

THINKING FAITHFULLY ABOUT SEX AND MARRIAGE

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IT HARDLY NEEDS to be said that as a society, we are both intrigued and challenged by issues of sexuality and sexual expression. “Sex sells,” they say, and if the billboards, magazine covers and television sit-coms provide any accurate reading of the times, “they” are right. It has doubtlessly always been so, but in the current cultural milieu it would seem an all but indisputable fact.

At the risk of oversimplifying matters, the Christian church has tended, at least in its more public manifestations, to fall into two fairly distinct camps. The “conservatives,” emphasizing personal and marital holiness, react to the proliferation of sexual imagery (and to the perceived breakdown of traditional sexual mores) with a critical defensiveness. In this view, sexual intimacy belongs exclusively within the context of heterosexual marriage, where it can be bounded, domesticated and marked by mutual accountability. The culture’s steady diet of sexual imager is destructive of God’s good purpose for a redeemed and sanctified humanity.¹

The “liberals,” on the other hand, have tended to dismiss conservative insights as puritanical and repressive. They will point, rather selectively, to portions of Paul’s teaching on marriage and celibacy, or to Augustine and some of the other church fathers, and argue that a latent gnosticism lies at the heart of the tradition’s inability to find a more affirming and positive place for sexual desire and intimacy. These liberal voices tend to want the church to find a more life and body-affirming anthropology; something more celebratory than what they hear in those voices calling for holiness. While feminist writers have alerted the liberal church to the problems posed by a media and popular culture that seeks to objectify bodies and sexual desire, the drive to *not* be puritanical and to *not* appear to be repressed often makes liberal voices unsympathetic to the deeper call to holiness.

This, of course, is a drastic oversimplification, yet it does tell us something of what is going on. Which churches, for instance, might be found protesting the establishment of an adult video store in the neighborhood? Which churches seem entirely unconcerned with pre-marital sex and common-law relationship within the membership of their congregations? Which churches have difficulty speaking openly about sexual violence or sexual infidelity as issues impacting their own members? And if they do speak, what sort of language is used? Are these issues seen as instances of sin and fragmentation, or as social and relational problems to be solved?

1. Eugene F. Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp 67f. I am indebted to Rogers for his identification of the core concern of the “conservatives” as being one of “holiness.”

A deep challenge for the Christian community is to begin to recognize that both sides of this oversimplified dichotomy hold truth, and each, in its own way, is deficient. Both the call to holiness and the instinct for a celebratory body-affirming sexuality are truthful, yet each holds only part of the puzzle. This paper represents one attempt to wrestle beyond the either/or impasse, and to offer something that takes seriously the place of celebratory and mutual sexual intimacy within the holiness of the people of God. Part of what must be taken seriously in such an exploration is the power of sex. No ecstasy is quite like sexual ecstasy, but at the same time no wound is as cutting as sexual wounding. There is no easy formula to be produced here, because the reality is that we are playing with something more powerful than dynamite. Any theology of sexuality must take that very seriously, and proceed with a profound humility.

A brief tour through the marriage liturgies of the Anglican tradition is instructive. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England (still the recognized and normative prayer book of that church) betrays a fairly deep ambivalence about sex. On the one hand, marriage is upheld in very positive terms:

(Marriage) is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church.²

This framing of marriage as sacramentalizing to us something of the very relationship of Christ and church is key, and will form part of the core of this essay's final theology. The positive frame, however, is quickly and rather starkly qualified:

(It) is not to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding.

"Careful, then, how you think about and experience your sexual desire," is the implied warning offered as the priest begins to outline the causes or purposes of marriage.

- "First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name."
- "Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication: that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body."
- "Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity."

