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A Topical Sermon

DELIVERED TO THE STUDENT BODY OF CONCORDIA SEMINARY, FEB. 22, 1967, BY THE REV. PROF. ANDREW M. WEYERMANN.

The sermon in this issue calls attention to the possibility of dealing with very specific and even rather difficult subjects from the pulpit. It is not necessary for sermons to restrict themselves to generalities, and it is possible for preachers to build on, rather than continually repeat, the "foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God." (Heb. 6:1)

In the academic community of Concordia Seminary the matching of content to congregation is more easily achieved than in a parish situation, where the assembly includes people on all levels of instruction and of every degree of academic achievement. The sermon should remind homileticians also to mind men of high degrees. They, as well as men of low estate, need the kind of leveling from the preacher that makes the power of the Word pertinent to their particular problems.

George W. Hoyer

1 COR. 6:12-20

The automobile, the motel, the pill, the time, the money, and the sheer fun of doing it—these are some of the ingredients that go into making the sex revolution in our time. There are many even outside of the church who agree the revolution has pointed to a fundamental crisis in the moral life of the West.

The crisis is not born in the fact that Van de Velde is in paperback so that there can be a free and open discussion of the sexual dimension of life. It is true that the gap between technical knowledge and the understanding of the love relation itself poses a problem. What ought to concern us is not that the female anatomy is exposed, but the illusion created that mean-

ingful sexual relationships can be established by gaping at or hiring out playgirls of the month. There was no need to cry in dismay at the Kinsey Report, "Say it isn't so." The crisis is not that there are more cases of infidelity in our time than in the era of petticoats and prudish papas. The crisis is not that we have fallen short of the ideals of chastity and fidelity. We always have. It is that we have ceased believing that they are ideals at all. We have ceased believing that there is any imperative at all.

In the play *The Seven-Year Itch* the hero is a husband who has been faithful to his wife for seven years (the playwright gives you the impression that this was a phenomenal work of supererogation on his part). While his wife is on vacation, he is seduced by and seduces a delicious single girl living upstairs. The morning after we are led to believe that the "parousia" has come. The girl now knows that she really loves her fiancé, and the sly old tiger got the itch out of his system once and for all. There is a mythology in the Doris Day "Pillow Talk" pictures. Everyone has a great time playing musical beds, and no one ever gets hurt. Human self-realization is seen in terms of Henry Miller's unbounded vitalistic self-expression, in which man simply sets out to impregnate as much of God's fairer creation as he can to the point of exhaustion. A more romantic form of self-justification is suggested in the touching sentiment, "It's all right when you're really in love." In this way a vast gulf is fixed between sheer promiscuity and the noble self-giving of a young maiden to her current lover.

We are not only called to minister the Gospel to this generation; we are part of this age. There can be an uncomfortably thin line between the woman with five husbands who says, "Life is loving and giving," and the incisive norm for evangelical ethics espoused by St. Augustine, "Love, and what you will, ignore." You and I rejoice in the freedom of the Gospel and declare with St. Paul, "All things are lawful." It is precisely in that moment that our greatest temptation is to justify a romantic antinomianism with regard to our sexual behavior. It is precisely in that context where we are called to affirm the secular and the legitimacy of the erotic dimension in every male-female relation, that we are tempted to move without conscience from the relative levels of holding hands and petting to sexual intercourse. It is precisely because we are most impressed with the compassion of Christ that we are tempted to suspend all critical concern of the premarital affairs of a fellow student, who, like you, was introduced to romance at the eighth-grade prom and is denied the fullest sexual expression until the near completion of a long and tedious program of study for the ministry. It is because we know that nude imperatives drive people to hypocrisy, despair, or rebellion against a gracious God that we are tempted to suspend all imperatives. It is because evangelical ethic is in a real sense "situational" that we are tempted to shy away from all "principles."

Lest I be misunderstood as falling into some new form of legalism or Victorian prudery, I should like to affirm the declaration that "all things are lawful" in response to the Gospel. I do not think it impertinent that Nikos Kazantzakes should

conjecture in *The Last Temptation of Christ* that Mary Magdalene was in love with our Lord prior to His ministry. How could He be in every way like us without evoking something of the fire that a true man kindles in a woman? How could He be in all ways tempted as we are, yet without sin, if He did not affirm His humanity and dare to risk real encounter with a woman? It is a gift of God to greet a young lady who kindles a warmth with her smile, and you pause afterward to say, "What a lovely woman!"

How many secretaries have preserved their bosses from dark doldrums of office routine by the scent of their perfume, the flower on the desk, the cup of coffee brought unsolicited with good cheer. Does our Lord not free us from the tyranny of sex precisely so that we can affirm this kind of subtle exchange of sex appeal? Is there a risk in such exchange? Yes. But our life is not determined by prohibitions based on possible risks. God's grace frees us to love His steadfast love and to love in every way our new being affords.

