

Holy Fire (1): God Incarnate

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Genesis 1&2

John 1:1-14

Inside the belly of a big ship at sea—is a fire—an engine that fuels the enormous tank through the pounding of waves and across the sea.

Inside the engine car of a train car—is a fire—that propels that train down the track and over the mountains.

Inside the human being—is a fire—that fuels us into life. It is God who put this sacred fire within us. And we call this fire “sexuality”—from it comes love, hate, joy, creativity, longing, the desire to create life just like God created life in a story we’ve heard this morning.¹

In the beginning, when the earth was a formless void and waters covered over the deep, God said “let there be light.” And God saw that it was good.²

And God “said let the earth put forth vegetation” And there were vines, plants, sea-grasses. And God saw that it was good.

And God said “let there be lights to separate the day from the night” and there were the sun and the moon and the stars. And God saw that it was good.

And then, God created humankind, in God’s own image. In the image of God they were created, male and female. And God saw that it was *very* Good.

The second account of Creation goes like this:³

Then the Lord god formed adam (man) out of the adamah (dust) of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and Adam became a living being. The earthling got busy tending to the earth, naming the animals one by one, but among all these animals a suitable partner for Adam was not found. God looked at Adama and said: “it is not good” that man should be alone.

Did you hear that? It was good. It was good. It was good. It was *very* good. And then suddenly, God sees Adam alone and for the first time: it is *not* good.

¹ Ronald Rolheiser. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*: (USA: Random House, 1998), 196. 3-12.

² Gen 1.

³ Gen 2.

So God puts Adam into a deep sleep, and takes a rib from Adam and creates with it Eve. When Adam awakes from the surgery, he gives birth to the genre of romance and says:

“At last – bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.”

Or, he might have said it like this: bone of my *bones*, and flesh of my *flesh*. ;-) Catch my drift?

There it is. The fire! The holy fire inside the belly of humankind that propels us to create, to connect, to make life, to share life.

Does this ever happen to you—you remember the scene of a movie you saw on television maybe 10 years ago. And you have no idea what the movie is, but there’s a scene that just sticks with you? Well, there’s a movie that is (I think) about a young doctor; he’s very well-educated, and could have a job at a great hospital in a big city, but instead he feels called to serve as a doctor in small town that otherwise wouldn’t have any doctors at all. And most of the folks are at least 30 years older than him. He is the only person his age, and it’s lonely work. But of course the town loves him and so he gets along okay. But you’re sort of rooting for him to connect with someone. And one day he goes for a walk down by the river, and there is a woman, about his age, gorgeous, bathing in the river. And their eyes meet, and she walks out of the river, totally unclothed, totally unashamed, and she walks toward him.

And it must have been for this doctor a total Adam and Eve moment: *at last: bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh*. It’s not about the nudity, but it is about their bodies—suddenly connected and vulnerable and desiring to make more of what they are and have.

When Adam first laid eyes on Eve, he didn’t say “spirit of my spirit, and heart of my heart.” He said: “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.”

And when God made humankind in God’s own image, God didn’t say: “these bodies are merely a disposable shell for the true spiritual essence.” No God, creates humanity alongside the muddy rivers and the feathery birds and the scorching sun, things with grit and substance and matter. God makes Adam and Eve out of earth and bone—physical stuff that you can touch and hold; and God saw that it was very good.

We have to start here in our sermon series on sex with the affirmation of physical good because Christians have a reputation of being body-deniers, sexually-repressed people, whose heads are in the clouds. “Christianity is all about the

spiritual life,” people will say, as if the body is bad, or as if the body and spirit could be separated in the first place.

They can’t. In the words of Margaret Farley, as human beings, “we experience ourselves as bodies, but not just bodies. As spirits but not just spirits.” She calls us “embodied spirits or inspirited bodies.”⁴ Though we can distinguish one from the other, we cannot ultimately separate one from the other. There is a fundamental unity—body and spirit—within each one of us. When someone touches my hand, they touch me. When someone hurts your body, they hurt you.

“Sometimes,” Farley writes, “we experience a kind of total unity of body and spirit, as when our skill in dancing and our immersion in music bring our whole being together in one glorious activity.”⁵ That moment in the dance when you are being twirled so quickly that your feet lift off the floor, just the way your soul is elevated.