In short, two positive "causes," both either directly or by implication laden with sexual shadings, and one rather more negative purpose. On the positive side, there is the procreation of children, understood unequivocally as a "good," and then this rather wonderful business of "mutual society, help and comfort" which has, in its vision of mutuality and closeness, clear implications for the sexual self. Squeezed between the two is a rather prophylactic cause, that of avoiding fornication. Instructed by Paul ("For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion," 1 Cor 7:9b NRSV), and no doubt influenced by Augustine's dark and fragmented sexual theology, the 1662 prayer book speaks at once to the gift of marital intimacy and to the complexity of sexual desire. It is content to let these two strands stand side by side in striking contrast; one can only wonder what the blushing brides and grooms of the seventeenth century made of their own sexual desires as they heard such words pronounced.

2. *The Book of Common Prayer (and administration of the Sacrament, and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the Use of The Church of England)*, 1662. The citations are from "The Order for Solemnization of Matrimony."

The marriage liturgy of the first Canadian prayer book, authorized in 1918, represented an attempt to reduce both this tension and the starkness of language. The opening lines, which present marriage as signifying the mystical union of Christ and church, are retained, but the phrase about “carnal lusts” and “brute beasts” is gone. The purposes of marriage are maintained, but the order is changed and the language of “avoidance of fornication” is replaced by the phrase, “the hallowing of the union betwixt man and woman.” Insofar as the 1662 liturgy had spoken openly about sex, it had spoken with that plain and cautionary voice; the 1918 liturgy chooses to speak in a far more genteel voice, and ends up speaking of sex in rather euphemistic terms. The Canadian prayer book of 1959/1962, with only minor revisions, follows the text of 1918, and so once again sex is addressed in only the most polite of terms.

This is all quite revolutionized in the 1985 *Book of Alternative Services*.³ The language of “Christ and his Church” is retained, yet somehow softened and downplayed. There is nothing about “mystical union”, and while marriage is named “a means of God’s grace,” the specific language chosen to replace that of “signifying” and “mystical union” seems to downplay the power of sacramental signification:

It is God’s purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love, they shall grow together and be united in that love, as Christ is united with his Church.

The traditional purposes of marriage are restated, and for the first time in its marriage liturgies the Canadian church found itself speaking positively and openly about sex.

The union of man and woman in heart, body, and mind is intended for their mutual comfort and help, that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love (and that they may be blessed in the procreation, care, and upbringing of children).

That the procreation of children has become a bracketed option is telling. Whereas the 1662 liturgy had listed procreation of children as the first purpose of marriage, and the 1918 version had moved it into the second position (following “the hallowing of the union betwixt man and woman,” no less), the *Book of Alternative Services* lists it as the third, and clearly optional, place. This speaks, of course, to the current pastoral realities of remarriage and blended families, as well as to the marriage of older, post-menopausal persons. It also reflects, however, the fact that even younger couples may choose to forge a childless marriage; it reflects this, but neither the liturgy itself nor the introductory rubrics offer any reflection on the meaning of such a monumental shift.

Even more telling, though, is that we can now speak liturgically about sex; that for the first time since we ceased using the 1662 liturgy, the bride and groom might have a moment of blushing. What is more, sex is addressed as an altogether positive thing. There is no indication that it is a mightily powerful, even dangerous thing; it is simply “to know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love.” Where the 1662 liturgy spoke of the avoidance of fornication, the *BAS* speaks only in positive tones. In a very real sense, both liturgical voices are deficient, for neither is able to tell the whole truth. What is required is a liturgy that can speak of marriage and sexuality in a more complete and truthful manner, and for that to occur we need to revisit and reinvigorate our theology of sex; we (and here I mean the whole *laos*, and not just the members of theological commissions...) need a theology that pushes beyond both the liberal/conservative impasse and the entirely deficient sexual ideologies of our popular culture. We require a critical theology of sex that will equip us to begin to live with this powerful thing that is our sexual desire. We need something akin to a celebratory holiness, which might give us a fighting chance to indwell our own desires in all of their power and ambivalence.

3. *The Book of Alternative Services* of the Anglican Church of Canada (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985). The citations are from “Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage.”

