

Can you imagine me reading this in the Raleigh News & Observer? A lady in the parish died, and her family wrote a rather snarky obituary in her honor. They ended it with these words: "Her memorial will be led by Rev. John Durbin of St. Andrew's in Apex, NC, a very questionable choice for any spiritual event, but one the family felt would be appropriate due to the fact that every time our mother heard Fr. John preach -- she prayed fervently for Jesus to return at that very moment." Can you imagine that? I did -- I made it up.

And for the men in the congregation who are looking for a date, St. Andrew's is a full service parish -- we're here to help! I have some clean, BIBLICAL pick-up lines for you: "I would part the Red Sea for you." "Now I know why Solomon had 700 wives -- because he never met you." "I believe one of my ribs belongs to you." And lastly, "Let me remove my sandals before coming any closer." Good luck guys!

First a bit of background. In all 4 gospels, Jesus almost never answers questions directly. Usually, when someone comes to Him with a question, Jesus answers with another question, or with a parable or a challenge. Author Philip Yancey reports that he heard a theologian say that Jesus was asked 183 questions in the gospels, and He only answered three of them. 3 out of 183. So we need to pay close attention to Jesus' answer here (this from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2019, citing footnote from Yancey, PRAYER: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE?) The question I would have asked about this situation is "Was this woman taking out life insurance policies on all these husbands?" (DYNAMIC, p. 32)

Jesus was asked about a woman who marries 7 times and all her husbands die -- whose wife will she be in the resurrection? And Jesus said that after the resurrection, we will no longer marry -- or be given in marriage. But let's get to the point. Is there sex in heaven? That's what we really want to know!

That great American theologian Janis Joplin, was once asked what it was like being a rock star. She replied: "It's pretty hard sometimes. You go on stage, make love to 15000 people, then you go home and sleep alone."

Jesus' answer and Janis Joplin's are not unconnected. Each, in its own way, says something about the all-embracing intent of our sexuality. What Janis Joplin is saying is that, in our sexuality and our creativity, we are ultimately trying to make love to everyone. What Jesus is saying is not that we will be celibate in heaven, but rather that, in heaven, all will be married to all. In heaven, unlike life here on earth where that is not possible, our sexuality will finally be able to embrace everyone. In heaven, everyone will make love to everyone else, and already now, we hunger for that within every cell of our being. Sexually our hungers are very wide. We are built to ultimately embrace the universe and everyone and everything in it.

To understand our sexuality -- and to live with its unfulfilled tensions, it can be helpful simply to understand this. In loving, the ultimate wound is not to be able to marry everyone. The greatest human hunger, felt in every cell in our being, is that we cannot be completely united with everyone and everything. This should not surprise us. As Sidney Callahan says: "We are united through all matter with all creation, and we are united as a species destined to come together in an ultimate unity in a new creation. We are destined to end up as members of one body in Christ. Is it surprising, then, that we hunger for this along the way?" We are not crazy, (although our sexuality can make us feel that way sometimes) but our sexuality is a big deal -- and a challenge -- and a wonderful gift all at the same time.

It is important to understand this, but it is also important not to misunderstand it. Because our sexuality is ultimately geared to embrace everyone does not mean that we can be promiscuous and, already here in this life, try to live that out. In fact, paradoxically, it means the opposite. Only God can sleep with everyone and, thus, only *in* God can we sleep with everyone. In this life, even though our sexuality has us geared up for universal embrace, we only have 2 options that are life-giving: either we embrace the many through the one (by sleeping with one person within a monogamous relationship) or we embrace the one through the many (by sleeping with no one, in celibacy). Both of these are ways that will eventually open our sexuality up so as to embrace everyone. If we go the route of promiscuity, eventually, we will embrace no one.

The pain of sexual inconsummation drives us outward, as is its function, to seek union with persons and things beyond ourselves. Up to a point, this is good. All of us, like St. Augustine, can thank God for giving us restless hearts. Our restlessness is the source of all of our energies. But it is also what keeps us from restfulness, from prayer, from being centered, and from being happy.

There comes a point in our restlessness when its purpose is no longer to direct us outward, but inward. When instead of letting our restlessness drive us outward to try to satisfy our incompleteness by yet more activity, friends, sex, work, entertainment, or distraction, we must enter it in such a way as to turn it into solitude.

Solitude, as we know, is not the same thing as loneliness. It is being alone, but it is being alone in such a way that our very incompleteness is a source of quiet strength and not of anxious dissipation. Henri Nouwen outlined 4 steps to turn our restless incompleteness into a restful solitude: This is the wind up, the conclusion – so pay attention!

1. We have to own our pain and incompleteness. Like an alcoholic cannot be helped until they admit helplessness, we too cannot move toward solitude until we acknowledge honestly our pathological restlessness and fundamental sexual unwholeness. Hence, the first step toward solitude is precisely to accept that, here in this life, we will find no final symphony and we may not give our congenital hungers for full consummation free reign but must direct them toward something else, something deeper.
2. We need to give up false expectations. Once we have accepted that we are fundamentally incomplete in that nothing in this life will ever fully complete us or satisfy us, we need then give up our expectations and demands. We have to stop expecting that somewhere, sometime, in some place, we will meet just the right person, the right situation, or the right combination of circumstances so that we can be completely happy. When we accept this truth, we will stop demanding that our spouses, families, friends, jobs, parishes, pastors, parishioners give us what only God can give us – clear-cut pure and perfect joy.
3. We need to go inward. When we are restless, everything in us screams to move outward, to seek some activity that will soothe the ache. However, to find solitude we must move inward, away from all activity. It means to put down our devices! Ultimately, what turns our restless aching into inner quiet and peace is not more activity, but sitting still long enough for restlessness to turn to restfulness, compulsion to freedom, impatience to patience, self-absorption to altruism, and heartache to empathy. We can never grow up without prayer and quiet!
4. This is a movement that is never made once and for all. Turning restlessness into restfulness, aching inconsummation into peaceful solitude, is not something that is ever accomplished once and for all. The world is not divided up between 2 kinds of persons, restless ones and ones who have found solitude. Rather our own lives are divided between 2 different modes of feeling: Some days we are

more restless and other days we are more restful, sometimes our congenital sexual aching is one huge heartache and at other times it is a deep well of empathy, and some days we find being alone almost too painful to bear and other days we bask in quiet solitude. Coming to grips with unfulfilled sexual hunger is to, more and more, find peace.

When we accept that we were made incomplete – because we are made to be with others and with THE OTHER, GOD, then we give up the unrealistic belief that we can have the full symphony here on earth. There is a true nobility to both human love and sexuality, as these are expressed in either marriage or in celibacy. A loneliness will always exist for all of us. We cannot be enough for each other, so we will always remain deeply sexed, separate, and somewhat alone.

But if this is recognized and accepted, its very absurdity becomes the center of peace where, finally, things begin to make sense and marriage and celibacy become both possible and beautiful. Because we know where they ultimately end – in the very heart of our loving God. Amen. (all of this adapted from THE HOLY LONGING, Ronald Rolheiser, p. 206-212)