

Rev. Tom Schade
First Unitarian Church of Worcester
Sermon of February 13, 2011
“*Sexuality and Religious Renewal*”

Scripture:

1 Corinthians 6:19 "Do you not know that your body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own."

Second Reading:

"We face a daunting task. Even to speak intelligently about sexuality is a frightening prospect for many people. Toxic secrecy, innuendo and vulgarity, misunderstandings and abuse, shame and guilt inhibit and pervert our God-given desire to relate in a mature, adult and responsive way....

This is a complex undertaking but one we can no longer shy away from. With honesty and transparency, we need to face the fact that sexual behavior has outgrown the institution of marriage and the culturally sanctioned context of the monogamous heterosexual couple. Other cultural containers will be necessary for the future, some of these are already unfolding... Most urgent of all is the need for a more adult, mature, discourse, devoid of the moralism of bygone days." Diarmuid O'Murchu, from the *Transformation of Desire*.

“*Sexuality and Religious Renewal*” by Rev. Tom Schade

My thesis this morning is that there is a secret and hidden history behind the decline of religiosity in the West. Religious historians and scholars inquire into why organized religion has declined so rapidly in Europe and North America, why has the church become in Europe a state subsidized string of museums. Why are the unchurched the fastest growing form of religious expression in the United States? What do people mean when they say that they are “spiritual but not religious”?

Some say that people are no longer religious because of science. They know that what the Bible seems to say about the world is not true, and so they don't believe in it. Yet, people are interested in all kinds of movies and books that are not true; aliens and zombies and all kinds of fairy tales. It isn't that our appetite for myths and magic and stories has gone away.

No, I think that the hidden and secret history of religion in the twentieth century has been that people turned away from religion because it was wrong about sex. People came to understand that what religion taught about sex was not helpful, was not good for them, was not true.

Now, we could, if we had the time and were given to that sort of thing, and were all willing to be perfectly candid with each other, we could all sit in a circle and go around one at a time (maybe we would need one of those talking sticks) and I bet each person here, especially if they came from another religious tradition, could describe a moment in their life when the teachings of the church came into conflict with their personal development and religious teaching was, at that moment, wrong. My goodness, the Catholic Church still teaches against masturbation, calling it “an intrinsically and seriously disordered act.” Now, I am a good UU, so I am tempted to say that is their opinion and everyone is entitled to their opinion, but I then I remember that it is just wrong.”

Now, I am not saying that organized religion is always wrong about sexual morality because sometimes they are right, even a stopped clock is right twice a day. Nor am I saying that there is no such thing as bad behavior when it comes to sex; there are all kinds of ways to be stupid, wrong and even evil in sexual behavior. What I am saying is that most of us learned long ago, and through personal experience, that if you are trying to figure out right and wrong about something having to do with sex in your life, organized religion

is not a particularly good resource to go to to get good advice. And believe me when I say that I have never been called on to offer my advice on a person's sex life, and most of my colleagues report the same. After all, what would I know; I am a minister. Many people would assume that I would be required to disapprove of whatever it is. I'm a minister; isn't it my job to disapprove of people's sexual lives?

Western Religion, for the most part, has not been just a little wrong, or out of date on sexual matters; the wrong goes all the way down. Listen to Paul again: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God and that you are not your own?"

"You are not your own". "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you which you have from God."

In this context, sexuality is a little bodily feature that makes reproduction an attractive thing to do, but has somehow gotten out of control. Sexuality is something that needs to be controlled, bounded, restricted to its real purpose. Marriage is the instrument of that control and the purpose of marriage is to regulate sexual desire. After all, you are not your own, your body is the property of this temporary landlord, this Holy Spirit you get from God.

People come to this church because the teaching of their home church is against divorce, and considers re-marriage to be morally equivalent to adultery. The root of this premise is that sexuality must be restricted and bounded and controlled.

I am sorry but they are mistaken, and the lives of people are being limited and damaged by that mistake. And when you get to the teachings of the Western religious tradition about same sex attraction, homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality etc, the mistaken doctrines of the church have damaged the lives and bodies of millions of people over the centuries, and still do.

Millions of Catholics have figured out, through their own experience that the Church is teaching an idealistic and limited view of love, sex and marriage. The church's teaching against same-sex marriage is based on the same faulty premises and presumptions.

I don't want to just pick on the Catholics – the evangelical Protestants are just as wrong about abstinence only sex education for young people.

That too is based on the fear of the body and its sexual desires. Their sexual morality is based on tightly controlling sexuality, the solitary struggle with the beast within, rather than on the ethics of the relationship within which sexuality is being expressed.

My point is not to catalog all the ways that religious conservatives get sexual ethics and morality wrong; these are hot-button issues and at the heart of the values-oriented politics in the country today. I just want to point out that the western religious tradition has gotten seriously out of step with the sexual lives of ordinary people in the twentieth century, and that one result has been the decline of the influence of religion overall.

It is said that Jesus speaks many more times about doing justice for the poor than about sexual morality, and that he never ever speaks about homosexuality. Perhaps the tragedy of our time is that no one takes Jesus seriously about the poor because his church has been so wrong about our bodies and our own desires.

Liberal Religion has taken on a prophetic role in the twentieth century about sexuality and religion. Like the prophets of ancient Israel, liberal religion has called Christianity back from its errors and mistakes. And like the prophets of old, it has not made us popular.

Just as 19th century Unitarianism and transcendentalism called upon people to free their minds and think for themselves, 20th century liberal religion points out that Paul is wrong when he says of our bodies, "that we

are not our own.” Our bodies, like our minds, are great gifts, but they are gifts given to us, a mind and a body inseparable, a person.

Listen to these words from the Religious Institute, an interfaith body, led by UU minister, Debra Haffner, from their Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing:

Our culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts. All persons have the right and responsibility to lead sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent and pleasure. Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, this ethic fosters physical, emotional and spiritual health. It accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status or sexual orientation.

3500 religious leaders from 50 religious traditions have signed this declaration.

Many Unitarian Universalist ministers have signed this declaration. Unitarian Universalism has been very vocal in the 20th century in speaking up for a new religious approach to sexual ethics. We have been especially out front on affirming gay and lesbian sexuality. But before that, UUs led the way on developing faith-based, values-oriented and completely candid and honest sexuality education for young people. This has been profound work, prophetic and sometimes lonely.

Make no mistake about it: Liberal Religion in general and Unitarian Universalism is working night and day for a great spiritual awakening in our country and our world.

We are as committed to a transformed future as any protestor in Liberation Square in Cairo: we are working for a world in which every man, woman and neither and both and child is completely alive to their inherent worth and dignity, that they know that they are their own: that they are children of God and siblings to all. This mass spiritual awakening is going on. I do believe it, and Religious Renewal is a part of it. We cannot separate the spiritual from the religious – for the great religious traditions of the world are the great libraries and museums of humanity’s spiritual knowledge. And when one or more of these great traditions are so wrong about something so basic as our bodies and our sexual desires, then they stifle the future and must be called to account.

O, Spirit of Life and Love, restore us to ourselves, minds and bodies, each one filled with respectful desire for each other, delighting in our affection and love, at home in our being, at home upon the earth, at home in thy great embrace.

May it be so. May it be So. Blessings and Amen and May It Be So.