And then there times when we sense a profound disunity between body and spirit. Aging for example—as scripture says “though my body is wasting away, my soul is being renewed day after day.”⁶ But even in this seeming bifurcation—my spirit is being renewed, as my body is wasting away—still we cannot separate the two in our experience, can we? It is through the body’s physical transition that the spirit finds its transformation.

Incarnation is a word that captures what Adam saw when he met his companion standing before him for the first time—bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. God made us this way—incarnate.

If you’re squirming in the pews right now, you probably come by it honestly. I don’t have time to detail the evolution Christian thought about the body, but suffice to say it has been a mixed bag. Richard Rohr points out that one of the gravest mistranslations in the Bible is the translation of Paul in the New Testament who writes about the ongoing struggle between the spirit and the Greek word “sarx” which is often translated flesh—and misunderstood to mean body. Rohr suggests that a better translation of the Greek would be not “flesh” but “ego.”⁷ We struggle not against our elbows knees and toes, but against our own self-centeredness,

⁴ Margaret Farley. *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 116. Margaret Farley. *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 116.

⁵ Margaret Farley. *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 118.

⁶ 2 Cor. 2:14

⁷ Richard Rohr. “Paul’s Dialectical Teaching: Flesh and Spirit” *April 10, 2015*: <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Flesh-and-Spirit.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=eavE9LPOong>

greed—which then gets lived out in our elbows knees and toes. But that doesn't make our bodies the enemy. Even St. Augustine, who is probably the last person we want to help us understand sex, even Augustine believed that the real division between us is within the spirit, not between the spirit and body.⁸

Elsewhere, Paul will write that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit.⁹ The temple is described at length in the Bible—it was made of cedarwood and gold, precious metals and jewels, it was glorious because it housed the presence of God. Paul is suggesting that our bodies are like that temple—a worthy place for God to dwell.

Not all “Christian teaching” is good Christian theology. And so in seminary, my friends invented something we called the horn of heresy. Whenever we heard our internship supervisors or church members say something that rang more of pop-culture than the truth of our studies, we would blow our imaginary horns of heresy.

One of the heresies we spent the most time studying in seminary was Gnosticism. Gnostics believed in a sharp dualism between body and spirit. They believed that the body is base, and worthless, and the spirit is higher and better and the goal of life is to escape the prison of the body through the mind. Early Christian theologians spent a lot of time defending the faith from Gnostic inroads. Have you ever heard a Christian say “what really matters is your spiritual life, what you do with your heart that counts, not your body?” Blow your horn of heresy! Gnosticism is alive and well in the church even today.

Shortly after I finished seminary, I lost a cousin to cancer. He was about 30 years old and left behind two young daughters behind. I went to his funeral, and the minister—a Methodist one—stood before us, and he began to speak about my cousin. About what a wonderful father he was, and friend, and brother. And I was tracking. And then he said “but Christopher’s spirit is still with us, only his body is gone, and the things you miss about Christopher—they don’t have to do with Chris’s body, but with his spirit which is still here.” And let me tell you, if I had an actual non-imaginary horn of heresy, I would have blown it as loud as I could in front of all those people. Do you mean to tell me that these little girls aren’t going to miss their daddy holding their hands, and braiding their hair, and tossing them into the air, and tucking them into bed at night? Do you mean to suggest that his bodily life was so

⁸ Margaret Farley. *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 127.

⁹ 1st Cor. 6:19

meaningless that they aren't going to miss it at all? It was a cheap shot at comforting us that was profoundly un-Christian theology.

John 1: In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. And the Word became *flesh* and dwelt among us.

Christ Jesus did not take on a human body because "it doesn't matter." Jesus Christ took on a human body because nothing could matter more to God than rescuing us—body and spirit—from the power of death. When we die, we die—body and spirit. And when we are raised—we are raised body and spirit made new. The resurrection of the body—Christ's and ours—is utterly orthodox Christian doctrine.

It's not just that *we* were made incarnate. *God* became incarnate. It's like all humanity is feeling lonely, is feeling disconnected, and yearning for a meaningful connection. We get along with each other sometimes, but we are called to higher relationship. So humanity goes down to the river with John the Baptist, and we see this man Jesus coming out of the baptismal waters.

And all humanity says: *at last, God is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh.*

This moment. This connection between us and God—bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh—is the spark which starts the holy fire of a healthy sexuality in us. Just as God has created life in us, so we long to create life in others. Just as God has touched our flesh, so we want to touch the flesh of another. So God has desired us, and become vulnerable in that desire, so we become vulnerable in our desire for others—at the right times, placing our bodies into their loving embrace.

