

For the last 9 weeks, we've been talking about *Becoming Whole*. We've been saying that when we ignore the emotional and relational components of spiritual maturity, we end up getting stuck in our life with God and others. All of us get stuck from time to time, but simply repeating the same patterns over and over again will very little to help us break free. When it comes to *Becoming Whole*, time doesn't heal all wounds and getting older doesn't guarantee becoming wiser—just ask Bill.

Bill was a fellow student in my grade 8 math class—the problem was that Bill was supposed to be in Grade 10. Bill's difficulties didn't include learning challenges; his challenge were of a different sort. During one geometry lecture, Bill decided to pierce his ear with a safety pin; a different lecture on algebra provided an opportunity to make a paper airplane, light it on fire, and throw it across the classroom. Bill spent more time outside of the classroom than in it.

Older doesn't always mean wiser, and smarter doesn't mean healthier. I know some extremely intelligent people who aren't very healthy—emotionally, relationally, physically, or spiritually. Our current teaching series, and a number of the ministries we are running, have been crafted for the purpose of inviting our community into an experience of the greater health and wholeness that Jesus provides.

So what does it mean to be “healthy?” There are many opinions to choose from but not all opinions are equally valid. For example, only a few centuries ago, blood-letting was considered a healthy practice. The idea was that in order to regulate the body's fluids, removing excess blood would lead to greater balance. Bloodletting was used to treat almost every disease. One British medical text recommended

bloodletting for acne, asthma, cancer, coma, convulsions, diabetes, epilepsy, indigestion, jaundice, pneumonia, and on the list goes. Bloodletting was even used to treat nosebleeds.

How did doctor know when enough blood had been “let”? When the patient fainted! I didn't check with the doctors who attend our church, but I'm pretty sure that “blood-letting” is no longer in vogue in the health industry. But the definition of “health” is somewhat “dynamic,” shifting according to ever-changing research, and popular opinion. What may be labelled “healthy” today might be re-labelled “unhealthy” tomorrow.

This morning, my subject matter is PG 13—my title is *Healthy Sexuality*, I'm not going to be using any graphic language but I am going to be talking about sensitive matters. What you're going to hear this morning is one pastor's perspective on Christian sexual ethics. You may be wondering, “*What does our sexuality have to do with our spirituality? Does God even care about our sexual orientation or boundaries? Why is this such a big deal?*”

I want to begin by saying that sexuality and sexual expression is a HUGE DEAL in our culture—it's a borderline obsession. The cultural landscape of sexuality and sexual expression is expanding rapidly; former boundaries are being rejected as antiquated, previous limits are being pushed aside in the name of “freedom”. What's clear to me is that because everyone else is talking about it, Christians need to be talking about it—it's naive to think that we can live and breathe West Coast culture without being touched by its influence.

If you'll give me a little latitude this morning, I want to take time to explore our West Coast cultural messaging surrounding sexuality, before I offer a Biblical perspective.

There's a lot of material to choose from, but I'll start with an article I read from the March issue of *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Allow me to read a few brief excerpts.

“Leah and Ryan, 32 and 38, respectively, don't fit...preconceived ideas. They're both young professional types. She wears pretty skirts; he wears jeans and trendy glasses. They have a large, downtown apartment with a sweeping view and are possessed of the type of hip hyperawareness that lets them head off any assumptions as to what their arrangement might entail. Moreover, they see themselves as part of a growing trend of folks who do not view monogamy as any type of ideal.

Termed “The New Monogamy” in the journal *Psychotherapy Networker*...the goal is to have one long-standing relationship and a willingness to openly acknowledge that [this] long-standing relationship might not meet each partner's emotional and sexual needs for all time. Or, more specifically, that going outside [this] partnership for sex does not necessitate a forfeiture of it.” In other words, the relationship is “open”...you might live together, and consider your relationship “committed” in every way, but, there is freedom to have sex with other people without it damaging this “commitment”.

I'll keep reading, “Leah's is a generation that has been raised with

the concept of sexual freedom and without solid guidelines for how to make monogamy work. People are navigating a new, wide-open, sexual landscape.”

