

Ministry in a Highly Sexualized Culture

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Acts 18:1-8

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

Sexual immorality found its way into the church in Corinth big time.

You've just heard an intense Minute for Witness. It's a challenge to preach following such an emotional story. I'd like to return to this testimony later in this sermon, but first, I want to step back and establish a Biblical context to talk about sexual abuse.

We have been tracing Paul's missionary travels in our sermon series through Acts. Paul's travels take him, in chapter 18, to the city of Corinth (18:1). Paul partners with a couple, Priscilla and Aquila, to plant a church in Corinth (18:2-4). Preaching in the synagogue that Jesus is Messiah is met with resistance, so much so that Paul is forced to relocate his ministry next door in the home of a disciple named Justus (18:6-7). Despite the opposition, Paul is reassured in a vision that God has many people to reach in the city (18:9-10). Paul invests 18 months in Corinth to establish a church there (18:11).

After leaving Corinth, Paul hears that divisions or cliques have formed in the church (1 Corinthians 1:11). He also receives reports that sexual immorality is rampant within this Corinthian church.

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, materially prosperous and sexually permissive. The corruption was so widespread that the verb "corinthianize" had become

synonymous with prostitution in the first century. Aphrodite, goddess of love, was revered in Corinth. A thousand prostitutes served in the temple dedicated to her worship.

Sexual immorality found its way into the church in Corinth big time. The Greek word used to depict this immorality, *porneia*, is where we derive our English word pornography. *Porneia* is associated with a wide range of sexual sins. In 1st Corinthians 5, *porneia* is used to describe the sin of incest. A man in the church is sleeping with his late father's wife, meaning his step-mother (5:1). Even people with no religious scruples recognize the impropriety of the man's behavior. What really galls Paul is that the church does nothing to censure the man's incest (5:2).

These Corinthian believers justify their "anything goes" sexual attitude with the words, "Everything is lawful for me" (6:12). These words are marked off in your Bibles with quotation marks since they serve as a virtual motto of the Corinthians. Their new-found Christian freedom gives them the right to do whatever they damn well please.

What Corinthian believers do with their bodies is no big deal. After all, their bodies will eventually wear out and die. What really matters are people's souls. The Greeks believed in the immortality

***We live in a
day and age
like Corinth.
Sex is
everywhere.***

of the soul. People's souls will live into perpetuity. Sex, however, is just hormones and fun. Sex, they argue, is as natural as eating, as evidenced by their slogan, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food" (6:13).

Paul challenges this body/soul division by declaring, in the 6th chapter, that sex is an act of the whole person. We're not mere bodies—we're a psychosomatic union of body and soul together. Paul closes the chapter by exalting the body as a living temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19-20).

Several weeks ago, Stan spoke about *porneia* in relationship with a church council convened in Acts 15. This council, called upon to settle a dispute between Jewish and Gentile Christians, settled on four practices for Christians to observe. The first three items on the list deal with ceremonial requirements such as keeping kosher food laws and refraining from food offered to idols. The fourth requirement, however, has a decidedly moral focus. These early Christians are to "abstain from *porneia*—sexual immorality."

We live in a day and age like Corinth. Sex is everywhere. Everywhere! It's not as if I'm telling you something you don't already know!

We've been preaching God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption this year in worship. Sex is created as one of God's good gifts to people. Sex is a vital part of the marital union between man and woman in Genesis 1-2. But when man and woman fall out

of relationship with God, this fall distorts everything, including the gift of sex. Sex is now used in abusive, destructive ways, as Genesis 3 enumerates. No institution is immune to the havoc caused by a distorted notion of sex, not even the church.

Let me take you back to 2005. A pastor on our church staff admitted to an extramarital relationship with a member of this church. We identified this misconduct as an abuse, since it's always an abuse for a pastor in a position of power and authority to take advantage of a pastoral relationship.

We notified the congregation of the devastating news. We met together to tell people what they needed to know. Our denomination conducted an investigation and the pastoral relationship was terminated.

As if this wasn't bad enough, three months later we learned that our youth director, Eric De Vries, was sexually active with students in our youth ministry. Two thousand five was a challenging, painful year.

