

## “God and Sex: A Fascinating Pair”

In speaking to a friend and member of this congregation about my topic this morning, he could not imagine what God had to do with sex or what sex had to do with religion and/or spirituality. My friend comes by his skepticism honestly. His problem is rooted in an ancient philosophical theory known as dualism, a theory that has haunted religion for over 2,000 years. Basically, dualism separates reality into two realms, matter and spirit. It worked conveniently for some philosophers trying to resolve the insoluble problem of evil. A 3<sup>rd</sup> century Persian philosopher named Manes was one of these.

Manes founded a sect known as Manichaeism. This sect was popular in the Roman Empire during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to this dualistic interpretation of reality, the world is divided into the good realm of light and an evil realm of darkness. Matter is regarded as inherently evil, which included the body and sexuality. As women were typically more identified with nature, the body and sexuality, they were consigned to the realm of darkness.

Tertullian of Carthage, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Latin Church writer, went so far as to describe woman as “the gateway to the devil.” Even the brilliant 4<sup>th</sup> century Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, before his conversion, was an adherent of Manichaeism. His negative attitude toward the flesh has been attributed to the nine years he spent as a member of this sect. It deeply affected the later teaching of this Father of the Church and has, sad to say, influenced Christian doctrine to this day.

Women scholars today are very aware of the way in which dualism has contributed to the subordination of women. Once you separate spirit from body, it sets up a divisive pattern of dominant-subservient relationships: men over women, intellect over emotions, mind over matter, heaven over earth; spirituality over sexuality; heterosexual over homosexual; sacred over profane; Platonic love and agape over eros.

Audre Lorde, in her writing “On the Power and Uses of the Erotic,” (cited in *Weaving the Visions, New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*) has helped to bring balance by redefining the erotic from a feminine experience. For centuries, women were not consulted regarding their side of the human experience.

In the past, Lorde says that the erotic has been patriarchally confined to the bedroom, at times even confused with the pornographic. Whereas from experience, she sees it as permeating all of life: our relationships, our creativity, art and work. Simply put, it’s a deep yearning for connection and engagement with the world.

I like to think that the erotic is what draws us into community, the desire to cultivate deeper relationships, relationships that generate affective and moral energy, energy that makes us a more effective and healing presence in the broader community.

Thomas Moore supports Audre Lorde in validating the power of the erotic in his national bestseller, *The Soul of Sex*, subtitled “Cultivating life as an act of love.” He writes: “In

Greek literature, eros is nothing less than the magnetism that holds the entire universe together and human love in its many forms is simply a participation in that great eros” (Moore, p.202).

When we separate sex and the erotic from religion, the assumption is similar to what my friend said when I told him the topic of this sermon, that sex has nothing to do with our high spiritual aspirations. Moore cautions that religion dries up, ceases to be juicy or attractive, when it becomes a kind of mental exercise, theological hair-splitting instead of a “passionate engagement with the mysteries that surround every aspect of life” (Moore, p. 142).

Like myself, Thomas Moore was a member of a religious order and lived in a community of celibates for a number of years. In choosing to enter religious life at age 21, which I did after college, I suspect that I shared in the assumption that sex had nothing to do with my high spiritual aspirations. I did see my sexuality as the best sacrifice that I could offer to God.

At times, I should confess that I hoped that same God would “stay the hand of Abraham.” You may be familiar with that biblical expression. It comes from the story in Genesis where Abraham assumes that God is asking him to sacrifice his only son Isaac, whom his wife Sarah had miraculously conceived at a very advanced age. Before this, Abraham and Sarah had despaired of having a child together. So Sarah agreed that Abraham could take Hagar as a surrogate wife. Hagar, formerly a slave girl, gave birth to Ishmael, whom Muslims claim as their ancestor and Hagar as their Blessed Mother.

Abraham thinks that the sacrifice of Isaac is a supreme test of faith that God is asking of him. Happily, God sends an angel to stay the patriarch’s hand before he plunges the knife into poor Isaac. Artists have often depicted this dramatic scene with the young Isaac bound to a wood pile like a helpless lamb about to be sacrificed as a whole burnt offering to a patriarchal God.