St. Paul may seem a strange place to begin, particularly if one has been influenced by the position that says Paul is anti-sex and hard on women. Entire books have been written on Paul's take on women or on body or on sex, and to mount any thorough overview here is well beyond the scope of this essay. However, we do need to give Paul his due: he believes that sex *means* something. Paul understands that sexual desire is a powerful force, and he is unflinching in his call that husband and wife meet each other's sexual needs/rights mutually and non-coercively. These are fairly strong insights from a writer often accused of being anti-sex!

Paul understands that sexual union is unitive at a deeper level; that in sexual intercourse the two become one flesh. His concerns that Christian men not get involved with prostitutes is born not of a prudish moralism, but rather of a theology that says sexual intercourse *means* something, effects something, does something (1 Cor 6:15-16). This is far from a dualism that wants to separate pure spirit from base body; Paul knows that what is done with the body is done by the whole self and has repercussions for the whole self; he also knows that this is peculiarly so with sex. There is a profound ontological dimension to sexual activity. To use the traditional language of sacrament, "it effects what it signifies." Between husband and wife, sexual intimacy can effect and deepen their oneness and their mutuality. With a prostitute, it deepens only the disintegration of the self.⁴

Paul clearly recognizes that he is dealing here with a powerful force. From his eschatological perspective, he is content (or at least seems so) to accept his own celibacy as a gift given by God for a life in the last days of the old order, but he freely accepts the fact that most will not share his contentment. Paul advises people to marry, and to work out their sexual desire in the context of that marriage (1 Cor 7:32f). He quite comfortably accepts the power of female sexual desire, for it is to widows that he writes the aforementioned "better to marry than to be aflame with passion." He quite specifically addresses sexual activity as being the "conjugal right" of both husband and wife, and forbids each from "depriving" the other. (1 Cor 7:3-7) For Paul, sex in Christian marriage cannot be about power; it is not a weapon or a level to be yielded by one to gain something from the other. It is truly mutual.

The questions of power, conjugal rights and mutuality are not, however, so easily resolved in most relationships. I recently heard a radio interview in which a marriage counselor said something to the effect that, "falling in love is like handing someone a loaded gun." A bleaker version comes courtesy of the pop band, *The Pursuit of Happiness*: "Sex is a weapon, but only she's allowed to use it."⁵ Clearly, for all of the cynicism, power and vulnerability are enormous issues in intimate relationships. Even the most mutual of marital sexual encounters has moments both of great empowerment and of deep vulnerability. When trust has been betrayed (and not exclusively sexual fidelity), or when hurt has been inflicted; when one or the other comes to the marriage with some sexual wound or with latent trust issues (second marriages can be powder-kegs here); when, for various reasons one is not comfortable with one's body or one's sexual desire, then there is always a sense that sex is risky ... maybe overwhelmingly so.

4. In his short story, "Transaction," John Updike narrates the tale of a married traveling businessman who, in a sort of mid-life crisis of boredom, impulsively decides to procure the services of a prostitute. Typical of Updike, the story is quite explicit, yet entirely without erotic or sensual appeal. The protagonist, known only as "Ed" (the false name he gives to the prostitute), finds the experience dispassionate, strangely cold and detached from any real desire. After the woman has left his hotel room, "Ed" checks their used condom to make sure it has not leaked. "The rubber held... Good girl. A fair dealer. He had not given her a baby, she had not given him venereal disease. What she had given him, delicately, was death. She had made sex finite." The story quite brilliantly illustrates what lies at the heart of Paul's concern, namely that the problem posed by so-called illicit sex is not so much moral as it is ontological. John Updike, "Transaction," *Problems and other stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1981), p. 131.

5. "Two Girls in One," lyrics by Mo Berg, from *One Sided Story*, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Chrysalis Records, 1990).

