

Kevin L. Ogle: Sexuality, Shame, and Resurrection Faith

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Seekers Church

Texts: [John 20:19-31](#), [Psalm 16:5-11](#)

Sexuality, Shame, and Resurrection Faith

Gracious God, apart from you our mouths are dumb and we have nothing to say. So send us, we pray your Holy Spirit, that in hearing your word we might know what we ought to know, and know what we ought to do, to become your faithful disciples through Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

It's now Eastertide in the church's calendar, the fifty days between Easter Sunday and Pentecost. Each year on this second Sunday of Easter the lectionary assigns the story of Jesus appearing to the Disciples, and of Thomas' initial disbelief. And traditionally each year today is one of the least well attended of church worship services. The Easter crowds having disbursed, the faithful remnant—along with Thomas—get the opportunity to wrestle with the paradox of resurrection faith in a still very fallen and scarred post-modern world.

As I speak US-led NATO forces may be dropping bombs on Yugoslavian targets while war policy-makers debate the pros and cons of sending in ground troops to quell a campaign of ethnic cleansing before it resumes – if it has stopped. Who and what to believe exactly remains murky for many, though clear perhaps to others. And while differing nations exchange accusations and exasperation the interests of some 16,000 to

25,000 Kosovo refugees seems to have been lost in the jostling. According to an NPR report I heard last night it is estimated that half of this number is comprised of children. Where is the resurrection in any of this suffering on what I understand is Easter Sunday for Christians of Eastern Orthodox tradition?

If we have the power to forgive sins, as the resurrected Jesus of our gospel text today tells the disciples, whom should we be forgiving? And relatedly, what should we be confessing? And to whom should we be confessing?

Such questions present themselves from the Easter story as Marjorie Bankson outlined it for us [last Sunday](#): that we are linked by loss, called by name, and sent forth to bear witness to what we have experienced.

Which brings me to the complex of reasons I volunteered to preach this morning. Chief among those, perhaps, is my readiness and desire to formally "come out" to Seekers as a member of the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group (SSMG). Not that I've been keeping my participation a secret, but I'm aware that until recently I haven't much advertised it either. And I imagine that as I do this some of you are wondering about my sexuality. In response to this imagining I want to confess that I'm merely what I assume I appear to be – that is a married heterosexual male. I started exploring with the Group during Lent last year and then decided to continue journeying with Bob, Kate, Molly, and Pat as a way to deepen my participation in Seekers at a time when work and parenting obligations made deeper connection difficult.

As I began to participate in the SSMG Jane Engle was transitioning out, and since that time we in the MG have gotten clearer about helping sustain a focus for Seekers which Kate articulated well in her March 21 sermon, "[An Invitation to Dance](#)." Specifically, we have been pursuing our call to help provide opportunity and space for Seekers to

intentionally reflect on and dialogue about our sexuality and its role – or perhaps the lack of a role – in our lives as people of faith. The vehicle for this pursuit in our MG this past year has been planning for the May 1st and 2nd Retreat at Wellspring, now just 3 weeks away.

So I want to do at least three things today, though not in this order: (1) share with the broader community a bit more of our MG experience in preparing for this retreat (2) invite you to consider personally some of the questions we have composed for those of us who will be retreatants that weekend, and (3) to share with you some of the life experience behind my conviction that it is vitally important for each of us to consider and work with the connection between our physical embodiment and sexuality and how we express our faith, spirituality, and values.

Kate shared in her recent sermon the idea that sexuality is integral to who each of us are, and to how God created us. She quoted James Nelson's helpful understanding that it is not only genital, but is "diffused throughout the entire body and enriches all relationships." She also alluded to Augustinian Christian tradition's conflicted legacy toward the body and sexuality and to the link between that legacy and the realities of sexual abuse, assault and harassment. Today in Western churches this legacy is perhaps most evident in the continuing ecclesial controversies around homosexuality and whether or not gay marriage should be blessed by the church and whether openly homosexual persons should be ordained ministers. With many others, I believe it is also the root of the Catholic hierarchy's refusal to ordain women to ministry. But what is the link for me, as an ordained heterosexual man and father of sons, to those who are suffering – suffering as a result of either religiously sanctioned homophobia and sexism or the legacy of shame, condemnation and silence surrounding sexual issues and expression which the church has bequeathed?