There are Jewish women biblical scholars who have written their own commentary on this age old archetypal story of faith. They take the perspective of Sarah, wife and mother. When she learns upon her husband and son’s return from the mountain the tragedy that was averted, she knows intuitively that yet again her husband has misinterpreted a divine message. Abraham didn’t get it. How could a loving God require such cruelty? If only he had conferred with his wife, her son would have been spared what had to be a trauma for Isaac—which is reminiscent of the lack of communication between another husband and wife, Harry Truman and Bess. According to their daughter Margaret, her parents’ relationship was forever marred by Harry’s deciding to drop the atom bomb without consulting with his wife, the woman whom, ironically, he called “the Boss.” In a society where power is evenly shared, judgments of patriarchs and presidents might be more balanced.

Patriarchal religion has suffered from the imbalance of power for over two millennia.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam claim common ancestry in Abraham. They all acknowledge him as father and understand his god to be one who is pleased by sacrifice.

At age 21, I never thought of the God of Sarah as possibly being different. Over fifty years ago when I entered the convent, I don't believe there were women biblical scholars questioning the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I could only hope when I wasn't feeling so sacrificial that in some way God would stay the hand of Abraham. Possibly some impediment in my family history might be discovered that would render me unfit for service to the community. I did have an aunt, whom I never knew, who died of T.B. at age 28. My father's side of the family was periodically threatened with tuberculosis. When I disclosed this to my mistress of novices, she assured me that, thanks to medical science, this no longer constituted an impediment.

So it seemed as if this is what God wanted. I shouldn't be looking for a reprieve. Once I settled in, things picked up. A healthy community life, filled with loving relationships among my sisters and students, kept my religious commitment from being a dry mental exercise. Thankfully, it was more of an engagement with the mysteries that permeate life.

And yet, in the '60s, an angel did stay the hand of Abraham. He took the form of an 80-year-old pope, John XXIII, who called an ecumenical council in 1962. He knew how much the Catholic Church needed reform. One of the changes that deeply affected my life was the teaching that created a level playing field for laity and married people and those who had chosen to be celibates or virgins for the kingdom of heaven. Sex was no longer something separate from God; it was part of God's revelation, a human way of being every bit as pleasing as the life of any religious.

This is probably why I find myself responding so strongly to the presumption that religion and sex are totally separate, don't belong together, least of all in the pulpit.

Just last week when I was chiseling out time to work on this sermon, I regretted having a routine dental appointment. I was tempted to cancel, but then I thought of the times the dentist had gone out of his way to make space for a family member in distress. My one hope was that I didn't get an overly sociable dental hygienist who might delay me. When it seemed as if the introductory remarks were going in that direction, I said that I was working on a paper and had a deadline. Immediately, the dental chair tilted back and, in the process, the hygienist politely asked about the topic. From then on, I was the listener as she went about removing plaque. My only regret is that I couldn't take notes. She was eloquent, a natural theologian.

She began by asking why would anyone separate God and sex. Then she proceeded to validate my own thinking without having to speak about dualism or Augustinian doctrine. She saw division and separation as stemming from the subjugation of women. It was the one nugget that she particularly resonated with in *The DaVinci Code*. She wasn't concerned about disputing the finer points in the novel of historicity or biblical exegesis.

She saw the subjugation of women as creating a profound imbalance, separating men and women from the power that is our creative force, the source of our being.

As she spoke, it became clear that she was a seeker, serious about her journey. Her search had led her to the study of world religions. When she said that she was led by the questions, I couldn't resist putting in a word for our faith tradition. What I found so authentic about her journey was its inclusivity. Initially alienated by Judeo-Christianity, her questions led her to India, a guru and ultimately an openness to the wisdom in both Eastern and Western religion.