In his article on “Sexuality,” R. Paul Stevens makes the suggestion that because the woman “receives the man ... she makes herself extremely vulnerable.”⁶ The male lover, meanwhile, is “directed outward,” and, citing Thielicke, Stevens speculates, “Perhaps it is less total for him.”⁷ There is no question that the woman’s experience of sexual union is different from that of the man, and that the union is experienced from a posture (both literally and figuratively) of reception and openness. There is a real vulnerability in the act of intercourse for the woman, but it is foolish and probably ultimately a bit chauvinistic to claim that there is a “less total” unitive experience for the man. Further, men bear a particular vulnerability in their bodies. Not only are their genitals sensitive organs unprotected by any body tissue or bone, but when are aroused they are so *obvious*. There is no being coy or hiding arousal on a naked male body, and this makes the man more than a little vulnerable to the rejection or disinterest of his lover. Both male and female bear their vulnerabilities on their bodies, and both experience sexual power (among other ways) in the place of vulnerability. “At least one reason for sex being limited to marriage,” writes Stanley Hauerwas,

is that marriage provides the context for us to have sex, with its often compromising personal conditions, with the confidence that what the other knows about us will not be used to hurt us.⁸

It is significant that Augustine’s fairly condemning theology of sex has its origins, at least in part, in his own experience of vulnerability in arousal. It is with his father at the communal baths that a spontaneous erection causes him shame over his whole sense of self.⁹ Later, in *The City of God*, he writes that on account of the Fall,

(Adam and Eve) experienced a new motion of their flesh, which had become disobedient to them, in strict retribution of their own disobedience to God. For the soul, reveling in its own liberty, and scorning to serve God, was itself deprived of the command it had formerly maintained over the body.¹⁰

Augustine felt no end of shame that his penis was beyond the control of his will. Involuntary, physical, sexual arousal, with all of the attendant emotions, was proof positive of the sinfulness of humanity. Had Adam and Eve not fallen, sexual reproduction would have been entirely under the control of the will; arousal at will, with no passion or sense of ecstatic or uncontrolled desire. It would have been a neat clinical act, for the sole sake of procreation.¹¹

6. R. Paul Stevens, “Sexuality,” in Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, eds. *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 881.

7. *Ibid*, p 881

8. Stanley Hauerwas, “Sex in Public,” *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 181.

9. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book II, part 3, translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin Books, 1961).

10. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIII, part 13, translated by Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950).

11. While the notion that sexual intimacy could even be imagined as a passionless act probably strikes us as a complete contradiction, for Augustine it seemed not only an entirely attractive thing, but also a completely reasonable one. In Chapter XIV, part 24 of *The City of God* he writes, “The man, then would have sown the seed, and the woman received it, as required, the generative organs being moved by the will, not excited by lust. For we move at will not only those members which are furnished with joints of solid bone, as the hands, feet, and fingers, but we move also at will those which are composed of slack and soft nerves: we can put them in motion, or stretch them out, or bend and twist them, or contract and stiffen them, as we do with the muscles of the mouth and face.” He goes on from there at some length, and includes the following example to illustrate his point: “Some have such command of their bowels, that they can break wind continuously at pleasure, so as to produce the effect of singing.” While some might read in this a humourless man citing ridiculous examples, it is also possible to read his more unusual examples as being intentionally ironic and playful. For all that he struggled to make sense of his fallen nature, Augustine never renounced a joy in what God has created. Thanks to fellow commissioner Paul Jennings for directing me to this passage.

Such was Augustine's sense of shame over his previous sexual misadventures, and due to a profound sense that his shameful sexual appetite was, at some level, a part only of his sinfulness. As Evdokimov notes,

For the doctor of the theology of original sin, concupiscence, which most strongly reveals that sin, is always mingled with the conjugal act; man is embarrassed about it, but the positive goal of procreation pardons it. The act is a means entirely determined by the end that one has in sight.¹²

In the end, it is risky to psychoanalyze a great thinker from the distance of 15 centuries. What all fuelled his theology of sex is too complex to boil down to one thing, yet this much at least we can say: his experience of his sexual body was one not of power but of shameful weakness, and this experience deeply affected how he lived and what he wrote.

