

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins,

Bishop of Saskatchewan

God hath not called us unto uncleanness but unto holiness.

Even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table. That Gospel raises all sorts of questions. Is the household pet a member of the family? Should your dog or cat ever be fed table scraps?

But that would be to avoid the more serious question and stumbling block we find in that account. Three times Jesus deals with this woman, in a way that shocks us. First, he ignores her. Now, notice that while he ignores her, he does not send her away. It is the disciples that want her dismissed. Next, he reminds her of the harsh reality of their relations as Jew and Canaanite and of his mission, to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She, of course, acknowledges all this in her call, "O Lord, thou Son of David." Finally, as she kneels before him, importunity personified, her stubborn faith, her hope against hope, will not let him go. She pleads, "Lord help me," and he speaks to her directly. He had said before that she did not

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

belong to his flock. Now he says that she is not part of the family of Israel. But he has left a door open to her, there is a small crack in his rebuff, and she seizes the opportunity: I know I cannot claim anything or demand anything from you, I'll take whatever you give, whatever you let drop. And she begs.

And then Jesus, who had ignored and put off this woman, who tested her in ways that we never see others tested in the Gospel accounts, crowns her with his praise. "O woman great is thy faith." He holds her out for public praise, as an example to all.

Now, this woman was as a Canaanite regarded as unclean, an outsider. Worse, she comes to plead for her daughter, who is possessed by an unclean spirit, this demon that vexes her. By her prayer and faith, the power and mercy of Jesus reach out to heal her daughter.

The Gospel tells us what is the cure for our uncleanness: the mercy and power of Jesus Christ, which we are to seek in the prayer of faith. And no matter what kind of outsider we are or feel ourselves to be, our faith can be matched by his grace.

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

Now, the particular possession and uncleanness that is before us today in our Epistle has to do with the lusts of the flesh. These Thessalonian Christians lived in a culture where sexual immorality was, at times, part of religious expression. It is said that fashionable ladies in Rome numbered the years by the name of the husband they had at that time. Promiscuous indulgence was seen as completely normal, and the keeping of concubines was expected.

What I want to say, then, is that the context Paul addresses in Thessalonica is not so different than ours. I came across a terrifying statistic which said that 25% of Canadian children - and they are children – under 14 had had sexual intercourse. Because of their common adolescent pretenses to invincibility and immortality, attempts at preventing pregnancy and disease fail. I have to admit that much of sex education in our society seems to take an odd approach. If the sex educators ran the drinking and driving campaign, I assume that the slogan would be “buckle up before you drink and drive.”

We are faced in our day with two clear and competing views of what is primary in human sexuality. One leads to death

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

and the other to life. It is the dreadful irony of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases that the very means of life, the very life-giving and transmitting power in us, has become the means of transmitting death. So I think it might be time to ask: Is human sexuality primarily for recreation or procreation? The Christian tradition is clear from Genesis 1 up to the present, and our society and culture are equally clear. What is not clear is where we stand.

Saint Paul begs and pleads with these Christian converts, living in such a context of sexual immorality, to lead Christian lives, distinct from the recreational sex with concubines, both men and women prostitutes, with which they were surrounded.

Now, I cannot imagine a more sensitive area to speak to you about this morning than sexual morality – well, nothing more sensitive than money. Yet the Gospel, and our conversion, must affect our relationship to both sexuality and money. They must be brought into the service of Jesus Christ. And it is in these, in our stewardship of both wealth and sexuality, that the state of our heart and soul is often most precisely known and reflected.

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

The demon of lust has a hold on us as a culture and a society, and no matter how far we think ourselves divorced from that culture, we are wrapped up in it. When the lusts of the flesh are let loose, disordered, outside of the rule of reason, natural purpose, and the revealed law of God, what has been given for a power of production becomes a terrible power of destruction. When the passions are ruled by neither reason nor love, they destroy family life, home life, the life of friendship, the life of the city and any other community.

So St. Paul tells us that fornication, or in other words to live in this lust, is the enemy of our sanctification. We violate and offend our own bodies. “He that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.” For this stems from and expresses a basic lack of self-respect. We transgress, trespass, go beyond the limits and hurt one another, in abuse, in degradation, in violation of marriages and families. Finally, we offend against the Lord, to whom our bodies in all their aspects belong. The body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body.

Sexual purity and chastity, then, are a matter of loving the

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

Lord with our all, and our neighbour as ourselves. For many, many people, the lusts of the flesh are like Esau's bowl of soup, for which small and transitory pleasure, he forfeited all his dignity and inheritance. Hebrews 12.16 reminds us of the necessity of holiness. We are warned, "Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."

And we must recall today that it was in regard to a dispute over sexual immorality, with the woman caught in adultery, that Jesus said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." So our sanctification involves a much higher standard than we suppose: 27 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.29 And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. 30 And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

We all, then, need to be forgiven, cleansed, restored and re-ordered. We all need to be made whole by the power of Jesus Christ.

So what does our sanctification mean, in terms of human sexuality? It means, first of all, a purity of heart, and a discipline in thought, word and deed. Clearly, it means self-sacrifice and self-denial. It means acknowledging that our bodies are not our own, that they belong to the Lord. And if we have been given in marriage by the Lord, then our bodies belong to our spouse. But whether we are single or married, divorced or widowed, gay or straight, we are all called to chastity, to abstain from fornication. We are all called to chastity. We are **all** called to chastity and we all fall short in thought and word and deed, and we all need to be cleansed of the demons of lust, which possess us, and can vex and destroy us. We are all called to chastity - to purity of heart and of body.

And so we belong together in humility, acknowledging our unworthiness, and trusting, clinging fiercely to his manifold and

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

great mercies. There is not a person here who does not know in their own family and life and heart the dangerous and destructive power of human sexuality, divorced from the ordering of God and the discipline of reason and love. We know that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. So we come to God in Christ, not to wallow in self-hatred, but to confess our sins, to acknowledge our wretchedness, and to cry out in faith and humility, “Lord, help me.” And so by faith in Jesus Christ we, too, may be made whole at this hour.

May the Lord help both me and you.