



AFFIRMATION GUIDE FOR

# **SEXUALITY & SPIRITUALITY**

Rev. Tonetta-Landis Aina

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Q Christian Fellowship



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## Rev. TONETTA LANDIS-AINA

Rev. TONETTA LANDIS-AINA is a native of North Carolina and moved to Washington DC in 2004. She holds a Masters of Divinity from Wesley Theological Seminary and is passionate about marginalized people finding their stories in scripture as well as about the new shapes the church will take in the 21st century. When TONETTA isn't geeking out on the Bible or trying to piece together what God might be doing in this beautiful city, she is enjoying time with her wife and 4 year old son.



# Introduction

For years, I was an English teacher in a quirky, suburban high school. Since my childhood days, I have loved poetry and the beauty of a good story well told, whether in a book or on a screen. Before I came out as a lesbian, realized that my love of men’s clothes meant more than the word “tomboy” could contain, or even had the vague inkling that I was different somehow, the explanatory power of words enthralled me. Maybe you have felt this power yourself even if you are not quite the addict that I am. For so many, words like “Jesus” and “love” and “grace” have been the pivot points in the dramatic arc of something exquisite. Yet, at times, such words have seemed to slam against other words with equally dramatic force. Queer. Gay. Effeminate. Lesbian. Trans. Mannish. These words too have been generated from our society with their own implied story arc of being outside, unworthy, impure, far from Jesus.

Yet, if you are here—if you have shown up at this page—then you are likely beginning to claim a different narrative. Perhaps you can now say aloud that you are a transgender disciple of Christ or a gay Christian or a bisexual lover of God. Perhaps you are finding language to name yourself as asexual or aromantic, or maybe you are beginning to tell your story as an intersex member of Christ’s church. Like so many, however, you may be sensing that something more lies beyond accepting yourself as God does. While a more nuanced theology is essential, how does such a theology shape our Christian ethics, especially our sexual ethics? In other words, now that our beliefs about ourselves and our sexuality have changed, how does that inform what we do with our bodies?

This question of how one’s beliefs inform one’s actions is as old as the Christian church, and much older. Such concerns are at the heart of the Ten Commandments and the covenant economics enshrined in the books of the Torah. The later prophets of ancient Israel were as passionate as their forebears about how belief in God should affect one’s posture toward the widow, the foreigner, and the orphan. In the New Testament, Jesus teaches about how allegiance to God influences the choices we make about power, sex, and money, choices that are lived out through the body. The same is true of all the writings of the New Testament beyond the Gospels. Reflected in these sacred writings are questions about eating food sacrificed to idols, handling sexual desire, and mixing with Gentiles, the ideological “other” of the day. These are all ethical questions about how faith is to be telegraphed through the body.

One of my favorite illustrations about the power of ethical choice comes from Tim O’Brien’s collection of short stories titled *The Things They Carried*. A character—also known as Tim O’Brien—tells of receiving his draft notice to serve in the Vietnam War. He is against the war, and is afraid to go, but he is also afraid not to go. Out of desperation, he heads toward the Canadian border. Exhausted from running, he stops

at a lodge just on the American side and rests for a few days. The owner of the lodge is a man named Elroy, O'Brien's only companion during his days of decision. Elroy holds a kind of silent vigil, holding space for O'Brien as he makes one of the most important decisions of his life. On O'Brien's last day at the lodge, Elroy takes him out fishing and, before O'Brien realizes it, they have passed into Canadian waters. Elroy says nothing but simply fishes while O'Brien weeps. Ultimately, O'Brien does not jump out of the boat and swim to Canada. Looking back from his perspective as a soldier, he writes that Elroy "meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand vigil as I chose a life for myself."<sup>1</sup>

My intent in this guidebook is to take you out on a different kind of river—to stand vigil as you too choose a life. You are not faced with a decision as cataclysmic as whether to serve in a questionable war. But we all must choose lives for ourselves, whether our decisions carry us forward until we have more information, or whether they last a lifetime. This is an opportunity to sit in the boat for a while and make your decisions with Christ-formed intent and courage.

But, unlike Elroy, I will not be silent. My hope is to offer language, examples, questions, and occasionally exercises that will provide a framework for your discernment. Also, unlike Elroy, I have a personal history that cannot be separated from the words I write. I am a gay, black, gender-nonconforming woman. I was raised in traditional African-American churches in a South I still love. And I was raised in a community where genitals and sexuality did not seem to exist unless someone made the mistake of mentioning that they did. Our bodies were treated as defiling at best and dangerous at worst. Around 13, I took a purity pledge and was initiated into the world of ascetic denial as a naive teenager. I did not come out as a lesbian until I was 27 and, over ten years later, I am still a detective in search of my full sexual self, hoping that Christ seeks and saves what has been lost.

I write assuming that you have already made the decision to come out as a sexual minority. I also assume that you are a Christian, or have an interest in a Christian framework, and have begun the necessary work of reconciling your faith with your identity. This guidebook will be most helpful for those in the Western world, simply because that is the culture which has provided me with my native tongue and my widest experience. It is intended to be helpful, however, to people of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Still, if you are a black or brown person, I must say up front that you will have additional work to do in discerning your sexual ethics amidst a society that has so often plundered and degraded black and brown bodies. I am also working under the assumption that ethical discernment is hard work, but good work. It will take time. Sitting in the boat, you will feel cold breezes slap against your face, the unsettling movement of waves tossing you about, the quick delight of river spray hitting your feet. You will feel these things even as your questions come to rest in the silence of answers or the beauty of a mystery that resists being oversimplified.

1 Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway Books, 1990), 56.

The truth is that even as I stand vigil with you and hold space for all possible outcomes, I cannot show you borders or boundaries. I am not fundamentally inviting you to choose a side. Rather, I am inviting



**LGBTQ+ people grow up persistently shamed, whether that shame is intentionally directed at us by family and friends, or implicitly received from the societal waters in which we swim.**

you to take a dive. In her 1973 poem anchored in the women’s movement, Adrienne Rich perfectly captures what we are up to here. The poem entitled “Diving into the Wreck” is about an unidentified human being, gendered as both “he” and “she,” diving down deeper and deeper to explore the wreckage of a ship. Throughout the journey, the diver carries a book of myths in which their own name is not included. They are simultaneously searching through history and searching through and for the self, to gain clarity.<sup>2</sup> They are searching for something beyond the myths and, at the same time, having examined the wreck,

are poised to write a new story. In perhaps the poem’s most iconic lines, the speaker observes, “I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps. / I came to see the damage that was / done / and the treasures that prevail.”<sup>3</sup>

As we explore together our sexuality and spirituality, this is our work also. LGBTQ+ people grow up persistently shamed, whether that shame is intentionally directed at us by family and friends, or implicitly received from the societal waters in which we swim.<sup>4</sup> If we are lucky, we at some point find ourselves prepared to dive into the wreckage, assess the damage done, rejoice over the treasures that remain, and insist that new, life-giving words can form the background of a new narrative. As Christians, this exploration enables us to follow Christ more authentically and to make decisions about our ethics—our walking-around, embodied choices from day to day—from a place of spiritual and emotional health. This search for clarification is difficult, to be sure. We need a community to walk with us at the intersection of a wholesome sexuality and spirituality. A good therapist, a gracious pastor, friends and family who pray for us as we make the dive, can be essential. So, let us begin now, trusting that by the power of the Spirit

2 [https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/rich/wreck.htm](https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/wreck.htm)

3 Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck,” in *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*, ed: Helen Vendler. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 566.

4 John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You* (Deerfield Beach: Health Communication, Inc., 2005).

we can “know the grace of perfect danger”<sup>5</sup>—the danger of fully looking at ourselves and our past, of standing still while we await clear vision, of choosing with our whole hearts—and then emerge fully as the powerful heroes of our own God-graced stories.

## For Reflection

1. In your journal or with a small group, explore your coming-out story using the five elements of story plot. Carefully create a narrative that includes: necessary background information, such as setting (exposition); the actions that develop the major problem (rising action); the point where the tension comes to a head (climax); the actions that begin to resolve the major problem (falling action); and an ending in which the major conflict has been fully resolved, though not necessarily happily or without pain (resolution). Did you discover anything new as you wrote your own story? What was it?
2. Make a list detailing how your theology has shaped your Christian ethics. In other words, list some ways in which what you believe about God has concretely shaped how you conduct yourself. Be specific. What specific decisions do you make day-to-day because of what you believe?
3. What is one major ethical decision you have had to make regarding your own behavior? In the end, what helped you make the decision? How did the process of discernment feel, whether it was rather quick or more extended?
4. Find a copy of the poem, “Diving into the Wreck,” and read it slowly, out loud. Read it again with a pen in hand, taking note of anything that strikes you. Where in your past or in yourself are there places that are still a “wreck”? What parts of your sexuality and spirituality can be described in this way? What things render you hesitant to make the dive?

5 John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 17.



# The Heart of the Matter: Spiritual Formation

Stories of calling abound throughout the Scriptures. They provide the underpinning of so much of the suspense and tension that the Bible contains. Noah is called by God to build a very large boat for reasons he does not fully understand. Abram is asked to leave his home for a land with which he is completely unfamiliar. Moses is called to rescue his people from the slavery of an oppressive empire. Mary is called to give birth to the Messiah. Later, Saul is told that he will witness to this Messiah among the outsiders of his day, becoming Paul. These are just a few of the most dramatic examples. The stories of calling that have always intrigued me the most are the ones in which Jesus asks ordinary people to follow him. In many of these stories, the reader is told exactly what the one called was doing at the very moment that Jesus says, “Follow me.” We get a vivid picture of ordinary people radically rearranging their priorities in ways that seem less than prudent. The Bible portrays men and women often being called by God to *do* something. However, what is less obvious on the surface is that God’s invitation to take an action is actually the beginning of a *journey of becoming*. Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai becomes Sarah. Simon becomes Peter. Saul becomes Paul. The goal of discipleship is to become more like one’s master. It is to change, to be utterly transformed inside and out. Our daily actions and ethical decisions are at the center of that becoming. Ethicist Margaret Farley puts it in this way: “The questions of morality that Christians must address are, therefore, questions not only of what we must do, but what we must be and become. A human justice ethic, and surely a Christian justice ethic, must attend not only to action guides but to the kind of person we are called to be”!<sup>1</sup> Christians are called in the largest sense to become like Jesus and to more and more become agents of the kingdom (or kin-dom) of God, ushering in an alternative to the present worldly empires in which we live. Thus, we must continually ask ourselves how a given action is forming us or malforming us to these ends. This will be our framework as we delve into the spectrum of sexual perspectives in our communities.

Spiritual formation is intricately connected to knowledge of the self. Many of us know this intuitively. Yet there may be tension in accepting this truth if our spirituality has been shaped by churches that place a strong emphasis on dying to the self. But rest assured that some of the most important Christian thinkers have understood this to be true. Augustine wrote, “Grant, Lord, that I may know myself, that I may know thee.”<sup>2</sup> Thomas à Kempis, the writer of what is considered one of the greatest devotionals in Christian

1 Margaret A. Farley *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 241.

2 Quoted in David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2004), 22.

history, *The Imitation of Christ*, concurred: “A humble self-knowledge is a surer way to God than a search after deep learning.”<sup>3</sup> John Calvin also expressed this view when he wrote, “Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> As we ground our sexual ethics in an intentional process of spiritual formation, overcoming alienation from ourselves is critical. Whether we frame this as overcoming the alienation from self caused by the Fall and the

## **SPIRITUAL FORMATION IS INTRICATELY CONNECTED TO KNOWLEDGE OF THE SELF.**

resulting brokenness of humankind or as the need to grow from the false self into the true self, we must know ourselves to become ourselves in Jesus. “Spiritual formation,” Henri Nouwen explains, “prepares us for a life in which we move away from our fears, compulsions, resentments, and sorrows, to serve with joy and courage in the world, even when this leads us to places we would rather not go.”<sup>5</sup> To be in the process of spiritual formation and to make ethical decisions out of that process is necessarily to know well our own fears, compulsions, resentments, and sorrows. Because we so often do not see these clearly on our own, a community of faith is crucial for a robust spiritual formation.

### **Stewardship of the Whole Self—The Parable of the Talents**

In the New Testament Gospels, the writers of the books of Matthew and Luke tell a story about faithfulness in the context of spiritual formation. In Matthew’s version, a man entrusts three of his servants with varying amounts of his property before he leaves on a long journey. To the first servant, he gives an amount equaling nearly a lifetime of wages. To the second, he gives an amount equaling about 30 years’ wages and, to the third, an amount worth more than 15 years’ wages. When the man returns, he finds that the first two servants have traded with their portions—a risky business for sure, but they have each doubled the amount originally given them. However, to the man’s chagrin, the third servant has simply buried the portion given him, out of fear. The servant is admonished by the man for being lazy and for not at least investing the money to earn interest. The story emphasizes that neither fearful inactivity nor passive waiting are representations of faithfulness to God.<sup>6</sup> Instead, absent clear instructions and within

3 Quoted in Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*, 22.

4 Quoted in Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*, 22.

5 Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), xxix.

