

**“Lust and Its Commodification”**  
**Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**Sunday, May 17, 2015**

We have been going along in our series of sermons dealing with the Seven Deadly Sins, and I have heard all but John Syster’s sermon because I was out of town that Sunday. One thing I have noticed from all the sermons that I have heard is that every preacher who is dealing with one of the Seven Deadly Sins pretty much begins by saying “I am guilty of this sin” somewhere along the line, so I would just like to continue that tradition and let you know and remind you that I don’t ever give a sermon that I don’t also need to hear myself. John, did you admit to your sin in your sermon? No? All right. Come to my office and we’ll work on it.

I want to start out with a quote and some advice. The quote goes like this: “Life is short. Have an affair”. This is the motto for a Toronto based website called ashleymadison.com. Begun in 2002, ashleymadison.com has made over \$20 million in its 13-year history. AshleyMadison.com is in the business of providing a service through which married men, and some women, can find a person to anonymously hook up with for sex—no strings attached. As the website makes clear, prostitution is illegal; cheating on your spouse is not. In a recent interview, the CEO from ashleymadison.com, Noel Biderman, says this: “This is just a business to me. There is a market need much like any other business that is successful. There is a huge demand for it. Indeed, adultery, it seems, is profitable.

During the summer of 1977, at the age of 12, I was at a friend’s house, and at one point in the day my friend called me back into his parents’ bedroom, where he asked me “Want to see something cool?” “Sure”, I said, having no idea what he was talking about, but just then my friend opened up the closet there in the bedroom, reached up on an upper shelf and brought down for my eyes to gaze upon the June issue of Playboy Magazine. My eyes were as big as half dollars, for I had never seen anything quite like that.

As I think back upon that day almost 38 years ago, I began to realize that was the day that my pornographic education began. It was the day that I began being socialized into the commodification of sex and, indeed, perhaps beginning with the Baby Boom generation of which I was at the tail end, each successive generation has been increasingly shaped by a pornographic notion of sexuality. From Playboy to Penthouse to VCRs, CDs and now the Internet, pornography has become a global history of lust, estimated today at being valued at over \$96 billion. There are over 4 million porn websites today, many of them distributed by our largest corporations. Indeed, there is a huge market demand for porn.

Gail Dines, Professor of Sociology and an anti-porn activist, says that porn in the 21st century is not just about men and women having sex on film, but “the porn industry”, she writes, “has hijacked the sexuality of an entire culture and is laying waste to a whole generation of boys, and when you lay waste to a whole generation of boys”, she writes, “you lay waste to a generation of girls”. Gail Dines is talking about porn in 2015, which is increasingly about the debasing of women as central to the sex act. Indeed, porn films today routinely include physical abuse, verbal abuse and acts of degradation that leave some women suicidal and permanently wounded psychologically and physically. Porn in 2015 is a force of destruction.

Into this world of pornography and websites dedicated to no strings attached adultery, we still hear the ever-diminishing voice of Jesus who says in Matthew “You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that every man who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart”. So Jesus, we can assume, was against lust. In Matthew, Jesus is referring to sexual lust, but lust defined is an emotion or feeling of intense desire that can take any form

such as lust for knowledge, lust for money, lust for sex, lust for power. Lust is an inappropriate desire that takes over our moral compass.

Now, what is interesting about lust, and especially pornographic lust in particular, is that the silence coming from the mainline church has been deafening. You do not hear the church speak about pornography. Somewhere along the line, lust has become a conversation that we do not have, and I have some ideas as to why that is. First of all, sexual desire and sexual relationships are a private matter. You don't talk about private matters.

In the United Church of Christ, in particular, with our congregational background—that is the other side of the UCC—we have what I call a “Puritan hangover”. The Puritans, who came here in the 1600s, believed that sexual intercourse was only to be had in marriage and primarily for the production of children. All other forms of extramarital sex including homosexual sex, masturbation, oral and anal sex, were forbidden as Puritans, and violators of such rules were punished by fines, whipping, public shaming like the “Scarlet Letter”, and even death. We don't want to be seen in this modern day as Puritanical, so we don't say anything. After all, sex is one of the great pleasures of life for people, but the silence of the church in regards to lust has created a moral void—a void into which the forces of the market have taken over because when a society and its economic system has no ethical restraints (and ours does not anymore), a bottom line ethic takes over. Lust and its cultivation as an economic force is widely profitable.