As Marjorie suggested last week, one thing that links me to these others is my own personal loss experiences associated with this legacy. Aside from the belief that we all suffer when our sisters and brothers in Christ suffer, and from the idea that each of us as Christians share loss experiences that the crucifixion represents, my loss experiences are more directly tied to that legacy of shaming, fear, silence and condemnation toward things bodily, sexual, and feminine. I have come to believe that my calling as a pastoral psychotherapist has everything to do with my own personal history as the first child of three born to an unraveling marriage between a heterosexual man and a woman who were ultimately alienated from each other and themselves in no small part because of deep confusion and woundedness associated with their attitudes toward and expressions of their sexual energies. Religiously both were reared in the mainline Christian denomination that ordained me to ministry. I don't know that I need or want to say a whole lot more than that today.

But the bare outlines of the story are simple and commonplace. A seemingly happy, young, 1950s Midwestern couple negotiates the transition to parenthood poorly and their relationship never recovers. Soon the husband secretly commits infidelities. One affair ends the marriage and results in a second, which is also seemingly quite conflictual but lasts as long as first. The children and first wife are abandoned, and she is emotionally devastated. They all do the best they can – which is not so well, if the truth is told. The father dies at the age of 58 due to liver cancer. The mother remarries 7 years after the divorce, and eventually makes peace with a second marriage that initially re-disillusions her greatly. But before that second marriage she rediscovers her vocation as a teacher and also turns to her church for support – which it offers to she and her children as best it can.

Since Psalm 16 is a part of today's lectionary, and since I

was moved to volunteer this sermon in part out of that awareness, I want to share some personal meanings and incidents associated with it. It is in today's lectionary because in the Acts text Peter quotes it as part of his Pentecost sermon, appropriating a Jewish psalm of David as forecasting the bodily resurrection of Jesus. At some point in my first year of seminary, as part of my emerging sense of call to ministry and finding myself much more at home in seminary as opposed to law school studies, I found that Psalm speaking to me, and it felt like the boundary lines were falling for me in pleasant places, at least vocationally. I was feeling called by name, and at that time to a specific ministry which could also benefit from my legal training. With one year of seminary under my belt, I journeyed from Nashville, Tennessee to Oklahoma City to spend most the summer of 1985 as full-time student chaplain in a hospital – in part to be near a young woman in whom I had a romantic interest.

[Tell sister's wedding day story – including mother's projection of her own disillusionment with men and intimate relationship with sister. Tell of reading of Ps. 16 and praying with sister to help calm her. End with birth of sister's second (male) child after 11 years of trying last month.]

Today, as most of you know, I am the father of two young sons who are teaching me how to be a Dad; I am the husband of a wife who has worked hard with me on our journey from being a two-career couple without kids to the ongoing transition that we are realizing as a couple that parenthood is. Carol Ann even gets along with and likes my mother. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.

So why is the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group for me now? One reason is that, as a pastoral psychotherapist, issues of spirit/faith and sexuality crop up all the time. Predictably, I trained in and now do quite a bit of couple and some family therapy. It seems that relationship issues – which means

typically romantic relationship issues, relationships complicated by Eros and attraction – are issues for almost every client I see individually in my practice. And I've come to notice that it seems my more religious Christian clients often have the most interesting and troublesome issues around successfully negotiating intimate personal relationships. But more bottom-line, as the father of two young children with a committed marital and parental partner, at some deep level I feel a call to wrestle with the issues the MG has named as part of our call, as well as a commitment to that part of Seeker's call, adopted in 1989, which embraces and affirms each individual...straight or gay... in the richness and diversity of his or her sexual orientation.

Which brings me back to the fascinating process within the MG of working to prepare for the upcoming retreat. At first the idea was for something beyond Seekers – something which would include Seekers but also others with whom we might network and share greater diversity of experience. Then came the increasing clarity that what we felt called to provide was a safe place for Seekers to do individual and corporate work around the sexual and embodied dimensions of our lives as incarnate people of faith. We scheduled Wellspring as a setting that would lend itself well for Seekers as a familiar and safe place to do this potentially energizing but also potentially frightening work. Then this past January we used a MG meeting to explore our own fears around the prospect of the retreat. I want to share with you the newsprint list of fears we came up with – both personal and for the community.

