The Jesus Way

1 of 5 in the series Biblical Sexuality

Oct. 20, 2024 Matthew 5:27-30, etc.

Good morning, everyone!

Today we begin a new and (I think it's fair to say) much-anticipated sermon series.

It's a PG-13 kind of series, and we've endeavoured to communicate this ahead of time to parents and guardians of children and younger youth. If you didn't get that message for any reason, let me take this opportunity to give you a heads up that we're about to embark on a 5-week series called *Biblical Sexuality*.

And all God's people said, "You've got my attention, pastor."

If you do happen to have kids with you right now, whether you're here in-person or are worshipping online, this would be a good time for you to make any adjustments you feel the need to make in light of the subject matter.

Why are we undertaking a series on what the Bible has to say about sex? Let me answer that by referring to our current ministry theme at Cornerstone: *Making Space for Joy and Flourishing*.

In the Bible, joy and flourishing are very closely connected terms that have everything to do with the relationships we share.

Indeed, joy is the positive energy that flows within and between us when we share healthy relational connections with God and with each other in Jesus. Such joy provides us with a sense of well-being that enables us to flourish, even as we navigate the challenges of life in a fallen world. In turn, biblical joy also provides us with the strength we need to fulfill our calling to partner with God in bringing his flourishing to the world around us.

Our sexuality is a profound part of who we are as relational beings who have been created in God's image. Therefore, sexuality is an incredibly important topic to address not only if we want to experience God's joy and flourishing ourselves, but also for the sake of our witness as followers of Jesus to the hypersexualized culture in which we live. Theologian Jonathan Grant puts it this way:

Sustaining faithful relationships and encouraging the ability to live disciplined sexual lives may be one of the most influential missional tasks of the contemporary church as we witness to the kingdom of God in the midst of a [sex-saturated] culture. This should make equipping [people] to live whole and healed lives in the area of sexuality and relationships a key priority and passion for Christian leaders. ¹

This is why we're teaching on biblical sexuality. If our efforts as a church to make disciples for Jesus fail to include our sexuality, then our capacity to both experience as well as to share God's joy and flourishing will be severely compromised.

¹ Jonathan Grant, Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age, p. 28.

Yes, it's a delicate and sometimes emotionally-charged subject. But to avoid teaching on biblical sexuality because it's uncomfortable and risky would be an abdication of our responsibility to faithfully shepherd the flock of Jesus— especially in light of the cultural moment in which we're all living.

With that in mind, allow me to share a brief overview of the series.

Today, I'm opening the series with a message called "The Jesus Way" which explores key aspects of what the Bible teaches about sexuality through the lens of one of Jesus' own teachings on the subject. After all, the whole point of the Bible is to point us to Jesus, so Jesus is the one we must ultimately hear and heed when it comes to our sexuality, not to mention all other aspects of our lives as well.

Next Sunday, Pastor Andrew will talk about "The Bible and Marriage"— a subject which has tremendous implications for Christian sexuality, not only for those who happen to be married, but for everyone.

Pastor Jeremy will then teach on a vitally important topic that is all too often neglected in Christian churches today—singleness— which the Bible sees as a vocation of equal importance to marriage.

Please pray for me as I share the fourth message in this series on the complex and sensitive topic of what the Bible says regarding *same-sex sexuality*. Too often, the church has approached same-sex sexuality as a culture war to be waged, a debate to be won, a problem to be fixed, or an awkward issue to be avoided. But by the very life that he modelled, the Lord Jesus would exhort us to never forget that first and foremost it's about *people to be loved*— our LGBTQ relatives, friends and neighbours that Jesus himself loves, has given his very life for, and is thrilled to receive into his family— even as he calls all of us— both gay and straight— to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him on the narrow path of discipleship.

Finally, Pastor Kevin, our Youth Pastor, will close the series with a talk about "Youth and Biblical Sexuality." His message will help us better appreciate the unique challenges that today's young people are faced with when it comes to sexuality, and how we can best pray for, support and walk alongside them in Christ.