6 Leander E. Keck, ed. *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol 7, The Gospels and Narrative Literature, Jesus*



a context of great freedom, the servants are expected to discern what is best to do with what each has been given.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most striking ideas in the passage is that each servant is given an amount “according to his ability.”<sup>8</sup> Another way to say this is that each is entrusted with the man’s property based on his individual strength, power, or capacity. All of the servants are not treated the same way; neither are they given a crystal-clear blueprint for being faithful. We are in the same boat as we discern what it means to be faithful to God with our erotic lives. Author Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, “Like the way the rich guy in the parable knew that each of the three servants was different and thus gave them different talents, sexual stewardship means recognizing that every one of us has different wiring, different needs, different sins, different gifts, different sensitivities. It calls for *attention*” (57). If intentionally discerning a sexual ethic comes out of our spiritual formation and spiritual formation is in part about knowledge of self, then sexual stewardship means being honest about our strengths and weaknesses. It means that we must sift through our own tendencies and appetites and needs in concert with Scripture and the Spirit. Bolz-Weber provides a first step in the process of uncovering where God might be leading us in this area of our lives. The first step is attention to our sexual selves. Who are we sexually? As we examine Scripture and tradition and reason—and practice discernment within a community of faith—we must know what we ourselves lean toward. What do we want? What do we need? Where are we broken? We can either be honest about these matters and the role they play in our decision-making, or we can let them shape our ethics unconsciously, hampering our faithful discipleship. “There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life,” cautioned Thomas Merton, “than to be immersed in unreality, for life is maintained and nourished by our vital connection with reality.”<sup>9</sup> By an attention grounded in reality, we can take responsible action even when risk is required. We can grow as stewards of our whole selves as we become aware of our unique strengths and struggles regarding our sexuality.

## For Reflection

1. Think about a story of calling: someone in the Bible, from history, or alive today who you find compelling. What elements of the story do you love? How is the story about becoming?
2. To what extent has the need to know yourself been included as an emphasis in your Christian formation? In what ways has knowing yourself helped you to live more faithfully?
3. In your journal or with a small group, name and explore some of your unique fears, compulsions, resentments, and sorrows. How has your faith prepared you to move beyond them?
4. Read the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 at least two times. Do you most relate to the way the first two servants handle what is entrusted to them, or to the way the third servant

*and the Gospels, Matthew, Mark* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2015).

7 Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*.

8 Matthew 25:15

9 Quoted in Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*, 58.

handles what is entrusted to him? Overall, how does the prospect of this kind of responsible freedom make you feel?

5. Who are you sexually? Describe your wiring, needs, sins, gifts, and sensitivities in your journal or with a trusted group of friends. What do you want? Where are you broken?





# The Book of Myths and the Better Story

As we claim ourselves as LGBTQ+ people created in the image of God and completely loved by God, we can begin to fully look at the harmful narratives we have been given and begin to write a better story. In the poem, “Diving into the Wreck,” the speaker begins the dive with these lines: “First having read the book of myths, / and loaded the camera, / and checked the edge of the knife blade, / I put on / the body-armor of black rubber / the absurd flippers / the grave and awkward mask.”<sup>1</sup> The speaker has inherited myths that are inextricably linked with the wreck they now need to explore. Underneath the wreckage that the myths have caused, the explorer will find both costly damage and undeniable treasures. But a knife and armor are necessary to cut away and to protect. A similar project is essential if we hope to become more faithful followers of Jesus and to write a better story grounded in our fullness as sexual beings. In order to live into a more compelling narrative, there are at least five primary concepts we need to examine, consider, and likely rethink. These are eros, the body, romanticism, consumerism, and individualism. I cannot claim that these represent an exhaustive list, but they constitute good beginning points. As we each engage the work of the dive, we will each discover our own “primary myths”—the framing stories we have been taught that are unique to our individual histories and which are so well absorbed that we now unthinkingly assume them.

## Eros

Growing up, I knew of the concept of “eros” in only two forms. The first was in relation to the word “erotic,” which was without fail connected to objectifying pornography or to women dressed in a way that was considered tempting to men. “Eros” was connected to what was considered unquestionably bad, wrong, and evil. The second way I understood the concept was in relationship to the ways in which preachers in the churches my family attended would parse the Greek words for “love.” I could not help but learn that “agape” love was unconditional and the highest form of love. “Philia” love was essentially sibling love—affectionate and acceptable. “Eros” love, however, was sensual love. It was a love felt in the body and was unspiritual. It was the lowest form of love by far—certainly not something on which good Christians should concentrate their energy. We were taught ways to cultivate agape and philia love. In the churches from which I came, eros was only discussed when it was deemed undesirable, forbidden, and untimely.

1 Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck,” 565.

Looking back, I realize that no one was actually systematic about carrying these ideas forward in a consistent way—a way that would have revealed the overlapping of these categories of love, though the word “eros” never appears in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, no one ever mentioned that God’s love for Israel and Christ’s love for the church are repeatedly described in erotic terms. Eros was defined in the communities of my youth without complexity and in the narrowest sexual terms possible<sup>3</sup>. Then it was dismissed with the near-implication that it was antithetical to the Christian life. Yet, these descriptions were hollow. They left out the depth of possibility that eros holds. Tina Schermer Sellers sums up beautifully Plato’s understanding of eros as “a coming-to-life in beauty in relation to body and soul.”<sup>4</sup> A coming-to-life. An enlivening. For Christians, such a coming-to-life is inseparable from the experience of abundant life. Erotic love is part of growing up as both human beings and followers of Jesus, whether we express that love sexually or not. Sellers goes on to explain that eros is the “force of life within us—our passion, our deepest hopes and desires, our creativity and creation. Eros is that sense within us that inspires us to create, to love, to heal, to care, to experience the fullest of life through the embodied experience of our senses.”<sup>5</sup> Eros is not just about sex. It is about passion and vitality. It is the love we give and receive most fully through our senses. “The erotic,” writes poet Audre Lorde, “is not a question of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.”<sup>6</sup> The recovery of eros as sexual but also more than sexual is critical to a healthy understanding of our sexuality. Whether we are celibate, divorced, single, married, reserving sex for marriage, polyamorous, or asexual, erotic love defined as that which comes through the body and brings healing is an essential part of the better story.

## The Body

Toni Morrison is the author of the only book I have ever been asked to never teach again. She is also the author of the one novel I read in seminary that truly articulated my questions about God’s justice and the black American experience. The latter novel, *Beloved*, revolves around a single, horrific act in which a woman named Sethe kills her own child rather than see the child endure the mutilating horrors of American slavery. Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is a witness to the event, and a kind of holy woman stabilizing the novel’s two main characters. Summing up the center of her existence, the author writes that Baby Suggs decided, “that, because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, as a woman “uncalled, unrobed, unanointed,”<sup>8</sup> she preaches to men and women in a clearing in the woods when she is not visiting a local pulpit. The author then describes in exquisite detail the way in which women,

2 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. ed. *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*. vol 2, D-H (Nashville: Abington Press, 2007).

3 Tina Schermer Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

4 Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*, xxi.

5 Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*, xxii.

6 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, [1984] 2007), 54.

7 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, [1987] 2004), 102.

8 Morrison, *Beloved*, 102.



men, and children follow Baby Suggs into the woods. And what she teaches there is a message that we need to hear today as LGBTQ+ Christians: “Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it... This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you.”<sup>9</sup> In this portion of the novel, what Baby Suggs preaches is that, despite what those who stand before her have been taught, it is essential that they learn to love their bodies— as an act of community, as an act of humanity, and thus as an act of resistance.

Growing up, I heard Galatians 5:24 in whole or in snaked-off parts quite often. “And those who belong to Christ Jesus,” the apostle Paul writes, “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” They deny their bodies, I was taught, as morally corrupt and as a hindrance to faithful living. Redemption consisted in running away from the body.<sup>10</sup> Followers of Christ were trapped in and tested by their bodies. To be redeemed meant to escape the tensions of the body—to lean as much as possible into your true self, which was soul, and away from the body. Margaret Farley explains that “in this binary division, the soul is frequently the truly ‘human,’ while the body constitutes an unfortunate and temporary limitation on the human spirit (signified by famous metaphors like container and contained, prison and imprisoned).”<sup>11</sup> In this framework, there is little sense that being an embodied spirit is inextricable from being an inspired body. Not until adulthood did I have any idea that Paul’s idea of the flesh is not nearly so one-dimensional. At times, he uses the Greek word for “flesh” to simply refer to the physical body and at times he employs it to convey human limitation.<sup>12</sup> And, yes, at times Paul does place flesh and Spirit in opposition to one another. However, Paul’s concern with the flesh comes not out of a sense that the body is bad. He writes so prolifically of the flesh, rather, because he sees the limitation and mortality of the body as leaving humans open to being distracted by short-term gratification as well as by seeking power and pleasure illegitimately.<sup>13</sup>

As LGBTQ+ Christians discerning a sexual ethic in keeping with God’s revelation, it is imperative that we seek to embrace our bodies. Just as Baby Suggs notes, we are flesh. We are bodies. In Genesis 1, after each act of creation, God calls the world, including humankind, “very good.” The materiality of the world is blessed by God and there is no hint that humankind escapes this blessing in our essential physicality. Similarly, scholars contend that the rest of the Hebrew Bible “does not view corporality [the reality of having a bodily, material existence] per se as evil and inferior to spirituality. In fact, although corporality implies weakness, it does not involve sinfulness. Instead, since it manifests vitality, Ezekiel (11:19; 36:26) can speak of God’s intention to replace the unresponsive ‘heart of stone’ with a ‘heart of flesh.’”<sup>14</sup>

9 Morrison, *Beloved*, 103-104.

10 Miguel A. De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2016), 4.

11 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 112.

12 Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*.

13 Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*.

14 Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 463.

Centuries of Christian tradition, however, have distanced us from the goodness of our bodies and thus from the goodness of ourselves as sexual beings. In the 6th century B.C.E., the followers of Pythagoras sought bodily purity in order to pursue “the culture of the soul.”<sup>15</sup> Both Plato and Aristotle followed this philosophical trajectory, by differentiating lower and higher pleasures. Plato specifically believed that the world of forms—essentially a realm of pure ideas—represented the highest reality to which humans should dedicate themselves, rather than being concerned with the world of the physical.<sup>16</sup> Kelly Brown Douglass succinctly describes this period: “According to Platonism the real world of value and beauty was that which could be perceived only by the soul. This world was conceived as timeless, changeless, and immaterial. The body and its senses could not grasp such a world. To appreciate this world, therefore, one had to essentially deny bodily pleasures and activities, including sexual activity, and strive for a more contemplative, ascetic life.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, later Stoics such as Seneca emphasized that the body was the seat of people’s irrational passions and emotions, in contrast to the reason considered in keeping with “nature.” Thus, bodily passions had to be carefully controlled and always made to serve

## **AS LGBTQ+ CHRISTIANS DISCERNING A SEXUAL ETHIC IN KEEPING WITH GOD’S REVELATION, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT WE SEEK TO EMBRACE OUR BODIES.**

rational goals such as procreation.<sup>18</sup> Because these philosophies were thickly imbued in the cultural air of the early church and because many of the early church fathers had been trained in, or saw use for, these philosophies, a heavily anti-body emphasis made its way into the ideological foundation of Christianity.

As we seek to discern what it means to live faithfully as sexual beings, we must confront the anti-body bias that has been so deeply intertwined with the faith that we love. We must ask ourselves about the ways in which we relate to our bodies unhealthily, and also about the path by which we may come home to our bodies as a part of God’s good creation. Our bodies resist our control in ways that sometimes feel deeply uncomfortable; they sweat profusely, give off undesirable smells, produce gnawing hunger, radiate sharp pain, and telegraph arousal. Yet our bodies are also the means by which we feel a soft breeze, find the freedom of dance, and enjoy the taste of chocolate cake or the smell of coffee. Our bodies do limit us, but our bodies also bring us closer to God. Lauren Winner writes, “God created us

15 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 32.

16 Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*.

17 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 25.

18 Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*.

with bodies; God Himself incarnated in a human body; Jesus was raised again from the dead with a body; and one day we too will be resurrected with our bodies. That is the beginning of any Christian—any moral theology—of how human beings in bodies interact with other bodies.”<sup>19</sup> The Incarnation is the key. That God freely chose to enter material and bodily existence through Jesus Christ is an indicator of how deeply God values embodied life. To take the Incarnation seriously is to imitate God by valuing the life that comes through our bodies as well. “Affirming the goodness of the body, mine and others, I have come to believe, is a spiritual activity,” explains Henri Nouwen. “To be intimate with God I need to come home to my body, where God is pleased to dwell.”<sup>20</sup> Such a coming home is at the heart of the better story that God is calling us to write as LGBTQ+ Christians.

