

Human Sexuality (24June18)
Rom13:9-10; Ps139; ELCA Social Stmt*

As we begin, I expect two things.

First, I expect if you knew about the ELCA's process of ethical discernment and social statements, it might be because of this on sexuality.

Second, I expect for Bible readings you probably *didn't* expect that from Romans 13 (even though the chapter has recently suffered odd applications also from the Attorney General). You probably anticipated something else to go with this topic, since almost always sexuality is approached with Bible bullets and proof-texting.

Maybe third, though we consider ourselves open and affirming, I expect there's some discomfort in this room to talk about sex. It's in this preacher, if nothing else.

So, adopted by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, this social statement famously passed the 2/3 threshold by one vote, and had a tornado go over the convention center at that moment. There's also the notoriety that since then ELCA membership has gone down more than 10%, half a million people, a statistic often blamed on the decision by critics, as over 700 congregations have voted to leave the denomination.

I can tell you straight off that most of those people have never read this careful and care-filled theology, much less engaged in almost two decades of study and reflection before the vote. The headlines (and this was almost certainly the only social statement with headlines!) were about what the ELCA thinks about homosexuality. While the statement does include some of that, in grace-filled language—reminding us of the benefits of committed loving relationships, that all our bodies are created in the image of God, that we're all responsible to love and to stop hate—yet it doesn't go much farther than the sort of support a predecessor denomination was able to declare nearly 50 years ago in 1970.

Besides hesitancy on same-gendered relationships, it has little to say about gender expression and identity. Admittedly, our society as a whole has learned much on that since 2009. The statement is also meager on women and justice, but couldn't have anticipated #MeToo movements about sexual abuse of power. Still, recognizing it “does not offer once-for-all answers to contemporary questions. Rather, [it says,] it seeks to tap the deep roots of Scripture and the Lutheran theological tradition...to discern what is responsible and faithful action in the midst of the complexity of daily life.”

That helps point us to a bigger purpose. Though there *are* social statements about a single issue (like abortion or the death penalty), and while this may have been prompted by a narrow question, the statement is certainly not only something like “what does God think about gays?”

In reality, I suspect a lot of the time that question gets asked because this topic makes us squirm and, for most of us, that's a way to direct it away from our own daily life. We focus on somebody else's behavior or identity not have to grapple with our own.

But of course the social statement won't let us do that. It very nicely is about and for all of us. It's intended for us who are in marriage, and us who are couples, and us who have been through some part of divorces or break-ups, and us going through puberty or changes or trying to figure out our bodies in whatever way, and us wondering who we are in relationships, and us who are single for various reasons, and us who are children, and us who are much older, and us who have been part of any kind of families. It's for all of us, because all of us are human. Even though it gets lived out or practiced or not practiced in such a variety of ways, gender and sexuality is part of what it means to be human, to live together, to be created and formed by God, in each of our very, very, very different bodies, to be seen by God as very, very good.

That breadth of understanding may make the allegedly racy topic seem almost bland. Which

* <http://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Human-Sexuality>

shows we need to re-evaluate our expectations on sexuality. I was asked with concern this week about how graphic this would be and how I was going to keep it G-rated since there would be children present.

But we clearly know our children are nothing like secluded from this. The social statement laments that exposure, from media and marketing and all that culture throws at them, and at all of us. In one way, we attempt to address that concern with things like our Parish Protection Program. The statement commends the church in such safeguarding concern for the vulnerable.

But it's not only about putting up barriers or pretending we can ignore the world around us. It's not only preventing the negative, but how do we encourage and practice the positive? If we don't talk about sexuality in church, that leaves it to be defined by commercials, magazines, movies, books, peer pressures, clothing fads, political discourse, bullying and hate groups, pornography, and so on. So not talking about it at church only leaves out the loving voice of God.

In society that severely limits types of body that are called attractive, with brief beauty, we likely need to hear God say again, "It is good. You are good." Amid a sense that anything about sex is secret and so shameful and somehow wrong, we need to be reminded it is not "intrinsically dirty and dangerous." When so much is devalued, we re-assert the value. Since it has such power, we need to be reminded you don't only "do it" because it feels good to you, but requires trust and love, that it has some of the most power for causing harm but also for sharing joy.

