

God's Good Gift

Isaiah 56: 1-8; Acts 8: 26-40

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The eunuch must not say, "I am nothing but a barren tree." (Isaiah 54:3)

Lincoln Cathedral has hit the headlines for agreeing to do what Westminster Abbey declined, and, in the process, encouraging tourism and fomenting opprobrium. The Cathedral has agreed to be one venue for the film version of the *Da Vinci Code*, that bestseller that has lined the pockets of its author and publishers but caused a little consternation in some Christian circles because of questions the book raises regarding the romantic designs of Jesus. I discovered this while working at Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina earlier in the summer. I was the conference preacher and had been asked to give a daily plenary address to senior high students. Preferring to dialogue with, rather than talk at, I devised a process that enabled these youth to articulate what for them were key questions regarding the Christian faith. The *Da Vinci Code* aficionados found thereby the means to bring up issues the book had raised: "Did Jesus have a girlfriend?" asked one boy. "Was he married?" asked another. Then a girl asked, "Was Jesus gay?"

Now it would have been easy and certainly convenient to suggest that these were not really crucial questions, that perhaps we should look at original sin and limited atonement. But I sensed that while the issues raised might not be big for me, they were big issues for teenagers whose bodies, emotions, and perspectives on life are all in a process of change. So I decided not to avoid the questions but to put them in a larger context. And I began by saying, "I want to tell you something about Jesus that maybe no one has ever told you before. But I can say this with abject certainty: Jesus had a penis." There was an intake of air and looks of disbelief on every face, particularly on the faces of twenty adults who were sitting at the back of the room, and who I wrongly presumed to be the Presbyterian Thought Police. So I said, "In case you didn't hear me, **JESUS HAD A PENIS.**" I think if I had said he had a tail or two heads it would have been much easier to deal with.

Now why should that information be so alarming? I mean, it is biblically verifiable. We don't know anything about Jesus' liver or Jesus' ears or Jesus' tonsils, but we do read in Luke's Gospel (2:21) that eight days after his birth he was circumcised. And that isn't done to a man's thumb. Yes, the truth is biblically verifiable, but in the long history of the church, issues of sex and sexuality have been treated with more embarrassment and negativity than with openness and affirmation. Some people might want to blame it on Paul, who was discouraging of intimate personal relations because he believed that Christ was going to return soon. Some would put the onus of blame on Augustine, who seems to have found his libido something of a problem. Certainly, since Augustine, much of the teaching of the Roman Catholic church has been "cautious" with regard to sexuality, seeing sex as primarily for reproductive purposes rather than for mutual pleasure. But the Protestant churches have been equally remiss. It is in most of our lifetimes that Anglican and

reformed Christians argued against the ordination of women. One of the objections was that because women menstruated they were somehow contaminated. And it is certainly in my experience that women who had given birth to a child had to stay away from public worship until they were no longer “unclean.” While Roman Catholics espoused a celibate priesthood as if there were an extra special spiritual virtue in being single, Protestants expected their clergy to have as many children as their manses had rooms. And any minister who did not find a wife was looked on as deficient. So there has been an awkwardness, an embarrassment, a lack of healthy appreciation of the body, never mind sexuality, in the history of the church. But I suppose there is also what we might call the scandal of the incarnation.

Incarnation—that word is most often associated with events at Bethlehem surrounding the birth of Jesus, as if the whole of his life were not a manifestation of God in the flesh. And sometimes what is said about Bethlehem is not very accurate. We have plenty of Christmas songs telling us that Jesus didn’t cry. “Away in a Manger” says that Jesus lay in his mother’s arms until his bar mitzvah; “Once in Royal David’s City” says that Jesus was born in a totally quiet environment; “O Little Town of Bethlehem” says that Jesus was given a lamb by the shepherds. “In the Bleak Midwinter” suggests that all of these presumptions have absolutely no scriptural foundation. But when it comes to Jesus’ enjoying food and drink, a constant in the Gospels, nothing is celebrated in song. When it comes to Jesus’ being angry, another constant in the Gospels, nothing. When it comes to Jesus’ being not only argumentative but provocative, again evident in the Gospels, nothing. When it comes to Jesus’ having the same genital equipment and emotional and sexual potential as any other man, our response is to perspire with embarrassment. Well it’s time we got over that—if we want to claim as the creed states that “He became human.”

God gave to Jesus what God has given to us all: marvelous and mysterious gifts. Sexuality is one; personality is another; creativity is another; imagination is a fourth. We’re all born with these potentials, and nothing in the Bible says that they are essentially bad. Not the Adam and Eve story, not St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. Indeed such gifts—sexuality, personality, creativity, imagination, each of them wonderful, are part of our being made in God’s image: “and when God saw what he had created, it was very good.” That is not to say that these gifts cannot be misused. The same personality present in a good husband and devoted father may also be present in a torturer or terrorist. The same creativity that can discover a cure for malaria could advance the frontiers of germ warfare. The same imagination that can create a Hollywood musical might also produce a sadistic horror movie. And sexuality has an equal potential to be life-enhancing or life-degrading whether we are in a committed relationship or single, physically expressive or celibate.

