

## FROM SHAME TO SHALOM

What's the gospel word on pornographic culture?

*Genesis 1:26-27, 31; John 8:2-11; 1 John 4:7-12, 18-21*

This is a sermon for everyone here. *Everyone.*

I'm guessing that, when you saw in the schedule

I would be addressing pornography today,  
you may have come with certain expectations . . . or hopes . . .  
of what I might focus on in this short sermon.

You may have come expecting a sermon

that strongly condemns the commercial pornography industry,  
and the damage it has done to individuals and society.

You will get that kind of sermon . . . in *part*.

You may have come expecting me to directly challenge

those who have succumbed to the sin  
of consuming this commercial pornography—  
on the internet, in magazines, videos, and other media.

You will get that kind of sermon . . . in *part*.

But you may, or may *not*, have expected a sermon

that is aimed primarily and directly  
at everyone of us in this room, myself included,  
and the role *we* play in developing a pornographic culture,  
and encouraging it to thrive.

We are all complicit,

in that we actively participate in a culture  
where our attitudes toward human nature, sexuality,  
relationships, and God,  
have *made* the pornography industry  
a natural, and predictable, result.

Let me first talk about the industry itself.

The producers of all this raunch.

Pornography. The *word itself* is informative.

“Porno-” is from the Greek word for prostitute.

“-graph,” of course, is from the word for writing.

Writing about prostitutes.

If prostitution is, as they say, the “world’s oldest profession,”

then writing about it must be the *second-oldest* profession.

So from ancient times—in the only media available at the time—

there has been a market for detailed, explicit descriptions,  
and drawings,

about what normally takes place in private.

Why? Because people wanted

the thrill of observation without participation.

They wanted the pleasure, without the cost.

Actual participation is too costly—  
financial, socially, relationally.

So it’s really nothing *new*—

this disconnection of sex from relationship.

What separates the old days from these days,

is not the basic concept.

It’s the big business it has become.

Technology has steadily progressed,

from text and line-drawings,

to black-and-white photography,

to moving pictures,

glossy full-color magazines,

video-tape,

digital images,

and now the internet.

With the coming of each new invention,

the early adopters *always* included pornographers,

because there was money to be made.

What makes our situation unprecedented,

is that with the internet,

the *amount* of money to be made is astounding,

because of how cheap it is to publish electronically,

and because of how vast and easily accessible the users,

who no *longer* need to duck into back alleys

in seedy parts of town,

and find places to hide the material at home.

They can do it privately, secretly,

and if they know enough about internet security,

they can do it without ever being discovered.

They can, and *do*, visit these sites at home, and at work . . .  
in government offices,  
in schools,  
in libraries,  
and *yes*, in churches.

You've heard the statistics, and they are truly alarming.  
Statistics are always a bit *slippery*, of course,  
and especially on *this* subject,  
we can't be scientifically precise.

But let's say these numbers are at least somewhere in the ballpark.  
Pornography revenue in the United States alone,  
is greater than the *combined* revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC.  
More than 1 in 10 of every website in the world,  
is pornographic.

People today Google almost everything, constantly.  
Still, 25% of requests on internet search engines,  
are for pornography.

Christians are not immune.

The Barna Research Group found that  
35% of Christian men, and 17% of Christian women,  
reported using pornography in the last month.

*Christianity Today*, in a 2000 study,  
found that 37% of pastors described pornography  
as a "current struggle."

Our youth are particularly vulnerable.

Statistics show the average age—*average*—

of someone's first exposure to internet porn is age 11.

90% of persons age 8-16 have viewed online pornography,  
most while doing homework.

Suffice it to say,  
the pornography industry, in the internet age,  
is pervasive, and hugely profitable.

And what about the *users*?

Pornography addiction is widespread.

It has destroyed marriages.

It has ruined careers.

It has psychologically wounded countless children and youth.  
It has incited acts of violence and oppression,  
especially toward women and children.

Pornography addiction is present in the church.

If statistics hold true,

I'm speaking to dozens of pornography addicts right now,  
in this room.

Some of you have spoken to me about your struggle.

Many of you, I would guess, have *never* spoken to *anyone* about it.

We, the church, need to be a place where wounded persons  
can safely come for healing,  
no matter the nature of the wound.

My solemn pledge to you this morning is this:

If you struggle with this addiction,

and have the courage to come to me and break your silence,

I promise complete confidentiality,

and, if you *want*,

I will make it possible for you to meet and talk with

*others* who are actively overcoming

the same addiction.

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But as I said *earlier*,

this sermon is not *only* directed toward  
the major producers and consumers  
of commercial pornography.

It would be easy for the church to get on its high horse,  
as it often has done,

and wag its fingers at Playboy and Hustler and their kind,  
and condemn the dreadful sinners who look at their garbage.

There's no *question*.

Producing and viewing pornography is sinful.

And sin requires repentance, and turning.

But if we *stop* there,

and never ask the "why" questions,

never ask the "how-did-we-get-to-this-point" questions,  
we're wasting our time.

So, why is pornography wrong?

