



ELCIC

*In Mission
for Others*

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Study of Human Sexuality

Session 7: **SPIRITUALITY**

Sexuality and Spirituality

Gathering prayer

God of grace, you have given us minds to know you, hearts to love you and voices to sing your praise. Fill us with your Spirit, that we may celebrate your glory and worship you in spirit and truth, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.¹

Hearing the word

Read Romans 12:1–8

Considering the word

Silence

Reflection and Discernment

- What did you hear?
- Is there a word of God for us?

Sexuality and spirituality

Humankind is created in the image of God; male and female are created in the image of God.² From the very beginning there is something about being male and female that invites us into pondering God and our relationship with the Holy One. Some might say that “sexuality and spirituality” is a topic that has not often been explored. Others may say they have studied or reflected on this topic, and might name helpful resources. This session invites participants to explore some connections between sexuality, spirituality, faith and discipleship.

“Spirituality” is a word that can mean different things to different people. For the purposes of this study, spirituality means “matters regarding the soul, especially as acted upon by God; the unifying centre of life’s various dimensions, especially as considered in relationship to God.” Christians confess to know God as the holy Trinity. Like sexuality, spirituality is a personal matter that is integral to our self-understanding, identity and personhood. Various individuals will have a variety of images and practices that are helpful in nourishing spirituality. Participants are invited to take a fresh look at the topic of sexuality and spirituality, recognizing the rich variety of ways that people might articulate their relationship with God.

¹ EvLW, Page 72

² Genesis 1:26-27

DISCUSS

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What comes to mind when you hear “Sexuality and Spirituality?”

Trusting God in all things

The apostle Paul’s appeal to offer “a living sacrifice” is one example of an appeal to submit the whole self to the ways of God. “A living sacrifice” is an oxymoron. In the apostle Paul’s world, a sacrifice was about killing an animal on an altar. If the sacrifice stays alive, it is not a sacrifice. The fullness of God’s being, grace and love are beyond description; sometimes metaphors can draw us into deeper contemplation of our relationship with God. The emotions, surprises and confusion of metaphors capture our attention, causing us to wrestle more deeply with the indescribable truth they seek to reveal.

“Justified by grace through faith” is an invitation to evangelical awareness that God loves each person holistically; in all the dimensions of being. Sexuality is an important dimension of our personhood and our identity. Jesus reminds us that the First Commandment is to *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*³ In Romans 12, “body” and “mind” are both metaphors for the whole self. Offering our bodies as living sacrifices is an invitation to offer our whole self to a life of faith and discipleship. There is a dying in this sacrifice; it is the dying of the self as led by human individuals. And there is living in this sacrifice, because each one gains the self as led by Christ. Being transformed by the renewing of our minds is an invitation to offer all our perceptions, actions, choices and relationships to a life in harmony with the spirit of Christ. Some will describe this as a call to deny all that is sinful in life and in the world, including that sin in us which resists Christ’s kingdom. Ultimately, we need Christ’s help to deny ourselves and to offer ourselves. Faith enables discipleship; and God enables faith through the Holy Spirit.

Father and creator

The creator of heaven and earth has made sexuality a sustaining force for all life on the planet. At creation, God commands birds, fish and people *to be fruitful and multiply.*⁴ For human beings, God commands sexuality to be more. This includes procreation, family, companionship, and joy. Moreover, God says to males and females you are created in the image of God. To look at another human being is to be reminded of the one who creates all that is. Claiming the sacredness of bodies, minds, hearts and spirits is a way of honouring the creator, and a way of staying connected to God’s purposes. “Our sexuality is linked to vitality, playfulness, spontaneity, delight, wonder, celebration, procreation and creativity of all kinds, a profound affirmation of life. To deny a person’s sexuality is to put a lid on energy and life.”⁵

³ Mark 12:29–30

⁴ Genesis 1:22,28

⁵ Niloufer Harben, “Dancing Towards the Light: Some Perspectives on Sexuality and Spirituality,” *In God’s Image: Journal of Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology*, vol. 20:3 (2001), p. 14. Quoted in the LWF Tenth Assembly Study Book *For the Healing of the World*, Part III G. “Justice and Healing in Families”, Page 191–202. www.lwf-assembly.org/study.html

When preaching in Athens, Paul affirms that in God *we live and move and have our being*.⁶ For nine months, a child grows surrounded by, connected to, and dependent upon its mother. You might say that we live out our entire existence in the womb of God: surrounded, connected and dependent.

