

“The Church as a School of Love: Human Sexuality”  
Genesis 1:26 & Psalm 139:1-14

I was surprised to read the news about a new law passed in Tennessee this month about marriage. Can you take a guess as to what it was? According to CNN, “The bill would delete language in the law enacted by the state’s General Assembly in 1829, substituting ‘nor the child of a grandparent’ with ‘nor the lineal descendant of a grandparent,’ effectively prohibiting marriage between first cousins.” It is always fascinating to see how our views of marriage and human relationships change and evolve over time.

A phrase that is often thrown around these days is “biblical sexual ethics” or “marriage according to the Bible.” So let’s explore that for a moment. What are biblical sexual ethics?

In the Bible, marriage and human sexuality are not so simple. We have examples of polygamy, sexual slavery, siblings marrying each other (Cain marrying his sister), forced marriages after military conquests commanded by God, and many other forms of relations that we would find abhorrent today.

Looking to the Bible for specific guidance about marriage and human sexuality is not as simple as one would like it to be. What we can get from the Bible is the general guidance about love and about the goodness of God’s creation. And so today we look at two texts that could give us guidance and inspiration about God’s intention for human life, sexuality, and relationships.

The first one is from Genesis 1:26 as part of the story of creation. Let’s listen:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

The second text is from Psalm 139:1-14

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

<sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.

<sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O LORD, you know it completely.

<sup>5</sup>You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
<sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
<sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
<sup>11</sup> If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night',  
<sup>12</sup> even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.  
<sup>13</sup> For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
<sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.

In both scriptures we hear a resounding affirmation of the goodness and sacredness of God's creation. We are all made in the image of God and are fearfully and wonderfully made. Genesis 1 has the first creation story in the Bible with the theme of God as the Creator of a good world. God is presented in this story as the imaginative power behind all of creation. God is the force by which creation comes into life. And creation is intimately related to God. In fact, the essence of all of creation is the very breath of God. God speaks the world into being through the breath of God and the created world responds and cooperates with God to bring more life into being. We tend to read this story very quickly and assume that we know what it is really saying to us. But if we put the story into its historical context, we see it as a radical statement of faith about God for the people of Israel against all the other views of creation that were popular in those days. Genesis is the first book in the Bible. Even though the book is set up as the first book to read in the Bible, the stories of creation in it were not written first before other texts. In fact, biblical studies show us that the time of writing these stories was around or after the exile (587 BCE). The people of Israel were exiled in Babylon. They had lost much of what gave them a sense of their own identity, of who they were as a nation. In addition, their stories of faith were being challenged by the stories of faith of other nations around them, especially by the stories of the Babylonians. Through an act of defiance to hold onto their own identity after the tragic experience of exile, the people of Israel recorded their own reflection on God as the creator of the world. So their stories of creation affirmed a radically different view of God and of the world. While the Babylonians affirmed a violent beginning for creation, the people of Israel proclaimed an act of creativity and goodness as the origins of life. And that made all the difference for the people of Israel. Instead of being afraid of God as a supernatural and distant being in the skies, they saw God as a covenant partner who walked with them daily. As a result, they saw their potential for good and saw that it was not impossible for them to imagine a world where people live out of a sense of blessing and love. They saw their work as mending the world and moving

it in the direction of God's goodness. The rest of the Hebrew scriptures tell of the struggle of this group of people to live up to this vision. Sometimes they succeeded but other times, they faltered. Some of their ways of life evolved over time and their conventions had to change, but the same core truth of God's love remained.

We don't always live up to our full potential, but who we are in our essence is good, including our sexuality in all of its varied expressions. The Bible and our faith give us the key to navigating our way through the ever-changing social norms of sexuality and gender: Respect and reverence. As long as we are able to affirm and respect the goodness and sacredness of ourselves (mind, body, and spirit), and of others. I cannot possibly understand the nuances and diversity of each human experience, but I can honor the experiences of others and ask for God's help to let me see the sacred in every person.

As human beings we have struggled to live up to the potential of seeing the sacredness of each human being, especially when it comes to the gift of human sexuality. One of the most brutal ways of humiliating and dominating others is sexual violence, whether in war or in our own homes. Sexual abuse and violence continue to plague our daily life.

There is so much fear surrounding human sexuality. We are afraid to talk about it with our loved ones. There is still great fear in our world today about homosexuality and gender identities. Family members and churches still shun their loved ones based on sexual orientation.

But there is also good news in this for us! We are evolving to a higher level of reverence and respect. I am always heartened by the courage of so many of our young people today teaching us to grow in our understanding of their experiences and identities. I find hope when I hear of LGBTQ young people who don't have to go into the closet anymore for fear of love and respect being withheld by their parents.

I want to invite you to take a few moments this morning to consider your attitudes and assumptions about human sexuality. Do you see it as a gift? Are there fears and judgments that you would like to ask God to redeem and heal?

We can all find a Bible verse or two to support whatever position we want when it comes to human sexuality. But today, I pray that we can be inspired and challenged by God's intention for human dignity.

We will conclude with a paraphrase of a part of Psalm 139 by Nan Merrill. I will read it twice. The first time, I invite you to pray while imagining yourself embraced by God. The second time, I invite you to imagine someone who is very different from you, could be a friend or a stranger.

You formed my inward being,  
You knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise You, for You are to be revered and adored.  
Your mysteries fill me with wonder!  
More than I know myself do You know me;  
my essence was not hidden from You,  
when I was being formed in secret,  
intricately fashioned from the elements of the Earth.  
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance;

Second Reading:

You formed their inward being,  
You knit them together in their mother's womb.  
I praise You, for You are to be revered and adored.  
Your mysteries fill them with wonder!  
More than they know themselves do You know them;  
Their essence was not hidden from You,  
when they were being formed in secret,  
intricately fashioned from the elements of the Earth.  
Your eyes beheld their unformed substance;

Amen.