

Message for 3-13-22

Shared by Rev. Ken Heintzelman

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his (their) glory, the glory as of a father's only son (a Creator's only precious creation) (a Parent's only child), full of grace and truth. John 1

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Romans 8

Linda Kay Klein is a storyteller and social innovator. She is the author of PURE: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free, and the founder of Break Free Together. On the home page of her website lindakayklein.com she defines purity culture. I want to share this with you.

The term "purity culture" is generally associated with the white, American, Evangelical Christian Purity Movement and the corollary Purity Industry launched in the early 1990s. However, evangelicals don't have a monopoly on the ethics that undergird purity culture. The specifics vary by religion and culture, but gender- and sexual control upon which purity culture stands is global, cross-religious, and cross-cultural.

In purity culture, gender expectations are based on a strict, stereotype-based binary. (I would add "patriarchy" which is another way the Church traumatizes people.) Men are expected to be strong, "masculine" leaders of the household, church, and (to a lesser extent) society. Women are expected to support them—to be pretty, "feminine," sweet, supportive wives and mothers.

Sexual expectations vary by gender. Everyone is expected to maintain absolute sexlessness before marriage (that means no sexual thoughts, feelings, or actions). And upon marriage, they are expected to flip their sexuality on like a light switch. However, men are taught their minds are evil, whereas women are taught their bodies are evil. That is to say, men's thoughts and actions are said to be either pure or impure, while women themselves (their whole selves) are said to be either pure or impure. Sexual metaphors abound: A "pure" woman is compared to a

brand new shiny car while an “impure” one is compared to a used car that everyone around town has already driven and that isn’t worth much anymore; a “pure” woman is compared to a delicious hamburger just set down on the table while an “impure” woman is compared to the last slobbery bite of that hamburger, etc.

I step aside from the narrative to add my comment at this point. As long as I can remember there has been a double standard set up by men regarding “purity.” In high school, most boys wanted to have sex and looked for a girl to have sex with, but it was also true that virginity was prized for a future bride. Young women were either frigid or sluts and this is a way that purity culture started traumatizing girls at an early. I go back to Linda Kay Klein’s narrative.

Purity culture also teaches that women are responsible for the sexual thoughts, feelings, and choices men make, and so must dress, walk and talk in just the right way so as not to “inspire” sexual thoughts, feelings, and actions in them. If they do “inspire” such thoughts, they are said to be a “stumbling block” – literally a thing over which men trip on their pathway to God. To avoid stumbling blocks, men are taught to train their minds using strategies such as “bouncing their eyes” when they see something that brings out a sexual thought or feeling—such as a woman’s cleavage in an advertisement or the knee of the woman sitting beside them at church.

Underlying these teachings are several assumptions, including those that gender is binary, and that heterosexual desire is the only “right” and “normal” form of desire/sexual intercourse. The white, American Evangelical Christian Purity Movement is further based on nationalistic and white supremacist assumptions. As a result, purity culture influences people’s lives in complex ways resulting in highly intersectional marginalization. For example, whereas white American women may feel they must unfairly maintain the “purity” they are assumed to have been born with, American women of color and women from other cultures may feel they must attain purity, as it is not something they are assumed to have been born with within the sub-culture.

Let us pray.

Spirit of Life and Love, sometimes we fall short and add to the trauma of people's lives and cause more injury to their bodies and souls. We confess this, not to wallow in guilt and shame but to own the way we are products of a "purity culture" and perpetuate it. In such naming this sin of the Church may we have the power to do better and add to the healing of the world. Amen.

For decades I have thought we as people of faith and as a species are groaning in labor pains. We long for the next growth spurt of the Spirit and we feel it in our bodies. For decades I thought the Church was distracted from its mission by focusing on policing everybody's body and building a "purity culture" based on fear of "wet sins." This is one of the ugly painful and bitter fruits of an inadequate understanding of our faith. For decades I have thought the Church has fallen short in giving wisdom and grace on the issues of abortion, sexuality, capital punishment, racism, suicide, and death with dignity. When someone asks for guidance from the Church regarding any of these issues they get different guidance depending on which Church they ask. If I am seeking guidance and support about my loved one being kept alive by extraordinary means I may have already made up my mind depending on where I seek help. One church may say it is about the quality of life and another may emphasize the sacredness of all life. This is the polarity, the dualism, that defines so much of our division.

Should I let my loved one go? Should I bring another child into poverty at the expense of my other children? Does ending the life of a murderer honor the life of the one they killed? If I cut myself who am I really trying to hurt? Do we really honor black and brown bodies the same as white bodies?

I do not think we could ever come up with one uniform Christian answer or Christian ethic. But I think we could do better. I think the reason we have fallen in wisdom and grace is that we do not have an adequate theology of biology. I have advocated for this for many years and I do not feel called to write it but I do feel the groaning of labor pains in my body for the need of it. A theology of biology is simply the exploration of what does God have to do with our bodies. What is the right relationship between creatures and the Creator? What is the right relationship between one creature and another (two-legged, four-legged, winged, and finned)? Do we ever cross the line and violate the boundaries of

creatureliness, Creator, the sacred, the profane, our finitude in the context of eternity? I know we rarely hear any of the hot button issues being discussed around these parameters but they are the foundational pieces underlying every passionate discourse and what they all have in common is the shared embodiment of our spirits.

I share these passages in our Word About Life today because it offers a starting point. It celebrates the existence of our bodies. The Word was made flesh and was full of grace and glory so it is with our flesh and bone. The place to start is not a condemnation or sense of ickiness about our bodies, but embracing and celebrating our bodies as they are and celebrating all our bodies can give to ourselves and to each other. It is through our bodies we engage the world, relate to each other, and express and receive love and honor.

The Church has added to the trauma of people's bodies and spirits. However, we have the wisdom and grace to begin again. Central to our faith is not the idea that we die and leave our bodies behind. Central to our faith is the Word of Life and Love became flesh and dwelled among us. This is the power of the idea of incarnation.

One of the central paradoxes of the incarnation is that it happens in unexpected places and in unexpected ways. We feel. We touch. We connect and are present to each other. Every time we do this, we know again the meaning of the Word becoming flesh. And we are surprised by joy.