In a poem called “Bodies A Dwelling Place of The Reign of God,”⁷ Vera Roth celebrates the meaning of being created in the image of God:

I, we, you with me,
Were created as was our bodies
Imbued with a fighting spirit and full of dreams,
Seeking the way to our place on earth,
Side by side with our fellow women and men
In the Image of God
.... and that is good!
And it is also good,
When we discover this
Your, my, our body;
Its contours; its scars,
Its mysteries and pleasures
When we discover that
We live in it, sometimes free,
Sometimes as prisoners;
And that through it,
In equality with other bodies,
We can give expression to the reign of God.
We can begin, here and now
We can, in you, in me,
In us in the family, in the community
Make real the possibility of a healthy life,
Without so many tears and barriers.
A life of shared bread, open arms, embraces,
Doing on earth what you do in Heaven.

As creator, God blesses us with life’s various dimensions, such as body, mind, sexuality, family, society, economics and nature. Some would describe spirituality as the unifying centre of these various dimension; a place in our soul where we are deeply aware of God as the source of all that we are and all that we have.

DISCUSS

- What does being created in the image of God mean to you?
- What does God being the creator of sexuality mean to you?

⁶ Acts 17:28

⁷ *Women Magazine*, July 1, 2003 The Lutheran World Federation, Vera Roth, Brazil, Regional Coordinator, WICAS, LWF.

- What comes to mind when you reflect on sexuality, spirituality and faith in God the Father and creator?

Lord Jesus Christ

The sacred drama of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us is additional affirmation of our existence as sexual creatures. Jesus is born of a woman, and in taking on flesh reminds us that our bodies are a good and valuable part of who we are. His forgiveness reminds us that everything that separates us from God is removed, so that we can know God's love in all its fullness.⁸

Sexuality is a powerful force deeply intertwined with human identity. As in all other dimensions of human existence, sexuality is tainted by sin and no longer truly reflects God's intentions for creation.⁹ Sin's distortion of sexuality needs to be redeemed through faith in Christ. Some would articulate this by saying that a surrendering of our sexuality to Jesus, and obedience to him through the Spirit's power, is essential to the restoration of sexuality's goodness. Some would describe times when there is a deep need for God's healing in matters of sexuality and of spirituality.

Some people might explore biblical images in considering the connections between sexuality and spirituality. For example, in Luke, a woman anoints Jesus' feet. The woman's tears fall on his feet and she dries them with her hair. She kisses his feet and rubs ointment on them. All this happens in the middle of a dinner party, and some of those gathered signal their offence. They are uncomfortable with the overt display of affection and with the woman's reputation. But Jesus accepts the woman's gift.¹⁰

Some might consider this woman touching Jesus feet to be an image of prayer. She approaches him in a spirit of devotion, humility and need; and she offers honour, respect and praise. The crowd is displeased with the whole situation. Jesus sees past the history and the style and what others think. He focuses on his relationship with the woman, her need for grace, and her choice to serve. Jesus invites the dinner guests to look at the woman from a new perspective, and he tells the woman that she is forgiven. In the process, the crowd's concern shifts from sexuality, to authority, to forgiveness. Perhaps a grace scandal is even more enticing than a sex scandal!

Using images from sexuality to describe the divine-human relationship has a long tradition. In the book of Revelation, the church is described as the "bride" of the "Lamb," where the Lamb means Christ. Paul compares the relationship between Christ and Church to that of husband and wife.¹¹ While clear husband-over-wife power structure of first-century Roman social order does not easily translate into twenty-first century covenant between equal parties, the image of the divine-human relationship being intimate, all encompassing and steadfast remain relevant.

⁸ Romans 8:31–39

⁹ Some Biblical examples that might be considered in expressing God's intention for creation are: Genesis 2, Ephesians 5, Matthew 19, sixth commandment, Matthew 5.27ff.

¹⁰ Luke 7: 36–50

¹¹ Ephesians 5:21–33

Similarly, Christian mystics have used sexual imagery to describe the intimacy of divine visions. For example, Catherine of Siena had a vision of Jesus marrying her, having heard Jesus say:

*Since for love of me you have forsaken vanities and despised the pleasures of the flesh and fastened all the delight of your heart on me. I have determined to celebrate the wedding feast of your soul and to espouse you to me in faith.*¹²

Some contemporary music carries on this tradition, in songs such as “I Keep Falling in Love with Him Over and Over Again,” by Lanny Wolfe, “You Light Up My Life” by Debbie Boone, or “I Keep Falling in Love with You, Lord” by Scott Haslem. Such music and metaphors are a matter of taste. Bud Bultman once referred to some of this music as “Jesus-is-my-girlfriend” songs. On the other hand, it is a phenomenon that is seeking to express a closeness and devotion to God.¹³

Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour connects with our souls in multiple ways. Our faith in Christ keeps us connected to his many gifts.

