Sunday October 16, 1977

Book 7

"LOVE'S CONTROLS IN HUMAN SEXUALITY" Matthew 5:27-30
II Corinthians 5:14-17

In last week's daily paper the following letter appeared to "Dear Abby."

DEAR ABBY: I'm fifteen and I'm going with a dude who just turned 18. He says he loves me and wants to marry me some day, but we fight almost every time we're together because he keeps trying to talk me into going all the way with him. I told him I was saving myself for marriage and I wasn't going to change my mind, but he keeps trying to break down my resistance. Abby, I really love this guy, but if he keeps hassling me to go all the way, I don't know what I'll do. How can I hold him off without losing him for good? (signed)
HANGING IN THERE

Abby's reply was as follows:

DEAR HANGING: Let's get one thing straight. A fellow who loves a girl doesn't hassle her to do something that's against her principles. If you lose him because you can't hold him off, you'll be lucky. Hold out for orange blossoms. He's offering you poison ivy.

What would you have answered the young lady? Would a Christian's answer necessarily be any different from the one which Abby gave?

In preceding weeks in this sermon series on "The Bible and Human Sexuality, we have examined a number of issues. This morning in this concluding sermon in the series, we are going to explore the boundaries, the ethics of human sexuality from a Christian point of view. So "Love's Controls in Human Sexuality"is our topic.

Some Christians in times past and even in the present might answer the young woman's question by simply quoting a basic rule--"You shall not commit adultery," the 7th commandment. Technically that answer would not be quite correct since adultery implies a relationship between married persons who are not married to each other. And even though in today's world we rightly give the 7th commandment a broader definition, the answer would not be adequate.

In the not too distant past the three-fold fear of "detection, infection, and conception," sometimes was enough to prohibit some pre-marital or extra-marital sexual behavior. And now even though it is relatively easy to avoid these three consequences, that is not happening. Venereal disease is on the rise and present statistics show that each year more than one million 15-19 year-olds become pregnant in the United States. That's one-tenth of all women in this age group. Two-thirds of these pregnancies are conceived out of wedlock. In addition some 30,000 girls younger than 15 get pregnant annually. The consequences for society as a whole, much less for these young people is not good. It does however show that fear of pregnancy or venereal disease has little influence on sexual behavior.

How then do we Christians answer young people who write letters like the one I quoted and even more what do we have to say to persons of all ages including ourselves in the whole matter of sexual behavior? Actually, Abby made a good beginning in her answer. As Christians we would say what she said and much more.

Our expanded answer would include at least what I'm going to say in the rest of this sermon.

To begin with, the Bible and the Christian faith make the following assumptions about human sexuality and our sexual behavior.

1. First, the Bible and the Christian faith underscore the fact that human sexuality is good, it is to be celebrated, it is to be used. Sexuality is an important part of being human, and is part of what God purposes for us. Briefly put, sexuality is the desire and drive to unite oneself with another member of the race, a union which brings enormous satisfaction and which releases energies which could not otherwise find the same expression.

Sexuality involves both body and spirit. They cannot be separated. It involves friendship, companionship, the joy of being in one another's presence--conversation, silence and more.

So it is important to recognize in the beginning what when the Bible and the Christian faith talk about controls, they are talking about something that is very positive, something that affirms the goodness of human sexuality and that is

concerned only with seeing to it that the very best expression of human sexuality is made possible for individuals and for society as a whole.

2. Secondly, not only is human sexuality a positive and good part of our humanity, but it is also central and intrinsic in every human being. That it is central and a very basic part of our life together is seen in the fact, for example, that in a list of Ann Lander's readers 10 most common problems, over half of the 10 have to do with some aspect of human sexuality.

Because it is central in our humanity, in addition to being the way the human race is maintained, this means that used within Love's controls, human sexuality can become the occasion for the fulfilment of human potentiality. It is not the only or exclusive way of fulfillment, but it does help us to grow and mature and make life more beautiful.

As I said earlier, human sexuality from a Christian point of view expresses our deepest desire for communion, for being close to other people and in a relationship with them. This is not to suggest that Christian men and women will have a different kind of sexuality than do others, but it does mean that we will understand in a distinctive way.

3. Thirdly, as Christians we know that as human beings we are always interdependent and related to all other human beings. We are all familiar with the words of John Donne--"No man is an island entire unto himself." We do not live to ourselves, nor do we live from ourselves, but whatever we do always has some effect, for good or for ill, on others.

Absolute separation from others is impossible in fact, even though we may wish for it in our own experience. Not only are we related to other human beings, but we are related to all of creation. The creation is in us and we are in the creation. Such mutual dependence and belonging is a characteristic of the entire creation and comes to its focus in the human reality of love. We can never completely do our own thing. If we are not moving in the direction of mutual and helpful relationships, then we are going contrary to the grain of the universe, to how things "go" in the world. The result then is frustration, dimishment of self-hood and loss of human value. We are dependent on one another and we find our best self-expression in contacts with one another.

Because we are not alone, we also know that our human relationships can and do serve as a means, a sacramental channel through which ultimate fulfillment in God is at least partially experienced.

And often we learn in our union with one person what is the true meaning of union with all others.

4. This means in the fourth place that precisely because human sexuality is good and because it is so central to our nature, it refuses to be hidden. When it is not accepted positively and used that way, it re-appears in ugly and distorted forms. The every day news is filled with stories of distorted and misused sexuality. In these instances, love is not the controlling factor.