Some people try to argue that dabbling in a little porn  
is harmless recreation,  
it doesn't hurt anyone else,  
it releases pent-up sexual energy,  
that might otherwise be expressed in more harmful ways.

There's a rather obvious flaw in that argument.

When someone buys and uses pornography, in *any* form,  
there are many others directly involved in that transaction.  
Everyone in present and future relationships with that user,  
who will suffer from that user's emotional wounds,  
including low self-esteem,  
and distorted attitudes about sexuality.  
And who knows *how many* people have been oppressed,  
humiliated, shamed, enslaved, and abused . . .  
somewhere in the business chain,  
of producing, manufacturing, distributing, and selling.

But all that pales in comparison to a systemic and pervasive sin,  
in which we all participate, as a people, as a society.

And it's a sin of the first order.

Because it's a sin that's at the root of,  
that cultivates and nourishes the sin of pornography,  
and so many other human practices that offend God.

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So this is where we turn to the scriptures  
to listen for the gospel word.

This is where we ponder the question,  
"How does the gospel speak?"

What are the larger issues at stake here,  
that get to the core of the gospel,  
the center of our calling as people of God,  
our identity as followers of Jesus,  
as citizens and subjects of God's reign in this world?

Our lives should be shaped *first* and *foremost*  
by the good news that we are God's people,  
that God in Christ loves and saves and redeems us  
for God's good purposes in this world.

You may not have thought of the scriptures you heard this morning  
as being anti-porn scriptures.

Not *much* specific to sexual immorality, or impure thoughts,  
or the like.

But these are formational scriptures.

They position us.

They clarify our identity.

Let's review.

Genesis 1 and 2 tell the story of creation.

We were reminded in the reading today,  
that on the sixth day, God did the crowning work of creation,  
the work that caused God to finally exclaim,

"This is *very good!*"

God said, "Let us make humankind in our image,  
according to our likeness . . .

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them."

And God said, "This is very good."

Chapter 2, although we didn't read it,  
gives another angle on the story.

God saw it was not good for the man to be alone,  
so was looking for a suitable partner.

Finding none, God formed a woman from the man's rib.

God breathed life into her.

Presented her to the man.

And the man was beside himself with joy!

Jubilant at this intimate connection with another.

The man exclaimed, "YES!

Bone of my bones!" "Flesh of my flesh!"

And Creator God says, "YES! This is very good!

This is what I want! This is what I love.

Men and women together, in wholeness, in unity,  
freely reflecting my image,  
in its beauty and diversity.

A picture of shalom and joy and sheer delight.  
And, by the way, they were both naked, and not ashamed.

It didn't last.

This shame-less shalom came to a quick end.  
When humankind veered away from God's purposes,  
we started making gods of ourselves and our desires.  
Delight turned to desire.  
Giddy joy in the *other* faded,  
and was overshadowed by a self-oriented desire  
to satisfy our own appetites.

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Then John 8. A famous gospel story.

It involves sexual sin—*adultery*, not *pornography*.  
A group of religious people, wanting to test Jesus,  
physically brought him a woman  
who had been caught in the very act of the sin,  
who deserved, according to the law, to be stoned to death.  
They asked Jesus, what shall we do with *this sinful woman*?  
Jesus defused the situation, not by excusing the sin,  
but by putting the sin in a larger context.  
“Whoever is without sin, throw the first stone.”

I think Jesus was saying, something's missing in this picture.

They were all pointing to this woman,  
saying, “*Here* is the sin that needs to be dealt with!”  
But this was *not* just the sin of one isolated individual.  
Other sinners were involved here.  
And they *all* lived in a community of inter-connected sinners,  
each blind to their own complicity in the sin,  
and self-righteously pointing at the easy target.

Sin takes root and grows not *just* in the heart of an individual.

It grows in a social context.  
In a culture that has lost its way.  
The sins of the community, and the sins of the individual,  
can *never* be separated.

That is nowhere more true than with the sin of pornography.

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What it all boils down to is this.

Pornography is a predictable outcome  
of our shared rejection of the biblical vision.  
Pornography is a natural result  
of our human attempt to undo God's good work.

The biblical vision is that human beings  
are the crowning act of God's creation,  
that we were created in love,  
in whole and free relationship to each other,  
in whole and free relationship to God.

The human experience in this world is to be, by God's design,  
an invitation into covenant, into community,  
into shared, mutually sacrificial love.

Our culture *vehemently* works against that.

In our culture, sexual relationships are governed by consent,  
not by covenant.  
We are fast losing the concept that there is more at stake,  
in our sexual behavior,  
than the private desires of consenting adults.  
God invites us into a comprehensive covenant.  
One that shapes the whole human experience.  
We are invited to live as one of God's people,  
within whose boundaries we find  
our greatest freedom  
and highest joy.

We know from the beginning of Genesis, and through all of scripture,  
that it is relationship, not independence,  
that characterizes the good life—the *very good* human life.  
But this relatedness to the other—  
core to our nature, and part of the divine image—  
is pushed aside as old-fashioned and irrelevant,  
by a culture that has successfully separated sex from relationship.

This non-relational view of sex is absolutely pervasive,  
in our every-day life—even *without* pornography.