“At 29, Curtis and his girlfriend have the most traditional arrangement. They met at a restaurant where they both worked at the time, happened to break up with people the same week, took advantage of their newfound freedom to sleep together immediately, and then started dating—an order of events he says is very much the norm.

‘It's almost in reverse in a sense. It's like the relationship is the really special and unique part,’ while the sex is a step you take to see whether or not you'd want to commit to the relationship. Joe is even more pointed: *‘It's more fun to get [sex] out of the way and see how you connect, and then focus on who they are as a human. Are you interesting? Are you fun to be around? Great.’* Sex isn't inherently a huge step. At the end of the day, it's a piece of body touching another piece of body—just as existentially meaningless as kissing.”¹

Perhaps you've been following CBC's recent firing of one of its radio hosts, Jian Ghomeshi. Ghomeshi has been accused of multiple accounts of abusive sexual behaviour, but in a recent Facebook post, he wrote that he has “done nothing wrong.” He went on to say that while his behaviour might be “outright offensive to others” what he does in private—as long as it's consensual—is none of anyone's business. Many Canadians are inclined to agree. But since when did “consent” become the litmus test of our activities? Abuse is abuse, isn't it? Does “consent” make abuse acceptable?

¹ <http://feature.rollingstone.com/feature/millennial-sexual-revolution-relationships-marriage#ixzz3l85YSEmL>

Perhaps you've been following the rhetoric surrounding Trinity Western—the law society is taking Trinity to task because their students are required to sign a code of conduct that includes limiting sexual activity to a marriage between husband and wife. The author of one article called this code of conduct “ludicrous.”

This past April, the Vancouver Sun conducted a poll with B.C. residents who were Christian—the purpose was to discover what Christians think about a variety of subjects, including sexuality and sexual expression. The poll suggested that 31% of B.C. Christians are Catholics, with the rest falling under the broad Protestant banner—Anglican, United, Baptists, and other evangelicals.

What they discovered is that when it comes to sexual morality, West Coast Christians are also all over the map. 74% of Christians polled approve of sex before marriage. The main sex-related act that most Christians oppose—at 92%—is “married men or women having an affair.” Almost all British Columbians, Christian or not, agree that marital infidelity is basically “unforgiveable.” The article also indicated that there is great division among Christians on whether God condones same sex relationships.

When it comes to addressing the subject of *Healthy Sexuality*, I recognize I am one small voice among many in our culture. And yet, I want to use my voice to draw our attention back to God's perspective on sexuality and sexual expression. The gravitation pull of culture is such that we are prone to think that the West Coast perspective on sexuality is “healthy” and “normal” and every other perspective is old, antiquated, “unhealthy,” and “abnormal”. As we follow Jesus, as we continue the journey towards wholeness, it's important that we come back to the Bible to get our bearings.

I am convinced from Scripture that we are, simultaneously, people living in exile, and, people on mission. What does it mean to live in exile? Biblically speaking, it means to live to live in a foreign land where God's name is not known, nor honoured—to live in exile is to live in a culture where God's will is not the way.

When God's people, Israel, were deported to the land of Babylon, they found themselves in exile—dazed, confused, lost. They were asking the same questions that we are asking today—“*how do we live as God's people in a foreign land?*”

Through the prophet Jeremiah (29:4-7), God spoke the following word: “*This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says...Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.*”

In other words, when living in exile, don't run, isolate, or put your life on hold—move into the neighbourhood, work, get married, and pray for the good of the city; God can be found wherever you lay your head. And yet, this is not God's only instruction to people living in exile. Through Ezekiel (11:19-20), God spoke another word: “*I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.*”

In other words, no matter where you live, no matter what the people around you believe, I am you God and you are my people. I will be at work in you, I will give to you the gift of my Spirit, so that you can live with an undivided heart, faithful to follow my will and my ways.

God calls us to settle down in this foreign land, to enter into relationship with people all around us, to pray for the good of our city, and, to remain faithful to God and His way; it's not one or the other, it's both/and. It's a tricky thing to do, isn't it? How do live in this West Coast culture without embracing things thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours that stand in opposition to God and His way?