Discuss

How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?

What comes to mind when you reflect on sexuality, spirituality and faith in Christ?

Holy Spirit: comforter and advocate

The Holy Spirit is active, giving the gifts of faith and transformation. The power of Christ keeps working on us: increasing our knowledge of grace and sending us to share God’s love with the world. In Hebrew and Greek, the words for “spirit” are deeply related to the words for “wind” and for “breath.” In Genesis 2:6, the human race comes to life when God puts the breath of life into the creature formed from the ground. In a sense, it is a kiss from God that brings us into being and gives us God’s spirit. Each time we take a breath, we can be aware that God’s spirit is what keeps us alive.

Similarly, in John 20:19–23, the resurrected Christ breathes on the disciples. It may or may not be a kiss, but it is a ritual act involving profound closeness. In that moment, the Church receives the spirit of Christ, and the Church comes to life in order to be in mission. *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*¹⁴ These are gifts that breathe life into relationships and community. The Spirit gives us the faith to offer our bodies as living sacrifices and to be transformed continuously by the renewing of our minds. The Spirit seeks to move us ever closer to faithful discipleship, including faithfulness in matters of sexuality. The Spirit unites us to be the body of Christ. The Spirit calls us into mission for others. The Spirit begets faith. Out of this trust in God, we are invited day after day to encounter the redeeming power of Christ.

¹² John Michael Talbot with Steve Rabey, *The way of the Mystics*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, Page 86.

¹³ John R. Howard and John M. Streck, *Apostles of Rock*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999.

¹⁴ Galatians 5:22–23

Faith enables discipleship; and God gives the gift of faith through the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther wrote:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth...¹⁵

As we seek to make sense of ourselves and God's complex world, we trust that the Holy Spirit is active among us, moving us along to become the disciples God calls us to be.

DISCUSS

What comes to mind when you reflect on sexuality, spirituality and faith in the Holy Spirit?

The Arts

Some would say that the arts help express God's relationship with the world, body and soul. There is a long tradition of the use of arts in worship and ministries. To name but a few examples, one might think of the architectural design of your favourite worship space, a painting of Jesus, the music played as a bridal party enters the church, a nativity scene, a poem that inspires you, a hymn sung on Good Friday, or a story that moves you. The work of artists in the wider society often reflects the human condition and spiritual quests of the human soul; some disciples find such art helpful in understanding self, context and God's redeeming work.

To reflect on one example, consider William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; a classic piece of English literature. As lovers, the characters of Romeo and Juliet are beautifully obsessed with each other. Their descriptions of their love, and their longing for each other during times of separation, poetically capture the sheer wonder and utter distraction of romance. Unfortunately, Juliet's family (Capulet) and Romeo's family (Montague) are sworn enemies; even to the point of brawling in the streets. Neither family will approve their marriage, so Romeo and Juliet find ways to get together, get married secretly, and form a plan so they can run away together. Alas, all their plans are foiled, not only by the families, but also by fate. Both lovers end up dead.

In one sense, the play is a pointed critique of the notion that "love conquers all." Romeo and Juliet strive to rise above, or move outside, their family histories and hatreds, but other forces continue to undermine their love. Even the well-intentioned efforts of the pastor/bishop ultimately contribute to the tragedy, instead of saving the lovers. To watch the play is to be painfully aware that our fate is not in our own hands. The lovers only wish to be together, but they remain entangled in a wider network of relationships and cannot escape by themselves the context created by their families. The play also draws attention to the way that hatred, violence and prejudice can destroy a beautiful gift of love.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, EvLW, page 1162.

Some would say that sexuality and spirituality are explored through art precisely because they are a mystery. A piece of art, such as this play, is intended to help us explore and challenge perceptions about the meaning of life. It may be truer today than when the play was written that couples are tempted to think “my love and I are all that matter; our choices and need to be together affect no one else.” And it is just as true today that our inability to move past our biases and hatreds can have tragic results for others as well as ourselves. Even beautiful relationships and love may be destroyed in the process.

The Bible

Some would say that biblical stories and images play the role of art in helping us to explore the mysterious complexities of being human, surviving life, and seeking the holy. The Bible offers artistic insight AND MORE, because the stories are sacred; they are Word, they are means of grace, and they have the potential to carry the presence of God into our midst. Frequent encounters with the Bible help us to understand our lives and the world.

