

**“Sexuality and the spiritual life” a sermon preached in Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on 25 April 2015 by Kerry Enright, Knox minister.**

**The sermon is the second in a series based on Mark Achtmeier’s book *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical’s Change of Heart***

Most Thursday nights I learn Maori at Te Wananga o Aotearoa. Not just a matter of sitting down and absorbing and writing. We begin, as we used to begin at school, with various exercises. One of the first steps is to get in touch with our breathing, with our bodies. Maori culture sees us as whole beings, body, mind and spirit.

In that it is faithful to the Christian faith, and as I said last Sunday night, quite different to the Gnostics who saw the spirit as good and matter as evil. Classical philosophers like Plato described spiritual enlightenment as a process in which the soul rises above the distracting concerns of the body and the material world in order to enter into communion with the pure spiritual essences of ultimate reality. This way of thinking continues today, as people imagine that religion focuses on the higher matters of the spirit, while earthly matters of the body and physical existence occupy a separate and lower plane.

Last week, I talked about how to read the Bible sensibly and thoughtfully. I talked about the importance of keeping the big picture in mind, of looking at the grand sweep of God’s relationship with us, of keeping that in mind as we read particular passages. I spoke about the mosaic and not being caught up with the individual stones.

As we heard read from the book of Genesis, creation is good. Matter is good. We are integrated and whole beings.

Indeed, our existence as women and men is seen as good.

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

So our being created in the image of God is entirely consistent with us being created as women and men. The gift of marriage is seen as a part of God’s good creation.

As God brings every part into being, God sees it is good.

Except, one is incomplete. Human beings are created by God for intimate communion with a partner. “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (2:18)

Note that Adam’s passionate joy comes in response to his recognition that Eve shares the same physical nature with him, bones and flesh. Human beings are created for deep communion with a partner, and because we are creatures possessing both bodies and spirits, this communion is all-encompassing – it involves our physical and bodily natures as well as our spiritual and emotional capacities.

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” And later it emphasises the goodness of this union, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”

The message is absolutely clear – sexuality is a good gift of God. Our bodies are as much a part of our communion as are our spirits and our minds.

The Song of Solomon is a veritable celebration of this communion, and of life lived out before God, and with God.

The Song of Solomon and the book of Hosea and other parts of the Bible, present the idea that God has married human beings, that God has married Israel, and that humankind can be unfaithful to God.

Jesus uses similar imagery. What is going on in this strange, and awkward and foreign imagery?

That the love that binds people together in marriage is like the love that exists in the heart of God, that this love between people is a part of the divine image in people.

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Marriage is designed to help our human love grow into the image of God’s own love for us.

And God’s love for us is expressed in bodily form, in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. The eternal Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.

This is expressed in a bodily way in this meal – “This is my body given for you”, Jesus said to his disciples.

What about single people?

All of this feels like it discriminates against people who are not married.

The most telling valuing of singleness, is Jesus himself. Jesus was single. Here is the epitome of humanity, the fullest expression we know of the nature of God, of divine being – he was single.

Marriage is not more valued than singleness in the Christian tradition. Indeed, the apostle Paul lists seven advantages in being single.

And he goes on to say, that different people have different vocations, that both single and married people have their own gifts from God.

So it is evident, that God’s blesses people with experiences of joy, passion and fulfilment, experiences that come from giving ourselves wholly to one another in accordance with the pattern of God’s self-giving love in Christ.

The question I want to explore in due course, is whether these blessings are for same-gender relationships as much as they are for heterosexual relationships.

That question is a couple of weeks away.