As I said earlier, we need to come back to the Bible to get our bearing. We need God-given-wisdom to exegete the Scriptures, but equally, we need God-given-wisdom to exegete our culture; we need to understand what aligns with God way and what does not.

The Bible is an incredible book. In 2 Timothy 3:16, the apostle Paul describes it as being “*God-breathed*,” God’s words are inspired—He worked through human authors to communicate exactly what He wanted to say. The Bible was communicated through particular people, to particular cultures, but, it continues to be God’s living word to all people, in all places—there is a timelessness about God’s word. So while we no longer live in the Ancient Near East, God’s word continues to reveal His expressed will for sexuality and sexual expression today.

I’ve been studying the scripture for many years, and something that fascinates me is the “progression” or “movement” I see in the Scriptures when it comes certain cultural issues. Take for example the issue of slavery. In a broken world, where fear, greed, and lust for

power exists, war and oppression abound—the same is true today. In a world such as this, it’s not surprising that people with power attempt to use and control others, without concern for their well-being.

While the Old Testament didn't bless slavery, it did accept that it was a part of broken society. But the Old Testament also maintained that all of humanity—men, women, slaves, and free—were all made in God’s image. And so, what separated God’s people from the surrounding culture was not the absence of slaves, but laws that protected the rights of slaves—this was unheard of in the ancient world.

By the time we get to the New Testament, the apostle Paul affirms the Old Testament perspective; all people—men, women, slaves, and free—are made in the image of God, but he goes further. In Colossians 3:22-24, Paul writes, “*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything...with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart...It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*” In Colossians 4:1, Paul addresses masters saying, “*Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.*”

To those who were slaves, Paul said, “*You are free men and women in Christ;*” to masters, Paul said, “*You have become slaves to Christ—He is your Master.*” In 1 Corinthians 7:20-21, Paul encouraged slaves, if it were possible, to gain their freedom. In a letter written to his friend Philemon, Paul encouraged him to release Onesimus—one of his slaves—so that Onesimus could continue to be a missionary partner with Paul.

Paul was certainly not an “abolitionist” but as you read the Scriptures, there appears to be a “progression” or “trajectory” when it comes to the issue of slavery—the same could be said with respect to the role of women. Most cultures in the ancient world were highly patriarchal; this was certainly true both of Jesus’ and Paul’s day. And yet, Jesus regularly included women in His ministry outings and honoured women as examples of true spirituality—remember, it was to women that Jesus first appeared after His resurrection.

The apostle Paul, in Romans 16, names a long list of women as his ministry partners—he honours Pricilla as a house church leader, and he refers to Junia as being “*outstanding among the apostles*.” Again, there appears to be a “progression” or “trajectory” when it comes to role of women in the Scriptures.

But the same cannot be said about the issue of sexuality or sexual expression. The Old Testament affirms the beauty of sexual love, but confines it to a husband and wife within the marriage covenant. The New Testament, written thousands of years later, affirms all of the same boundaries.

And lest we think that the times were more “traditional” back then, it’s important to note that 1st century Roman boundaries around sexuality and sexual expression were less restrictive than our current Western boundaries. Ours is not the first “hook up” culture, nor is it the first culture to embrace same sex relationships as a “healthy” expression of sexuality. Much of contemporary Western culture views Christian sexual ethics as ludicrous today, and in that regard, they have much in common with 1st century Roman culture.

So what is the Christian sexual ethic? It was summed nicely by C.S. Lewis when he wrote, “Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it; the Christian rule is, ‘Either marriage, with complete faithfulness [between husband and wife] or else total abstinence.’ Now that is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that... either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong.”²

I want to direct our attention to something God said, through Paul, to a 1st century church in Corinth—a city that prided itself on “freedom” of every kind. In 1 Corinthians 6:12-13, Paul writes, “*You say, ‘I am allowed to do anything’—but not everything is good for you... You say, ‘Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food’... But you can’t say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies.*”

Paul continues in vs. 16 and following, “*And don’t you realize that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her? For the Scriptures say, ‘The two are united into one.’ But the person who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him. Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. Don’t you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honour God with your body.*”

Our culture tells us that our sexual appetite is like every other

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 95.

appetite; when our body is hungry, we need feed it. Earlier in my sermon we heard from Joe—he said, “Sex isn’t inherently a huge step. At the end of the day, it’s a piece of body touching another piece of body”. The Bible teaches something very different.