## For Reflection

1. Besides the myths which surround the way we conceptualize eros and the body, what are some additional myths related to sexuality which arise from your individual history? Aside from romanticism, consumerism, and individualism, what other cultural assumptions make up the water we swim in regarding sexual expression?
2. Using Appendix 1, compare John O’Donohue’s vision of eros to the three definitions included in *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church*. What do you find compelling about each understanding? What do you find beautiful? Which ideas unsettle you?
3. In what ways have you despised your body? In what ways have others despised your body because you are LGBTQ+?
4. Do you tend to think of yourself more as an embodied spirit or more as an inspirited body? What has influenced you to one over the other?
5. In your journal or with a small group, explore how you relate to your body in healthy ways and in not-so-healthy ways. What are some practices you might engage in to become more deeply at home in your body?
6. Listen to the song “This is My Body” by The Many. Spend time in prayer reflecting on the truth that God created us with bodies and calls them good.

## Romanticism, Consumerism, and Individualism

In a commencement speech that has now become somewhat famous, David Foster Wallace began by addressing his audience with a story about three fish. “There are these two young fish swimming along,” he began, “and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’”<sup>21</sup> Wallace meant to make the point that

19 Lauren F. Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 33.

20 Nouwen, Henri. *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 96.

21 <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

we are all immersed in limited ways of thinking and doing that remain largely unexamined. “The most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about,” he notes, in explanation of the anecdote.<sup>22</sup> If the devaluation of erotic love as part of the maligning of the body to maintain an ascetic spirituality is the water we swim in as Christians, then it must be noted too that romanticism, consumerism, and individualism constitute the water we swim in as Westerners. Exploring these constitutes a further part of the dive and another step in drawing closer to a God-honoring sexual ethic.

One of my favorite romantic comedies is the 2001 film *Serendipity*, starring John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale. In it the main characters, Jonathan and Sara, meet while each shops for a gift for their lover. They spend one romantic afternoon together and then spend the rest of the movie trying to find their way back to each other with the help of fate. My favorite scene of the movie—the one I rewind over and over and whose music I know by heart—is when Sara’s boyfriend proposes to her. He arranges for Sara to arrive home to a living room full of lit candles. The floor is covered with soft, pink rose petals and a fire is roaring in the fireplace. Sara then notices a large, wrapped present in the middle of the floor which she breathlessly unwraps. Inside is an empty, velvet ring box. Sara’s beautiful fiancé then walks into the room and presents her with an engagement ring.

I love this scene because everything in it is richly prepared and sensual. It does not matter to me that the entire thrust of the movie implies that this is not the right man for Sara. The scene is superbly romantic and that is all that my heart remembers. And this is exactly the water we Westerners swim in when it comes to relationships and sex. The ideal of our erotic self-identity that we hold up is flawlessly romantic. Our sexual relationships too should be driven by romance, we are told, or at least should be romantic most of the time. Lauren Winner points out, I think rightfully, that Christians must “diagnose modern romanticism as fundamentally unsustainable, as something that militates against Christian love properly and constructively conceived.”<sup>23</sup> Our culture’s fascination with cultivating the romantic in sex and relationships often comes at the expense of developing greater virtues which would sustain those relationships, such as mutual care, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In other words, idealized romanticism strips the messiness of reality from our sexual lives, leaving them naked and unprotected. Winner goes on to write, “Love, sex, and marriage, to partake in their transcendent mission of revealing God’s grace, must embrace life’s decidedly non-transcendent daily going-ons. In a Christian landscape, what’s important about sex is nurtured when we allow sex to be ordinary. This does not mean that sex will not be meaningful. Its meaning, instead, will partake in the variety of meanings that ordinary life offers.”<sup>24</sup> Part of discerning a God-honoring sexual ethic is examining the way in which the various ways we live out our sexuality are influenced by romanticism, rather than by the real-world joys and challenges that will ultimately form us as embodied followers of Christ.

22 <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

23 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, 80.

24 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, 81.



In a similar way, it is important to consider how the Western landscape of rampant consumerism impacts the way in which we think about sexual ethics. Advertising is an inescapable part of our everyday lives, with some experts estimating that most Americans see between 4,000 and 10,000 ads a day.<sup>25</sup> Ads are the background music of our lives, it seems, and they offer us a kind of populist liturgy—if not the



**The consumerist liturgy teaches us to value speed, gratification, efficiency, productivity, ease, and novelty.**

actual work of the people, then certainly the careful work of some who very definitely intend to form us as a people.<sup>26</sup> The consumerist liturgy teaches us to value speed, gratification, efficiency, productivity, ease, and novelty. It teaches us to want to want—to find more pleasure in desiring a thing than in actually possessing it. Because of this, consumerism also teaches us to value disposability. Advertised images of beauty, longevity, success, deep satisfaction, and esteem disguise the rough edges of values that otherwise might seem crude. In writing about the disposability and detachment of consumerism, William T. Cavanaugh explains that “consumerism is not so much about

having more as it is about having something else; that’s why it is not simply *buying* but *shopping* that is the heart of consumerism. Buying brings a temporary halt to the restlessness that typifies consumerism. This restlessness—the moving on to shopping for something else, no matter what one has just purchased—sets the spiritual tone for consumerism.”<sup>27</sup> When contending that marriage is not a product, psychologist William J. Doherty adds that “most couples marry with every intention to remain faithful and committed, but without priority discipline, these values are in danger of being eclipsed by consumer values of personal gain, low cost, entitlement, and hedging one’s bets. In consumer culture the exit door is always accessible. Commitments last as long as the other person is meeting our needs. We still believe in commitment, but powerful voices coming from inside and outside tell us we are suckers if we settle for less than we think we need or deserve in marriage.”<sup>28</sup> As Christians we are to relate to other people as ends, not means; as subjects created in the image of God, rather than as objects which can meet our needs. Considering the ways in which consumerism shapes our contemplation and practice of sexual ethics is essential if we are to experience our sexual selves as more than entrepreneurs seeking

25 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/08/25/finding-brand-success-in-the-digital-world/#13a22cd626e>

26 James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

27 William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).

28 Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*, 52-53.

the greatest profit at the lowest cost.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, Westerners are beset by individualism, the philosophy that places the needs of the individual over the needs of the community. The objectification of creation and the people who inhabit creation is the wheelhouse of consumerism. Without individualism—the sense that my right to happiness can be exercised over the communal good—consumerism would cease to exist. The Western habit of emphasizing individual rights over the rights of the larger community also conditions our view of sexual ethics. Lauren Winner again offers a helpful corrective here: “In the Christian universe, the individual is not the vital unit of ethical meaning. For Christians, the most basic images, metaphors, and signs are corporate, and the basic unit of ethical meaning is the Body, the community.”<sup>30</sup> In the same way, Bible scholar Richard Hays notes that “the New Testament never considers sexual conduct a matter of purely private concern between consenting adults.”<sup>31</sup> It is true that New Testament language emerges from a social context quite different from our own. Yet, the ways in which individualism has so rapidly fed into consumerism provides us a way to think about the damage caused by not balancing independent needs with communal concerns. It is incumbent on us that, along with exploring the effect of romanticism and consumerism, we consider how our sexual ethics have been shaped by the individualism of the West.

## For Reflection

1. List some of your favorite romantic movies. What specific scenes portray a healthy concept of romance? What specific scenes portray an unhealthy idealization of romance? What qualities make up the former versus the latter?
2. In what ways does consumerism shape the way you think about, talk about, and live out your sexuality?
3. How do you relate to the idea that in a Christian cosmology the Body of Christ rather than the body of the individual is the primary unit of ethical meaning? How might this affect the way you live out your sexuality?

29 Referenced in Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*, 52-53.

30 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, 51.

31 Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: Harper One, 1996), 392



# Necessary Movements of the Heart

You may now be realizing, possibly to your chagrin, that discerning a God-honoring sexual path really does require a great deal of personal work. To live faithfully as sexual creatures truly is to confront the myths that have so often encumbered our lives of faith and our lives as Westerners. Discerning an ethic entails going down and down and down into the depths of our theology, our culture, and our heart. We have been examining the first two as we have considered our ideological inheritance concerning erotic love, the body, romanticism, consumerism, and individualism. Now, we must turn to work that is no less essential, but which is perhaps even harder: grappling with the orientations of our own hearts which guide our decision-making.

Henri Nouwen is one of my favorite spiritual writers. For me, reading Nouwen constitutes a form of prayer and contemplation because his words unfailingly slow me down and demand of me a kind of raw attentiveness. It is also meaningful to me that Nouwen, a Catholic priest and sought-after scholar, was also a celibate gay man. In the small book, *Spiritual Formation*, Nouwen frames the Christian journey as movements one must continually make. The spiritual life, rather than being about “steps to enlightenment . . . is about the practices of the heart. Instead of progressive stages of development, it is about movements—from the things that enslave and destroy to liberation and life” explain the editors of Nouwen’s thought on the matter.<sup>1</sup> There are four movements Nouwen names which I believe we as LGBTQ+ Christians should especially consider when praying about a sexual ethic— first, movements from sorrow to joy, from resentment to gratitude, and from fear to love. Then later, as we consider what it means to arrive at a sexual ethic with confidence even as our fellow Christians arrive at different conclusions, we will ponder the movement from exclusion to inclusion.

## From Sorrow to Joy

Loss is a reality for all living things. As human beings, we are conscious of our losses in unique and profound ways. We lose loved ones to death, betrayal, or simply the drift of life. We lose our innocence and the things we loved about our growing up or our place of origin. In certain seasons, we lose hope or even faith altogether. For LGBTQ+ Christians, such losses may have unique dimensions. For me, many of my teen and early adult memories are tinted with sorrow. I think of prom night, which has become, in North America, a kind of threshold into the world of dating and adult socializing. On my prom night, I applied make-up as perfectly as I knew how and carefully donned a beautiful burgundy dress. I went

1 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), viii.

with a lovely boy whom my youth pastor had thoughtfully urged to take me. It was a fun night with music and friends. Yet, I will always remember that on that night I wasn't able to be myself. I was who, at the time, I thought I was supposed to be. The same is true of my college years, which mostly went by in a blur. They were enjoyable in a vague way, but because I was disconnected from myself, I look back at so much that I did or did not do with regret. None of these things are unlike what many people experience for a whole host of reasons. In that way, these feelings connect me with the suffering of others. However, if I unthinkingly act out of a sense of loss—if my ethical practice does not take into account the need to process sorrow—then I run the risk of causing further damage to myself or others. For example, if I have unprocessed sorrow around the years I fully repressed my sexuality out of fear and shame then my knee-jerk reaction may be to express compulsive non-monogamy in answer to my earlier repression. Or, in the opposite way, if I feel sorrow for years of sleeping with multiple partners in a way that did not honor the image of God in myself or others, my knee-jerk reaction may be to take up celibacy without really processing the grief prompting the impulse to withdraw. Nouwen helpfully prods us to go deeper in understanding our sorrow: “Think about your own losses right now—the many places in your life where you have lost something dear and life-giving.”<sup>2</sup> He then adds, “the question is not whether you have experienced loss, but rather how you live your losses? Are you hiding them? Are you pretending they

## **DISCERNING AN ETHIC ENTAILS GOING DOWN AND DOWN AND DOWN INTO THE DEPTHS OF OUR THEOLOGY, OUR CULTURE, AND OUR HEART.**

aren't real? Are you refusing to share them with your fellow travelers? Are you trying to convince yourself that your losses are little compared with your gains? Are you blaming someone for what you have suffered and lost? There is another possibility—the possibility of mourning.”<sup>3</sup>

We must mourn our losses. We must mourn in order for healing to occur and in order for joy to spring from that healing. We must trust that intentional grieving will soften our hearts, opening the way for abiding joy.<sup>4</sup> “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”<sup>5</sup> “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”<sup>6</sup> As expressed so well in these two well-known verses, the movement from sorrow to joy entails a deep hope that God will comfort us if we grieve and that grief will not be forever. “Mourning and dancing,” writes Nouwen, “are part of the same movement of grace.

2 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 39.

3 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 41.

4 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 43.

5 Psalm 30:5

6 Matthew 5:4

Somehow, in the midst of your mourning, the first steps of the dance take place. The cries that well up from your losses belong to your song of praise. Those who cannot grieve cannot be joyful.”<sup>7</sup> As beautiful as this image is, it is not once and for all. The movement from sorrow to joy occurs by the week, the day, even the hour. Yet, as we become deliberately attentive to this movement—to this dance, as Nouwen puts it—we become more whole and more able to live and act from a place of wholeness as embodied creatures.

