

Words to Live By
“An Adult Conversation”
Exodus 20:14, Song of Songs 2:3-7; 4:1-4

When we first decided to do a sermon series on the Ten Commandments, I didn't really stop to think through everything that this would involve. That is, I hadn't paused to imagine exactly how I would preach on the commandment about adultery and its broader applications for sexuality. And so, having arrived at this point, it is time for a rather adult conversation. Hopefully, the children have left the room. If you are of particularly delicate sensibilities, this might be a good time to take a bathroom break or go stretch your legs...are we okay here? Let's begin.

The seventh commandment is directed at human sexual relations, and specifically, the nature of the marriage relationship. Marriage is sacred, special, and unlike any other human relationship. I recently saw an interview with a prominent actress who said that she has no interest in being married, but that she treats each of her relationships like a marriage. I'm sure she's a wonderful person and I don't doubt that she has taken her several relationships relatively seriously. But that doesn't put them on the level of marriage. **It's just not the same.** Marriage has a special place in human life, and in Biblical faith. The seventh commandment recognizes this and seeks to protect the bond of marriage. **The Commandment** is literally and simply this: Do no commit adultery.

What does this mean? If we start with **a narrow definition, adultery** occurs when someone has sex with a person who is married to someone else. It might be that both partners are married to other people, or just one. Either way, the commandment is definitely a prohibition against a married person having sex with someone other than his or her spouse. This used to be a no-brainer. Virtually everyone knew this was a bad idea. These days, people seem to have less sense about it. As we prepared for this service, Pastor Megan told me how she had heard an advertisement on the radio for some company that is dedicated to helping married people find sexual partners for casual encounters. They even had a jingle, a little song advertising their business. I didn't hear it myself, and can't imagine how any responsible radio station would air it. But that's how far our society has gone adrift.

Now, for the sake of argument, why is it a bad idea to commit adultery? People find all sorts of excuses for it: They've grown apart from their spouse, or their partner doesn't share their interests or needs, or sometimes they feel it will enrich their marriage through the introduction of variety. With all due respect, none of these things make any sense. If you and your spouse have grown apart, I assure you, having sex with someone else will not improve the situation. Nor is your relationship with your spouse going to become more satisfying if you seek to meet your needs and desires elsewhere. And the idea that a variety of partners will somehow spice up your love life is ridiculous. Introducing other people into your marriage will only drive a wedge between you. Some years back, there was a couple that advocated what was called "open marriage." They even wrote a book about it. Guess what? They wound up getting divorced because they couldn't handle the divisions and jealousy it brought into their marriage.

Sexuality is the most intimate form of sharing available to us. Yes, people can engage in sexual behavior without any real intimacy. But married sexuality, at it's best, is a form of complete and total connection, not just physically, but emotionally, and spiritually. It is the most vulnerable we ever make ourselves. In the context of a relationship built on absolute trust and commitment and acceptance, sexuality can be a source of the greatest joy and delight. But without that trust, commitment and acceptance, it can instead be a terrifying, embarrassing, humiliating, or dehumanizing experience. Why would you want to open your deepest self to someone who has no commitment to you, with whom you have no bond of trust, and no guarantee of acceptance? Adultery is not good for the person who commits it, and it absolutely shatters the marriage relationship – damaging everyone else in the process: spouses, children, parents, in-laws, and friends. It is just devastating. And so, in the commandment, God says, "Don't do this!"

Of course, there is **a more comprehensive definition of adultery** that we need to consider too. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us that the act of adultery is born in the heart. He says that the intentionally lustful look gives birth to adultery. What this means is that we have to guard more than just our physical actions if we want healthy marriages. Our hearts, our thoughts, our fantasies, are important determinants for the health of our marriages. If you look at your spouse and start to think, "I could do better," chances are slim to none that your relationship is going to be strong or improve. If you start thinking there is someone out there who would understand you better, be more satisfying, or less irritating, or somehow be a better deal for you, your marriage is in big trouble. Now, I know that there are plenty of spouses out there who take their partners for granted-whether it is by ignoring their needs or speaking poorly of them to others. Friends, the battle for a good marriage and a healthy sex life is won or lost in your head. If you have mentally given up on your spouse, you are already missing the point of the commandment and letting go of the opportunity to have a truly joyful marriage.

I am well aware that this message is focused primarily on that segment of our congregation that is married or about to get married. If you are single, widowed, or divorced, it's not the intention of the commandment to cause you pain. There are different seasons of life: sometimes we have to go it on our own because of a death, or because we haven't found the right person, or because we want to be single. Sometimes, people choose divorce as an act of self-preservation in the face of a destructive or abusive marriage relationship. The human situation is complicated. Even so, I hope that those who have been married can at least be witnesses to the truth proclaimed in the commandment. Plus, you never know what might happen. One of the most memorable weddings I ever performed was for a couple in their eighties who had been college sweethearts but lost touch during the Second World War. Years later, after both had been married and widowed, they found each other and married. So, you never know. This might apply to you more than you think!

In keeping with our Presbyterian tradition, I have been trying to lift up not only the literal meaning of each commandment, and the prohibitions many of them contain, but also the positive actions they call for. In our reading from the Song of Songs, we find an invitation to live out our sexuality by **embracing the best**. The Song is one of great love, devotion, passion and commitment shared by a man and his bride. They are single-minded in their desire for each other. This is surely a matter of physical attraction and desire. In fact, the

Song is at times a pretty graphic celebration of sexual love! But it also includes deeper matters of emotional and spiritual commitment. For this couple, no one else will satisfy them but their beloved. They want to be together, and are not willing to let anyone or anything get in their way. That is the Biblical ideal for marriage. Now, for those who have been married for some years and perhaps weathered the pain of disappointments, hurts and maybe even betrayals, it can be hard to recover this sense of singular passion. But by the grace of God, it can be done. One of the wisest books on marriage I've ever read is called, "Passionate Marriage." The idea behind the book is that for a truly satisfying marriage on every level, it is important for a couple to be honest and open with each other. They suggest that it is as important to be real with each other about your differences as it is to share your similarities. It is a matter of bringing your true self to the relationship, which makes intimacy, openness, and deep sharing possible. Obviously, this is a process requiring care and sensitivity, and sometimes outside help. When you are truly able to love, forgive, accept and desire each other as unique individuals, there is no better recipe for a marriage that is satisfying on every level, including the sexual. When you have a bond of total acceptance, commitment and love with your spouse, no one else stands a chance, and there can be no competition for your affection. So if you are struggling, let me encourage you with the wisdom of the scriptures. Do not commit adultery. Do not look around for a better deal. Instead, devote yourself to knowing, accepting, and loving the spouse God has given you. Recover the passion you once had, and nurture and share that together, to the glory of God.