

Matthew 5:27-32
The Arms of Jesus, Open to All!
WRCoB 6.23.24

We know that cultures are constantly changing.

Norms change

Traditions change

Beliefs change

Some of the changes are good, healthy, and needed.

And well, some are not-so-good and not-so-healthy.

Within the whole shifting nature of society

We find “culture wars”

Politics, racism, sexuality, climate change, etc.

Within these culture wars, we find the church.

One of the most contentious culture wars

Facing the Church of the Brethren today

Relates to human sexuality.

It is dividing our beloved denomination.

I grieve.

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Many new people

To our congregation and denomination ask me

What is the church’s position on human sexuality?

The official position of the Church of the Brethren
Is taken from an AC paper passed in 1983
And reaffirmed in 2011, entitled

Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective

It is a very thoughtful and engaging paper.

The most debated and controversial
Part of the statement concerns homosexuality.

Its conclusion states

“Covenantal relationships between homosexual persons is an additional lifestyle option, but in the church’s search for a Christian understanding of human sexuality, this alternative is not acceptable” (page 580, 1983 Annual Conference Minutes).

Currently, a congregation cannot call
A noncelibate LGBTQ person to the pastorate.

Nor can an ordained Brethren minister
Officiate same-sex weddings.

Consequently, this has left some Brethren
Feeling stigmatized within the LGBTQ community.
And many seek to change the official position.

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Now to begin
Brethren profess no creed but the New Testament.

Meaning, we view the Old Testament
Through the lens of the New Testament
And the New Testament through Jesus.

Brethren consider the final authority
On issues of faith and practice
Residing in Jesus Christ.

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Now, over this past generation
The church began a discussion on sexual ethics

This discussion turned into a debate
And now has evolved into a dividing force.

We have been forced to take sides.

You either support same-sex relations, or you don't.

But this is the problem in an either/or divide.

1. We end up losing the moderate middle ground
2. We end up demonizing those we disagree with
3. We end up dividing the church in two

However, instead of an either/or scenario
Jesus shows us another way.

From the website, *The Jesus Collective*

*... a growing number of Christ-followers are expressing
a desire to avoid the polarizations of the culture war and*

instead seek to embrace a Jesus-like third way approach to human sexuality.

It is a Jesus-centered position.

One, I think, the church can move forward with.

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In Palestine, 33 AD

The Jewish and Greco/Roman cultures clashed, too.

Jesus grew up Jewish.

His Bible was the Hebrew Scriptures

And in it much was written about sexual ethics

You find it in the creation story of first man and woman

In Leviticus with its laws concerning sex ethics

You see it in the supercharged sexual material

In the Song of Songs or Song of Solomon.

And it is found in the words of wisdom

Throughout the Book of Proverbs.

Jewish code of conduct was very specific

Regarding sexual behavior.

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Now, in the larger geographic area

Jews lived within the Greco/Roman culture.

Whether you were a Jew in Jerusalem

Or a Jew living in the Mediterranean basin

You were exposed to and influenced by
A very different sexuality.

Whereas the competing Greco/Roman culture
Allowed men to do just about anything sexually

Jewish scripture stated that sexual relations
Could only be between husband and wife
In the sanctity of marriage.

No pre-marital sex, no sex outside of marriage
No same-sex activity.

Jesus challenged both cultures.

*It was, in this sense, a third way – a counter-cultural
vision of, and approach to, sexuality that contrasted with
the two polarized alternatives of his surrounding world
(Jesus Collective).*

Whether it was the Greco/Roman culture
Or the Jewish culture that challenged him
Jesus responded in a different way.

In the strict Jewish view of sexuality
When it was sinful to even associate
With people considered deplorables.

Jesus welcomed to his table
Those who were ostracized as sexually unclean.

Let me give some examples.

There was the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-8

Jesus stood up against the lopsided view
That the woman should be stoned

When Scripture clearly stated both parties were at fault.

He challenged the self-righteous religious leaders
Saying, he who is without sin cast the first stone.

No stone was thrown
And soon only Jesus and the woman remained.

John 8:10-11 TLB

¹⁰ Then Jesus stood up again and said to her, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” ¹¹ “No, sir,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

And then there was the Samaritan woman
Whom Jesus met at the village well.