So why am I bringing these matters up four years later? Some of you are hearing about these matters for the first time. Others remember these events as only a distant memory. But for the victims of this abuse and their families, what happened remains imbedded in their memory. If you're not impacted by this abuse, you may think we talk about it too much. But for victims and their families, we don't talk about it enough. The Washington Post ran a feature article recently about the alarming frequency of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse in

***Our
community
needs to talk
about abuse
and name it
for what it
is—evil and
sinful.***

church and culture is far more pervasive than we care to admit.

I am talking about the agonizing events four years later for three principle reasons: To share with you the full story, to launch a new ministry and to think with you about the challenge of living and doing ministry in this highly sexualized culture.

First, let me share the full story. The last time we talked about this issue in this forum was 2005. We had limited information when we terminated Eric De Vries for sexual misconduct; that's what we called it at the time, while we were investigating. We confronted his behavior with a student and also had indications that other students may have been harmed as well. Eric was promptly terminated and moved away. We turned this matter over to Fairfax County Child Protective Services and detectives, who presented findings to a Fairfax County court. He was found guilty of abuse. The judge imposed a 12-month jail sentence, which was suspended, since it was his first offense. The suspension was pending his completion of a year's worth of sexual abuse counseling.

As the months and years have unfolded, multiple students have come forward to identify themselves as victims of Eric's abuse. We now know during the time Eric was on staff here that he was a sexual predator. His abuse was sexual, emotional and psychological.

We must resist every temptation to keep silent about what

happened or avoid talking about it. We are a church committed to telling the truth. Beware of churches who keep secrets. Our community needs to talk about abuse and name it for what it is—evil and sinful.

Earlier this year, our Session leadership revisited this issue and recommitted our church to care and support the young women victimized by this abuse. Let me say it as clearly as I know how—these women were not at fault. Nobody asks to be abused.

Our Session also pledged to tell the truth about what happened. That's what I am doing today on their behalf. Our church provides ongoing training for all staff and conducts careful screening of all volunteers to insure this abuse never happens again. Sexual predators sometimes target churches because we are seen as accepting environments where people want to believe the best about other people. Our Minute for Witness bore witness to the power of evil in so-called Christian people. Evil is sometimes concealed in a charming, likeable persona.

My second purpose for revisiting what happened is to introduce a new ministry. Our Session, earlier this year, pledged to begin a ministry for the sexually abused within our church family as well as for people throughout Northern Virginia. Today, we are launching NewSpring. If you want to explore this new ministry further, either for yourself or someone you know, you can access our website at www.viennapres.org/newspring. If you would like immediate contact

***God can
redeem any-
thing, even the
travesty of
sexual abuse.***

with this ministry, Stephen Ministers and professional counselors are available to you following worship.

I have a third reason for revisiting what happened. I'd like to widen the lens and think with you about the growing challenge of living and doing ministry in a highly sexualized culture. Our culture is awash in sex. Indeed, we are drowning in it.

I spent my sabbatical this summer reading and writing on the subject of church and culture. I wrote from the perspective of someone who has watched the culture change dramatically in the last 30 years. When I came to this church in 1979, sexual addiction was new to my lexicon. Given the proliferation of sex over the last 30 years, I am convinced there are growing numbers of people who sit in church on Sunday morning and haven't told anyone, much less admitted to themselves, that they are sexually addicted.

Sexual addiction is being fueled today by the ubiquitous nature of internet porn. The internet has become the primary portal for sexual addiction. I looked up the statistics on the use of internet porn this week. I was absolutely overwhelmed with how quickly and thoroughly porn has saturated our culture. Porn is hollowing out relationships and destroying marriages and families.

Some of you will, no doubt, minimize what I say. But for people caught in the grip of this insidious temptation or who have been victimized by sex, they will

tell you a vastly different story.

Let's be absolutely clear about something. God's Big Story doesn't end with the fall. God's Big Story culminates with redemption. God can redeem anything, even the travesty of sexual abuse.

Earlier this year, church staff joined with victims of Eric's sexual abuse and their families for a Restorative Circle. We not only revisited the deep pain of four years ago, we experienced the reality of God's incredible healing. Jesus Christ redeems people suffering from the devastating effects of abuse. Jesus Christ heals people.

You might be a victim of someone's *porneia*. Or you might be caught in the grip of its devastating effects. There might be some area of sexual sin and brokenness you have never named to God or anyone that is now coming to mind. I am here to attest: Jesus Christ can redeem and set you free!