Just before we read our main scripture passage for today, please allow me to share some additional notes about this series.

First, instead of the usual 25 minutes or so, we'll be taking up to 40 minutes for each of these messages. Other elements of the worship service will be adjusted to accommodate this. The extra time will allow us to address these vital topics more effectively than we could otherwise.

Second, this series will surely generate conversations throughout the congregation, and that's a good thing, provided we keep those conversations respectful, gracious, kind and constructive. Even in areas where we don't see eye to eye, we can learn a great deal from each other's perspectives and life experiences when we maintain a posture of humility and seek to listen more than we speak, amen? Will you commit before Jesus this morning to do your part in this regard? If so, please hold your hand up high...

Thirdly and finally, I want to let you know that we pastors have been preparing for this series for the better part of a year. Much study has been done; many books have been read from different sources and perspectives; many hours have been invested in deep reflection, as well as in conversation with others in

this church family that we needed to listen to and learn from before taking the pulpit to teach on these subjects. We of course take our responsibility to preach and teach very seriously no matter the series, no matter the subject. But given the times in which we live, the stakes just feel higher when it comes to a series like this— especially given its potential impact on the lives of so many precious people, and on this church family. Therefore, we are approaching this series with a considerable amount of extra effort and care, and no small amount of prayer.

With that in mind, the time has come for us to read our main scripture passage for today— Matthew 5:27-30. Please follow along as I read these words of Jesus:

"You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ²

Now in today's culture, many people—perhaps including you— would have a negative reaction to those words of Jesus. "Aha, see?" some would say. "There's that negative view of sex that Christians always seem to have. I mean, isn't this passage pretty much saying that anyone who has sexual desire is on their way to hell?"

But that would be a huge misunderstanding, both of what Jesus means in this text, as well as of the Bible's overall view of sexuality. The Christian view of sex, while radically different from that of mainstream culture, is arguably among the most attractive aspects of Christianity when it's understood rightly.

Those of us who follow Jesus are called to walk in the way that he sets out for us. What is "the Jesus Way" when it comes to our sexuality? With the words of Jesus that we just read in Matthew 5 as our jumping-off point, I'd like to share with you five biblical insights about sex. The first insight has to do with:

1. The goodness of sex.

Our passage in Matthew 5 comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In that famous sermon, Jesus instructs us about how we are to live as his followers in just about every aspect of life, including our sexuality. Our passage begins with Jesus saying:

"You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say..." 3

Here, Jesus refers back to the Old Testament—and specifically, to the seventh of the Ten Commandments: "You must not commit adultery." ⁴

² Matthew 5:27-30 (NLT)

³ Matthew 5:27 (NLT)

⁴ See Exodus 20:14

If we want to understand what Jesus is saying about sex in Matthew 5, we need to have at least some understanding of the Old Testament sexual ethic that Jesus accepts as a given. Many today will automatically assume or expect that the Old Testament view of sex would be largely negative. But listen to the evidence and judge for yourself whether the Old Testament has a negative view of sex.

In the Bible's very first chapters, God brings Eve to Adam, and Adam bursts into this ecstatic love poem as he sees the woman: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." And don't forget, they're both naked, according to the text. ⁵

Here's another example from the book of Proverbs, where husbands are exhorted to:

Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you.
Rejoice in the wife of your youth.
She is a loving deer, a graceful doe.
Let her breasts satisfy you always.
May you always be captivated by her love. 6

Some of you are thinking, "That's in the Bible?" Indeed, it is.

But that verse is nothing compared to any number of lines from an Old Testament book called the Song of Solomon, which is essentially a poetic celebration of the delights of romantic and indeed sexual love between a husband and a wife.

In fact, Song of Solomon chapter 7 has been called the sexiest chapter of the Bible. ⁷ (And all God's people started to look up that chapter on their Bible app.)

Go ahead, look it up, and you'll get a sense of what I'm saying when it comes to the poetically unabashed way the Bible celebrates the goodness of sex.