Sexuality is an important element in a drama, and the sacred story is no exception. God’s covenant is carried through particular families. As such, the marriages, affairs, births, adoptions and family dynamics are important elements of the sacred story. A couple’s passionate love for each other, body and soul, is celebrated in the Bible by the Song of Solomon. Seeds that die and rise, shoots that grow from stumps, and blooming lilies are images of life reproducing itself. They work as metaphors because they are part of the familiar, natural life cycle, and because we know the importance of this cycle for the well-being of life and the planet. Parables about wedding banquets are effective because we have been to such feasts and because we know they are critical moments in the life of families and communities. On the cross, Jesus continues to be concerned about his mother (John 19:25–27); the bond to the one who gives us life is never broken.

The Bible is remarkably honest about family life. Abraham passes his wife off as his sister, sends a concubine and child into the desert to die, and almost kills his son. The stories about Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, and Joseph and his brothers portray sibling rivalry in all its brutality. Mary and Martha squabble about the best way to serve Jesus, and mourn for their brother to the core of their souls. In their own way, each of these stories reveals God’s grace and faithfulness, and teaches us something about life in family and discipleship. There are more heroic stories as well. Moses and Aaron team up to deliver God’s messages to pharaoh and liberate God’s people from slavery. Ruth, Naomi and Orpah comfort each other in widowhood. David and Jonathan support one another in the face of Saul’s struggle to hang on to power. Elizabeth becomes spiritual director to Mary. Hosea takes metaphors to a whole new level. He marries the prostitute Gomer to prove a point about the nation’s infidelity to God. Clearly, some parts of scripture are much more for information than for imitation. The glory of heaven was not a full enough expression of divine love for the world, so God sent Jesus and turned the whole thing into a drama.¹⁶ We need the drama to enliven our worship, prayer and choices. We hunger and thirst to hear the story often.¹⁷

¹⁶ See John 1, Philippians 2, John 3

¹⁷ See “I Love to Tell the Story”, *EvLW* #661.

DISCUSS

- Do you have a favourite Bible family, character or story?
- Why is this one important to you?
- What comes to mind when you reflect on sexuality, spirituality and the arts?

Prayer

God invites into ongoing conversation. *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*¹⁸ Prayer includes listening to God, trusting that God continues to guide, support, correct and inspire us. Prayer includes talking to God, sharing our concerns, confessions, praise and thanksgiving with God. Prayer includes Word and Sacrament, where we trust that God works to give us grace. People find various methods of prayer to be nourishing. At the heart of prayer is a holy relationship with the one God, who has acted and continues to act through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

*God calls us, through Word and Sacrament, to be disciples and to make disciples. Our discipleship is defined by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.*¹⁹ We pray that in matters of sexuality, our discipleship will demonstrate love for God, and will demonstrate respect and care for neighbour. We acknowledge that sin is a factor in our lives. We also acknowledge that God is faithful and calls us to repentance and forgiveness in the name of Jesus. We pray for transformation, that witness, integrity, community, justice and peace might grow in our lives. Our relationship to Father, Son and Holy Spirit has a power to transform. God's salvation can heal our whole self and the whole world. We pray that we will continue to listen to God in all circumstances.

DISCUSS

- What practice and styles of prayer help you to sense God's connection with you?

Listening to the whisperings of the spirit

Personal reflections:

- What happened for you during this session?
- My insights into my life are. . .
- My insights into life and mission of my congregation are. . .
- My insights into the life and mission of the wider church are. . .
- In light of this session, questions that need to be explored are. . .
- Insights I would like to share with the ELCIC Human Sexuality Task Force are. . .

¹⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

¹⁹ *In Mission for Others: A Theology of Mission*, a mission statement for the ELCIC affirmed by convention in 2007 was originally developed as the *Evangelical Declaration* and affirmed by convention in 1997. www.elcic.ca go to “What We Believe”

Feedback for the ELCIC Task Force (form provided in appendix #1)

- Having considered this session, what observations might help the ELCIC as it develops a social statement on human sexuality?

Closing prayer

Give thanks for: Opportunities to pray
 Artists, poets and musicians
 The God who never gives up on us
 Renewal

Pray for: Those who feel lost and those who yearn for God
 Care, respect and stewardship of creation
 Unity for the church
 Forgiveness and the reign of God to be made manifest

Offer your own prayers: