

The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time January 17, 2021

In the time of St Paul, Corinth was one of the wealthiest cities in the Roman Empire. It was located in what is now the country of Turkey on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. As a port city, it was an important center of trade in the ancient world. In the course of a year, thousands of sailors and merchants would pass through Corinth, many of them looking for a good time. Because of that, Corinth had a reputation for being an immoral city where anything and everything happened.

Corinth was a city where many people considered pleasure to be the highest good. As a result, prostitution was rampant, even in the pagan temples. Children were regularly abused and infants were often left outside the gates of the city to die. Women and children were considered objects that could be bought and sold like any other commodity. The city's rich people had no qualms about taking advantage of the poor.

Also, in the time of St Paul, Greek culture had a tendency of seeing the body as something evil. They considered the soul as the true identity of the person. The body was just a vessel that the soul occupied until it ascended to higher levels of knowledge. For this reason, many Greeks considered the body something that should be enjoyed and used for as long as possible before it lost its beauty.

It was into this culture that St Paul came to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. And it is in the context of the culture of Corinth that we can begin to understand the meaning of St Paul's words in today's second reading.

To a society that considered the body something evil, St Paul taught that our bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit". What does that mean? A temple is a place where one encounters God. It is where we go to hear God speak and to worship Him. St Paul, then, is telling the Corinthians and us that our bodies are a point of encounter with God. He reveals Himself to us through our bodies and uses us to reveal Himself to others.

This is possible, because we are created in the image and likeness of God. Not only our souls but our bodies as well. Our bodies are good because they were created good by God. He breathed His own Spirit into us and that Spirit continues to live within us.

Once we understand that every person is a temple of the Holy Spirit we can understand why it is so wrong to treat others as objects for our own pleasure. When I look at someone with lust in my heart, I am defiling something holy. When I take someone made in the image and likeness of God and use that person, I am not only offending that person but God Himself. Not only that, but I am sinning against myself

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because my body was created so that I could show love to others not so that I could use them or be used by them. That is why St Paul warns us, "Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body."

Our bodies are good and holy. Because of that our sexuality is also something good and holy. It is given to us as a gift. It drives us to reach out beyond ourselves to others. It makes it possible for us to be in relationship with others and to love them. Our sexuality teaches us that we cannot find our ultimate fulfillment in ourselves but in union with others.

God does not want us to deny our sexuality. He does not want us to make believe it's not there or ignore it. Rather, He wants us to use the power of our sexuality to pour ourselves out enthusiastically in love and service of others. Because it is such a powerful force in our lives, He wants us to use it responsibly.

How do we do that? By exercising the virtue of chastity. Chastity is the power to direct our sexual desires toward the love and the service of others. It does not seek to REPRESS our sexual desires but to EXPRESS them in healthy and loving ways.

We need to learn chastity if we want healthy friendships and relationships. The truth is that the unchaste person is not capable of love. If we treat people as objects for our own pleasure or only value people who are attractive, then we cannot love unconditionally. All our relationships will end in failure because no one will be able to meet our unrealistic expectations. Only when we learn to love people as they are - can we have healthy, intimate relationships. Only by being able to give love can we find love.

Today, we live in a society that is much like the Corinth that St Paul preached to. It is not easy to be chaste. Because of that, many have fallen into the trap of using others for their pleasure or allowing themselves to be used. But we should never despair. We have the Sacrament of Confession to relieve us of our shame and guilt and to give us the strength to get up and try again. We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us who is Love itself whom we can rely on to strengthen us when we are feeling weak. And we have the Eucharist. Jesus teaches us the way of love by giving Himself totally to us - even going so far as giving His actual Body to us. The more we imitate Jesus by giving ourselves unconditionally to others without expecting anything in return, the more we will find love. Then, as temples of the Holy Spirit, others can find God more clearly in us.