In this, I hope you're already hearing this ELCA perspective is not only different from what our culture normally conveys about sexuality, but also not what we'd usually expect from religions. This is not typical categorical judgments and finger-wagging condemnations and threats. Here in church we don't need to be shamed or excluded; we need to rejoice in what goes right and lament what doesn't, in society, but even more in our own lives.

Again, this is a different religious voice because it is not only saying that whatever happens outside marriage is wrong or what happens inside marriage is right. It's no sacrament, not something that makes you holier. Like all the rest of daily living, but in one of the most intensified ways, it is where God operates with concern for the sake of life. Where the social statement extensively accentuates marriage, it is because it offers "the highest social and legal support" for our relationships.

Some religions make sexuality only about procreation. Clearly children and families play an important role in the social statement and in our understanding, but to limit it to making babies is a crazy restriction. There's plenty about touch and intimacy and connection that isn't only about how we make more people on this planet, or about how we take care of the ones arriving on this planet, but already about relationship as couples, and about what happens in our individual bodies, and about how our bodies interact much more broadly in community.

For that, as a second-to-last point, I want to return to the surprising Bible reading. This social statement is framed by Jesus' teaching to "love your neighbor as yourself," a version of which we heard from Paul's letter to the Romans. That may not sound much like sexuality. That's partly because we tend to distance our neighbors: they are migrant children at our national border, clearly an example this week of why families are important (as if we needed a social statement to clarify that wrong). But even for that, I'd say those aren't your neighbors Jesus is most concerned about this week.

Your closest and most important neighbors, I'm always striving to help you remember, are the ones who live in your house, in your family, your most regular connections, in your closest relationships. That's where love is required and most challenging. That is why we're looking at this statement, not because we need to answer a question about somebody else, but because we need to keep working on it ourselves. How, then, does our conduct or our attitude affect those who

are the very nearest to us? How do they feel? How are they loved?

In a last point, in want to tie that loving to the word “consummate.” It’s one of the many euphemisms for sexual relations, but I’d say it’s a vital and correct one. It’s a word that means “be all with,” sharing all of who you are. It’s with some of that sense that we celebrate and share the importance of sexuality. To say it another way that I hope you continue to hear how I use this word, it’s about a communion of souls. See, in biblical usage a soul isn’t a little separate part of you, not the little divine eternal spark. The Bible’s words for soul are about the fullness of who you are as a person—your heart and emotions, your spirit and connection to God, and also your body. Your flesh is not separate from your soul; it is vitally connected. And sexuality is about sharing that soulful all-of-who you are.

So, with the social statement, we recognize it isn’t something trifling, not only about you feeling good or your personal gratifications. It should not or maybe even cannot be momentary, since it’s about the relatedness of all your emotions, about a commitment of being connected most deeply at the heart. That is why it is so high, so important, why it is consummating the soul-whole of who you are with another, being all-in. Far from some mere physical act, this is the whole category of the deepest way we express who God made us to be with each other.

This vulnerability also carries so much weight and hardness and sadness and potential for harm and abuse and struggle and even exploitation. It is weighty and can cause problems in our relationships and carries so much demand for personal discernment and work on it exactly because it is filled—you are filled—with the joy and delight of such God-given potential. And you are good.

A post-script: knowing each of you face it uniquely but this was a blanket message, I absolutely don’t want you to feel left out or that this made something worse, so as always I’m available if it would help to talk more.

God of communion, we are all united in you, together as the mystical body of your Son. Lead us to care for and recognize all these body parts in your church. LIYM

Your creation is good, very good. When we ignore the world around us or disparage body types, remind and renew in us the promise that you love this world, created us in your image, and were born into our flesh. LIYM

We pray for places of brokenness and hurt: for vulnerable children, for places where gender justice is desperately needed, in sex trafficking and abuse, for where people of various sexual orientations or gender identities suffer intense oppression, and for the understanding we all need to pursue. LIYM

We pray also for our households and families, in celebration for when these good gifts of who we are can be consummated and foster life, but also for the places of brokenness and longing—for the lonely, for those hurting from divorce, for those hurting in relationships and looking for answers, for our bodies when they don’t behave how we want, for all the ways this can be a very personal and very difficult topic for us, be here now with your grace and love. LIYM