Maybe we have to get over the fiction that only those who are sexually active have sexuality. One of the sexiest women I know died as a virgin at the age of ninety-two. She was feminine with every fiber of her being. The fact that she never had had a partner did not diminish her sexuality. If anything it enhanced it, for she was everybody’s girlfriend, big sister, and, in her later years, granny.

If we agree that sexuality is one of God’s gifts to each of us, there is then a concomitant question: What do we recognize and value first in a gift—its good potential or its possible misuse? Suppose on your next birthday a friend gives you a present wrapped in fine paper. You feel that it is heavy. You begin to unwrap it. Be-

neath the paper is a solid cardboard box. You open it up and there's a lot of tissue paper. You clear that away and see a beautiful silver Celtic cross, twelve inches tall, set in a solid green marble base. What would your friend think if, as you looked at the gift, you said, "You know, if you hit someone with this, you could kill them." What an outrageous thing to say! What about its beauty? What about its crafting? What about its potential to inspire devotion, to remind you of your Savior? What is it that makes us see God's gift of sexuality as some kind of bogus, dubious, devious endowment?

I love the story of the two nuns who were walking along a country lane. They came to a wall on which was a large sign: Nudist Camp. One nun said to the other, "What do you think is behind the wall?" And the other said, "I don't know." So the first suggested that she would bend down and let the second nun stand on her shoulders. So the second nun did that. Then the first nun asked, "What do you see?" The answer came back, "It's just people walking about." "Yes" said the first sister, "but is it men or women?" "I don't know," came the reply, "They have no clothes on." What blissful naïveté, and what a positive affirmation of humanity.

I sometimes think that if I were to go back to my first job, which was youth work, I would spend much more time intentionally praying with young people about their bodies, thanking God for the physical changes, thanking God for the range of feelings and emotions, thanking God for the curiosity that is inevitable in teenagers, thanking God that Jesus had known all these feelings and confusion, and asking God to help us honor the marvelous gift of sexuality and to know how to use it respectfully. This is what many churches in Africa find themselves doing. For faced with one in four people in some communities being HIV positive, a message of negativity and condemnation has not proven fruitful, as demonstrated recently in Swaziland, where the rate of infection has increased rather than decreased following a celibacy campaign. What is needed is a positive appraisal of God's good gift and encouragement to honor it.

But there are two things I haven't yet dealt with that might reasonably be in your minds: The first are the questions I alluded to earlier: Did Jesus get married? Did he have a girlfriend? Was he gay? I can't answer each question for certain. But I believe, and I take this directly from the gospel, that he never entered into a committed romantic or sexual relationship. And the reason is very simple: his legacy to humanity was the gospel of salvation, and anything that might detract from that was not to be pursued. Had Jesus a partner or a wife, had he had children, there would have been a burden on them that would have been intolerable to carry. Countries with a royal family know all too well how throughout history the sons and daughters, wives and lovers of kings have been a source of scandal and intrigue. Jesus would never have burdened anyone with that legacy. And this is consistent with the way in which he distances himself at times from his mother to prevent her from being the center of salacious media attraction or common gossip.

But the second thing you might have in your mind is the Ethiopian eunuch. I haven't mentioned him yet, although it was his story we heard from the Book of Acts. Eunuch is a funny word. You don't get it in hymns. It doesn't rhyme with much, unless you are Scottish. But eunuchs—whether born as such or castrated maliciously or ceremonially—have, throughout history, been seen sometimes as trustworthy and sometimes as sinister. In Deuteronomy, the law of Moses made it quite clear that no man whose testicles did not function could be part of the household of God. This must have isolated these men even more because often their own families did not want them,

looking on them as freaks. And if they themselves were incapable of fathering children and having a family of their own to whom did they belong?

Eunuchs suffered from triple estrangement—from their faith community, their birth family, and from any hope of a future family. So in the early days of the church, Philip is led by the Spirit to join not a local Jewish eunuch but a foreign Ethiopian eunuch, a black man, in his carriage as he reads a part of Isaiah's prophecy from chapter 53. When asked to whom Isaiah's words referred, Philip reveals to the eunuch the gospel of Jesus. The effect is such that though he himself might feel unattached and unattachable, and though others might disapprove of or be embarrassed by his sexuality, he asks for baptism. And through this sacrament, administered in a desert pool without a book of church order, he is brought into the community that is the church, in which men and women, partnered and celibate, are brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, sons and daughters to each other. This happened because Philip realized that while others might have viewed the eunuch's sexuality as a curse or a predicament, God wanted him, and wanted him to know that he and his sexuality had a place and purpose in the community of faith.

When Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary, he wasn't an emasculated angel who came from Mary's womb, he was God taking on human flesh and human emotions, gifts of which humanity should never be ashamed. To the One who makes this and all things possible be our praise and glory, now and forever.