A question that Augustine could never have framed nor answered in positive terms is asked by Eugene Rogers in his *Sexuality and the Christian Body*: "How does the Christian community think God sanctifies and upbuilds it with sexual desire?"¹³ Presuming we can safely set aside Augustine's entirely negative take on desire (which, after all, fails to take seriously even Paul's utilitarian acceptance of sexual intimacy in marriage, to say nothing of the positive renderings of sexuality given in the Old Testament creation stories, in the Song of Solomon, and in other places), where can such a new question lead us?

It leads, in fact, into the prospect of a deep theology of sex and intimacy. How is it that we can think of sexual desire as being "of God," given as a gift to bless and build us both in relationship and in community? Karl Barth offers the surprising statement that, "Because the election of God is real, there is such a thing as love and marriage."¹⁴ God weds Godself to humanity through Jesus Christ, and in so doing God declares Godself to be relational. There is first the inner relational nature of God as triune, as Father, Son and Spirit, caught eternally in the Holy Dance that is the divine life.¹⁵ No dispassionate monad here, the God revealed in the Christian tradition is relational. All of the created order echoes the great dance, and never more than in the life of the creature made in the image of God. If we take seriously our Trinitarian faith, then no Christian — in fact no human — can afford to stand alone. We are in the community of relations, as God is in the Trinity. We echo only impartially, and can convince ourselves that the "I" that I am is self-evident and self-existent apart from the "thou" that is you, or the "Thou" that is God.¹⁶ Betrayed by the Enlightenment, we keep imagining that we dance alone, as self-contained participants in the social contract. Yet "no man is an island," and no one can attain to the fullness of his or her calling to be human so long as island existence is being played out. Not to say that the married life is for all, just that even true hermits are in need of an anchoring community of prayer and accountability.

There is also God's other coterminous relational life to which Barth makes explicit reference. This is "the mystical union betwixt God and his Church," and the recapitulation of humanity through the self-giving life, death and

12. Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), p.p. 24-25.

13. Rogers, p. 18.

14. Karl Barth in Rogers, p. 14.

15. I am particularly indebted here to Baxter Krueger for alerting me to the theology of perichoresis, or mutual indwelling, so central to the Trinitarian thought of the Cappodocians.

16. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958). Buber has been so influential that this work hardly requires a citation. For Christians, though, Buber's work is not altogether complete, as it does not take into account the triune character of God. The doctrine of the Trinity proclaims that our inherent relationality is always poised to move us into a *community* of relations.

resurrection of Christ Jesus. Jesus is God's efficacious declaration that the wedding is on, that the feast is beginning, that we are home free in the unstoppable love affair between God and humanity. We are, as a people, desired by God, and though we have a story of infidelity on our side, we have been romanced home. Our "election" — our being desired, loved, and courted by God — is real, and we hear it echoed, however imperfectly, in our romances and our marriages. Hence desire and sexual intimacy do not just sacramentalize that particular love between *this* man and *this* woman, but also stand as sacraments of the triune God who dances as Father, Son and Spirit, and who dances us home as the beloved.

Never mind, incidentally, which partner is analogous to Christ and which to the gracefully redeemed humanity. Because our desire sacramentalizes both the great desire of God for humanity and the surprising revelation that, once desired, we feel desire, human sexual desire echoes both. Each lover is also the beloved, each also is returning what is first given.

Rowan Williams offers a most helpful insight here,

The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity... The life of the Christian community has as its rationale — if not invariably its practical reality — the task of teaching us to so order our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.¹⁷

"... that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy." What is powerful here is the acknowledgement of the profound and moving impact of *being desired*. The experience of feeling sexual desire and having that met and satisfied is one thing; the experience of *being* desired, and of knowing that as joyous, is another altogether. This, it would seem, is the moment of true mutuality, where to each of the lovers the beloved is their heart's (and mind's and body's ...) sole desire.

