

Sermon January 14, 2024
[1 Corinthians 6:12-20]

The F-Word (It's Not What You Think)
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Grace to us and peace, from God the Creator and from Jesus God's son, Christ our Lord. Amen.

The F-word. It's a word you would never say or expect to hear in church.

It sounds harsh; it feels condemning, and it implies something dirty, something hardly appropriate for Sunday morning worship. Of course, you all know what the F-word is: Fornication.

The Apostle Paul mentions it repeatedly in 1 Corinthians 6, our Second Reading for today. The meaning is simple. "Fornication" refers to sex outside of marriage, or perhaps more broadly, outside of a committed relationship. It's a term I've never preached about from the pulpit and there are two reasons why:

Number one, I'm Scandinavian. We don't talk about things like fornication.

Number two, I cringe when I hear TV or radio ministers speak about fornication. Why? Because they come across as severely judgmental and holier than thou. Not only do they shame people, and not only are some of them hypocrites, but they vilify the body in the process, even though, as the Book of Genesis affirms, God created the body along with the rest of the world, as something good, however corrupted.

So this is why I shy away from the F-word, fornication, from the pulpit. After all, our congregation, as Pastor Wayne called it, is a place of grace. A place of grace.

This means I'm not here to preach at you.

This means I'm not here to judge you.

This means I'm not here to shame you.

This means I'm certainly not here to condemn any of you.

That said, as a called and ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I *am* here to preach the Word of God; to invite you to explore with me what the theologian Karl Barth called "the strange and mysterious world of the Bible." I mean to see what it says that might illuminate, in this case, the way we live our lives.

I think we can do this, moreover, in a non-judgmental way, a fundamentally *Lutheran* way. How? By looking together at Paul's writings on the subject and asking the question: "What does this mean?" For those of you who made it through Lutheran confirmation, you know that this is the question Luther asked his students, and that is with respect to the Creed or the Lord's Prayer or the Ten Commandments, his question is always "What does this mean?" and the reason for that is this: the original word "catechism" comes from *katēkhēō* in Greek, which means "to repeat back." Luther was not content, as a good teacher, with his students in Christ simply repeating back what they've learned. He wants them to appropriate it, he wants them to receive it. He wants them to think and ponder about it. I think this is the best way to approach Scripture.

And I think this is the way that we can use to explore, at a deeper level, why Paul opposes the F-word; why Paul opposes fornication. In the process we can uncover, I believe, apart from locking ourselves away in a monastery or convent, the alternative Paul proposes to fornication that might actually strengthen our relationships with one another, unify us in our life together as the Body of Christ, and reset our relationship with God.

A tall order. Let's start by looking at the bigger picture:

What, beyond Paul, does the Bible say about fornication?

The Old Testament: nothing. The word never appears in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, the word fornication appears merely 27 times. I say "merely" because, as some of you may know, the New Testament contains roughly 8,000 words, 27 of which are "fornication." That's 1% of 1% of 1%. I'll send you to Tim Porter if you want to do the math.

What's equally interesting here is *where* the F-word occurs in the New Testament. Only twice in the Gospels, once in Matthew, and once in Mark; only three times in the Book of Acts; and only five times in the letters by, or attributed to, the Apostle Paul, one of which, of course, is our Second Reading for today.

Can you guess, then, where the remaining 12 references to fornication occur in the New Testament? Revelation! Revelation. Why? Because the author recognized that "fornication" would be a powerful metaphor for Rome, and how it has exploited Christians economically. Listen to this excerpt from chapter 17:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.' [Rev 17:1-2]

You can see why the early Church was reluctant to accept the book of Revelation. Perhaps you can see here why, in part, Martin Luther said, "I cannot accommodate my spirit to this book."

Nevertheless, there it is. When the author refers to the fornication, where "the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk," he's talking about how the Roman Empire has persecuted and killed the martyrs and drank their blood, consumed them, if you will.

Why does Revelation refer to Rome as the "whore of Babylon"? Because, as you recall, Babylon was the first power to destroy the First Temple of the Jews, some five hundred years earlier, and then in 70 AD the Romans did the same thing; they destroyed the rebuilt Temple of the Jews. So this text was clearly written after 70, on the other side of the destruction of the Temple, and it explains why this author talks about the prostitute who committed fornication with the kings of the earth – the "kings of the earth" being lesser governments.

When the Apostle Paul, on the other hand, uses the term, he has a very different meaning. For him, it's not a metaphor concerning how Rome is exploiting Christians and persecuting them. It's also – and I really want you to hear this – *not* simply a reference to sex outside of marriage. Paul, rather, is condemning *men* – men in the Corinthian church, who sleep with prostitutes.

“Do you not know,” he writes, “that whoever is united to a prostitute, becomes one body with her, for it is said, ‘the two shall be one flesh?’”

The Lutheran Study Bible explains this passage perfectly.

“By condemning this behavior, it says, Paul rejects a privilege available to men of privilege. In Greek antiquity, elite, married males regularly maintained women for sexual relationships outside of marriage. Although Paul does not say so directly, this use of prostitutes or mistresses would have emphasized the social power of elite males even within the church.