Later in the message, we'll consider the goodness of sex on an even more profound level. But hopefully through this brief sampling of Old Testament texts, the point is clear enough. The Bible unashamedly rejoices in sex as a good gift from a good God. If you think the Bible is anti-sex, you didn't get that view from actually reading and studying the Bible. You got it somewhere else.

In fact, the Bible shows us that God so affirms the goodness of sex, and the incredible power of sexual intimacy, that in his wisdom, and for our good, he placed a boundary around it. Which brings us to our second insight.

2. The boundary of sex.

We've seen in Matthew 5:27 that Jesus refers back to the seventh commandment, "You must not commit adultery." This a God-given boundary for sex. Jesus then expands that boundary to include not just the physical act of adultery, but lustful looks and thoughts as well.

⁵ See Genesis 2:18-25

⁶ Proverbs 5:18-19 (NLT)

⁷ Song of Solomon 7

This raises a question. If the Bible really does affirm that sex is so good, why put boundaries on it like that?

Jesus would likely respond to such a question by going back even further, to the story of creation, where we see God's original intentions for human sexuality. That's exactly what Jesus does in Matthew 19, where he says:

"Haven't you read... that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 8

Here, Jesus refers to Genesis chapter two, where the union of Adam and Eve essentially stands as the prototype—God's intended design— for both marriage and sexual intimacy: "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

Pastor Andrew will break this down much more thoroughly when he teaches next Sunday on "The Bible and Marriage." In fact, this passage will likely come up a handful of times throughout this series. But for the purposes of this message, take note that the phrase "be united" speaks of a relationship of exclusivity and life-long commitment. The phrase "the two shall become one flesh" points to sexual union, and particularly, the act of sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife.

So Jesus takes us back to the beginning of creation, and reminds us that God's design was for sex to take place within the boundary of marriage— a relationship meant to last a lifetime.

Why this particular boundary for sex? Well, by God's design, sex is much more than a mere physical act. There are also deep emotional and spiritual consequences when two people become one flesh. It is the fusion of two people together at the deepest levels. Indeed, from a biblical point of view, there's no such thing as casual sex. For example, the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians:

Don't you know that he who unites himself with a prostitute becomes one with her in body? For it is said, "The two shall become one flesh." ⁹

Isn't it interesting that this verse refers to an encounter with a prostitute as a "one flesh" experience—the same phrase used elsewhere in scripture to describe the deep, mystical union between a husband and a wife? Even in a one-time sexual encounter with a prostitute, something much more profound happens than just the temporary joining of two bodies together.

Therefore, God ordains that sex must take place within the protective boundary of a marriage covenant. In the context of marriage, sex is a vehicle for engaging the whole person in an act of self-giving and commitment. It is meant to serve as a physical sign of the binding promise of permanence shared between a husband and a wife.

With this in mind, C.S. Lewis writes that those who engage in sex outside of marriage:

⁸ Matthew 19:4-6 (NIV)

⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:16 (NIV)

... are trying to isolate one kind of union—the sexual—from all other kinds of union, which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. In marriage, however, sex helps you strengthen and celebrate your whole-life commitment to each other. It's meant to deepen, nurture and solidify the relationship.

But outside of marriage, when you're willing to do with your body what you're unwilling to do with the rest of your life, sex has the opposite effect.

Theologian Frederick Buechner explains that that sex is like nitroglycerin: "It can be used either to blow up bridges or to heal hearts."

Which is why God, in his wisdom and love, ordains that the only place where sex can safely deliver its life-giving power—its bonding power, its healing power, its power to literally create new life— is within the boundary of biblical marriage— and again, we will be considering the nature of biblical marriage a lot more in the weeks to come.

Thes insight about the boundary of sex leads us to our next insight, which gets to the heart of what Jesus is addressing in our Matthew 5 passage:

3. The problem of lust.

Jesus has taken us back to the Old Testament, reminding us that by God's design, sex should not take place outside of marriage. But he doesn't just leave us there. He takes us further, saying, "Now let's talk about your thought life."