To be desired — and to be "cherished" as the old liturgies phrased it — is an extraordinary and formative human experience. This is quite different from being ogled or cat-called, which is to experience oneself as an object of someone's raw lust. To be desired by a beloved is to be recognized by them as a wholly desirable person, as a subject. It is to have some rumour, in your very body, of God's desire for you. It is also to be so taken by the beloved that all fears of being hurt in vulnerability fade, at least for that time.

Meeting, lover to beloved, person to person, in that experience of mutual desire we can risk (again) letting our fears of vulnerability fade, letting the self meld for a time with the other. This is not always or even usually about intercourse. The lightest, seemingly casual, brush of a lover's hand down one's arm or across one's face can be a powerful sacramental sign of being loved, desired, cherished and recognized by this person.

It is a profound insight that one of the Hebrew words used for sexual intercourse, "yada," is most literally translated "to know." The experience of lovers in mutual desire is one of empowerment and vulnerability, in which each is utterly *known* to the other and to the self. This is why after years and years of monogamous marriage lovers can still see the beloved as the most desirable partner on earth. Here desire has two subjects, and no objectified other. Arousal *is* arousal for the beloved, who is a whole embodied person. Asked to choose who is more desirable, the lover of 25 years or the latest *Vogue* magazine super-model, and (perhaps completely surprising to some who have been narcotized by the culture), the beloved is named without hesitation.

17. Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," in Charles Hefling, ed. *Our Selves, our Souls and Bodies* (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1996), p. 59.

This transcendent experience of desire and mutuality is, of course, an ideal. Many will experience this some of the time, a few will be graced to live it virtually all of the time, but most will only have glimmers of it in their own lives. The glimmers are fine; they too are inklings of the divine life, and can be treasured as icons of hope and of promise. Yet we do need to be realistic, and admit that this side of the City of God, we always see as through a glass darkly. More, we will desire and be desired only imperfectly, and sometimes we will turn our beloved into a body object, or we will wield her/his desire as a lever, or we will find ourselves feeling vulnerable and even as shameful as Augustine himself.

“The Bible understands that sexuality is the ultimate arena of cost and joy,”¹⁸ writes Brueggemann, and we too need to know that in our theologies of sex. No wound is quite so deep as a sexual wound, but its close second is the more general relational wounds of betrayal or abandonment or violated trust. Most of us will limp into our marriages with some such wound or a personality quirk or foible, and there will be days when desire will be difficult, both to express and to receive. The self-help books will attempt to correct our thinking, improve self-esteem, or enhance pure technique, but none will heal the wounds, and some such approaches may in fact deepen the sense of alienation. It is all fine and good to read endlessly about how things should be, could be and might be, but if the reader has any experience at all with such books, she/he will realize that the quick fix textbook approach is likely to fail. Besides, one partner might be completely convinced and motivated to follow a book’s advice, but if the other partner does not buy in, what then? The convinced book reader may end up feeling more hopeless, even trapped, in what they see as a one-sided hunger for more. The same, of course, holds for marriage counseling. Further, in a culture that sometimes seems therapy-mad, experts will offer to plumb the depths of your soul to help you fix the problem, but this is far from a guaranteed process and may even form people who are fixated on the self.

This is probably an appropriate point to offer a cautionary word against treating sex too earnestly, making it so fraught with meaning that it all but paralyzes us. Eugene Rogers makes the following observation:

Worried about the sort of idolatry that comes from too high a view of sex and marriage, a friend has complained that “all married couples need is to have a theologian telling them that they should not only expect great sex but *spiritually significant* sex, God help us.”¹⁹

Expecting each sexual encounter to be both technically stellar and ontologically significant is not only idolatrous, it is not a whole lot of fun. “Most of us know,” writes Williams, “that the whole business is irredeemably comic... (with) many opportunities for making a fool of yourself.”²⁰ If intimacy can’t have about it something of play and laughter, but is instead all seriousness and technique, we are doomed to disappointment. In my undergraduate course in child psychology and development, I was taught that children (including the “children” of apes and other primates) *need* to play as they grow and develop; not simply as a way of learning about social interaction, but also to learn something of the self and of the power of imagination. Maybe there is something analogous in keeping our sexual intimacies “playful,” and our readings of them suitably and humbly “comic.”