Now, as we have been talking about the Seven Deadly Sins these last six weeks, one of the definitions for the seven deadly sins is that they are those transgressions which are fatal to our spiritual progress. While sexual desire is normal and can be a very healthy component of a mature and committed relationship, lust in its sexual form, and perhaps in all other forms, is destructive. It is, theologically speaking, one incarnation of the power of death. It is a power which, when left unrestrained, without any ethical restraints, can lead to death, but we are people of resurrection. We are people who believe that the power of life is victorious over the powers of death, so in reference to the deadly sin of lust, resurrection then takes the form of sexual ethics. One of the things the church needs to say, and say out loud, is that sex is of God. God has made us to have and to enjoy sexual intercourse in responsible relationships. The church needs to say that, because if we don't say that, then pornographic gets the last word. We need to get off our Puritan “bench” and start saying out loud that sex is of God when it is healthy.

What does sexual ethic look like? What does the power of resurrection look like in terms of a sexual ethic? Well, as I have just said, our sexuality, like all else, is a gift of God. It is not our private possession to dispose of as we see fit. It is how God has made us, and it comes with responsibility. So, sexual ethic as a Christian says that sex is of God.

Secondly, sexual ethic says, and lifts up the idea, that right and wrong are not matters of individual choice. There are moral absolutes. Not everything is relative. There is right and wrong in sexual relationships.

Thirdly, our private sex lives (that's why we don't like to talk about it, because there is certainly a private element to it) do involve others and may hurt them even if we are unaware of it. Adultery is a destructive force as Jesus was pointing to—even if it is hidden—so we have to be careful with how we behave.

Last, but not least, in a healthy sexual ethic, there are structures and healthy orders of human life into which our sexual behaviors must fit, so we can, in a healthy sexual life, honor God. The mantra “if it feels good, do it” only leads to chaos and does not honor God.

So, there is resurrection. There is the force of life, of joy, of pleasure, of intimacy in healthy sexual relationships. What is so powerful about the deadly sin of lust in our day and time is that lust is no

longer now simply a temptation of the heart or a weakness of the soul. Lust is now an economic force to which we are invited to participate without conscience. So, what do we do in a society that lifts up as good that which is difficult? What I think is that our faith of resurrection calls us to live lives of resistance. We no longer have ethics in our society other than the economic bottom line. We do not have a social ethic in place that can help us to live and make judgments about our sexual lives, in particular, so we can make decisions that are healthy. We, as Christians, must live lives of resistance to free market sexuality. How do we do that? Well, we get ourselves informed. We get ourselves informed in order to be empowered, and we are empowered so that we can be engaged—that we can be engaged in acts of resistance against those sins which lead to death. That is why the Christian community that we are a part of here is so important, because we are trying to live an ethical system and a system of morals and values that are not shared in our wider world, so we have to help each other with our temptations, our struggles, and all that stuff that is going on out there. We are trying to live something differently, so we need each other. We need each other to strengthen each other and give each other hope and encouragement to live a life that is different. All these deadly sins are, of course, out there, and we need strength from each other to be able to live in resistance to those sins.

So, resurrection is about getting a new grip on life. It is about getting right in our relationships with one another, with our intimate partners, and with our community. That is resurrection—when we are right with each other. It is about getting right with our souls, getting right with our conscience, and getting right with God. Of course, all of us struggles with these temptations, and all of us at times, gives in, but we know as Christians we are forgiven, but we are not left there to just dangle. We are called not only to be forgiven but to live new again—to get right with God.

The challenge today is that we truly continue to grow to be people of resurrection, people who embody and live the power of life in the midst of all the forms of death that are out there to this day, so we give thanks for God's power of resurrection through Jesus Christ, and we give thanks for this community of faith which gives us hope and strength and courage to stand in our faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.