First the personal list: a sense of shame, and a desire to avoid going there (to sharing that might evoke shame for the sharer); I fear what I disclose will change how people perceive me; I fear being perceived as a victim when I don't feel that way; I fear that what I divulge/share will affect my partner who won't be there; I fear judgments by others; I fear that I will get in touch with sexual hungers, and that I will

have to do something about it; I fear boundary violations; I fear what might get stirred up in me from what others might share; I fear being objectified, and not being able to do anything about it; I fear being out of control; and finally, we feared what one school of psychotherapy calls foundational relational fears – fears of annihilation, engulfment, and abandonment. And these were just our personal fears!

Then, our fears for the community: fear that we would host a retreat, and no one would come; fear that the participants might be unhappy with the experience; fear that people would get stirred up, and that we wouldn't have follow-up mechanisms; fear that the diversity would be overwhelming, resulting in isolation rather than validation; fear that confidentiality and safety wouldn't be preserved; fear that sharing might lead to unwelcome pursuit.

In short, despite our shared belief that sexuality is a good gift of God and an agenda for the retreat that includes helping retreatants address the personal and corporate issues necessary to claim it as such, what we had to acknowledge and attend to was our own ambivalence and fear associated with the idea of even addressing those issues within Seekers. Out of this experience we have taken seriously the task of building safety into the retreat – and attempted to heed some of the wisdom of the recent three Seekers men's retreats in doing so. We also took it upon ourselves to be more intentional by dialoguing with other mission groups and individual Seekers around the concerns and hopes they might have for such a retreat, and those sometimes surprisingly rich conversations have fed into our thinking and planning.

Today I am delighted to report that a nucleus of 15 persons, including the MG members, have expressed clear intentions to participate, helping alleviate our first fear that no one else would come. But to give all of you – as well as the handful of Seekers fence sitters/procrastinators – an idea of some of the questions we are inviting retreatants to consider, and to

extend an invitation to work with them to the broader Seekers community, I wanted to share them here:

- What attitudes toward sexuality did I learn from my family of origin?
- What attitudes toward spirituality/religion did I learn from my family of origin?
- What has been helpful to me in embracing my sexuality over the course of my life?
- What has been hurtful or hindered me in embracing my sexuality over the course of my life?
- Do I feel shame about my sexuality or my sexual experiences? If so, why?
- Am I aware of injuring others as a result of my sexuality? If so, how?
- Am I aware of being injured by others as a result of my sexuality? If so, how?
- Am I aware of times when my sexuality has been a gift to others?
- What is my growing edge in becoming an embodied person of faith?
- When, if ever, have my spirituality and sexuality been well aligned?
- What do I need to work on to better align my sexuality and my faith?
- What do I need from my faith community and how can others help me with this?

These questions are simply intended as guides for reflection. But in posing them we in the MG are also making ourselves available as potential community and pastoral resource persons. We would also of course encourage taking up the implications for you of such questions with your life partners and your own MG spiritual guides. If the healing and enlivening of our lives as embodied Christians is to take place in the context of this faith community then we will have to learn how to break the silence that seems to naturally

inhibit working with these issues – and we will have to work to create the safety as a community that is too often shattered by unconscious, anxious, or unthinking responses.

Lest I neglect the possibilities for resurrection and healing in all of this, I want to close with a quote from James' Nelson's wonderful (1978) book, Embodiment, in which he lifts up an image of sexuality reclaimed with faith:

The resexualization of the entire body, the movement away from the genital tyranny of relationships, the eroticisation of the world so that the environment's deliciously sensuous qualities are felt – these things are possible, faith affirms, by the grace of God. To the extent that I can accept my acceptance, experience my body self as one, and know that my sexuality is richly good, to this extent my sexual awareness and feeling inevitable expand beyond a narrow genital focus. Then I will be less fearful about recognizing and celebrating the erotic dimensions in a whole variety of my interpersonal relationships. I will be able to share the sensuousness of shared personal communication, and of the environment's movements, shapes, sounds, and smells.

This sensuous diffusion thus undergirds our capacities to experience beauty. Sexuality is the living and flowing energy which invites us into communion with other realities in creation."

May each of us be able to claim our sexuality in such a way that we come to truly see and value the beauty and handiwork of God in each other and the rest of creation. And may we all become co-creators and co-protectors with God of the beauty and holiness that overcomes evil and alienation. Amen.