## From Resentment to Gratitude

A second movement about which Nouwen compellingly writes is the movement from resentment to gratitude. Nouwen defines resentment as “a paralyzing set of complaints that makes us feel angry and frustrated with the people and institutions on which we have made ourselves dependent.”<sup>8</sup>

Resentment is often connected to not processing other emotions, such as sorrow or anger and is the frustration that life has not unfolded as we would have liked.<sup>9</sup> The movement from resentment to gratitude is a movement from paralysis to creative action. Nouwen writes that “resentment blocks action; gratitude lets us move forward toward new possibilities.

Resentment makes us cling to negative feelings; gratitude allows us to let go. Resentment makes us prisoners of our passions. Gratitude helps us to transcend our compulsions to follow our vocation . . . Resentment entangles us in endless distractions, pulling us down to banal preoccupations. Gratitude anchors our deepest self beyond this world and allows us to be

involved without losing ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> In order for us to discern and to live out a faithful sexual ethic, we must become detectives of our own hearts when it comes to resentment. Discernment of our hearts’ condition is necessarily an act of creativity in concert with the Spirit. The paralysis caused by harboring resentments can only be a hindrance when seeking to determine a way forward. As we do with sorrow, LGBTQ+ Christians have need of uncovering where resentment has taken root in our lives. For me, the Church is often an easy target for my resentment. As an institution in America that has often been



**Covenant love is evident when people make a relational commitment to one another regardless of gender.**

7 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 43.

8 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 43.

9 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 31.

10 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 65.

complicit in the oppression of black and brown people, of women, and of sexual minorities, I constantly have to monitor whether or not I am moving toward gratitude—whether I am letting go and depending on God in my relationship to the Church. Without regular checks on my heart, I will paint with too broad a brush, forgetting that it is in the Church that I have also experienced some of the most beautiful events of my life—baptism, marriage, ordination, communion. This is not to deny that real moments of injustice have occurred. However, it is to trust that God’s caressing, carving hand is at work. “To reclaim our history in its totality means that we no longer relate to our past as years in which only good times can be remembered and bad times need to be forgotten, but as opportunities for an ongoing conversion of heart. In a converted heart all our past can be gathered up in gratitude . . . and become the source of energy that moves us toward the future.”<sup>11</sup> As a triple minority—black, woman, gay—this notion of gratitude unsettles me. Yet, I sense that this is a path that we all need, at the very least, to be curious about. Lingering resentments block our ability to act with wisdom in the present and to fashion futures free of the kinds of injustice we have experienced. Examining our relationship with trust and gratitude is a necessary step as we search for a better story.

## From Fear and Shame to Love

Nouwen also speaks of a continual need to make the heart journey from fear to love. This movement is rooted in the central Scriptural injunction, “Do not be afraid.” As LGBTQ+ people, we have often had to make a choice between being accepted and being honest. Our fears may have become such familiar friends that we now no longer are aware of the insidious ways that they affect our actions. If you are reading this guide, you have likely begun to overcome the fear of coming out. Still, what other fears guide the daily decisions you make? Are there ways in which the sexual ethic you feel most at home in or drawn to is really an expression of an unexamined fear? “The invitation of Christ,” says Nouwen, “is the invitation to move out of the house of fear and into the house of love: to move out of that place of imprisonment and into that place of freedom . . . it is a voice that announces a whole new way of being—a way of living in the house of love, the house of the Lord.”<sup>12</sup> Our fears are often simply a quiet part of our everyday lives. They hide behind other emotions that are easier to admit or simply more suitable to the palate.

As I write, I am in the process of starting a church. It feels like there is so much at stake. If the church does not become sustainable, perhaps I will have spent needless time away from my family. Perhaps I will regret the money that I have put into getting it off the ground, mine and that of other people. Maybe I will have led people who are spiritually hungry down a path of community that is, in reality, a dead end. Yet, when I think about these possibilities, I realize that often they are not my most real fears. They are not truly the things that make me hesitate. Those are deeper and riskier to name. The same is true for all

11 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 68.

12 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 78.

of us in various areas of our lives. Our focus on the things that we think we should be afraid of can keep us from identifying the things that we truly are afraid of. Doing more than a cursory review of these twin levels of fear is a practice that will place our ethical decisions on much firmer ground.

Along a neighboring plane, toxic shame is an emotion which can often undercut wise decision-making and yet which has the possibility of being converted to love. Noted psychologist John Bradshaw comments that gay, lesbian, and transgender children “are the most viciously shamed and oppressed in our society,” and this is particularly tragic because they are shamed for what he calls their “instinctual life.”<sup>13</sup> While healthy shame creates in us the true sense that we are essentially limited as humans, toxic shame teaches us that our whole self is completely flawed.<sup>14</sup> Healthy shame grounds us continually in a sense of awe and reverence.<sup>15</sup> It is, explains Bradshaw, “the basic metaphysical boundary for human beings. It is the emotional energy that signals to us that we are not God—that we will make mistakes, that we need help.”<sup>16</sup> Toxic shame, rather than helping us to embrace ourselves as limited beings, leads us to flee from ourselves and to seek a false self which Bradshaw identifies as “always more or less than human.”<sup>17</sup> This quality of toxic shame leading us to live in ways that are more or less than human is one to which we will come back.

In a society that is overwhelmingly cisgender and heterosexual, LGBTQ+ people often have significant barriers in overcoming shame. There are the ways in which societal standards have resulted in shame for so many of us and there are the specific messages we received as young people to consider as well. But we can move into the house of love—the house of God in which we do not have to be afraid or to hide. We can learn to love ourselves with our limitations. For most of us, moving into this house of love will take dedication over an extended period. For all of us, it should probably require a trained counselor. However, the effort involved is worthwhile. I know of little more rewarding than being able to settle down into a knowledge of oneself as the beloved of God. With such a heart journey underway, we will more fully be able to love our neighbor well in all our actions because we are loving them as we love ourselves.

## For Reflection

1. What losses have you suffered related to being an LGBTQ+ person? How are you currently processing those losses?
2. Set aside some quiet time to read through Henri Nouwen’s liturgy, “A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance,” which is included in Appendix 2. Try to notice what arises in you as you read. Spend

13 Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, 26, 81.

14 Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, 7, 23.

15 Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, 18.

16 Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, 8.

17 Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, 34.

time praying for the ability to fully mourn and for your mourning, at the right time, to be converted to dancing.

3. What resentments linger in your heart related to being an LGBTQ+ person? How have these blocked your ability to act creatively?
4. To what extent do you feel you can reclaim your past in its totality? What might be difficult or problematic about doing so? How might doing so allow you to relax into God's carving hand?
5. In your journal or with a small group, explore in what ways, as an LGBTQ+ person, you struggle with fear and shame. What are some fears that are difficult for you to admit? How have you experienced shame during your childhood and your adult life? Name at least one time when your shame has led you to act as either more than human or less than human.
6. What are some practices you might engage in to move forward into the house of God's love?





# The Bible's Better Story

Keeping in mind some of society's myths which have affected us, as well as the movements our hearts must continually make in order to approach sexual ethics from a healthy place, let us now turn to sketching a portrait of the better story. From where can we draw inspiration in crafting a better narrative when so many of the stories we have been taught and which are part of the water we swim in are problematic? Nadia Bolz-Weber spins a narrative that begins to point us in the right direction. She describes a congregant named Sheila. "Sheila is shameless," she explains. Sheila "grew up with five older, overprotective brothers on a family farm. When her brothers realized that their teenage little sister was sexually active (she was blatantly unapologetic about this), they tried to keep her out of trouble by piling up outdoor chores for her. Sheila developed a deep brown tan that tops her natural olive color, and which she maintained through young adulthood by remaining a lover of the outdoors... even now she makes her living outdoors, working as a zookeeper and specializing in various sheep and oxen from the Middle East. She and her partner, Mike, met at work. Apparently she finds time every day to flirt with him. If nothing else, she sends him sexy text messages that tell him where she wants to meet up later and what she wants to do to him. They compete with each other in a sweet and slightly old-fashioned way: by seeing who can write better poetic lines about the magnificence of the other's body using only images they see at work. Sheila gets lots of jokey midday texts comparing her breasts to the baby gazelles in the zoo nursery."<sup>1</sup>

Bolz-Weber is of course providing an introduction to the main characters in the Biblical book, Song of Songs, in her own brilliant way. Compiled in the 3rd or 4th century B.C.E, the Song continues to contain the power to "speak a better word" regarding what our lives as erotic beings can look like.<sup>2</sup> The name of the book itself is the first clue that it is a potent counter-witness to so much we have received. The phrase "songs of songs" is superlative in nature and would have echoed closely for its first readers the understanding of the temple's inner sanctum as the "holy of holies."<sup>3</sup> To conceptually juxtapose poems of erotic love with the most holy place in Judaism where God's presence fully dwelled should provoke us to seek new language to express a sexuality and spirituality which are deeply connected. "In effect," writes Miguel De La Torre, "what these rabbinical commentators are insinuating is that the bedchamber becomes the Holy of Holies. To express the concept of sexual intimacy as the Holy of Holies in a Christian understanding is to depict sex as holy communion."<sup>4</sup> That the Song never mentions procreation

1 Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 165-166.

2 Hebrews 12:24

3 Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, [2008] 2014).

4 De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets*, 29.

implies that sexual union is good for its own sake. Perhaps most profoundly, the phrase “I am my lover’s and his desire is for me” seems to reverse the Genesis curse on Eve, that “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the setting of Song of Songs is a lush, overflowing creation that seems the opposite of the cursed earth of Genesis 3 characterized by thorns and thistles. As we read, it is almost as if we have been returned to the Garden of Eden, a place of abundance and joy and connection, utterly free from alienation. Almost. Even while painting a portrait of the possible, the Song makes clear that the woman’s brothers do not approve of her relationship. Additionally, there are

## **THE SETTING OF SONG OF SONGS IS A LUSH, OVERFLOWING CREATION THAT SEEMS THE OPPOSITE OF THE CURSED EARTH OF GENESIS 3 CHARACTERIZED BY THORNS AND THISTLES.**

sentinels of the city walls who find the woman and beat her. The scene is pregnant with the implications that these men need to control her erotic energy. Even their location in the city contrasts with the natural freedom of the countryside, the book’s primary setting. Even in this most hopeful depiction of erotic love, fear is not absent. The lovers seem to keep secret their true thoughts and actions about their sexuality out of fear, and the society around the couple tries to insert its own fears about sexuality into the couple’s romantic life. Scenes like this make the book all the more compelling not because they actually happened, but because they capture so well the tension between our yearning for deep, erotic expression and our yearning for safety and belonging.<sup>6</sup>

As we begin to discern a sexual ethic, some of the details of Song of Songs can act as compass points. For example, the book begins with the stunning lines, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you.”<sup>7</sup> The expression of unabashed desire is placed in the woman’s mouth, not the man’s. Right at the outset this places us off balance culturally. She describes the man’s love—better understood as lovemaking—as more enjoyable than wine. Their physical relationship is intoxicating, with all the danger and the joys that implies. The following verses are also wrapped in rich imagery that touches all of the senses. Their love with its physical relationship is characterized not only by intercourse but by what authors Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton call “outercourse,” sexual activity that

5 Michael D. Coogan, *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says* (New York: Twelve, 2010), 58.

6 De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets*.

7 Song of Songs 1:2-3

de-centers penetration in favor of activities ranging from massage and kissing to mutual masturbation and oral sex.<sup>8</sup> Toward the beginning of the second chapter, the lovers exchange compliments: “As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens,” the man praises. “As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men,” she replies. Their compliments reflect a strong sense of mutual adoration rooted in equality and in difference. They frame the way they think of each other in similar language, yet they always make clear that they are different people. The subtle reality that they even each refer to the other by a unique pet name underscores that, although they feel themselves to be kindred, they are unique individuals with boundaries. In the same chapter, the male lover exclaims, “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.”<sup>9</sup> Here, we get the unmistakable sense that the male lover is calling for his beloved to come out of hiding. He longs for the nuances of her personhood to be disclosed. Along with the fruit of mutual adoration and equality amid difference, a sexual ethic that is faithful will result in the beloved feeling invited out of their particular places of hiding. This sense of being invited out into the open in the Song likely has to do with the sense of loving gaze that permeates the book. In the long speeches that the book is known for—two by the man and two by the woman—each reviews the details of the other’s body in graphic detail, drawing favorable analogies that would have been well understood by the book’s first readers. Scholar Ellen Davis writes of one such section in which the man admires the woman’s body: “The women’s body is not a sex object. That is, it is not viewed from the uninvolved, objectifying perspective that characterizes pornography.”<sup>10</sup> What we see through the man’s eyes is what her body evokes for him as connected to his wider world; in the end, we have no idea what the woman actually looks like.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the book can be a clue in pointing us toward a sexual ethic that includes, at the very least, non-objectification of others. The picture of the lovers as involved with each other in ever deepening and multi-layered ways can help us investigate whether we are following suit.

