

# Kate Cudlipp: Sexuality, The Sacred and Seekers

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

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## Sexuality, The Sacred and Seekers

The opening lines from this week's reading from Job is a warning to anyone who dares to speak about God, and it certainly should put fear into the heart of one who stands up to preach: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man. I will question you, and you shall declare to me.'"

Anyone who stands behind this pulpit is presumptuous, presuming to speak with some kind of knowledge, praying that what we say is more than simply *our* story or *our* "take" on scripture or *our* insight on how God is at work in the world. The story of Job is not reassuring in this regard. God comes down hard on Job, and by implication, on all of Job's so-called friends, for asserting their understanding of how God is at work in the world. Interpretations of the meaning of the book vary widely: Some see Job rewarded for acknowledging his complete inability to grasp what God is doing, while others believe that Job remained defiant to the end. Under any reading, it is a cautionary tale for those who wish to assert the meaning of events or scripture, and I take that warning to heart.

So here I stand, about to tell a piece of my story that I believe – maybe without true knowledge, but that remains to be

tested – contains a call from the Holy. I believe the call is for Seekers as well as for me, and the call is about sexuality and the sacred.

## The Story

The summer I turned eleven I went to Girl Scout camp for two weeks and was desperately homesick. At least that's how my family named what had gone on. It was actually more complicated than that. Camp was my first encounter with feelings about girls and boys that differed from others' feelings. I could not have put that into words at the time, but that is what was going on.

I cried off and on for a week. The counselors would probably have loved for me to go home, but my parents insisted (at great cost to themselves, I later learned) that I stick it out. I managed to regain some stability by the second week, thanks to finding a friend who seemed more like me than the others.

The following September I entered the seventh grade. The feeling of fundamental difference returned with a vengeance. Once again, I couldn't name the nature of this difference but experienced it at the very core of my being. The chasm between me and everyone else in the world seemed so wide and deep that it could never be bridged. I wanted to die rather than live my whole life without connection to anyone else, for that was what my isolation felt like.

This state went on for two weeks. I cried constantly before and after school. My parents were at wits' end. My mother asked me if I wanted to change schools, but that question only deepened the sense that there was no escape from what plagued me, which was something in *me*, not in the world outside.

One morning as I lay across my bed dressed for school and crying, my father walked by the door to my room. In an

exasperated voice he said, "You know what's wrong with you? You're just feeling sorry for yourself."

Something inside me snapped to attention (and just plain snapped). "Oh, so that's what it is. I hate people who feel sorry for themselves. I'll show him I not like that." I stopped crying. I did not cry again (that I can remember) – other than a few tears in an occasional movie – for 28 years.

At age 39, in Paris with Carole, the floodgates opened again. As many of you know, Carole and I went to Paris together as good friends, though I was finally acknowledging to myself that what I felt for her went beyond friendship. The unwelcome tears were an embarrassment to me and a puzzle to both of us. Then one night, standing on the Pont Royale, in a drizzle, in the City of Light, I found myself blurting out to this friend of six months, "I have so much love to give, and it's not getting out."

## **The Insights**

That is probably one of the most accurate insights I have ever had, and it is the basis for my continuing to want to hold up sexuality and sexual issues in Seekers. At the same time I was coming to terms with my sexual orientation, I was beginning my search for a community of faith – after 20 years of "going it alone." My sense of the connection between sexuality and spirituality is informed by this experience. So, in the spirit of God's accusation against Job and the others, I ask myself, "Does this count as knowledge? Or is this empty counsel?" Obviously, I cannot answer that question on my own. I need my faith community to help me. Therefore, I want something *from* this community.

This past July I attended a [weeklong sexuality workshop](#) with 25 other people. We ranged in age from young adulthood to my age and older. One of the presenters was 84. For some, the week was a life-changing experience. For me, it was my first

experience being with a group of people where the primary topic of conversation for six days was sex. We saw films, heard lectures, arranged ourselves in configurations in the meeting room based on our sexual attitudes, and talked in small groups about our sexual histories and personal experiences. Close relationships were formed among many participants, and an active e-mail correspondence has deepened my sense of connection to the others since the workshop.

When I decided it was time to do this sermon, I emailed the entire group to ask for insights about what had happened during that week of intense focus on sexuality. Let me share three responses:

1. "After we left Thornfield and each other, I reflected on the messages I received about my sexuality while I was growing up. To be unforgivably brief, all messages were negative. Being a child, I assumed all those negative messages were true. So, what opened up for me during our workshop was – if you'll pardon a little melodrama – seeing myself as a child of God. Not a mistake, but a child of God. And what opened up because of that – and only gradually – was that I could be more honest with myself. So, for one thing, I could admit that I had the wrong job, and I was willing to leave. So, for another thing, I could listen to people I love on a different and deeper plane."
2. Another response: "To me the week revealed the core of what God wants from us: to be utterly trusting that we are safe, even with our darkest secrets, in the company of the Divine Lover. We were given the gift of being accepted just the way we are. But we must accept the gift, and if we are to be followers of Christ, we must pass it on. Only by emulating that trust can we be instruments of peace and healing on this planet."
3. A third response: "For me, the workshop meant that I could be myself without fear of rejection, that no

matter where I fit in on the Kinsey scale, it was OK. That is huge!!!!!! Complete acceptance. Perhaps that is what we strive for and what we have always had from the creator, but did not realize it or maybe found it difficult to believe...total acceptance for who and what we are. After all, we were made in the creator's image, and how could God not accept who God is."

