

Sermon
Christ Church, Cooperstown
Epiphany 2B 2012

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!” I Corinthians 6:15

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last April, Ryan Miosek asked me if I wanted to go fishing with him on the first day of trout season. I said I would love to, but to be honest, I was a little nervous. We’d never been fishing together before, and you see, I’m really not a fisherman. I enjoy fishing. I’ve been fishing hundreds of times. I’ve even caught a few nice ones. But I’m not a fisherman.

Because I didn’t grow up as a fisherman. We had rods in the garage, you know, like everyone else I knew. But it wasn’t our thing. In our family we hunted deer, we played baseball, we told stories and played cards—but we didn’t fish, not seriously anyway. I had lots of uncles and cousins who did, and I was always excited to go along with them on a beautiful spring day. But I never had anyone take me under his wing when it came to fishing. No one taught me what I needed to watch for, how to anticipate what would come next. No one practiced the little steps of the thing alongside me until I got them right. I can sometimes fish very well, but I’m not consistent, and I end up making the kind of little mistakes all the time that you make when you don’t really know what you’re doing.

The night before I went out with Ryan, I went down to Oneonta to buy a fishing license, and I picked up a new reel and some line while I was there. I’d never filled my own reel before, but the guy at Walmart told me I wouldn’t have any trouble, and I read all the instructions. But something went wrong. I tied one knot incorrectly or didn’t pull the line quite tight enough—I’m not quite sure what it was. I ended up with a big mess on my hands. The thing didn’t cast right at all. It was my fault, of course, but it was also what you pretty much would expect for somebody who isn’t that good with his hands and had never really been formed into a fisherman.

The Corinthians had reported to Saint Paul, that things in their little church were pretty much a disaster. On my most frustrating days as a parish priest, I can always give thanks that God didn’t send me to Corinth. There was a staggering amount of disunity: people divided into factions over theological opinions, people arguing over whose spiritual gifts were most important, lawsuits in secular courts, the Lord’s supper made into a disgrace. And yes, there was

sexual immorality as well. It a vice for which the Corinthians, with their mountaintop temple to the goddess of love and their deep harbor full of travelling sailors had long been famous. It had been reported to Paul that one of the men—or maybe a number of the men--had been visiting a prostitute.

Paul doesn't hesitate to address the issue, but I must say, he goes about it rather oddly. He doesn't say, "haven't you ever heard of the seventh commandment, you idiot." "Knock it off, pull yourself together, have some sense about you." So far as I can tell, he doesn't speak directly to the guilty man at all. Everything he says is in the plural, it's addressed this whole divided mess of a congregation. He points them to the deeper reality behind what was happening in that prostitute's bed. That man, together with the rest of them, had become one with Jesus Christ by baptism and faith. They had been incorporated together into Christ, become a part of His body. So that wasn't just one man in a bed with a prostitute—it was one man who was part of all the rest of them—and part of Jesus Christ himself. This illicit sex wasn't just a matter of lust, or infidelity, or foolishness. It was also sacrilege, profaning the body of Christ, His whole people called together to holiness.

The failure wasn't just one man's, it was a failure of all of them together—and it was deeply related to their common division and enmity. The Church in Corinth hadn't formed this man to have sex in a holy way, a bit like I have never been formed to be a fisherman. The failure was his own, but without a vibrant Christian community to train him, support him, and hold him accountable, he didn't really have much of a chance.

Part of what Saint Paul is saying here that we need to be formed by a group of people who follow Christ with us if we want to learn to have sex properly. We're just not bright enough or good enough to get it right on our own. Because having sex in a holy way, at least as the Scriptures understand it, is a complicated thing. There are important ground rules, especially the fact that sex belongs within marriage, where it can strengthen a couple's love and be fruitful in the conception of children. But even within those rules—and outside them too for that matter--it's possible to do things in better and worse ways. Sex isn't just about physical acts, of course. It's about speaking and listening, negotiating power relationships and sorting and directing our desires. It's about the way we do things as well as the things we do. Sexual holiness demands patience, gentleness, generosity, and sacrifice. It needs to be an enacted form of love, Christ-like love, not a means of self-expression or control.

To have sex in a holy way means that each action we take in our relationship with the one we love, each word we say and way we touch needs to fit God's full vision of the one-flesh union. The whole of this part of our lives needs to bend toward God's purpose. Theologian Wendell Berry has it just right when he says we should ask of our sexual acts this question: "Can we imagine this sweetness continuing on through the joys and difficulties of homemaking, the births and upbringing of children, the deaths of parents and friends—through disagreement, hardships, quarrels, aging and death?"¹ That's a crucially important question, and it's almost certainly one we're not going to be able to answer on our own. Because it involves lots of other people, people whose lives will be impacted by the way we have sex, we *shouldn't* try to answer it on our own

We need to understand how other people we trust have made those kinds of decisions: to see examples that can guide us. We need to be able to talk out these choices beforehand, and to be honest about our fears and doubts and temptations with people who we believe can point us in the right direction. We need people who will challenge us when we make the wrong choices, people who will care when we fail, and who will point us toward repentance and forgiveness.

And if we don't have a supportive community gathered around us, well, we're really not equipped to have sex in the right way at all. We're being left adrift, to make up our own rules and habits as we go along. And when the society around us relentlessly hammers in false messages about the meaning of sex, we're not likely to be strong enough to choose well. It's bad enough to try to fish without having been being formed to be a fisherman. Fishing doesn't bring with it the compelling desires, the easy self-deception and the power to harm another so deeply that we find in sex. But when the communities that are meant to guide and train us are divided and indifferent, when they seem to tell us that it doesn't really matter what we do with our bodies, that no one will be looking anyway—then we're really setting ourselves up for disaster.

The faithful witness of the Church in our time and place demands that we get sex right. In this area, if in no other, the world is watching us, and it wants to see if all our talk about knowing Jesus and being strengthened by his grace makes any difference. And the real challenge is that so many of our congregations just aren't strong enough to form each other to do this faithfully. We don't know each other well enough, we don't care for each other or trust each

¹ Berry, Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community. New York: Pantheon, 1993., 165.

other deeply enough. We are not willing to take the risk of talking about things that are hard to talk about, and challenging people about things that are difficult.

About a month before Allison and I were married, my mother hosted a bridal shower for her at the home where I grew up. And while the ladies were eating chicken salad and opening presents, Dad took me out for a drive in the country with a few old guys from our church. Together, the three of them had over a century of married life. And they talked to me about what this new thing in my life would mean for me, how I would need to treat my wife to have a good marriage. There wasn't anything graphic or smarmy in that conversation, and it wasn't half as awkward as you would think it might have been. I left that day knowing that my faithfulness in this marriage that was soon to come mattered deeply to them, that if I found myself confused, they would be ready to help, and if I failed they would hold me accountable. As a woefully inexperienced, overconfident and uncertain young man, that conversation meant an awful lot to me. My father may not have made me a fisherman, but I do think he formed me to be a husband. Can I just say this: if we want half a chance at a faithful use of the gift of sex in the days ahead, we will need a lot more of those kinds of conversations.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.