Sometimes sexuality is reduced to sheer sensuality after the fashion of the barnyard. In such instances we forget that human sexuality is different from that which rightly or wrongly we ascribe to dogs and cats and other animals. Human beings do not have a "rutting-season" in which we are driven by recurrence of period to engage in sexual activity. We are free to choose the time and the place and the person and love is to be the controlling factor, not biology. To revert to the animal level in sexual matters as in other aspects of human life, is to deny our humanity.

The reduction of sexuality to pornography is another example of completely distorted sexuality. That the best can be corrupted into the worst is something that we should never forget. It is here that the need for controls comes so forcibly into the picture. A man of great genius can become a man with enormous capacity for doing evil. Somebody with remarkable personal appeal (a Hitler is an instance) can exercise that appeal in a way that is disastrous for a whole generation.

Anybody with good qualities can allow these to be distorted so that they work for evil ends. We all know this quite well both from history and from personal experience. Controls are necessary for all of us. In the area of sexual behavior, the person who is unable to exercise any control over his or her sexual desires is the person whose personality is itself uncontrolled. He or she is tossed to and fro by momentary impulse, often unable to say the necessary "no" at this moment so that the "yes" at another can be rich and full and glorious.

III. Now let's look more carefully at the word "controls" and then we'll see how love's controls can provide the proper guidelines for our sexual decisions.

- The folk wisdom which has been handed down through the centuries has always known that there are ways in which human sexuality may be most satisfactorily and properly expressed and ways which are less satisfactory and in one sense or another harmful to human beings. The "rules" as we may call them, have varied from place to place and from age to age, but "rules" of some sort there have always been--even when they have not been much followed.

- Societies and communities of persons have always discovered that sexual behavior in an entirely unrestricted fashion is hardly conducive to the best interests of men and women if they are genuinely to become lovers and not simply gratify impulse whenever they have the urge to do so.

  In our time the word "controls" is often used to describe the conditions under which research and enquiry may be carried out in the best fashion possible with the most assurance of sound results.

  ~~So it is that~~ Also, a crucial feature of our modern world is the control room. We see it in the quiet of a great power plant which controls the light, heat, and power of an immense city. We see it with amazement in the train dispatcher's office where levers and buttons control scores of trains and hundreds of lives. We see it as crucial in the whole space program.

- Thus it should not surprise us that our Christian faith teaches us that in human life too, control is important. When a life gets out of control, it runs amuck, like an automobile with a drunken driver crashing over an embankment. When living cells go out of control, out of community in the human body, we have a disease we call cancer. Control does not mean that we give up freedom; it means that freedom always and can only exist if there are proper controls.

  A woman who quite inaccurately heard William James lecture on pragmatism, went away from the auditorium piously caressing one word: "Ah fragmentism, what a lovely word!" A lovely sound, perhaps, but a word meaning a life split and all out of focus, fragmented, out of control.

III As Christians, we talk about "love's controls." We are saying that love in the Christian understanding of that word is the reference, the criterion, and that love is the basic significance of human sex. Therefore, our controls are exercised by and in the interests of love. They are not arbitrary, imposed from the outside; not legalistic and hence essentially negative. St. Paul said, "The love of Christ controls us. So when we talk about love, the love of Christ, we are talking about the kind of love that is never a business of coercion, nor of cruelty. Rather it is tenderness, gentleness, kindness. Christian love also implies two other very important factors--that what we do matters, and what we do always has consequences, good or bad, not only for us but for others.

IV How then specifically does this kind of love control us in our sexual relationships?

1. First, whatever one does, in terms of sexual manifestation, is to be an expression of love, rather than to satisfy the merely animal lusts. This is not to say that those animal desires are bad, but need control in terms of love.

2. In all sexual activity, coercion and pressure have no place, for they are a denial of Christian love. Abby was right in as far as she went in her answer to the letter quoted earlier. The boy was using coercion and pressure and that is not a part of love.

3. In any and every sexual activity, those who engage in it must accept the responsibility for whatever it entails, whether this is the emotional state of the other person, a child who may result from that contact, or anything else.

4. This means that most of the time, in most places, the usual way of finding sexual satisfaction will be through a commitment in married life. Recently one person wrote, "I don't trust anybody's ability to look to the dignity, worth and freedom of another person absolutely without manipulation, unless they've gone through those safeguards that our cultural and religious traditions provide, marriage in other words.

At its best, the context of the married state, its approval by society, it's legal sanctions, its long historial development, combine to make it an ideal condition for love's highest expression.

In sexual life, as everywhere else in our existence, we are part of society. Any decision we make, any good that we achieve, any failures that are ours, affect others and seriously influence the social life. Thus we are always to be mindful of the wide-range consequences of any of our actions.

5. In any and every yearning really to love, really to be open to another's love, God is present and at work. This tells us that no human being should be afraid to love or fearful of accepting love.

At the same time, since God as Love seeks always the right growth of us human beings, our proper movement toward fulfilment, means we need to be alert to God's guidance. And this guidance does not come in a kind of verbal dictation from God, but is to be found when a person keeps his or her eyes open, uses his or her head and thus sees opportunities for good opening before him or her. One of these opportunities is given when he or she meets another with whom life can be shared most deeply. Yet the sharing of life itself demands that one shall be loyal, controlled, ready to sacrifice for the other--even to sacrifice what may appear to be attractive possibilities of sexual contact with a third person. And it is right here that love demands even more than control; it demands difficult decision of a negative sort, precisely in order that the earlier positive decision for the loved one may be maintained. Amen.