It was socially not right for a Jewish man
To speak to a Samaritan woman especially alone.

But Jesus took up a conversation with her.

John 4:16-18 TLB

**¹⁶ “Go and get your husband,” Jesus told her.
¹⁷⁻¹⁸ “But I’m not married,” the woman replied.**

“All too true!” Jesus said. “For you have had five husbands, and you aren’t even married to the man you’re living with now.”

Instead of removing himself from her presence
He had this delightful spiritual conversation
That led to her conversion.

And because of this sinful woman’s faith
Many, many in the village came to believe in Jesus.

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And then there was the woman
Who anointed Jesus’ feet.

She was known in society’s gossip circle as a sinner.

The Pharisees were disgusted with Jesus
For allowing her to anoint his feet.

Luke 7:39 TLB

³⁹ When Jesus’ host, a Pharisee, saw what was happening and who the woman was, he said to himself, “This proves that Jesus is no prophet, for if God had really sent him, he would know what kind of woman this one is!”

And Jesus’ response?

He turned to the host and said
When I entered your house
You gave me no water to wash my feet
You did not greet me with a kiss
You did not anoint my head with oil.

But she did!!

Luke 7:47 TLB

⁴⁷ Therefore her sins—and they are many—are forgiven, for she loved me much . . .”

Even when Jesus dined with “tax-collectors”

It wasn't just tax-collectors he sat at the table with.

It was prostitutes and sinners.

Jesus wined and dined alongside them all

And welcomed them into his inner circle.

Much to the mortification of the religious leaders.

You would think, the way he treated

Those who were outcasts due to their sexual activity

He had dropped the values of Judaism.

But he didn't.

In fact, he raised the bar

He upped the ante

He elevated sexual ethics to an even higher level.

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Today's lesson is the second and third juxtapositions

Found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:27-28 CEB

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, *Don't commit adultery.* ²⁸ But I say to you that every man who

looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart.

Now this passage has hyperbole

We know not to gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands
But the point is clear

Jesus insisted people's sexual ethics
Shouldn't just be about obeying external laws
It should be more about matters of the heart.

Proper sexual conduct included private thoughts.

In that way, Jesus was even more conservative
Than the Jewish law required.

We go now to a conversation concerning divorce.

In Mark 10:1-12 or its parallel in Matthew 19:1-12
A group of Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus.

Divorce was a debate that even two prominent rabbis
Hillel and Shammai, differed on.

It was a hot topic.

John the Baptist was beheaded
Because he publicly challenged
Herod's marriage to Herodius.
Since they were both divorced.

Jesus confronted them that it was not God
But Moses who allowed divorce
Because of the hardness of hearts.

Divorce was not part of the original plan.

And then, Jesus, stated his position
On the topic of human sexual behavior

Mark 10:6-9 TLB

⁶⁻⁷ But it certainly isn't God's way. For from the very first he made man and woman to be joined together permanently in marriage;

therefore a man is to leave his father and mother, ⁸ and he and his wife are united so that they are no longer two, but one. ⁹ And no man may separate what God has joined together."

Jesus emphasized God's original plan in creation.
One man, one woman
In the sacred covenant of marriage

Divorce was not part of the plan.

Neither was any sexual activity outside of marriage

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I stand before you as a divorced and remarried person.

Where do I fit into the debate on sexual ethics?

Is my sin any less than any others?

He said to the woman caught in adultery
I do not condemn you
Go and sin no more.

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Jesus loves unconditionally
His grace is boundless.

Jesus loved those considered detestable
In Palestine 33 AD.

Jesus continues to love all who struggle
With sexual issues in the US 2024.

Human sexuality with all its variations
Is an equal-opportunity condition.

*This means that within the community of Jesus, there is
no place for anyone to look down upon another in
sexual self-righteousness (Jesus Collective).*

Judge not lest ye be judged.

Jesus calls us to a third way
A Jesus-centered approach.

It is not about aligning with any specific cultural stance

It is not about jumping on the band wagon
Of one or the other opposing positions.

It is about embracing the love and grace
That Jesus offers to all.

Let us, as the Church of the Brethren
Strive to be a community of compassion
Understanding, and support

Where we can disagree without being disagreeable
And where we can walk together
Into the arms of Jesus, open to all. Amen.