Many of the classical Christian mystics used the image of sexual encounter to describe our ultimate union with God.

St Teresa of Avila, for example—a young nun. Picture a nun, wrote this about God.

"When He touches me, I clutch the sky's sheets,
the way other lovers do the earth's weave of clay.

Any real ecstasy is a sign you are moving in the right direction,
don't let any prude tell you otherwise."¹⁰

Celibates, like St. Teresa, remind us what sexuality and marriage is for, in that they entrust their bodies directly into the hands of God, unmediated by a romantic

¹⁰ Teresa of Avila. "When He Touches Me." Translated by Daniel Ladinsky. *Love Poems from God: 12 Sacred Voices from the East and West*: (USA: Penguin Compass, 2002), 381.

partner. And so they remind us that this holy fire is *from* God and it ultimately burns *for* God.

The truth is that for most everyone—even those called to marriage and not to life-long celibacy—there are stretches, long stretches, decades perhaps, without sexual intimacy. And so sexuality has to be something much wider than what the bedroom can contain.

Let's return to our small town doctor. Who for years, perhaps, worked in this town taking care of the elderly, providing for the people with compassion and attention, greeting them with love in the streets, and sacrificing much of a social life one might expect of a man in his 20s and 30s. Here we see that sacred fire in full bloom and maturity—lived out in his body as a doctor—just as much as it is suggested in the next scene of the movie when the young woman comes out of the river.

Ronald Rolheiser defines sexuality as “the beautiful, good, extremely powerful sacred energy, given us by God and experienced as an irrepressible urge to move toward unity and consummation with that which is beyond us. This hunger makes us co-creators with God, mothers and fathers, artisans and creators, big brothers and big sisters, nurses and healers, teachers and consolers, farmers and producers...co-responsible with God for the planet, standing with God and smiling at and blessing the world.”¹¹ All of this requires our bodies, and God saw that it was good. Very good.

If we are charitable toward the mixed Christian history on sex, we might say that Christianity has been repressed at times only because it knows the phenomenal power for bodies to be harmed and to cause harm. For sexuality to run amok.

Ronald Rolheiser is correct when he says that “sex is responsible for most of the ecstasies that occur on the planet, but it is also responsible for a lot of murders and suicides...It is the most powerful of all fires, the best of all fire, the most dangerous of all fires, and the fire which, ultimately, lies at the base of everything, including the spiritual life.”¹²

We have four more weeks to explore this holy fire—and how to steward it wisely. But since it's a Sunday, I want to leave you with this little gem from Thomas Aquinas that stodgy 13th century Catholic theologian who I thought had his head in the books. Aquinas wrote:

¹¹ Ronald Rolheiser. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*: (USA: Random House, 1998), 196.

¹² Ronald Rolheiser. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*: (USA: Random House, 1998), 193.

“On the Sabbath, try to make no noise that goes beyond your house.
Cries of passion between lovers are exempt.”¹³

Thanks be to God.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas. “On the Sabbath,” Translated by Daniel Ladinsky. *Love Poems from God: 12 Sacred Voices from the East and West*: (USA: Penguin Compass, 2002), 138.

Eternal God,

You stepped out of infinity, and took on the limits of time,

You stepped out of heaven, and took on the trials of earth,

You drew near with your spirit, and took on the confines of a human body,

Bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh.

Jesus Christ,

In your bodily life, you showed us how to love,

How to honor that fundamental unity—body and spirit—in another person

Guide us to channel the sacred fire into justice and peace

Help us to steward the gift of sexuality within each of us

And Have mercy on us when our desires turn us to selfishness and greed

We pray for the bodies and spirits who are systematically degraded, used, and destroyed

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for the bodies and spirits who are considered less valuable than others—for whatever foolish invention of humankind.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

And we pray for those bodies and spirits who are recovering from trauma.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We long for the day when justice will roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I pray with these words of John Wesley, Lord, I give you my body. May I glorify you with it, and preserve it holy, fit, for you O God to dwell in. May I neither indulge it nor use it too much rigor towards it, but keep it as far as in me lies, healthy, vigorous, and active, fit to do you all manner of service, that you shall call for.

And with the words of Jesus we pray, Our Father...