She found in the poor a special source of revelation, a sense of oneness both in India and Vermont. She told me a story that happened to her 20 years ago, but continues to give meaning to her life. She was working as a hygienist in an office in Barre that served low-income families and children who were mentally challenged. One afternoon, shortly before closing, a mother came to the clinic with her challenged daughter. My friend, who was feeling tired at the end of the day, hoped against hope that these clients had an appointment with the dentist. When she realized the inevitable, she made every effort to, as she put it, "change her thinking." She began to see this young girl as herself, just dressed differently; she began to see her as God in ordinary clothing. At the end of the session, the girl opened her arms wide and gave the hygienist a huge hug and a very wet kiss. My friend felt totally blest. Her story blest me as did our time together.

I find it significant that just as my friend found revelation, a sense of our oneness, in her experience with the poor, students of the great psychoanalyst Carl Jung, credit Jung's insights regarding the "collective unconscious" and archetypal experience to the time he spent in working with the poorest of the poor. His work in the state system in the Burgholzli Psychiatric Hospital in Zurich from 1900-1909 exposed him to a very different population than that of his colleague, Sigmund Freud. They say that Freud's work with the tamer upper-middle class of Vienna is what deprived him of the most revelatory research into severe psychosis. This difference of population exposure finally contributed to the dramatic split between Jung and Freud.

Much has been written and speculated about the relationship between these two giants in the field of psychology. When the two men first met they talked for thirteen hours straight. Their intense collaboration was short-lived, a little over six years. It ended shortly before WWI, May 1914. The tension that grew between them was due in large part to their disagreements of the nature of libido and religion. Jung claimed that Freud was obsessed with sex and Freud claimed that Jung was obsessed with God. Each of them stated that the other was unable to admit he could possibly be wrong.

Jung was highly critical of Freud's technique of treating his pupils like patients, which produced in his words "either slavish sons or impudent puppies." He quoted the words of Nietzsche to Freud, "One repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil."

Despite their differences, both Jung and Freud have been a profound influence on our culture. Their psychological categories have become part of our everyday language: a

Freudian slip, an Oedipus complex, synchronicity, extravert, introvert, collective unconscious.

The popular TV sitcom, "Frasier," offers just one example of their influence. On the show, Dr. Niles Crane is a devoted Jungian psychiatrist, while his brother Dr. Frasier Crane, is a Freudian psychiatrist. This fact is mentioned a number of times, and from time to time, forms a point of argument between the two brothers. One memorable scene has Niles filling in for Frasier on Frasier's call-in radio program, in which Niles introduces himself as the temporary substitute saying: "...and while my brother is Freudian, I am a Jungian, so there'll be no blaming Mother today."

Not unlike my dental hygienist friend, Jung studied a number of religions and philosophies—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judeo-Christianity, Gnosticism, Taoism—from which he concluded that life has a spiritual purpose beyond ordinary goals. According to Jung, our main task is to discover and fulfill our deep innate potential, much as the acorn contains the potential to become the oak, or the caterpillar to become a butterfly. He discovered that this journey of transformation is at the heart of all religions. On this journey we meet the self and the Divine. In listening to my friend's story about her mentally challenged client, I heard overtones of this kind of meeting in her own solidarity and sense of identity with the young girl and, ultimately, with the Divine.

It's unfortunate that sex and God should cause Freud and Jung to split. Yet again, it is not all that surprising given that both subjects are, as Thomas Moore describes them, "*tremendum et fascinans*," incredibly alluring and yet at the same time overwhelming in their sheer vitality and emotional power (Ibid p. 120).

The more religion understands eros as nothing less than the magnetism that holds the entire universe together, and human love in its many forms as simply a participation in that greater eros—the more religion appreciates the power of the erotic as infusing all of our relationships, as being part of the fabric and joy of community—the less we will allow differences to divide us and the more we will experience our oneness with each other and with the mystery at the heart of being.

The more integrated we become as spiritual/sexual beings, the less we will be given to blaming Mother, the universe or the other and the more we will take joy in the magnetism that holds us all together.