"You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." ¹⁰

And this would not just be about men's lust for women. This would apply to any lust any of us may have toward anyone.

Again, it would be easy to interpret Jesus' words as morally uptight and sexually repressive— as if any kind of sexual desire we could ever have is dirty and puts us in danger of divine judgment.

But that's not what Jesus means. How do we know this? First, as we've already seen, the Bible views sex as a good gift from a good God. And second, of all the words Jesus could have used to describe sexual desire, the specific phrase used in this passage—the phrase we translate as "lust"— has strong overtones of greed and idolatry.

If we take a moment to appreciate the Bible's understanding of what greed is about, we'll be well-positioned to understand what Jesus is saying about lust in this passage.

Greed takes hold of us when we have an attitude toward money that is:

- Selfish
- Addictive

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¹⁰ Matthew 5:27-28 (NLT)

• Driven by fantasy

First, greed is selfish. I want money for me. I don't want to share it or give it away. Second, greed is addictive. Greedy people feel like they *have* to *have* more money—they can't live without it— so they'll bend rules, use people, become workaholics, and sacrifice relationships to get more. Thirdly, greed is driven by fantasy. If you're a greedy person, you'll often fantasize about what you're going to do or buy or how you're going to feel once you acquire a certain amount of money or certain possessions.

The bottom line of greed is that you're looking to money to give you the deep sense of security and self-worth that only God can give you. Therefore, greed is a form of idolatry in which you make money your functional god.

In Matthew 5, Jesus is saying that lust is about having same kind of idolatrous attitude toward sex that a greedy person has toward money: **Lust turns sex into an idol.** As with money, we can turn sex into something that is selfish, addictive, and driven by fantasy. That's what happens when we look to sex to give us what only God can give us. Rebecca DeYoung sums it up well when she says that:

Lust is a problem with the heart above your belt before it is a problem with the heat below it. 11

Let me share with you now three examples of lust as sexual idolatry.

First there's pornography. Is the use of pornography selfish? Obviously. It's a party for one, consumed entirely for the sake of personal indulgence, with zero regard for anyone else. Is it addicting? Powerfully so—it actually re-wires your brain. Is it driven by fantasy? In every way.

People think that pornography, because it's consumed in private, really doesn't harm anyone else. But it develops in you crushingly unrealistic expectations regarding sexual performance and physical appearance that you will carry with you into your relationships, and potentially into your marriage.

Pornography can ruin your ability to remain faithful in a real relationship with a real person, and that can bring all kinds of hurt not just for you, but for those closest to you as well.

And never forget that when you consume pornography, on the other side of the images you ogle are human beings, precious to God and created in his image, who are being exploited by a dark and greedy industry that profits off our lusts. Pornography is anything but victimless.

A second example of sexual idolatry is simply the belief that you can't have a happy and fulfilling life—that you can't possibly be a whole person— without an active sex life. Don't believe the lies of prevailing culture, which tell us that we can never possibly be happy and healthy and whole apart from continually acting on our sexual drives and desires. The Bible says no such thing.

If you're a Christian, the only object you can rightly look at and say, "I have to have that to be happy," is Jesus. To say that of anything else, including sex, is to put that something in the place that only Jesus should occupy.

It's a diabolical myth that you have to act on your sexual desires in order to be the true you.

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¹¹ Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, p. 163.

Here's a third example of sexual idolatry, which may not seem particularly sexual.

Do you have in your mind a dream—a fairy tale that has captured your heart—of finding your soul mate? Does that dream make you say, "If I could just find that special person to complete me, then I'd finally be happy?"

Our society has made an idol out of the romantic idea that in order to be complete and fulfilled, you need to have a "significant other" in your life. And the church has bought into their own version of the same lie. How so? Well, often the church makes single people feel "less-than" if they don't find a mate and get married.