God has designed sex in such a way that it is a profoundly unifying act—a marrying act—two people are united into one. Sex connects both bodies and souls. You may not view sex this way, this may not be your intention as you engage in sex, but it does not change the fact that God has designed sex to unite body and soul. Sex goes beyond the physical to the spiritual and sacred.

The idea of “casual” sex is an illusion and I think that deep down, most people know it. In the movie, *Vanilla Sky*, Tom Cruise breaks off a fling with Cameron Diaz and she expresses her outrage saying, “Don’t you know that when you sleep with someone, your body makes a promise, whether you do or not?” This Hollywood character has captured the heart of Paul’s argument. Erwin McManus writes, “There is no such thing as free sex. It always comes at a cost. With it, either you give your heart, or you give your soul. ... You can have sex without giving love, but you can’t have sex without giving a part of yourself.”

You would think, according to our West Coast messaging, that causal sex with multiple partners will lead to satisfaction in life, to better relationships, to a sense of completeness—sadly, this isn’t the case. Instead, people feel alone, unsatisfied, and unable to connect in deep, meaningful, relationships. When we engage in sexual activity outside of God’s boundaries, we find that our appetites may be momentarily

satisfied, but lasting satisfaction eludes us—we find ourselves craving more and more of what satisfies less and less.

Now how does same-sex relationship fit into this discussion? Given the right-wing-fundamentalist rhetoric, it may surprise you to discover that the prohibition of same-sex behaviour is not at the centre of Christian sexual ethics. Instead, same-sex behaviour is *one of many* sexual acts that fall outside of God’s intention for sexual expression. The Christian ethic begins with the broader affirmation that our sexuality is good—indeed, that sexual expression is good, within the context of marriage between a man and a woman.

Ronald Rolheiser, in his book *Holy Longings*, describes sexual energy as “the most powerful of all fires, the best of all fires, and the most dangerous of all fires. It can lead us to ecstasy or despair, to heaven or hell.” Ken Shigematsu writes, “A fire set in a fireplace can warm the entire house, but a fire set to the curtains can burn it down. A healthy rule of life that guides and directs our sexuality will not repress our sexual energy but will help us to channel it... A rule of life around our sexuality is not a dam that blocks the flow of our sexual energy; it is more like the banks of a river, helping to direct a powerful current.”³

There is a gravitation pull in our culture when it comes to the issue of sexuality and sexual expression—the messaging of our culture is strong, insistent, and unyielding. Either the Christian sexual ethic is wrong—and needs to be tossed aside—or the Canadian, cultural, sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong. As we follow Jesus, as

³ Ken Shigematsu, *God In My Everything*, 96.

we continue the journey towards wholeness, it's important that we come back to the Bible to get our bearings.

We've talked for weeks now about *Becoming Whole*—the basic premise of our current teaching series is that God created us to be whole, to experience health in every facet of our lives: emotional, relationally, sexually, etc. The challenge is, of course, that we live in a broken world, with broken desires, broken emotions, broken relationships, even broken experiences of sexuality. If we are going to find wholeness, we're not going to find it by looking within, or, looking to our culture—we need God!

We cannot ignore God's design for sexual expression and expect to walk in wholeness; embracing His purpose and intent for sexuality is key to experiencing the wholeness He longs to impart. God calls us to reserve sex for marriage in order to honour His design, so that, we might flourish. Perhaps even today you are experiencing the pain, the regret, the shame of living outside of God's boundaries. God feels your pain, He cares about you, and He longs to show you compassion.

God is for you, not against you. He can forgive every boundary we've crossed; we can begin again with Him today—make today a day of new beginnings for you.