Before we leave this paradigmatic vision of the better story, it bears pointing out that Song of Songs does push forward two notes that may feel discordant to some readers. The first is that the two lovers may be either married or unmarried. While I tend to see mostly evidence that they are unmarried, scholars debate this point energetically. The book is not a clear source of support for either those who hold that sex is reserved for marriage or those who view sex apart from marital bonds as faithful. What is clear is that the book seems to describe a relationship that is faithful, exclusive, and mutual. “My beloved is mine and I am his,” the woman says in 2:16. “My vineyard [the woman], my very own, is for myself; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand” echoes the man in 8:12. We will soon explore ethical stances which range from celibacy, the lifelong abstinence from sex, to polyamory, the embrace of multiple, consenting

8 Janet W. Hardy and Dossie Easton, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love* (New York: Ten Speed Press, [1997] 2017), 21.

9 Song of Songs 2:14

10 Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 263.

11 Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 263.

sexual relationships. Song of Songs makes plain for us what will become readily apparent as we investigate each of these positions: the extent of exclusivity is a major dividing point within the spectrum of sexual expression. Your discernment will be particularly called upon regarding the meaning of this quality.

## For Reflection

1. Set aside time to read the eight chapters of Song of Songs in one sitting. What language, images, and ideas do you find compelling? What do you find disturbing?
2. How do you relate to Miguel De La Torre's idea that Song of Songs portrays sex as holy communion? In what ways is it holy? In what ways is it communion?
3. What insights about sexuality might be gleaned from the poems being set in such a lush landscape?
4. In your journal or with a small group, describe a time when you have experienced "sentinels"—those who keep watch to ensure social order—intent on controlling your erotic expression. Of what were they afraid?
5. What is your reaction to the lines, "My beloved is mine and I am his," and "My vineyard [the woman], my very own, is for myself; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand." Are you drawn to or repelled by such language? Why?





# Considerations for Developing a Personal Sexual Ethic

“All things are lawful for me,” writes the apostle Paul, “but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage but that of the other.”<sup>1</sup> Depending on your perspective and inclination, these verses are either luxuriously comforting or completely unsettling. Paul, lightning rod for controversy that he is in many of our circles, addresses the question of whether Christians can participate in the meat market of his culture. His response is affirmative, although constrained by a few qualifications. While he cites an old Corinthian saying which goes, “All things are lawful,” Paul qualifies that what is lawful has ethical boundaries. The possible actions taken in response to the meat market’s connection to the Roman temple sacrifices are multiple, yet all of those possible actions need to be measured by the extent to which they are beneficial and enriching to the self and the community—the extent to which they build everyone up in accord with the common good.

I would argue that today we have a meat market of a different sort to consider. Whereas Paul was reflecting on whether Christians could eat the meat used in the various temple rites dedicated to the Roman gods, we must discern the ways in which we are to interact with the spectrum of ethical postures on offer in our own culture’s sexual and romantic “meat market.” Celibacy, reserving sex for marriage, embracing sex apart from marriage, and nonmonogamy represent some of the prominent postures that Christians are exploring. Each of these postures is in conversation with much of the wider culture’s objectification of the erotic. In our case, one can guess that Paul would prohibit sexual relations that objectify and cannibalize. But his primary concerns would likely still focus on the numerous ways of engaging the issue which stand in contrast to the wider culture’s individualistic orientation. How is each posture beneficial to not only us, but others we relate to, and the larger society as a whole? How does each build up and enrich the common good? How does the practice of one posture over another spiritually form the whole person toward the way of Christ or away from it? The way in which a particular sexual or romantic practice shapes us toward or away from Christ and the way in which it is of benefit to the world must form the ground of our self-reflection. Three other considerations further improve our stability when seeking a firm ethical place to stand.

1 I Corinthians 10:23-24

## Witness

The earliest Christians were known and terribly persecuted for leading lives that were fundamentally countercultural. The Gospels paint a compelling portrait of the disciples creating an alternative community in which the practices of Rome's empire were alien. Wesley Hill writes helpfully about this alternative lifestyle: "Where the surrounding culture trumpeted materialistic values of accumulating wealth and comforts, the Christians sold their possessions and belongings and distributed the proceeds to the needy who were part of their fellowship (Acts 2:45). Where society scuttled prisoners and other undesirables off to murky dungeons, the Christians visited those who were mistreated, often bringing food and warm clothing for these helpless outcasts (Hebrews 13:3). Where raucous revelry marked pagan social life—orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry," as one observer put it (I Peter 4:3)—the early Christians were known for a weekly gathering they called a 'love feast,' in which they shared the body and blood of Jesus, whom they worshiped with hymns and prayers."<sup>2</sup> While Hill uses this reality to support his claims about celibacy, all of us would do well to think through what it means to be ethically countercultural. I would not claim that this is a straightforward consideration in the least. However, where Christians have been most vital in the spiritual transformation of people and the prophetic transformation of society, they have engaged alternative, Gospel-informed practices. How might we do the same in our erotic lives and, indeed, in all of life?

## Embodied Humanity

The way in which any specific ethical posture relates to the body provides another pathway for reflection. How do celibacy, reserving sex until marriage, embracing sex apart from marriage, and nonmonogamy relate to and hold sacred our bodily life? While early Christians were shaping an alternative community amid empire, their leaders were codifying a faith often in reaction to Gnostic thought. Gnostic Christians, not unlike the wider community, were informed by Greek ideas about the hierarchy between the soul and the body—with the soul winning out every time—but took these ideas a few steps further. Gnostics believed that matter was evil and that only the spirit was of value. They held that Christ came as a spiritual redeemer and was not, in fact, corrupted by what they considered evil, fleshly life. Scholar Mark Allen Powell comments that "the implications of such a belief system for life in this world varied dramatically. Many (probably most) gnostics held that liberation from the flesh involved renunciation of bodily pleasures and material concerns: they encouraged virginity, celibacy, fasting, strict diets . . . But other gnostics drew the opposite conclusion: they engaged freely in all manner of wanton excesses on the grounds that since the spirit is all that matters, what one does with the flesh is completely irrelevant."<sup>3</sup> To address the Gnostic spirit, Christian leaders doubled down on the

2 Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness & Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [2010] 2016), 73-74.

3 Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 40.



centrality of Christ's divinity and humanity. The concept of the Incarnation was solidified as a necessary doctrine regarding material life in response to the movement to ascetic purity, on the one side, and boundless permissiveness on the other. To them, to escape the accusation of heresy, bodily life had to be considered sacred and a fundamental part of human life in all Christian ethical practices.<sup>4</sup> However, we do not need to travel into such dangerous territory as labeling heretics in order to capture their essential point: what we do in and with our bodies is significant and carries sacred meaning. As we think through the specific ethical postures we might adopt regarding sex, we must reflect upon the way in which attraction to one posture over another might mirror in us a shame-based desire to be more than human or a willingness to be less than human. As those created in the image of the God who chose to become flesh, we must interrogate how each posture leads us to "live as angels, as though we don't have bodies, or . . . as beasts, as if bodies are all there is."<sup>5</sup>

## Rules, Principals, or Some of Both

There is one final overarching concern to which we should give our attention. It is not related to what particular posture we live out but rather requires stopping to think through how we will live out whatever posture we discern is most faithful. Because of our particular social and religious histories, some of us may feel more drawn to rules and some of us may feel more attracted to principles as a means of carrying out our erotic ethic. Many LGBTQ+ Christians have been adversely affected by cultural and religious systems that were heavily rule-based. Does that mean that we should swear off rules regarding our ethical practice? In contrast, many of us have engaged in behavior that we now view as unhealthy. Does that mean that we should exclusively search for rules to contain and control our sexuality as we take up one sexual ethic or another? Principles have the benefit of being deeply formative because they demand that a person wrestle with the gray areas found in practice in an intentional way. However, principles assume that the person seeking to abide by them is in control of themselves and not victimized by self-deception. Rules, on the other hand, assume that we are at times not indifferent enough to our own desires to make an ethical choice. Instead of being founded on the proposition that we are able to be our own judge and jury, rules assume that there are moments



**Many LGBTQ+ Christians have been adversely affected by cultural and religious systems that were heavily rule-based.**

4 De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets*.

5 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, 99.

when clear external guidance can aid us in acting ethically. As you discern a faithful way of living out an erotic ethic, consider the manner in which each potential ethical posture relates to rules and principles or might lead you to relate to rules and principles.

## For Reflection

1. How counter-culturally do you believe that the Christians in your community are living? To what extent is living counter-culturally important?
2. How well do you believe that the Christians in your community hold sacred bodily life? Where in modern Christianity do you see the Gnostic idea that the individual's spirit is all that matters?
3. Are you more attracted to using rules, principles, or some of both to frame your sexual ethic? Why?





# The Nine Criteria

There are nine basic criteria which we can use to evaluate a faithful sexual ethic. Certainly, more criteria can be considered depending on the particular life situation in which you find yourself, but these nine represent a thorough starting point. I owe a great debt to Margaret A. Farley, a scholar at Yale, for providing me with many of these principles and enriching my thoughts. Two other writers, Karen Lebacqz and Nadia Bolz-Weber, added to my overall framework. You can, I suspect, pick up any number of books on Christian sexual ethics and find these ideas echoed.

## Vulnerability

The first criteria by which to evaluate any sexual ethic is through the lens of vulnerability. While Genesis is a problematic book from which to draw proscriptive norms because it was originally intended to solidify Israelite identity and understanding of God in the context of Babylonian oppression, the scene at the end of chapter two should give us pause.<sup>1,2</sup> After a description of the formation of a new kinship group through the physical joining of a man and woman, the Genesis author explains, “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”<sup>3</sup> Karen Lebacqz suggests that as a precondition for developing a sexual ethic, Christians must explore the connection between vulnerability and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Of the Genesis passage, she notes that the book’s ancient audience would have understood nakedness to be a metaphor for vulnerability and “feeling no shame” in the imagination of the time would have carried connotations of appropriateness. “Vulnerability,” explains Lebacqz, “may be the precondition for both union and procreation: without a willingness to be vulnerable, to be exposed, to be wounded, there can be no union . . . ‘Appropriate vulnerability’ may describe the basic intention for human life—which may be experienced in part through the gift of sexuality.”<sup>5</sup> In a Christian vocabulary, ethical sex is sex which is connected to a loss of the need to protect oneself, and thus open to self-transcendence, a healthy moving out beyond the limits and needs of the self into contemplation, reverence, and spiritual connectedness with the other.

1 Walter J. Harrelson. ed. *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2003), 11.

2 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. ed. *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*. vol 2, D-H (Nashville: Abington Press, 2007).

3 Genesis 2:25

4 Karen Lebacqz, “Appropriate Vulnerability,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James. B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

5 Lebacqz, “Appropriate Vulnerability,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 259.

## Do No Unjust Harm

Ethical sexual expression within a framework of vulnerability requires that we pay close attention to the potential to do harm, deliberately or otherwise. Accepting ourselves and others as essentially limited entails a need to seek ways to care for ourselves and others. While harm can sometimes be just, as when doctors choose to cut the body during surgery in order to heal it, unjust harm is that which does the opposite of building up and edifying.<sup>6</sup> Farley explains that there are “many forms that harm can take—physical, psychological, spiritual, relational. It can also take the form of failure to support, to assist, to care for, to honor, in ways that are required by reason of context and relationship.”<sup>7</sup> Simply put, with a view toward the violence that we are capable of inflicting upon each other—from exploitation to negligence, from deceit to outright betrayal—we have to contend with the reality that we are our “brother’s keeper,” so to speak.<sup>8</sup> As a baseline, we must establish for ourselves rules and principles that will make doing unjust harm to an intimate partner as difficult as possible.

## Free Consent

Similarly, the absolute requirement of free consent in all sexual expression is fundamental. The idea that all human beings are created in the image of God and have the breath of life given to them by God means that we should approach other human beings with deep respect and profound awe. The possibility of encountering Christ himself in the faces of those around us is a theme found in both the New Testament and the tradition of the Church. To approach others with a sense of the sacred that is within them implies a reverence for their capacity for self-determination and need for bodily autonomy.<sup>9</sup> To insist upon free consent is to assert that, whatever ethical posture we may take, we will respect the human capacity for choice. We will not be sexual with anyone who does not have the full capacity to choose freely. Thus, minors and persons with mental disabilities which impair comprehension of consent are out of bounds. If a person says “no” to intimacy with us in any shade, they are also out of bounds. If a person is unable to freely consent because of power dynamics latent in the relationship,

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**To insist upon free consent is to assert that, whatever ethical posture we may take, we will respect the human capacity for choice.**

6 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*.

7 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 217.

8 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*.