But what the church so often fails to emphasize is that the radical teaching of the Bible is that celibate singleness is as high and holy a vocation as marriage. ¹² Indeed, Jesus Christ— the perfect and complete human being— was himself single. Single person— you are already complete in Jesus *just as you are*. Pastor Jeremy will have a lot more to say about this subject two weeks from now.

Why does Jesus speak out so strongly against lust and sexuality idolatry, in whatever forms it may take? Remember, in our Matthew 5 passage he says:

So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ¹³

To be clear, Jesus is in no way implying that sexual sin cannot be forgiven when there is true repentance. Take heart— it *absolutely* can. Otherwise, virtually all of us would stand condemned. Forgiveness and the path to freedom are offered to all of us in Jesus. We'll talk more about that in a few minutes.

But in these verses, Jesus is of course speaking metaphorically. He's not asking you to literally gouge out your eye or chop off your hand. What he means is that you need to *take drastic measures to root out lust and sexual idolatry from your life*. Why? Because God loves and cares about us, and our sexual idolatry can do so much damage to us, as well to others.

www.cornerstonechurch.ca/christiansexuality

With this in mind, I want to let you know that we have prepared a special web page for you or anyone you know needs guidance or support in the area of sexuality. If you scan the QR code or go to the URL that's printed on the little card that was placed on your seat, you will find our Christian Sexuality Support and Resource Guide.

Among other things, it includes resources for parents of children and youth, a list of Christian therapists who specialize in helping people with sexual addictions, some technology and accountability supports to help you or a loved one resist the temptation of internet pornography, and lots of links to great books and websites on a range of topics, as well as workshops and courses you can participate in.

¹² See 1 Corinthians 7

¹³ Matthew 5:29-30 (NLT)

Let's move on and consider our next insight about biblical sexuality, which has to do with:

4. The future of love.

Oddly enough, Jesus' comments about hell in our Matthew 5 passage contain hints about how we can be delivered from sexual idolatry.

Whereas as several English translations of this passage say, "It is better for you to lose one part of your body that for your whole body to be thrown into hell," the original word Jesus actually uses is *Gehenna*. Gehenna was a literal place just outside of Jerusalem— it was essentially a dump where garbage was always burning.

So this word picture, Gehenna, suggests a place of unquenchable thirst, a place of unfulfilled longing, a place where our desire always burns but is never satisfied. We were made to know God and to have our deepest needs satisfied in him. Therefore, if we reject God, and attempt to satisfy our desires on our own terms, we actually end up losing the ability to have our heart's truest desires satisfied.

To use another analogy, Jesus is saying that if you're engaged in sexual sin, trusting sex to give you what your heart most wants and needs, you're like a person who's lost at sea on a raft, dying of thirst. Even though there's water all around, it can do nothing to quench your thirst, and the more you drink, you sicker you get.

If sex outside a marriage covenant points toward Gehenna, what does sex in the context of a marriage covenant, or faithful celibacy in singleness, point toward?

The Bible teaches that even the most rapturous sexual love between a husband and a wife is but a dim foretaste of what it's going to be like to fall into the arms of our true and eternal Spouse—Jesus Christ—when he returns to make all things new. In Ephesians 5 Paul writes:

As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. 14

We've seen this before, haven't we? It's from the creation story in Genesis 2, which points to sexual union in the context of marriage. We've heard Jesus quoting it, and now Paul quotes it. Except Paul adds that sexual union in marriage is a picture of the way Jesus and his church are one.

According to the Bible, the church is the bride of Christ, and both married sex as well as celibate singleness are signs pointing to the fact that we will one day fall into the loving arms of Jesus, who is our true and eternal Spouse. Revelation 22, the Bible's final chapter, includes this invitation:

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." Let anyone who hears this say, "Come." Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life." ¹⁵

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¹⁴ Ephesians 5:31-32 (NLT)

¹⁵ Revelation 22:17

The "bride" in this text is the church— it's us. We're the bride of Christ. And to all who are thirsty, the Spirit of Jesus freely offers the water of life. Only he can quench your deepest thirst. Only he can meet your deepest needs, your truest longings, because whether you realize it or not, your heart's deepest and truest yearning is for him.

