

Kate Cudlipp: An Invitation To Dance

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

March 21, 1999

An Invitation to Dance

I started going to the health club after I suffered an injury that kept me from running for a while. I wanted to do something rather than nothing, so Carole, my partner, suggested that I pay a visit to the nearby fitness club – one of a chain of which she was a member – to check out their possibilities.

I found lots of things I could do to stay fit. I also rediscovered something: I was not comfortable being nude in the locker room with other nude or near-nude bodies. Nude bodies should be hidden, something in me felt, just as Adam felt when God called to him in the third chapter of Genesis. It is good to exercise and discipline the body. It is threatening to give the body free rein to dance.

We Christians are heirs to a very old love-hate relationship with our bodies and our sexuality. We have our roots both in the Jewish tradition that did not separate soul from body, and in the Greek traditions – Platonism and Stoicism, among others – that did.

The Hebrew scripture reading for today [[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)] is grounded in the physical reality of human bones, muscles, and skin. God transforms the assembled inanimate material into humanity by giving it breath; God breathes life into every fiber. Breath plus matter equals human being. Spirit and body come together to make the person.

In the gospel lesson [[John 11:1-45](#)], it is not Lazarus' soul that Jesus resuscitates; it is Lazarus' embodied self. "Rabbi, it has been four days now. There will be a stench." You can't get much more physical than that.

The attitude toward the human body is more complex in the epistle [[Read Romans 8:6-11](#)]. Paul's writings, here and elsewhere, reflect the tension between the Jewish understanding of body as inseparable from personhood, and reflect the Greek elevation of the pure, rational soul over the emotional, tainted body.

We can see this tension (dare I call it confusion?) in the scripture. Flesh and spirit are set over against one another. Flesh is death; Spirit is life. But then Paul says that the body is dead because of sin and that God will give life to our mortal bodies, not destroy them. So are bodies, per se, bad, or are our bodies us, and in need of God's transforming grace?

James Nelson, in his book *Embodiment*, notes that Bishop John A. T. Robinson sees the keystone of Paul's theology as the body: "It is from the body of sin and death that we are delivered; it is through the body of Christ on the Cross that we are saved; it is into His body the Church that we are incorporated; it is by His body in the Eucharist that this Community is sustained; it is to a resurrection of this body to the likeness of His glorious body that we are destined." Robinson and others also find that when Paul uses the term "mind of the flesh," he is referring, not to sensuality as such but to the denial of human dependence on God and a return to reliance on the law as the means of salvation.

Christians through the ages have acknowledged, in one way or another, the close relationship between spirituality and sexuality. Augustine concluded that it was only by the power of the Spirit that one could be freed from the dominating power of sexual desire. (We are, in my mind, the unfortunate heirs of that rigid and flawed understanding of our incarnate

being.)

The mystics speak of their experiences of God – their sense of union with the Godhead – in sexual terms: consummation, penetration, and ecstasy. Nuns become brides of Christ. In that connection, a Catholic friend of mine once described the point in the ceremony of young women entering the convent, when their hair was cut to denote their joining with Christ, as a highly sexually charged moment.

The possession of worshippers by the Holy Spirit in the sanctified or Pentecostal church tradition can also have strong sexual overtones. Perhaps mainline Protestant churches are the primary places of worship where explicit acknowledgment of sexual power is largely avoided. At least it was in the churches in which my friends and I grew up.

But regardless of whether or how sexual power has been acknowledged in churches, its expression in human bodies has rarely been celebrated. Through this church-encouraged alienation, our bodies become physical objects possessed by our "real" selves. This perception of our bodies – similar to machines – can lead to asceticism, which is our attempt to control the dangerous, alien force that is the body, on the one hand, and to promiscuity – the need to discharge a disturbing, alien force – on the other. Nelson quotes a psychotherapist who works with sexually troubled clients: "When the body becomes alive, compulsive sexual behavior and promiscuity cease. Sexuality assumes a new meaning ..."