9 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*.

they too are off limits. Moreover, Farley notes that, “derivative from the obligation to respect free consent on the part of sexual partners are also other ethical norms such as a requirement for truth-telling, promise-keeping, and respect for privacy . . . their violation hence hinders the freedom of choice of the other person: deception and betrayal are ultimately coercive.”<sup>10</sup> In short, any sexual behavior in which freedom of choice is at all constrained violates consent.

## Mutuality

As with the lovers in the Song of Songs, a Christian sexual ethic will center on mutuality. This would seem to follow logically from consent, yet much that we have inherited has actually undercut this norm. Particularly problematic is the sexist proposition that, by nature, men are active initiators and women are passive recipients. Instead, a faithful sexual ethic embraces all humans’ capacity for “active receptivity and receptive activity.” I suspect that LGBTQ+ Christians may have a lot to teach the Church in this regard even as I also know that cultural standards we have received around gender leave nearly all of us with work to do in pursuit of mutuality. The Bible gives us helpful imagery here by toying repeatedly with the idea that God is at times the host and at times the guest of humanity. In Psalm 23, God is the host who “prepares[s] a table before me in the presence of my enemies,” while in Matthew 25, Jesus is the guest who proclaims, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Ps. 23:5; Matt. 25:35). Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that mutuality is much more a path to follow together than a line to cross once. As a norm, it must be insisted upon at the beginning of any sexual relationship, but as a concept that contains the power to lead us into deeper understanding of the Trinitarian God, it is an area in which we should seek to ever grow.

## Equality

Equality of power also is a criterion that we can seek to develop, but which requires minimum standards to be met at the outset of a sexual relationship. “Major inequalities in social and economic status, age and maturity, professional identity, interpretations of gender roles, and so forth,” explains Farley, “can render sexual relations inappropriate and unethical primarily because they entail power inequalities—and hence, unequal vulnerability, dependence and limitation of options.”<sup>11</sup> The requirement of equality will, at times, be fairly clear cut. It is unethical, not to mention criminal, for an adult to have sex with a minor. But it is also unethical in most cases for a manager to have sex with a person she manages, or for a millionaire to have sex with a student struggling for money, because of the same requirement of equality. The relationship must be “balanced enough for each to appreciate the uniqueness and difference of the other, and for each to respect one another as ends in themselves,” Farley writes.<sup>12</sup> Sadly, the writers

10 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 219.

11 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 223.

12 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 223.

of Scripture, ensconced as they were in patriarchal assumptions, have not left us with many images of equality.

## Commitment

As noted previously, the Song of Songs offers us a compelling view of erotic relationship. And the book's bold portrait of exclusivity accurately provides a foil to many of our common anxieties about such relationships. The lovers are, indeed, unambiguously exclusive. But whether they are married is an open question. What does seem clear throughout the Bible is that some type of commitment is required for sex to be ethical. The form a commitment takes may be less important than the quality of the commitment but some form—whether covenant, contract, or agreement—should be entered into with intention.<sup>13</sup> Particularly for those attracted to a nonmonogamous ethic, the requirement of commitment raises a number of questions for consideration. However, similar questions are helpful for all of us. How does a brief sexual encounter facilitate union in profound ways? What about a longer-term sexual relationship? Do they each make possible the kind of “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh” kinship relationship that is portrayed in Genesis and in Song of Songs? Farley takes a specific view on this matter: “although brief encounters open a lover to relation, they cannot mediate the kind of union—of knowing and being known, loving and being loved—for which human relationality offers the potential.”<sup>14</sup> Whether one agrees or disagrees with Farley, it is important to grapple with how this essential “knowing” of another human being can best be made possible. What forms of commitment best facilitate it? In the Hebrew Bible the verb for “to know” can refer to intellectual knowledge, sexual intercourse, or the union of the human soul with God.<sup>15</sup> The act of one person “knowing” another carries connotations of not simply physical knowledge but also knowledge of the whole person. Commitment is a requirement for ethical sex. Which forms of commitment allow this kind of “knowing” is the appropriate subject of thorough individual and communal reflection.

## Fruitfulness

While providing ethical norms for sexual activity in the context of the LGBTQ+ community, including the concern for fruitfulness might at first glance seem extremely odd. The idea that sex is only justified when it carries the possibility of offspring has been used to bludgeon those who cannot have children and those who choose not to have children. For LGBTQ+ Christians, the damage of this teaching has been incalculable. Yet, the depth of theological understanding and spiritual formation available in the Genesis call “to be fruitful and multiply” should not be overlooked.<sup>16</sup> The potential for responsible care of offspring, in fact, is an important criterion for evaluating sexual behavior among those who are involved

13 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*.

14 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 225.

15 Coogan, *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says*. De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets*.

16 Genesis 1:28

in relationships which make pregnancy possible. Still, I believe that the meaning of fruitfulness extends beyond this for all of us. Farley again is helpful here: “Beyond the kind of fruitfulness that brings forth biological children, there is a kind of fruitfulness that is a measure, perhaps, of all interpersonal love. Love between persons violates relationality if it closes in upon itself and refuses to open to a wider community of persons . . . love brings new life to those who love. The new life within the relationship of those who share it may move beyond itself in countless ways.”<sup>17</sup> The crucial point is that all erotic love should move us beyond itself in some way.

## Social Justice

Social justice is a final criterion that we must consider as we attempt to live out our sexual relationships ethically. Our concept of this norm should go back to Paul’s warning that many ways of handling pressing moral issues are permissible, but not all are beneficial for the individual or for the common good. Basic to the norm of social justice in our intimate relationships is the imperative not to harm third parties affected by these relationships, such as children or others close to us. It also includes the imperative to take into consideration public health.<sup>18</sup> But beyond these fundamentals, sexual expression that is ethical will help form us into just citizens of the world. For example, ethical sexual expression will undercut, rather than perpetuate, violence and false gender stereotypes. “What we do with our flesh in the privacy of our bedroom with our beloved,” writes Miguel De La Torre, “can be a means of learning how to love

### **ALL EROTIC LOVE SHOULD MOVE US BEYOND ITSELF IN SOME WAY.**

selflessly in the public sphere. It can become a model for the generous extension of compassion for others . . . It can school us to attend with love to the needs of others. Although physical sex may be limited to the beloved, still, the principles of putting the needs of others first become the foundation for creating justice-based relationships.”<sup>19</sup> Making social justice a priority as we express ourselves sexually may seem the least obvious and least straightforward of all the requirements for ethical sex. Yet, evaluating the extent to which our relationships do or could reflect this norm is critical not only for our own flourishing, but for the flourishing of the world.

17 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 227-228.

18 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*.

19 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*.

# Concern

Vulnerability provides the lens through which to view all the requirements for ethical sex. Doing no unjust harm and freedom of consent constitute baseline standards. Mutuality and equality also provide baseline standards for intimacy, with the caveat that they not only must be met at the outset but also will require continued growth. Commitment is perhaps the most controversial norm, and fruitfulness the most surprising. The hardest norm to articulate may be social justice. Many of us may have visceral feelings of discomfort when we see injustice, and we may need to work backward from those feelings to discover what has unsettled us. I believe that author Nadia Bolz-Weber hits the nail on the head when she encompasses these requirements in the need for concern. She writes, “A sexual ethic that includes concern means seeing someone as a whole person and not just a willing body. The only way to show true concern for ourselves and others is to see, to pay attention. As the social philosopher and mystic Simone Weil said, ‘Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.’”<sup>20</sup> How might we offer this generosity to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us when it comes to our sexual expression? How might we see this generosity as significant to the cultivation of love of God, love of self, and love of our neighbors as ourselves? We will now drill down one final layer to explore the major postures on erotic expression that LGBTQ+ people are adopting and living out. As you encounter each one, prayerfully consider the extent to which the kind of generosity put forward in these nine criteria might be met or developed in them.

## For Reflection

1. In your journal or with a small group, explore which of these criteria you find most compelling and which you find most challenging. Which is the most difficult for you given your unique desires and needs? Is there one that you find problematic?
2. Where in the Bible do you see a problematic sexual ethic at work? In what places do you see a life-giving sexual ethic? What aspects in the Biblical passage make them one, the other, or both, depending on the situation?
3. If mutuality and equality are moving targets, in a sense, how might one detect them at the outset of a relationship?
4. How do you think about the commitment required for sex to be ethical? What must the commitment entail?
5. Do vulnerability and social justice make sense to you as the first and last criteria—the ones which frame the rest? Why?
6. Alone or in a small group, create a graphic of the ways in which these nine criteria align with the language, images, and ideas found in the Bible. What might they each reveal about God?

<sup>20</sup> Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, 12,



# The Possibilities: From Celibacy to Polyamory

Having begun to do the head and heart work to embrace a better story for our erotic lives, let's now turn to some of the most prominent ethical postures that LGBTQ+ folks are taking. The four ethics we will explore are celibacy, reserving sex for marriage, embracing sex in monogamous relationships apart from marriage, and nonmonogamy. Each in its ideal form embodies a way of engaging sexuality that seeks to be just and loving to the self, to all partners involved, and to the wider world. What is left, then, is to discern personally and in community how each corresponds to our own experience of and beliefs about the Christian story. Additionally, we must consider how each uniquely meets the criteria for vulnerability, doing no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, sexual justice, and concern. How does each relate to our embodied humanity, and to the countercultural nature of the Gospel? As you consider each position, endeavor to engage it with hope-filled discernment and with lively discussion in community. Ultimately, I pray that whatever decisions you do make will be the outcome of a soul weary with illusion and hands that are unafraid.

## Celibacy

For many of us, “celibacy” is a scary word. For LGBTQ+ Christians, in particular, the idea of celibacy often carries unavoidable baggage. Some of us may have been told that celibacy was the only way we could please God as sexual minorities and thus undertook it as the only way to be faithful. Others may associate it simply with unnecessary repression. The most visible group of people in our society who practice celibacy are Catholic priests and nuns, some of whom tragically have been responsible for sexual abuse. For this reason, too, we may have a bad taste in our mouth for this posture. Yet, we must not forget that both Jesus and Paul, along with many other influential voices throughout Church history, such as Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich, were celibate. That Jesus never had sex, explains Hill, “dislodges our assumption that having sex is necessary to be truly, fully alive. If Jesus abstained and if he is the measure of what counts as true humanity, then I may abstain too—and trust that, in doing so, I will ultimately not lose.”<sup>1</sup> Notably, we also erase the existence of our asexual siblings if we assume that celibacy must result in repression.

Celibacy is likely the framework in which a majority of LGBTQ+ Christians have expressed themselves

1 Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness & Homosexuality*, 95.



erotically throughout history, keeping in mind that the erotic both encompasses, and is much more far reaching than, sex. While many of those who embrace celibacy do so out of a sense of same-gender attraction being sinful, many others choose celibacy while also believing that the attractions themselves need not be a source of shame. These Christians often identify with the term “Side B.” Side B Christians understand themselves to be gay or lesbian or bisexual, but choose not to engage in sexual activity with people of their own gender. A range of belief comprises the reasons why they consider same-gender activity out of bounds for themselves and, while the positions discussed here are not exhaustive, they are representative. One group in the Side B community would say that being attracted to the same gender is a part of the brokenness of creation. However, brokenness is a condition in which all of humanity shares, so LGBTQ+ Christians need not deny that they are LGBTQ+ nor attach any special shame to it. A second group in the Side B community chooses celibacy because they identify the pivotal role that heterosexual marriage plays in the Bible. The idea that the Bible portrays heterosexual marriage as communicating something crucial about God is particularly important to these Christians. A third group of Side B Christians understand the Biblical story, in part or in places, to prohibit same-gender sexual activity. The idea that all the verses overtly related to same-gender activity in Scripture provide a negative portrait is convincing for some. They may also consider newer arguments seeking to reclaim such Scriptures and others in favor of same-gender activity problematic, since they are, in part at least, speculative. These three groups, and especially those who hold that heterosexual marriage portrays something crucial about God and that the Bible prohibits same-gender sexual activity, place allegiance to Scripture in the foreground of the Christian faith life. In sum, while a LGBTQ+ identity is embraced by the folks who claim Side B, this posture precludes same-gender sexual activity. Thus, among Side B Christians, the reasons why people have been born LGBTQ+ are left to God, but the identity itself should lead to no shame.

Those who choose to embrace a Side B position have much to teach us. Although this posture can be taken from a place of fear, shame, misreading of Scripture, unhealthy obedience to what has always been done, or reacting to past personal issues in sexual expression, it can also be chosen from a sense of call or a devotion to truth as understood in Scripture.<sup>2</sup> It might also be chosen out of a sense of calling to a marriage, to a community, or to a tradition, and may demonstrate striking beauty in all of these circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Those who are celibate must depend radically on God, and some may revive alternative forms of community that have become impoverished in our sex-saturated, marriage-centered culture. Henri Nouwen writes of celibacy as “a visible manifestation of the holy space in an overcrowded world.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to share that “Thomas Aquinas calls celibacy a vacancy for God. To be celibate means to be empty for God, to be free and open for his presence, to be available for his service.”<sup>5</sup> Celibacy, like all the postures we will explore, must be discerned and chosen. If chosen freely and not out of shame,

2 Melinda Melone (Side B LGBTQ+ Christian) in discussion with the author, July 2019.

3 Melone in discussion with the author.

4 Henri Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (Garden City: Image Books, 1979), 44.

5 Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation*, 45.



celibacy can be a beautiful picture of what it means to depend on God, be fulfilled by God, and be available to God.

