

“Sex or Jesus?”

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Anne M. Cameron

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Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

How many of you subscribe to the Dallas Morning News? Did you see Wednesday's *Metro* section? Pastor Ed Young of Fellowship Bible got his sermon title into the news headlines, just below the fold. It wasn't just in the newspaper. Apparently he was on T.V. Tuesday evening. He's also on the Internet. Probably by now he's scheduled to be on *Saturday Night Live*. Pastor doesn't really need the publicity because his congregation is upwards of 20,000 people, so it's hard to know what's going on.

What's all the buzz about? Wednesday's headline: "Just do it. Pastor wants married couples to have sex every day for a week."¹ And apparently right now as we worship, Pastor Young is delivering his interpretation of the word of God from a large four poster bed at the front of the huge Fellowship Bible auditorium. He did draw a line of decorum, though. He said he wasn't going to deliver the message in his pajamas.

Apparently there are no unmarried people in his following of 20,000. No singles, no divorced people, no widows or widowers, no teens, no children. No married people with problems. No married couples on the brink of divorce. And I am quite certain there are no gay people, no handicapped people, no people struggling with illness.

Oh, for such a congregation! 20,000 healthy married people with just a bit of ennui in their relationships, but no real issues. Oh, for such a congregation? No thanks.

No thanks. Three reasons.

1. This kind of thing is not about Jesus.
2. It's not about community.
3. It's not real.

Good marketing does not always make for good gospel. Christian marriages do need good advice. But sitting on a bed during a worship service and delivering a so-called sermon that encourages married couples to have intimate relations is not the answer.

This is when I am grateful to be a lectionary preacher. The scripture is chosen from the appointed lessons for the day. The preacher does not get to preach only her favorite texts. The preacher has to encounter most of the Bible, and the preacher has to honor the liturgical seasons set by the church.

Sometimes the appointed scripture texts are difficult. Sometimes they are challenging messages. Sometimes there's a word for us that we'd rather not hear. Good gospel doesn't always make for good marketing.

We are near the end of our church year. Next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday. In two weeks Advent begins the new Christian year. During Advent, we anticipate Christmas. But there is another side to Advent--- we anticipate the coming of the Kingdom. That's Kingdom with a capital K. What we find in the lectionary at this time of year is a look at Kingdom questions, questions of eternity and eschatology. Questions about what happens when all is said and done.

¹ DMN, November 12, 2008 This is his latest in a sermon series called "Leaving Lust (LUST) Vegas." (from the church's website)

The epistle we just heard is part of a short five page letter. This letter was written to the church community². It would have been read out loud in worship. It's a little different than the message in the newspaper headlines. Paul gives thanks for their ongoing faith in his absence (1 Thess 2:13). Paul writes about real concerns of everyday living. Paul even talks about sex. He encourages people to live moral lives, to avoid sexual immorality, and to control lust (1 Thess 4:3ff). Right living is key to the Christian life, and right living leads to hope in Christian death. And of course, Paul writes about Jesus. The Thessalonian church anxiously awaits Jesus second coming. They need some encouragement to hang in there. Paul tells them, basically, "don't worry about the time; the time will come."

One commentary said Paul's letters to Thessalonica help us make sense of faith in the cemeteries of life³. And isn't this what we need? We don't struggle with tough questions of faith when all is well. We struggle with faith when we are scared, when we are confused, when we suffer. When life or death stares us in the face; when we can no longer avoid the cemeteries.

These are the times when we ask big questions.

We wonder "what's the use?" when we hear the grim, unimaginable account of an eight year old boy who murdered his father and another man⁴. We wonder how this could be possible. What kind of darkness reigns?

We wonder whether darkness triumphs when a friend loses a son on the morning of a wedding celebration. It happened to a friend of a friend of someone in our congregation. The groom, his brother, and another guy were out partying. It was the wee hours of the morning on the day of the wedding. There was a bar fight in a parking lot. One of the wedding party was knocked out. Another, a Good Samaritan, came over to help. The angry opponent walked away, got into his Camaro, and proceeded to run them over⁵. Two young men murdered, the brother of the groom and the Good Samaritan. A one year old girl left fatherless. A wedding cancelled. Many lives shattered.

This is the darkness Paul warns against; this is the darkness that faces us squarely where we live. These are the cemeteries of our lives.

The questions that challenge our faith are not the ones posed by some slick message about "the superglue of relationships." The real questions are the ones that knock at our door in the cold, hard realities of life:

Homelessness. Hunger.

² This letter is one of the oldest documents in the New Testament, older than the gospels, written less than twenty years after Jesus was crucified. Go home and read it. It's very short, only about five pages, with footnotes.

³ Roger E. Van Harn, The Lectionary Commentary: Acts and The Epistles

⁴ The child admitted to planning and executing the murders and was in court this past week in Arizona.

⁵ News story reported in www.tulsaworld.com/news

Fear of shrinking retirement savings.

Worries about global terrorism.

Losing a loved one, a job, a relationship, a dream.

Confronting our own death.

I told you this was a difficult word. But we know this word in the cemetery of life is NOT THE FINAL WORD!

We know, because of our faith, there is in the darkness also the promise of light. The promise of a light that shines forth in spite of all the darkness. The promise of a love that will not let us go. The hope of a future **and a present** that is filled with peace and safety. Because when we live with the Lord in our hearts, Jesus will not, Jesus **cannot** surprise us like a thief in the night. When we walk with the Lord every day, we know the kingdom is not just something off in the future, after we die, but something real and tangible and with us here and now. When we wait for the Lord, like watchmen in the morning⁶, we live in peace. There is nothing that can surprise us, no event that can undo us.

God's Kingdom is here, in our faith community. Where all kinds of people gather, the old and the young, the healthy and infirm, the self-assured and the insecure, the insiders and the outsiders. It is here we experience Jesus with skin on. It is here Jesus is enfleshed, made real, here and now. We do not need to worry about the megachurches. Because we have something special right here, right now. And that something special is the Kingdom, rooted in the love of the Lord.

In the great letter of St. Paul to another church at Rome, we are reminded of the assurance of God's presence and the reality of God's Kingdom with us always, no matter what our circumstances, no matter what happens to us. . .

"When we live, we live to the Lord, when we die, we die to the Lord, so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14)

No, it's not very sexy. But it is gospel; it is rooted in the community we share. Graced with our joys and concerns, our struggles and our sorrows. It is Jesus. It is REAL.

⁶From Psalm 103.