This was from a workshop that was studiously *not* religious in content!

## **Grist for Our Mill**

What these responses and the workshop, itself, opened up, once again, for me is the extent to which our sense of connection to God and to others is wrapped up in our sexual beliefs and understandings. Recent theological work contributes new insight into Christian understandings of sexuality. James Nelson and Sandra Longefellow, in their anthology, *Sexuality and the Sacred*, observe:

*Throughout most of Christian history the vast majority of theologians who wrote about sexuality tried to approach the subject from one direction only: they began with affirmations and assertions of faith (from scriptures, from doctrines, from church teachings, and so on) and then applied those to human sexuality. Now theologians are assuming that the other direction of inquiry is important as well: What does our sexual experience reveal about God? about the ways we understand the gospel? about the ways we read scripture and tradition and attempt to live out the faith?"*

While I have dipped into some of this theological work, I must confess that I have not been able to sustain an interest in (or in some instances, even understand) the more theoretical analyses. I am intrigued by the work that could be done by folks in faith communities like Seekers with some of the

insights these thinkers offer. Here are some examples: One writer states, "Sexuality is the crucible of faith in which each of us struggles with the vision of our basic nature; it is where we see most clearly the face of the divinity we truly believe in."

Another asserts that God is to be found at the heart of all desire, for desiring is the image of God that is planted within us. Yet another writer suggests seeing sexuality as "who we are as body selves who experience the ambiguities of both 'having bodies' and 'being bodies.'"

James Nelson sees sexuality as not only genital but also "that which is diffused throughout the entire body and enriches all relationships." And Audre Lorde defines "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 satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness."

What would it be like to wrestle with these understandings in a Seekers setting? What would it be like to engage them from our own life experiences and to see them in the personal encounters of others? How might this open up for each of us a fuller appreciation of our incarnate selves – not as bodies to be worshipped or despised but as fully integrated human beings *and* the image of God? How might this be good news to those we hope will be coming toward us as we move into our new home and our new incarnation as Seekers?

Might this work be part of what we have to offer other faith communities as "the genius of Seekers," as Jeanne put it in her sermon a couple of weeks ago? God knows churches could make good use of new ways to engage sexual questions and realities!

## Hopes for Seekers

I said earlier that I wanted something *from* this community. I also want something *for* this community. I want Seekers to be a trustworthy place for people to bring their sexual questions, excitement, confessions and doubts. I want this to be a place where the goodness of our sexuality is not only given lip service but also is experienced and believed. I want this to be a place where our young people learn about the goodness and as well as the dangers of sex.

I want this to be a place where the dark sides of our sexual nature can be acknowledged and confronted without driving them underground to fester and deplete us or to spring out and damage us. As Nelson and Longfellow write, "However deeply personal it is to each of us, sexuality is invariably social and public."

As Ron Arms once noted in a sermon: "Incarnation can be discovered individually, but it needs to be practiced person to person. To guard against an individualistic, Lone Ranger faith, we need the help of others who share our hope and our vision. Human beings have an amazing capacity for self-deception. In sexual matters a caring community can help us distinguish God from our gonads."

How might we go about this work? And I don't mean to suggest that we are not already engaged in it. Twelve years ago Seekers went through a process that culminated in changing [our call](#) explicitly to welcome people of "every sexual orientation." In 1991, the Spirit and Sexuality mission group was started. In 1992, Ron Arms preached a series of sermons that focused on body spirituality and "erotic faith." In the past year and half, the Spirit and Sexuality mission group has led a retreat on sexuality and there have been a gender class in the School of Christian Living and at least two sermons directly on the subject.

Nevertheless, how might we bring questions around sexuality to the same community level of awareness and openness as questions about call or theological grounding?

Classes in the School of Christian Living are one important and obvious way. Strengthening the ability of spiritual guides both to invite and deal with sexual questions is another. Additional one-day or weekend retreats are yet other possibilities.

The Spirit and Sexuality mission group is having conversations with a few Seekers to get ideas about what is on people's hearts and minds. We invited these individuals to speak with us because they had indicated an interest in one or another area related to sexuality. We need more of this kind of input, so this is an open invitation to talk to one or all of us with any thoughts, hopes, or suggestions you may have. We will be looking for ideas on topics and formats for classes or retreats and for much more. If you are simply interested in having a place to come to talk, let us know. In addition, if you are drawn to work with these questions on behalf of the community, you might consider exploring with the mission group.

Am I speaking without knowledge? I don't know. You will have to help me find out. However, let me close by saying that I believe finding the sacred in our sexuality and finding our sexuality to be an avenue to the sacred is challenging but also joyful – fun! So I invite you, as we continue to discern together and as you make your offerings to God and listen to Scott Joplin's music, to enter into the circle of dancers the music evokes. See if, in the midst of bodies and movement, you do not glimpse the Holy.