Jesus once offered someone else living water to drink. Do any of you remember who it was? It was the woman at the well in John chapter 4. ¹⁶

He told her, I've got water that if you drink it, you'll never be thirsty again. So she said to him, "Sir give me this water so that I can drink it and never thirst again." And Jesus said, "Go get your husband." An interesting request.

She replied, "Sir, I don't have a husband." And Jesus said, "No, you don't. You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now is not your husband."

Why does Jesus bring up this woman's complicated romantic life? Because he knows she's been looking to illicit relationships to fulfill her deepest longings, but it's been getting her nowhere. The only thing she had to show for it was a string of broken marriages. Jesus was saying, you've been trying to find in the arms of men the kind of deep, unconditional love, worth, affirmation and acceptance that only I can give you.

You will never be married well unless Jesus Christ is the primary Spouse of your heart and of your soul. And you will never be single well unless Jesus Christ is the primary Spouse of your heart and of your soul— unless his love is the most important thing in your life.

Look to the spousal love of Jesus, because only then will you be in a position to resist the dangers of lust and sexual idolatry— and all the more so in this hypersexual age that we live in. The more we look to the spousal love of Jesus, the more our sexuality— whether we're single or married— will become a pointer to our ultimate and eternal relationship with him.

Now, please allow me conclude with one final insight about biblical sexuality.

5. The grace-and-truth way of Jesus.

Today, we've been looking at biblical sexuality through the lens of one of Jesus' key teachings on the subject. So far, we've seen that the Jesus Way celebrates the goodness of sex; it honours the boundary that God has placed around sex; for our own good it urgently warns against the problem of lust; and it anticipates the future of love in which Jesus will be the ultimate spouse of his church, and of our hearts.

Maybe you've been struggling sexually, as so many of us do in one way or another. Jesus died on the cross so that you could experience forgiveness, restoration and freedom in Christ, and deliverance from all condemnation. As the Bible says in Romans:

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. 17

¹⁷ Romans 8:1 (NLT)

¹⁶ See John 4:1-42

If you come away from today's message feeling condemned and hopeless because of your sexual struggles, know that such condemnation is not coming from God. It's coming from the enemy, Satan, who the Bible refers to again and again as *the accuser*.

But if you come away from today's message having experienced both grace and truth, then you've encountered Jesus. Because the Way of Jesus is the way of grace and truth. As New Testament scholar Preston Sprinkle says:

The grace-and-truth way of Jesus has a very high standard of obedience, but excessively loves those who fall short of that standard— especially those who have been marginalized and ostracized by religion today. ¹⁸

We see this so vividly in the account of the woman caught in adultery in John's gospel. 19

Jesus stood with this woman in front of a crowd of self-righteous religious leaders who were eager to stone her to death. After stooping down to write in the dirt with his finger, he stood up again and said to the angry mob, "Let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone."

One by one, the people in the crowd dropped their rocks and went away, until only Jesus and the woman remained. Turning to the woman, he said, "Does no one condemn you?"

"No one sir," she replied.

"Neither do I condemn you," said Jesus. "No go, and leave your life of sin."

Grace: Jesus does not condemn us.

Truth: Jesus doesn't gloss over the reality of our sexual sin.

John chapter 1 says that Jesus came to us from God the Father full of grace and truth. 20

And because of this, Jesus is the perfect embodiment of God's love. With his very life, and ever more so in his death, Jesus demonstrates that a theology of truth without grace is unloving, and a theology of grace without truth is equally unloving.

The way of grace and truth is the Jesus Way— and it's the way of love. Cornerstone, may we all follow the Jesus Way as we journey together with him and with each other through this series and beyond. Amen?

Let's close with prayer...

¹⁸ Preston Sprinkle, Digital Leaders Forum Handbook & Notes (The Center for Faith, Sexuality and Gender) p. 6.

¹⁹ John 7:53-8:11

²⁰ John 1:14