

(Countryman)

generous God's love is.

The people in our own world who like to wield the Bible as a weapon—they like to claim that they're just reading it all literally. They're not. They pick and choose what they will take seriously, just as Jesus did in this morning's Gospel story. They just prefer not to notice what they're doing. The big difference is that Jesus knew what he was doing and said it straight out.

Jesus wasn't a biblical conservative. But he wasn't a biblical liberal, either. He expected something important from the Scriptures; he expected to be challenged and surprised by God. And he also expected that when you are challenged and surprised by God, some of the details enshrined in the sacred text will be revealed for what they are, as concessions to hardness of heart—and they will have to go.

But how do you decide which ones to discard? That's still the scary question for us, isn't it? Well, you know, this passage does one more thing for us. It actually gives us a principle for making those decisions. I'm going to conclude with that because I hope you will take it away with you.

When Scripture seems to confirm your own hardness of heart, it's wrong. Ditch it, just the way Jesus did. Conversely, when Scripture breaks your world open and makes it bigger and more loving, it is achieving its true goal.

Hang onto that principle. It may not be the whole story, but it's a great place to begin and it will take you a long way. Hardness of heart is a dead giveaway that we've got it wrong. Only generous love can open the door to God's truth.

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## Honoring the Sexual Body - Stephanie Paulsell

If you read the newspapers, you know that the most fiercely fought debates over sexuality in churches these days have to do less with questions of pre-marital sex and more to do with homosexuality and whether churches ought to bless the union of homosexual partners. In recent years we've seen church trials of pastors who have blessed such relationships and the disfellowshipping of churches that have welcomed gay and lesbian Christians into their congregations. To say that the church is struggling with this issue is an understatement. At times we seem to be devouring ourselves over it.

Can the Christian practice of honoring the body help us here? It is, after all, a practice, not a set of doctrines. But can we live as if all bodies are good and then say that some bodies are worthy of condemnation? Can we cherish the discipline of fidelity and then say that it is wrong for some people to live within the bonds of faithful love? Can we insist on the unity of body and spirit and then ask some people to deny their sexuality, to divide an integral part of their identity from their very selves?

The covenant of marriage is one of the finest gifts Christian faith has to offer to those who wish to care for one another, make families with one another, and live in sexual intimacy with one another. Marriage can be an important dimension of the practice of honoring the body, and the practice of honoring the body is indispensable to the flourishing of a marriage. What is crucial is not whether the partners are heterosexual or homosexual. What is crucial is whether there is trust and fidelity, whether vulnerability is shared, and whether a new family formed by covenant is an agent of blessing in the world.

Making a lifetime covenant, speaking a promise one intends to keep in good times and in bad, is a risk for anybody, straight or gay... The daily pressures and responsibilities of life lived in covenant will on occasion threaten to overwhelm. Can the marriage remain a harbor, even in times of stress?...

One of the most famous wedding stories of all is the story of Jesus' first miracle at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-10), the story in which the host runs out of wine at the wedding feast and Jesus' mother urges her reluctant son to keep the party going... The author of the Gospel of John tells us nothing about the bride and groom - they are left unnamed and undescribed. But even though they are ignorant of the miracle taking place, it is the ordinary miracle of their pledging themselves to one another until death parts them that opens a space for all the other miracles of the day. For it is precisely when two people are led by love to make such radical commitments that the boundaries between earth and heaven, between water and wine, seem so transgressable...

When we mark those commitments by sexual intimacy and sexual fidelity, when we devote ourselves to learning to meet the desires of our beloved, and when we teach our beloved to answer our body's longing, we taste one of the sweetest gifts God has bestowed.

*Excerpted with permission from Honoring the Body, Meditations on a Christian Practice (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2002). Dr. Paulsell is one of several speakers at the 2004 Covenant Conference in Chicago.*

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