Not, of course, that our marriage covenants are not matters of gravity. The vows in our marriage liturgies call us to be together through thick and thin,

18. Walter Brueggemann, “Sexuality” in *Reverberations of Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 194.

19. Rogers, p. 212.

20. Williams, p. 58.

... for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish
for the rest of our lives,
according to God's holy law.²¹

There are a whole series of anthropological and sociological theories as to the source of the tradition of taking such vows (many having to do with property rights and the securing of familial lines), yet from the church's perspective perhaps the strongest reason is that we need at least a life-time to make our way through this stuff. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13 NRSV), which, as Charles Williams pointed out, may have more to do with the habits and disciplines of a lifetime than with a single self-sacrificial act:

Many men (sic) have exhibited their will of life in such a surrender, but many — perhaps more — have exercised among all kinds of hardship a steady tenderness of love besides which the other seems almost easy. The "greater love" is distinguished by the "laying down the life"...²²

The real weight of these life-long vows is in a steady and insistent willingness to be prepared to make *that* sort of surrender. Marital fidelity may have less to do with morality than it has to do with the mutual formation of two people. As Hauerwas puts it,

... we always marry the wrong person. We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being what it is, means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The primary problem morally is learning how to love and care for this stranger to whom you find yourself married.²³

We always face being formed and re-formed in our marriage relationships, and not least of all in our sexual play. The elements of deep familiarity and of deep, yet still elusive, trust and respect are what elevate us to the place where we might actually make love. Free to sleep with anyone and ready to move to a new partner every time things became too risky, people dis-integrate sex from soul; and for all the sex, they never grow up as a lover... or as a beloved. The phenomena often called "serial monogamy" is profoundly limiting in terms of any real development of the "I" that I am in an "I-thou" relationship. In fact, it may well be a recipe for stunted growth. Again, witness the insight of Williams:

In other words, I believe that the promise of faithfulness, the giving of unlimited time to each other, remains central for understanding the full "resourcefulness" and grace of sexual union. I simply don't think we'd grasp all that was involved in the mutual transformation of sexually linked persons without the reality of unconditional public commitments: more perilous, more demanding, more promising.²⁴

21. *The Book of Alternative Services*.

22. Charles Williams, *He Came Down From Heaven* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), p. 114.

23. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Family: Theological Reflections," *A Community of Character*, p. 172.

24. Rowan Williams, p. 63.

Is it possible that sexual desire *is* risky and finally beyond domestication, and as such is almost sure to be experienced as both blessing and curse? That like wine, it can both make the heart glad yet also intoxicate and depress? Again, from the liturgy of the BAS, “that they might *know* each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love.” But when being known is filled with risk, or when acts of love are laden with other meanings and with the politics of the relationship, it is not so easy a thing to feel delight. An adequate theology of sex has first to deal with the reality of human brokenness, and with the fragmentation of ourselves into so many discrete bits. If we come to our marriage beds in truthfulness, we may occasionally be surprised by the dance. To know that we are wounded and may be wounded this night; to know that we have hurt our beloved, and may do so again; to know the power and vulnerability of this desire and its consummation, and to chose again to risk all: this is our hope, and this is our pattern. For in risking all to love us and carry us home to the feast, God risks all. When we muster the courage — again — to die to the fears and games and power — again — “when we are naked and making the clumsy gestures necessary to ‘make love,’”²⁵ there is much more going on than just sex. “The beloved being,” Evdokimov reminds us, “is not a god, but a royal gift, radiating the presence of the Giver.”²⁶ Our marriages, our bodies and our desires, are then finally not for us or for our personal gratification. They are for the other, and ultimately for God.

25. Hauerwas, “Sex in Public,” p. 181.

26. Evdokimov, p. 107.