## FOR REFLECTION

1. In your view, how does celibacy correspond to the Christian story?
2. How does celibacy relate to the criteria of vulnerability, doing no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, sexual justice, and concern?
3. How does celibacy accord with our embodied humanity and with the countercultural nature of the Gospel?
4. In what ways is the practice of celibacy beautiful? What might be some of its pitfalls?

## Reserving Sex for Marriage

Throughout the centuries, the majority of the Christian Church has held to the view often articulated as “chastity in singleness, fidelity in marriage.” That this view is very old and has been widely held does not mean it has been always looked the same. The idea that the proper and morally correct place for sex is marriage has always contained shades of difference based on geography, tradition, and culture. For example, where colonizing versions of Christianity have met with indigenous practices, teaching about sexual ethics and actual sexual practices have sometimes diverged. In addition, this ethical posture became more central in the life of the Church when marriage became more visibly the purview of the Church over and against the state and, later, when marriage gained acceptance as a sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church. During most of those centuries, legal marriage was not an option for LGBTQ+ people. With the altering of that reality in the Western world in the past twenty years, the terrain from which we discuss same-gender activity has certainly shifted, if not undergone a major earthquake. In short, while it is likely that covenanted unions between LGBTQ+ people have existed for centuries, with some people not engaging in sex before those unions, the advent of legal marriage in many countries has made it more clearly possible for the LGBTQ+ community to have more applicable conversations about the meaning of premarital sex on the same terms as heterosexual people.

As with LGBTQ+ Christians who adhere to a posture of celibacy, many who believe that sex should occur only within marriage strongly rely on Scripture and the historic position of the Church to ground their position. The apostle Paul’s admonition to flee sexual immorality is most often understood to include fleeing sexual relations outside of a covenantal relationship. Even more important than the possible immorality of sex apart from marriage, however, is a Biblical reading that sees marriage as a fundamental union which communicates something important about God and us. This is similar to the line of thinking that many Side B Christians hold. Lauren Winner says, “What sits at the center of Christian sexual ethics is not a negative view of sex . . . rather, the heart of the Christian story about sex is a vigorously

positive statement: sex was created for marriage.”<sup>6</sup> While Winner herself is not LGBTQ+, the logic of her statement rings true for many people who are. In the rich language of Scripture, the relationships between God and Israel, and between Christ and the Church, are frequently expressed in terms of a marriage. This connection, then, has implications for the meaning of all marriage as a witness to God’s exclusive fidelity to us and to the vulnerability at the center of erotic relationships. Moreover, for those who take this posture, the Bible’s symbolism regarding sex as a life-joining act is significant.<sup>7</sup> To find the one who is “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” and to be joined as “one flesh” through the sexual act suggests that sex requires a framework that is committed rather than transient.<sup>8</sup>

LGBTQ+ people who hold the view that sex should be reserved for marriage, including same-gender marriage, are asserting that the joys of marriage, with its aspirational vows and formative, life-long commitment, are not only for heterosexual people. As with every posture, it is not difficult to walk the road of reserving sex for marriage for unhealthy reasons or in unhealthy ways. The purity culture prominent in the Church of the 1990s often used guilt and shame to induce many of us to take this path. It is also easy to take this path out of a sense of wanting to be the “model gay,” of needing to be more than human as a reaction to deep-rooted shame, or of embracing asceticism in the belief that the desires of the body are defiling or insignificant. Still, being chaste in singleness and faithful in marriage can, like celibacy, be a fruitful disciple when undertaken freely. It can demonstrate in our consumerist culture that gratification can in fact be delayed. It can also simultaneously hold up both LGBTQ+ life with sex in marriage and life without sex in singleness as rich revelations of God. “Marriage . . . instructs the Church in what to look for when the kingdom comes—eternal, intimate union,” writes Winner,<sup>9</sup> and singleness prepares us for the other element of the end of time, the age when singleness trumps marriage. Singleness [without sex] tutors us in our primary, heavenly relationship with one another: siblings in Christ.”<sup>9</sup>



**Being chaste in singleness and faithful in marriage can, like celibacy, be a fruitful disciple when undertaken freely.**

6 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, 25.

7 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*.

8 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*.

9 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*.

## FOR REFLECTION

1. In your view, how does reserving sex for marriage correspond to the Christian story?
2. What potential does reserving sex for marriage have for vulnerability, doing no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, sexual justice, and concern?
3. How does reserving sex for marriage accord with our embodied humanity and with the countercultural nature of the Gospel?
4. In what ways is the practice of reserving sex until marriage beautiful? What might be some of its pitfalls?

## Embracing Sex Apart from Marriage

In recent decades, the call for the Church to reclaim sex as a good gift from God has become urgent. Christian history is full of examples of celibacy and abstinence being undertaken out of fear of the power of sex. Christian history is also full of instances in which controlling sex has been a way of controlling people, especially women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities. Christians who embrace sex apart from marriage emphasize that sexual pleasure is God-created and can be a part of the flourishing and responsible freedom of the whole person. Instead of a central prohibition, this posture is built largely on the assumption that establishing principles in keeping with one's faith is rich in possibilities for spiritual formation. This posture often also contends that trends toward earlier adolescence and later marriage in the West must reshape the ways in which Christians talk about when sex is appropriate. Thus, this posture may be taken up as a pastoral solution to a largely new problem. For LGBTQ+ people who have often been told that their sexual expression is particularly immoral, recovering the positive potential for all sexual expression can go a long way in healing shame.

Many LGBTQ+ Christians who believe that sex can be embraced apart from marriage tend to see the benefits of reserving sex for some kind of exclusive commitment. The commitment could be expressed as the simple intention to continue getting to know the other person after a few dates or it could be expressed through one or many years-long committed sexual relationships over the course of a lifetime (serial monogamy). It might also look a lot like marriage, but with promises made largely in private and without the sanction of the state. The most important thing in this posture is that extended intimacy and exclusivity between partners is understood as the appropriate framework for sex. Therapist Tina Sellers writes that "human sexuality finds its most erotic, dynamic, and satisfying experience inside the context of love, trust, safety, commitment, and desire. People come alive in the context of safety and love."<sup>10</sup> LGBTQ+ people who embrace sex apart from marriage often believe that trust, safety, and some degree of love cannot be achieved apart from the commitment to get to know another. This commitment cannot be satisfied on the day one meets a potential partner. Often people who hold this posture value

10 Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*, 79.

the qualities of the marriage commitment expressed in the Bible but may take issue with the abusive and unequal forms in which marriage in the Bible is actually depicted. Essentially, the qualities can be achieved without the form, as long as one has a basic orientation toward (or commitment to) those qualities. The Bible, along with reason and experience, may hold a prominent place in shaping the ethic to embrace sex apart from marriage.

LGBTQ+ people who embrace sex apart from marriage have something important to speak into the conversation of making and remaking a faithful sexual ethic for our time. These folks take seriously the pastoral concerns related to asking people to remain celibate or to wait for long swaths of their lives to satisfy their natural appetite for sex. They also take seriously the possibilities for spiritual formation that are a part of having to discern personally and communally when sex is appropriate with every new relationship. In this way, a priority is placed on following the leading of the Spirit and listening to oneself in a way that can restore balance to teachings that have, for many of us, emphasized rigid obedience to external authorities. However, it may be the easiest posture to hold thoughtlessly, simply because it is the posture of the majority culture in the West. One might also take this posture because the alternative options of celibacy and reserving sex for marriage require a very intentional discipline that is uncomfortable, or, some would say, impractical. And others consider it inherently unhealthy to refrain from sex. Still, the reality that more and more people are embracing sex apart from marriage has brought much needed discussion about what constitutes human flourishing and the role of sexual pleasure in that flourishing.

## FOR REFLECTION

1. In your view, how does embracing sex apart from marriage correspond to the Christian story?
2. What potential does embracing sex apart from marriage have for vulnerability, doing no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, sexual justice, and concern?
3. How does embracing sex apart from marriage accord with our embodied humanity and with the countercultural nature of the Gospel?
4. In what ways is the practice of embracing sex apart from marriage beautiful? What might be some of its pitfalls?

## Nonmonogamy and Polyamory

Nonmonogamy represents another major posture that some LGBTQ+ Christians are now exploring. Nonmonogamy as a framework involves simply rejecting the idea that monogamous, exclusive relationships provide the only appropriate context for sex. While people who hold this view usually do not advocate against monogamy, they may view nonmonogamy as working against assumptions that sex

entitles one to at least a degree of control over one's partner.<sup>11</sup> The central proposition of nonmonogamy is that sex need not occur within an exclusive relationship to promote the flourishing of both people involved. Additionally, in nonmonogamous relationships, commitment is understood on different terms. Since nonmonogamy represents a whole host of sexual activities, each of which deserves its own consideration, here we will focus on polyamory, as it is likely to be the next practice that churches consider and discern over the next decade.

Polyamory is a term that was coined in 1992 which means “many loves.”<sup>12</sup> It is the view that a person may ethically relate romantically, sexually, or both romantically and sexually with more than one other person at the same time as long as all involved are consenting. “Commitment in polyamory doesn't mean commitment to sexual exclusivity,” explain authors Franklin Veaux and Eve Rickert. “Instead, it means

## **THE BIBLE, ALONG WITH REASON AND EXPERIENCE, MAY HOLD A PROMINENT PLACE IN SHAPING THE ETHIC TO EMBRACE SEX APART FROM MARRIAGE.**

commitment to a romantic relationship, with everything that goes along with that,” they continue.<sup>13</sup> To put it another way, polyamory requires commitment to the needs of a person rather than to a particular framework of relating with others. Polyamorous configurations can work in a variety of ways. There may be a primary relationship, with one or both primary partners involved in secondary relationships. There may be a network of relationships in which people intentionally build a larger community to care for and connect with one another. Celibate and asexual people may enjoy this way of relating because, in polyamory, a sexual relationship and a romantic relationship need not be conflated.<sup>14</sup> Thus, a celibate or asexual person may seek the benefits of romantic relationship and community that polyamory can offer.

Polyamory is not new. The Oneida community in 19th century Ohio and the Bloomsbury group in early 20th century England provide just two examples of communities that intentionally embraced polyamory.<sup>15</sup>

11 Franklin Veaux and Eve Rickert, *More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory* (Portland: Thorntree Press, 2014).

12 Hardy and Easton, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love*. Veaux and Rickert, *More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory*.

13 Veaux and Rickert, *More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory*, 8.

14 Janet W. Hardy and Dossie Easton, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love*.

15 Hardy and Easton, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love*.

Still, while it is not new, it is the least mainstream of our four postures. For that reason, polyamorous people often remain closeted because they hope to keep custody of their children, to keep their jobs, and even to keep their apartments. For LGBTQ+ Christians, the social cost of polyamory may be even higher. Because of the often knee-jerk reaction to polyamory, it has often been dismissed as a topic not worthy of theological discourse. Still, Christians are beginning to point to the way in which it may promote the Gospel values of community, sharing, abundance, mutuality, and boundary-breaking love.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the Bible is coming more into view as an ethical source for polyamorous Christians. Reason and experience are other sources to which polyamorous Christians appeal. Long time polyamorous writers Jane W. Hardy and Dossie Easton have this to say: “There is nothing that can be achieved within a long-term monogamous relationship that cannot be achieved without one. Business partnership, deep attachment, stable parenting, personal growth, and care and companionship in old age are all well within the abilities” of the polyamorous person.<sup>17</sup> While polyamory, like all of the postures, can be engaged in for problematic reasons—to fix a relationship or to add variety in a way that objectifies partners, for example—it also offers ground for rich reflection. What does it mean to express our sexuality in ways that do not presuppose control or ownership? What would it mean if we all had in our relationships the commitment to communication and truth-telling that polyamorous people often maintain? How might our relationships be transformed if they were rooted in a sense of abundance, a sense that there is enough love, romance, and sexual pleasure for everyone?

## FOR REFLECTION

1. In your view, how does polyamory correspond to the Christian story?
2. What potential does polyamory have for vulnerability, doing no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, sexual justice, and concern?
3. How does polyamory accord with our embodied humanity and with the countercultural nature of the Gospel?
4. In what ways is the practice of polyamory beautiful? What might be some of its pitfalls?