Beginning *early*,  
often innocently and unwittingly,  
we are training our children and youth to objectify the body,  
to make the body, and specific parts thereof,  
little more than objects of desire.  
We ascribe worth to each other  
by the shape of our anatomy.  
And we call attention to certain parts of our body,  
by the clothes we choose to wear . . . or *not* wear.

And we don't need Bible-thumping, right-wing,  
Christian reactionaries to *tell us* this is happening.

A few years ago the “liberal” American Psychological Association  
formed a task force on the sexualization of young girls,  
and found a pervasive culture pattern at work.

Even *parents* contribute to their girls' sexualization,  
they found,  
by obsessing on their daughters' physical appearance,  
and by the products they allow, or *encourage*,  
their children to buy.

The study mentions Bratz dolls, hugely popular among young girls.  
Targeted for children age 8 and up,  
Bratz dolls, the report said,  
are marketed in bikinis, sitting in a hot tub,  
mixing drinks, and standing around,  
while the boy dolls play guitar,  
and stand with their surf boards, poised for action.  
*Other* Bratz dolls come dressed in highly sexualized clothing—  
fishnet stockings, see-through miniskirts, and feather boas.

The study cited thongs—  
undergarments that originated with strippers—  
being marketed to children, sized for 7- to 10-year-olds,

some printed with slogans such as “wink-wink.”

The study criticizes teen magazines aimed at girls 11 and up  
for being full of alluring ads depicting young women  
in the kind of bodily posture or facial expression  
that implies sexual readiness.

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We live in a culture of sexually-saturated media.  
And nearly all the sexual images are reductionist.  
That is, they reduce God's good gift to something cheap.  
They take the inestimable worth and beauty  
and complex sexuality of the human being  
created in the image of a loving, relational God,  
and reduce it to a less-than-human object  
to be used for someone *else's* cheap and temporary pleasure.  
No *wonder* there is such a strong correlation  
between pornography and sexual violence.  
Once we accept that another human being  
can be a legitimate object for our use,  
we open the door to all *kinds* of domination  
and violent oppression.

*Meanwhile*, almost all of us, without giving a second thought,  
partake of mainstream popular media every day,  
sometimes for hours.  
Especially television,  
but so many *other* forms,  
from magazines in waiting rooms,  
to billboards, movies, smart phones, and internet.

But if we stop and think honestly about it,  
we will have to admit there is *not* really a sharp dividing line  
that separates the reductionist images of sexuality  
we consume every day  
from the images being sold as hard-core pornography.

*Clearly*, they are at different points on a continuum.  
But they are on the *same continuum*.

They *all* take God's great gift of human intimacy and sexuality—  
the gift that made Adam joyfully shout,  
“Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!”—  
the gift of being able to passionately cherish and connect with  
the wholeness of one's partner in covenant—  
they *all* take that gift and tragically reduce it,  
cheapen it,  
demean, degrade, and exploit it for almost *any* purpose,  
*other than* the covenant love for which it was intended.

At the hard-core end of the continuum, the degradation is obvious.  
And we rather self-righteously condemn it.  
At *other* points on the continuum,  
we shrug.  
Or we wink and smile.  
Or we say, “Cool!”  
and plunk down the cash for whatever they're selling.

What a *tragedy*!  
That is the systemic, societal sin in which we all participate.  
The rejection of God's good gift of wholeness,  
and opting for fragmentation.  
The rejection of God's shalom, embodied in creation,  
and exchanging it for a shameful illusion.  
The rejection of God's covenant love,  
and pursuing instead our personal fleeting pleasure.

But the gospel word remains.  
God still loves, with a steadfast, unchanging love  
for his good creation,  
God still extends the offer of forgiveness and redemption.  
God is ready to re-make the covenant.  
We can move from shame back to shalom.

But it will take concerted effort on our part  
to overcome the damage already done to our thinking.  
We will have to be re-sensitized.

Perhaps that might happen if we

- (1) Develop the habit of critical thinking
- (2) Develop deeper Christian community, and
- (3) Celebrate and cherish the gift of covenant love.

We should pay careful attention  
whenever we see or interact with any media,  
or whenever we walk through any shopping establishment  
We should think critically, ask thoughtful questions,  
of ourselves, and of any children or youth who might be with us.  
Like,  
“I wonder what message *that* picture is trying to get across?”

We must not take on this battle alone.  
We must immerse ourselves in the kind of community  
that can effectively reshape our thinking.  
And I don't mean attending church at least 2-3 times a month.  
It will take exponentially more than *that*  
to counter our over-sexualized culture.

And we must, above *all*,  
celebrate, and cherish, and glory in,  
the unconditional love that God extends to us,  
and invites us to reflect, in *all* our relationships.

This morning we heard the writer of 1 John say,  
“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.”  
“God is love.”

Let us bask in that covenant love of God,  
let us rest our weary souls in that healing love.  
There is forgiveness. There is restoration.

Let us turn to HWB 577, and meditate on these words,  
O love that will not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee.  
I give Thee back the life I owe,  
That in thine ocean depths  
its flow may richer, fuller be.

—Phil Kniss, September 26, 2010