Is there any connection between our religious tradition of distancing ourselves from our bodies and the daily reports of sexual abuse, assault and harassment? I believe there is. You, like me, may not see much you can do about the pandemic sexual dysfunction in our culture. But are there steps we can take in our own lives to raise sexuality from half-hidden and sometimes fear-ridden places into the full light of day? To where its Spirit-filled potential can be celebrated and its

damaging proclivities confronted? Is this an undertaking, one among others, that is worthy of Seekers energy and focus?

I suspect that for many of us the visceral response is, "No. Let's not go there. I have enough things on my plate already. With sexuality, there's too much opportunity for disagreement and for opening things up we won't know how to close back down. There's no crisis in Seekers around sexual issues, so why rouse sleeping dogs?"

No, as far as I know, there is no sexual crisis in Seekers. But then, I am not sure I would know if there was one. Until the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group began to plan for its retreat, I had very little occasion to talk to anyone in the community about sexuality. It's not a normal topic of conversation. We can talk about hearing or not hearing a call, successes and failures in our vocations, dry and productive periods in our creative and intellectual lives, fear of growing old and of death, but in my experience we almost never talk about our sexual lives, positive or negative.

It was over six years ago that I joined the health club. I still find myself avoiding looking directly at the bodies of others, and as I walk to the shower I focus my awareness anywhere other than on my own body. Some might think this is admirable modesty; I think it's scary.

On the other hand, there have been times when I catch sight of a person's face on the street or in a crowd; eyes meet, and I feel a spark of excitement and energy run through my body. That same excitement comes when I see particular friends or meet someone new who ignites something in me.

We are sexual beings. Sexuality is integral to who we are, and to how God created us. As Nelson says, sexuality is not only genital, but is "that which is diffused throughout the entire body and enriches all relationships." And in a similar vein, Audre Lorde defines the word "erotic" as "an internal sense of

satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire...Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness."

We repress our sexuality at our peril, indeed, at the peril of losing our most intimate and lively encounter with God and with creation.

And, as we know from the newspapers and from our own lives, we open up our sexuality at our peril. In community we see "up close and personal" the dangers of taking the cork off the container of our sexuality: we work closely with one another on things that really matter to us, share deeply with one another, go on silent retreats with one another. These are settings that tap into our longings for connections, into our sexual beings. How do we respond authentically to these invitations to grow without leaving behind a swath of destruction in the lives of loved ones and in our own lives?

I think there is no simple answer, but refusing to engage the question is no answer, either, and does not lead to the fullness of life that God calls us to. Nor does avoiding the issues allow us to bring our deepest wisdom to conversations with our children. How do we know what we want for them if we have not examined what has enriched and impoverished our own lives?

What might it look like for Seekers to engage the questions?

- First, it would mean understanding that we are not trying to develop a rulebook of do's and don'ts that provides all the answers. The sexual dimensions of living in community are ongoing, and the challenges are ongoing just like the issues of call, vocation and what to do with our material resources.
- Second, it would help to recognize that however little

or much an individual has worked with her or his sexuality, we're all beginners at sharing our journeys and teaching and learning from each other.

- Third, setting foot intentionally on the path of greater communal sexual awareness means learning to hear others without judgment. We work hard to hear each other without judging around questions about our vocations, our relationships, and use of our resources. We need to develop that same facility with respect to each other's sexual questions, for it is in this way that we enable each other to listen more honestly for God's voice in our lives.
- Fourth, each of us needs to look for places in the community where we are willing to bring sexual issues, rather than try to ignore them or keep them to ourselves. This could be in the context of spiritual direction relationships, in personal sharing in mission groups, in conversation with a member of the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group or the leadership team, in classes in the School of Christian Living, or in other informal ways.
- Fifth, come to the Spirit and Sexuality retreat on May 1-2, which will be an opportunity to practice the art of listening for, and naming, in community, those things that enhance and those that block true relationship with God and each other.
- Finally, we need to say "Yes!" to the resources already in our midst that help us recognize and celebrate our lively, embodied selves: the Bodyspirit Mission Group, the emerging music group, our occasional clowns, the tangible fruits of our bodies on display in the art in Seekers Aloft – and in our children!

We need to say, "Yes!" to God's invitation to dance!