## Hospitality: From Exclusion to Inclusion

As you read and hopefully took time to sit with the brief explanation of each ethical posture, you may have felt some discomfort. One or more of the possible sexual expressions may have seemed distasteful or offensive to your conscious or unconscious sensibilities. I would encourage you not to leave these feelings of “ick” unexamined. Set aside some time to be curious about why such visceral feelings arise in you. Jesus confronted a variety of sinful ways of living, but I can find no instance where

16 Brian G. Murphy (co-founder of QueerTheology.com, author and instructor of Christianity and Polyamory) in discussion with the author, July 2019.

17 Hardy and Easton, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love*.

his primary motivation is driven by a sense of “ick.” To the contrary, Jesus was always exploding the boundaries between what was considered clean and unclean in the faith of His people. Moreover, not allowing discomfort to be the most significant factor in what we consider ethical is the first step toward a generous hospitality to ourselves and others. This does not mean that we ignore what makes us uncomfortable or accept for ourselves positions that we personally discern as less than faithful to our beliefs or ideals. It does mean, though, that we take up the call to radical hospitality with intention, cultivating the vulnerability, humility, availability, and awareness of reciprocity that such a hospitality requires.<sup>18</sup> As Henri Nouwen discusses the heart movement from exclusion to inclusion, he sagely writes that, “real hospitality is not exclusive but inclusive, requires a radical openness, and creates space for a wide range of human experience.”<sup>19</sup> We commit to love those who do not meet our criteria for faithfulness. We respect others as those responsible for their own lives before a gracious God just as we are. Particularly as LGBTQ+ Christians, we resist new fundamentalisms. Like all movements of the heart, this one can take a long time and include many regressions. Still, we are a part of a great communion of riotous variety across time and space which has held as primary symbols a cross and table. The cross helps us remember that we are to allow ourselves to be led to places where we would rather not go, and which mean for us a kind of death. The table reminds us that we are lovingly beckoned to boundary-breaking connection with all who are created in the image of God and that we are lavishly welcomed at a feast of resurrection that heals all our woundedness and division.

18 Emma Justes, *Hearing Beyond the Words: How to Become a Listening Pastor* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2006).

19 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 91.





# An Invitation to Discernment

It is now time to begin to choose a life. You and I have been sitting in this boat together for days, for weeks, or for months. Hopefully, you accepted the invitation to truly dive deep. It may have felt like an endless descent, and you may have discovered in yourself whole new geographies of anger, fear, or sadness. But if you have made the journey with care—doing the work of following the faintest of footprints over here, and exploring unexpected valleys over there—then you will now see more clearly “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, having to swim between the “damage that was done” and “the treasures that prevail” is also an invitation to discernment.<sup>2</sup> “Nothing can spare us the torment of ethical decision,” writes John Bradshaw.<sup>3</sup> “Ethical decision,” he notes, “is an uncertain and ultimately a creative act.”<sup>4</sup> Reflection by itself is not enough. The creativity that ethical decision demands requires courage and trust. We do always “see through a glass darkly,” and in order to decide wisely the most faithful option we must accept this reality.<sup>5</sup> In addition, we must accept that “every vocation is always accompanied by a renunciation,” as Winner puts it.<sup>6</sup> To choose one path is likely to close off other paths. Yet such a commitment will be a further step in our formation as followers of Christ.

We are called to take the risk of stewarding our erotic selves with creativity, believing that the one who has entrusted us with sexuality is not harsh, but one who graciously invites us to an active responsibility. We proceed, deliberately aware of which sources of authority bear the most weight on our decisions, whether Scripture, Church tradition, reason, or experience. We open ourselves to the feedback of the community—to our pastors, therapists, and friends. Still, after the journey is done, the decision will be yours. I can only pray that you begin to write a better story with the pen of a clear-eyed honesty unshakable in your hand, and the song of “Do not be afraid” ringing steadily in your ears. And I can only pray that together, we as LGBTQ+ Christians can live the questions and the mystery and the tension with faithfulness, persisting because, as Carl Jung once said, we would “rather be whole than good.”<sup>7</sup>

1 Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck,” 566.

2 Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck,” 566.

3 Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, 3.

4 Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, 3.

5 I Corinthians 13:12

6 Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, 140.

7 Carl Jung quoted in Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, 281. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [1934] 1954).

## For Reflection

1. Which postures left you with a feeling of “ick”? Why might you have had such a knee-jerk reaction?
2. What are some practical ways that we can commit to love those with whom we disagree on sexual matters?
3. In your journal or with a small group, explore in your own life “the damage done” and “the treasures that prevail.” With these in mind, describe the better story that you hope to write with your personal erotic and sexual self-expression.
4. Listen to the song “New Law” by Derek Webb. Spend time in prayer reflecting on the ways in which you would rather belong and be safe rather than be transformed.
5. Set aside a bit of time each day for a week to move through the Ignatian spiritual discernment process outlined in Appendix 3. Frame the question based on what feels most pressing to you having completed the guidebook. Include at least one trusted pastor, therapist, or member of your spiritual community in this process.





# Appendices

## Appendix 1

### For Eros<sup>1</sup>

by John O'Donohue

When you love,  
May you feel the joy  
Of your heart coming alive  
As your lover's gaze  
Lands on your eyes,  
Holding them,  
Like the weight of a kiss,  
Deepening.

May the words of love  
Reach you and fluster  
Your held self,  
The way a silhouette of breeze  
Excites a meadow.

When you are touched,  
May it be the gentleness  
You desire,  
Your lover's hands sending  
Each caress deep into your skin  
Like a discovering glance.

May slow sequences  
Of kisses discover  
Your secret echoes.

May your desire flow free  
And never be fettered  
By the thorn-chains  
Of old guilt  
Or crippled touch.

May you feel  
How your soul loves  
When your skin glows,  
And your eyes darken  
When promise ripens.

In the gaze of your lover,  
May you see clearer  
In the mirror  
Of your own being.

May the silences  
Be spaces where you  
Can gather swiftly,  
At ease with all  
The subtle complexity.  
May you be able to listen  
To your lover's heartbeat  
And think only of the joy  
You can awaken.

May you be able  
To let yourself fall  
Into the ocean rhythm,  
Unfolding ever more.  
Until you become

One crest of wave,  
Rising into wild foam

Whose beauty will show  
In the graceful sweep  
Of its home-breaking.

1 O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, 27-29.

## Appendix 2

### **A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance<sup>1</sup>**

A Meditation by Henri Nouwen

Jesus came to sing a dirge and say: “Cry with me.” Jesus came to play a pipe and say: “Dance with me.” There is a secret place in us where the Spirit brings new life. There is a creche where the Child is born in you. There is the broken soil of your soul where the seeds can grow in you. The Spirit of God within us says: “There is a time to mourn and a time to dance.” The Spirit of healing that makes us mourn is the same Spirit that makes us dance. The mystery of the dance is that its movements are discovered in the mourning.

#### **A Time to Mourn**

Mourn, my people, mourn. Let your pain rise up in your heart and burst forth in you with sobs and cries. Mourn for the silence that exists between you and your spouse. Mourn for the way you were robbed of innocence. Mourn for the absence of a soft embrace, an intimate friendship, a life-giving sexuality. Mourn for the bitterness of your children, the indifference of your friends, and the hardness of heart of your colleagues. Mourn for those whose hunger for love brought them AIDS, whose desire for freedom brought them to refugee camps, whose hunger for justice brought them to prisons. Cry for the millions who die from lack of food, lack of care, lack of love... Cry for freedom, for salvation, for redemption. Cry loudly and deeply, and trust that your tears will make your eyes see that the Kingdom is close at hand—yes, at your fingertips!

#### **A Time to Dance**

To heal is to let the Spirit call us to dance. Can you feel the freedom that rises up in you when you have been stripped naked and have nothing to inhibit your movements anymore? You can dance as David danced in front of the Ark. Can you notice in your innermost being the joy of living that comes from having nothing left to lose? Can you see the soft, beautiful smile that appears in the tearful eyes of your mourning friend? Jesus enters into our sadness, takes us by the hand, pulls us gently up to where we can stand, and invites us to dance. And as we dance, we realize that we don't have to stay on the little spot of our grief but can step beyond it into unknown, spacious territory, until we finally know that the entire world is our dance floor. Yes! Leave—leave your father, mother, brother, sister, friend; leave your nets—and you will have many fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and friends; all the world will be yours, and you will catch people wherever you dance.

1      Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 54-55.

# Appendix 3

## Ignatian Spiritual Discernment

(Excerpted from *50 Ways to Pray*)<sup>1</sup>

### Intention

To seek God's desire for us in a given concrete, life situation.

### The Exercise

- *Prepare.* Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed as you enter this adventure with God. Have a journal on hand to write your reflections or jot down your thoughts. Light a candle and begin this process with a prayer, asking God to open your mind and heart to God's desires. Ask for honesty of heart, and inner freedom from any destructive habits.
- *Desire to follow God's leading and be indifferent to all else.* Ask God to help you become indifferent to anything that is not of God. This does not mean you are uninterested in the outcome of your discernment, but it means you are willing to leave the outcome in God's hands. If you feel you cannot find in yourself this place of "holy indifference" to the outcome, then express to God your desire to be open to God's leading, saying something like, "Lord, help my lack of indifference."
- *Frame the question.* Name the issue you wish to discern. It should be a concrete and concise question. Questions that are most helpful are those that can be answered yes or no (as in "Should I start to look for another job?") or those for which you can list realistic and concrete choices. Your question may change over time in discernment. Write out your question and sit with it in prayer. Pay attention to any insight, emotion, or felt body sense that arises in you.
- *Look at the question rationally.* First, list two or three choices that would answer your question. Make a list of pros and cons for each choice. Gauge at this point which choice you are leaning toward. How does each choice feel after considering the pros and cons? Weigh your lists. Which pros and which cons feel more important than the others? Make a tentative choice before moving on to the next step.
- *Look at your life situation.* The tentative choice you made will affect the context of your life. How will this decision affect your family? Your lifestyle? How is your circle of friends affected? How does the choice fit into your personal spiritual journey? What image of God pervades as you consider this issue? What is the background history of the issue under consideration? What are the facts at hand? Now that you have spent some time with this choice, hold it in the light of your desire to follow God. Notice how free or unfree you feel as you imagine yourself pursuing this choice. At this time, do you want to go back and consider other choices? If so, do that now and proceed with a new tentative decision.

<sup>1</sup> Teresa A. Blythe, *50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Traditions and Times* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2006), 73-76.



- *Look at your beliefs and values.* When you think about your choice, how are your personal and spiritual values honored? What “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22) is evident? Is the choice in accord with the Biblical witness? Does this choice increase your generosity, openness to others who are different, your self-esteem? Does this choice allow you to love as Jesus loved?
- *Listen to your intuition.* Imagine your thoughts dropping down into the center of your being and becoming very still. Listen to your breath for a few minutes. Now, allow any images to emerge freely for you. Does any image predominate? In what way does this image relate to your choice? What is your gut feeling about the path you have chosen? As you ponder your options, what is your present body language? How does your body feel? Can you identify a felt sense within your body that is related to this choice? After listening to your intuition and to any images or bodily senses that emerged, do any new ideas or choices emerge?
- *Use your imagination.* Imagine yourself living out the choice you are most leaning toward at the moment. Then, imagine taking a different course. Which feels more right? More free? In which choice did your body feel relaxed and energized?
  - Imagine that you are very old and looking back on this decision. What will you wish you had done?
  - Imagine that your best friend came to you with a similar question and was leaning toward a similar choice. What would you advise?
  - Imagine that you are explaining your decision to the wisest person you know. What do you imagine they would say to you?
- *Examine your consolation and desolation.* As you continue to test the option you are leaning toward, examine it to see if you are feeling more consolation or desolation:
- *Consolation.* A mostly positive movement of the heart (even in the midst of grief or longing); an increase in faith, hope, and love; inner and lasting peace; joy; an inner knowing that encourages, supports, and enlivens your decision. Consolation generally draws you closer to God.
- *Desolation.* A mostly negative movement of the heart (even in the midst of good fortune or excitement); a turning away from faith; a restlessness, heaviness, or anxiety; an inner knowing that discourages, calls into doubt, or dulls the energy around your decision. Desolation generally makes you feel far from God.
- *Make your decision.* Based on all you have experienced in the questions and tests of this process, make a decision. Notice your immediate reaction. Is it one of consolation or desolation? You may choose not to act on the decision right away, testing to see if your feelings and thoughts remain the same for a few days. At some point, though, you must act on faith on the decision you have made.
- *Test the decision.* How does the decision feel after taking action on it? Do you have energy to live it out? Are you feeling more consolation or desolation? Does your decision fit with the law of love that Jesus calls us to? How have the people in your life responded to the decision? What “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal.5:22) have you noticed? Do you feel closer to God or farther from God as a result of taking action on your decision? If, after testing the decision, you believe it not to be a call from God, do not panic. This is a time for ongoing discernment. Do you need to adjust your decision?



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