being arrested. Out of every hundred prostitution-related arrests, ninety-six are women (prostitutes), three are male prostitutes, one-half of an arrest is a client, and less than one-half of an arrest is a pimp.² Our laws concerning prostitution are based on two premises (1) women need to be "protected" and (2) men cannot be expected to be sexually responsible.

Perhaps I should explain. The original intent of marriage laws was to define property and lineage. A man could only be certain that those were his children if he were the only man having intercourse with that woman. Therefore, it became necessary to protect a woman (wife) by regulating access to her. And, of course, all men have sexual urges which they cannot possibly be expected to control, so it has become necessary to designate certain women who would be responsible for that: prostitutes.

It can also be noted that throughout the church's history in its attempts to regulate sexual contact there have frequently been "mixed messages." An example of this would be the declaration in early medieval times that the "better" or "higher" life was always that of the celibate, a concept addressed to both men and women. But the one true way to salvation was (particularly for women) having babies.

NOT SO NEW REALITY # 4: Prostitution is here to stay. In spite of a "sexual revolution" prostitution thrives. What was once solely the domain of women is now also the turf of men and children. The average starting age for a girl into prostitution today is thirteen-fourteen and for boys is twelve-thirteen. Some agencies report working with children as young as ten years of age who have been involved in prostitution.

Prostitution meets many needs, one of which is socio-economic stability for unskilled labor. Most of the women with whom I work have only been prostitutes and there is absolutely nothing about prostitution that lends itself well to "straight" life. It is not possible for most women working the streets to just walk away from it into something else—certainly nothing that pays as well for their educational and skill levels. Other needs met by prostitution concern areas of politics, sex (kinky), intimacy, violence and power.

AND ONE MORE REALITY: To get out of this mess we have got to get involved. We have to train ourselves to see not only the abuse but to respond to it with shelter and prayer, sex education, parent training, self-esteem and assertion training for our children. We have to realign our understanding of the family to include not just mother, father, 2.3 kids, but also the single parent with three children, a poverty level income and no support network.

There is a lot of work to be done. I have no illusions about wiping out prostitution or even making a little dent in it. Prevention programs and an

increased awareness of the issues surrounding prostitution are the most intrinsic solutions. Taking prostitution to your pulpit may be a valuable and viable part of that. Good luck!

NOTES

¹ For more information on incest and church families I refer you to *The Best Kept Secret* by Florence Rush and a survey of prostitutes done in San Francisco by the Delancey Street Foundation.

² These statistics on the arrest of prostitutes are from Los Angeles County and may vary some in other communities.