Readers will note that the arguments of 6:12-20 seem disconnected from each other. From Paul's viewpoint they are. Any argument that puts an end to the behavior will do. His stated concern is not for the economic and psychological ruin that prostitution might bring to women. Rather, he seeks to shame the men out of this behavior by appealing to a widespread male attitude that in a romantic affair a man subordinated himself to the authority of women.”

So, Paul here is speaking about wealthy men who engage prostitutes outside marriage. Remember, as well, that for Paul, God's victory in Christ frees us from sin and death. Which is why Paul says at the beginning of the reading, “I will not be dominated by anything.”

In that day it might have been prostitution for elite males, today it may well be about pornography; either way, Paul believes that we have been freed by God in Jesus Christ to overcome this temptation.

Paul gives us another reason not to engage in sex outside of marriage with prostitutes. And that is this: it tears apart the body of Christ.

Now, it's easy to think of Paul as a puritan, as a sexist, or as a prude regarding his attitude toward the human body. “Shun fornication!” he writes in verse 18 – the Greek there is actually “flee fornication” – “every sin that a person commits is outside of the body, but the fornicator sins against the body itself.”

One can hardly overlook the double meaning here. Yes, Paul speaks to individual fornicators, to men themselves, as evident in the next verse. But when Paul says the fornicator sins against the body himself, he clearly has another body in mind. Can you guess what it is? The body of Christ. The community of believers. The assembly of the faithful.

Paul's thinking becomes clear when he speaks of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5: “Now the works of the flesh are obvious,” he writes, “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

Why does Paul condemn these actions? Is it because he's a Puritan who thinks, like a character from a popular cartoon, that sex is bad, that the body is bad; or is it because he recognizes that these behaviors introduced division into the Church?

For my part, I think it's the latter. works of the flesh, things like strife and jealousy and anger, tear the body of Christ apart, which, again, is why Paul says the "fornicator sins against the body," that is, the community of the faithful itself.

The works of the *Spirit*, on the other hand, do the opposite. They *unite* the body of Christ. They knit the body of Christ together; they keep the body of Christ. Listen to what they are, again from Galatians 5:

"By contrast," Paul writes, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

"Love, peace and joy" may indeed be good in themselves. But in the context of faith, they do something more: they keep us together as a family of faith. And this is how Christ, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, exists in the world today.

We are His body. Acts of infidelity within the community tear the body apart. Paul is not speaking about the individual sins of the body itself; he is ultimately talking about that which disrupts the unity of believers.

So now that we've clarified the original significance and application of the F-word, fornication, according to Paul, let's turn to the last question.

What can we do about it? Or more importantly, what has God done about it?

Three things: Number one, **honor your body**. Honor your body. As Paul says, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God." It's not yours. So, take care of it, as your most prized possession. Treat it with respect, as a gift, as a loan, from the Lord. Somehow, this universe brought together the brief marriage of molecules that makes you, you. What a miracle. Be grateful. Honor your body.

For me, that's meant exercising more regularly. It's meant participating in what I like to call "military fire yoga," which I hate every minute. But I do it anyway, because I'm taking care of my body. This, I think, is the deeper meaning of what Paul calls for in our second reading.

Next, **be a vessel of the Holy Spirit**. The works of the Spirit all have one thing in common. They make us one in the body of Christ. Our unity distinguishes us from a world with all its political factions, divisions and wars. So, as a member of the Body of Christ, don't introduce division. Behaviors like Paul describes disrupt Christian unity, and they complicate things.

So driven by the Spirit, be kind. Treat others as Christ at Queen Anne Lutheran church. Be generous with them. Be patient with one another, and be patient with me. In so doing, Christ lives among us.

Finally, **imitate God**. The opposite of fornication is not sexual purity. It's faithfulness. It's fidelity. We have a perfect example of that in our First Reading for today – our rather-long First Reading for today. There God chooses Samuel and remains faithful to

him. From verse 19: "As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him" and – I love this poetic expression – "and let none of his words fall to the ground."

God takes a risk in choosing and sustaining Samuel. But God never abandons him. God believes in him. God remains faithful to him without knowing how the story ends.

What an incredible example of fidelity. What an incredible example of commitment. What an incredible example, on the part of God, of trust! We like to think of God as all-loving, or all-knowing or all-powerful, but how many of us think of God as all-faithful?

My brother attended a Lutheran church back East a few years ago, and he tells me this story, as we discussed with a friend "why we are Lutheran Christians." He says he was talking with a group of people, and one man said, "It's not about us believing in God. It's about God believing in us." We turn it around.

Yes, the F-word can sound harsh. Yet when you see it from a deeper perspective, as we did today, we can see the alternative: A life of fidelity, and commitment to ourselves, to those around us, and to God, the source of everything.

Honor your body. Be a vessel of the Spirit. And Imitate God.

In these ways you will avoid the sin of fornication.

Amen.