

“Sex in Church?!”

A Sermon by Rob Keithan

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READING

Our reading today is on the lighter side. It's from Butch Hancock, a Texas musician who helped launch the progressive country movement of the 1970s through the groundbreaking group the Flatlanders, and went on to a solo career of his own. He writes:

Life in Lubbock, Texas, taught me two things: One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in Hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love.¹

SERMON

I imagine from the reading and the musical selections that you've probably caught on that I intend to have a little fun with today's topic. I think it was one of my colleagues here who said, during a worship planning meeting, that “talking about sex is funny, but talking about sex in church is even funnier.”

I should give you a disclaimer that my sermon is considerably more serious than it is funny, but as with many serious issues it's helpful, and perhaps even necessary, to be able to step back and relax sometimes. So, thank you Jeremy, Cal, and Paul for bringing us some *Love Potion #9* this morning.

In the reading, in just two short, sentences, Butch Hancock manages to brilliantly sum up our society's utterly conflicted relationship with theology and sexuality. He also, at least by implication, makes it clear that theology and sexuality are connected:

God loves us and we're going to burn in Hell, and sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and we should save it for someone we love.

I'm sure that most of us here today, at least intellectually, have strongly rejected the negative aspects of these beliefs. We reject Hell and we reject the suggestion that sex and our bodies are dirty. And yet, these views are so pervasive and so powerful that they still have a dramatic influence on both our personal views and our public policies. Even within Unitarian Universalism, despite our strong, historic commitment to liberal values and science and comprehensive sexuality education, our engagement with sexuality happens only within relatively confined arenas, like supporting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights, providing instruction for our children and youth, or dealing with sexual misconduct. We rarely talk about sexuality generally. I think that's unfortunate, and here's why:

I believe that sexuality can be one of the best and most beautiful aspects of our lives, and it can also be one of the worst. Issues and experiences related to sexuality can be tremendously important for us, from decisions about connecting with a partner, or not, and having kids, or not, to how we feel about our own bodies. And what is religious community for, if not to address the most important things in our lives? For me, the question is not why *would* we address sexuality in church, but why *wouldn't* we? Why *wouldn't* we address it openly and honestly, so that our experience of sexuality is more likely to be beautiful than broken?

Yes, there are risks for talking about it. But rather than thinking only of the *potential* costs of talking about sex in church, I want us to consider the *actual* costs we pay for *not* talking about it. The first cost is that we cut ourselves off from a tremendous source of healing and wholeness in an arena where many of us could probably use some healing and wholeness. If studying sexuality has taught me anything, it's that virtually everyone will struggle with sexual health and happiness at some point in our lives, if not throughout our lives. If our religious community stays silent on the subject, then our faith becomes just one more entity sending us the message that our struggles with sexuality should be hidden; that our only option is to wrestle with them in isolation.

Unfortunately, our relationship with sexuality is badly damaged by thousands of years of sexism, racism, ignorance, arrogance, and fear. It's damaged by physical violence and it's damaged by emotional and spiritual violence. And in Western culture historically, and US culture currently, the single greatest source of our utterly dysfunctional relationship with sexuality is religion. What this means is that how our faith deals with sexuality is incredibly important. The second cost of our remaining silent is that we let other religious groups and other theologies dominate the issue.

I'm going to make a comparison that's perhaps a little unexpected: which is how our relationship with sex is similar to something in the Harry Potter series of movies and books. In that series, the central plot revolves around the conflict between the boy magician Harry Potter and evil wizard named Lord Voldemort. Voldemort is so evil that only a few people, like Harry himself, will even say his name; other will only call him "You Know Who" or "He Who Must Not Be Named."

I believe that we need to stop treating sex like Voldemort, referring only to it quietly or with euphemisms. Treating sex as That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named only feeds the suspicion and fear surrounding it. Silence only reinforces the idea that sexuality is something bad, something too dangerous to even talk about.

Our negative views about sexuality, and human nature generally, come chiefly from two religious sources: Augustine, who argued that Original Sin is transmitted through intercourse, which is why sex is evil, and Calvinism, which holds that humans are depraved, sinful creatures. These two theological concepts are exactly what Butch Hancock is referencing in today's reading, and they are a huge part of the reason our society's relationship with sexuality is so thoroughly messed up!

Thankfully, Unitarian Universalist theology thoroughly rejects both of these perspectives. In fact, our opposition to these doctrines of sin and depravity is central to the birth of both Unitarianism and Universalism.

So here's the thing. When we let fear and negativity dominate our approach to sexuality, we are giving in to a misguided theological perspective that our faith rejected long ago. We're letting decisions about a critical area of our life be warped by views that we don't even believe!

The reason for this, in my opinion, is that we are not doing a good enough job of lifting up our own positive, healthy, religiously-grounded vision of sexuality. Without a strong, compelling, accessible vision to pull us forward, we simply don't have the resources to avoid being pulled back by the culture of fear and shame.

Unitarian Universalism, I am pleased to say, has already done a great deal to articulate a positive vision of sexuality. One of the best examples of our work is printed on the announcements sheet in your order of service: it's the values which guide *Our Whole Lives*, the comprehensive lifespan sexuality education curriculum developed jointly by the Unitarian Universalist Association and our theological sister the United Church of Christ. I had the values printed because I want you to see and know what beautiful, life-affirming, healthy, responsible, justice-centered principles we're teaching. I also want to recognize this congregation, because thanks to your excellent staff and dedicated volunteers you have been providing children and youth with accurate, high quality sexuality education for decades.