It is our Lord's presence at Cana that sanctifies the nuptial union and enables us to enjoy our wife in our youth. The analogy of Christ's union with the church confirms the fact that for many the greatest gift a man receives and the one who can be the most important human vessel of his redemption is his wife. The poet does not go too far for us when he says:

I need love more than ever now . . . I need
your love,

I need love more than hope or money,
wisdom or a drink,

Because slow negative death withers the
world — and only yes can turn the tide
Because love has your face and body . . .

and your hands are tender

And your mouth is sweet — and God has
made no other eyes like yours.

(Walter Benton, *This Is My Beloved*)

In Christ we can affirm the erotic ex-
pression of the Song of Solomon:

How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!
You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
I say I will climb the palm tree
And lay hold of its branches.
Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of
the vine,
And the scent of your breath like apples,
And your kisses like the best wine
That goes down smoothly,
Gliding over lips and teeth.

(Song of Solomon 7:6-9)

Indeed in Christ "All things are lawful for me." But not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be enslaved by anything." The Gospel does free us in faith for a full expression of erotic love, but "all things are lawful" does not mean "anything goes." The Corinthians are tempted to use this declaration of freedom as a justification of a kind of gnostic libertinism, the exhaustion of the body through unlimited sexual self-expression. St. Paul tells the Corinthians they cannot use the Gospel as an excuse for returning to a life under the powers of the old age. Whatever the Gospel indicative offers in terms of free life, it does not infer that there are no longer any imperatives or points of no return.

Paul dares to establish the boundary imperative without reservation or apology at the point of "fornication" or "immorality." This imperative not to fornicate is not imposed heteronomously from the outside. He unfolds the reason for the

imperative from the inside in terms of the nature of Christian life itself. Two basic reasons are given why fornication is the point of no return. The first is theological. The Christian who willfully engages in promiscuous sexual relations has fallen under the tyranny of sex into the clutches of his *sarx*, which is idolatrous. When this happens, the Spirit which is housed in his body is dispossessed, and the garnished house is opened for the invasion of seven demons worse than the first. The second reason which is implied is ethical. The sexual union not only involves the whole person but involves profound union of two persons into a single unity. In the act of willful fornication a man not only loses his freedom and the Spirit, but he lovelessly exposes the other person by establishing a union for which he does not assume responsibility in love. The Epistle lesson adds he may also thereby "defraud his brother" as well.

St. Paul here reminds us of several profound insights into the sexual relation. First of all, that sex is not merely a biological expression but one that involves the whole person. What is really human sexual self-realization is not found in sex *per se*. This every animal can express. What is human is that man expresses himself sexually in the context of faith and love. Dogs and cats are driven deterministically in periods of heat to amoral sexual behavior. A Christian possesses the Spirit and is called to act responsibly in faith and love. Sometimes this may mean the willful setting aside of one's own needs for the sake of another person. Christ frees us by giving us the gift of His grace to die to the tyranny of sex. As soon as

one passes the dimension of faith and love, the personal relation is destroyed.

Let me cite a few examples in support of this insight. *Dear John* was a poetic motion picture which showed so clearly how every love affair combines the sensual and the personal spiritual dimensions. You may recall the scene where the lovers are at the zoo. For one brief instant there is a shot of two monkeys copulating. The girl turns away, partly in embarrassment and partly in repulsion. I took the reaction to be the typical response of a woman who is made to see the sexual relation objectively and mechanically. She does not want to identify her love that way. A real human expression is to want to give oneself to the other, and it always anticipates reciprocal response. The consequence of the self-giving is that the union formed is always more profound than casual lovers frequently intend. St. Paul is so much more profound and positive in his view of sex than the *Playboy* philosopher for this very reason. The assumption in *Playboy* is that you can successfully engage in a sexual relation without getting too involved with the other person, and therefore have but little responsibility toward the other person. Technically of course you can, but existentially it doesn't work that way. The promiscuity of *Darling* leads to impotence and isolation, not creative union. A Don Juan defeats himself by seeking fulfillment through superficial sexual relations when fulfillment lies in accepting the responsibility a real love union requires. In Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* the prolific lover tries to exonerate himself by saying

that the women loved him and he them. But when he is confronted by them, he cannot remember their names. In the sexual relation one does not merely know the name; one knows the person and is entrusted with the name. This assumes that the name is a maiden one and that the one who accepts the trust will keep it pure.

I hope this was not too formal or abstract this morning. I am speaking to your humanity. For a young man in Christ there is probably no more intense tension than that between a genuine sexual self-expression and sheer capitulation to the flesh. There is a built-in cruelty in our situation which exposes one so soon and withholds honest and open consummation for so long. I have no resolutions for the tension. Certainly, we all fall in the struggle. You must believe in God's forgiveness so that you do not come to curse your potent sexuality. It is not the struggle and the failure that will defeat us but the temptation to tranquil capitulation to abandoned self-satisfaction. It is the temptation to discard the imperative in the name of the Gospel as a cover for the unleashed libido. As we come to the Lord's Table, we anticipate and pray, "From this bondage, Lord, deliver me, and give me the grace to love my beloved with a pure heart. O Christ, free me by Thy presence to give myself to my beloved that we may be one and find fulfillment in each other. O Holy Spirit, teach me to love my beloved so much that I can make every sacrifice that prevents betrayal of her trust with joy." Amen.