Of course, the *Our Whole Lives* values listed on this page are sound principles for all people, regardless of age. In my view, it will be a great day indeed when, within strong ethical boundaries, each person gets to choose the kinds of behaviors and relationships that are right for them.

Indeed, one of the biggest problems we face in this arena is the tendency to judge ourselves by what we think is "normal," by our often deeply mistaken conclusions about what other people are doing or not doing. In this way, I think our relationship with sex is like our relationship with the collection plate. The culture tells you that you should give, and it generally feels good to give, but sometimes you don't want to or you just can't. Nor are you supposed to look at what the person next to you is doing, but it's hard to resist comparisons. Am I giving often enough? Am I giving too little? Am I giving too much? Is this bill big enough?

The reality is that a vast number of individuals and couples in this country struggle with sexual health and happiness. I submit to you that the problem is not having problems, the problem is thinking that we're the only person or people that do, or that there's nothing we can do about it. The problem is letting our society's broken relationship with sexuality stand in the way of our own wholeness.

I recently took a seminary class entitled “Sexual Issues in Parish Ministry,” and one of the best sessions was a presentation by the couple that runs a nonprofit called the Center for Intimacy After Cancer Therapy. Through books and presentations, the organization’s founders, Barbara and Ralph Alterowitz, have helped thousands if not tens of thousands of people deal openly and effectively with the sexual challenges caused by serious illness, injuries, and medications.

As middle school youth learn in their *Our Whole Lives* classes one of the keys to healthy sexuality is remembering to use the largest, most powerful sex organs that we have: [pause] our brains. So much of healthy sexuality boils down to basic information and communication, and there are massive quantities of resources out in the world that can help. Here’s just one example of the difference knowledge and intention can make: one couple reported that after hearing Barbara and Ralph speak at a conference, they went home talked for hours, cried, laughed, and made love for the first time in two years. Healing probably won’t be that easy for most of us, but I think it’s still a worthy testament to the kind of healing that is possible.

I’m getting ready to switch gears and talk about our public work a bit, but beforehand I want to get a little more concrete on what it would look like for our congregation to engage more openly with sexuality. One of the keys to opening up is recognizing that there are plenty of ways to talk about sexuality and maintain appropriate personal boundaries and privacy. I do not, for example, want an X-rated coffee hour.

Really, the only time I could imagine it being appropriate to get personal on this issue at church would be in the context of classes or groups that are intended specifically to deal with sexuality. The congregation’s main role, in my view, is to help us identify and live our values, and to give us positive reinforcement to take care of ourselves and our relationships and to seek outside help when needed.

The other part of the congregation’s role is on the social and cultural level, to make our faith a force for healthy sexuality in the public square. Since religion has caused a disproportionate share of the damage to healthy sexuality, I believe it stands to reason that religious people have a disproportionate responsibility for being part of the solution. And while it may be easy to forget the power religion has in this arena, every suicide of a gay and lesbian teenager is an awful, tragic reminder that we have a long way to go. There is a great deal at stake here, and what we do matters. Whether we speak out or not matters.

Just two weeks ago, following approval in the Senate and with support from the governor, it looked like the Maryland House was going to pass marriage equality legislation. But opposition from some religious communities is incredibly strong, and it was pulled from the floor. If this bill is to succeed in 2012, there needs to be stronger support from the religious community. If you aren’t yet one of the many Unitarian Universalists involved in this work, maybe now is the time. The Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland will be happy to have you.

Through its support for the Rainbow Youth Alliance, UUCR has taken a very important stand in the community in support of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth. And it's not only UUCR, either: in early May there will be a gathering for all the UU congregations in the area working in this arena, which is fantastic because such a gathering is only possible because there are so many congregations actually doing this work. Our faith has responded to the need, and as a result we are making a difference in the lives of queer and questioning youth.

The UU Church of Arlington has taken the bold step of creating OWL Out, a program dedicated to taking the *Our Whole Lives* curriculum out into the community at places like Beacon House Community Ministries. Listen to what Angel, a 9th grade girl wrote in an essay last year about her experience at Beacon House:

Similarly to the many college programs, the sex education programs are very helpful as well. They have allowed me to know more about myself and feel comfortable in my body. Programs like ...*Our Whole Lives* give me important information to make the correct decisions in my life. With these programs I am a much better person.

Ultimately, that's what all this is about: all of us knowing about ourselves, being comfortable in our bodies, and having the resources and motivation to make good decisions. If you're struggling with sexual wholeness and happiness, I encourage you to take whatever steps are necessary to find healing. You are beautiful and you are worth it. Don't let the lingering remnants of bad theology get in the way of your health and well-being.

Today's postlude, as you've probably noticed, is an instrumental version of Sexual Healing. While the lyrics are rather specific, it's an amazing song and the title really does capture what we need, both as individual and as a society. We need healing. Our relationship with sex is troubled. It can be one of the worst things in our lives...

But it can also be one of the best. If we're willing to talk about it. If we're willing to challenge the fear and shame and bad theology. If we're willing to lift up a positive, healthy vision of sexuality for ourselves and for our world.

The question is not why, but why not.

Amen.

¹ Quoted in the documentary film "The Education of Shelby Knox," released in 2005.