

“In/fidelity”  
Joshua 24: 14-26; Romans 8: 1-11

I was about as shocked by the title of the cover story for last Sunday’s New York Times Magazine as I am shocked by the number of people who don’t subscribe to the New York Times. There it was, right on my television room floor when I walked through the door last Sunday after worship: “Infidelity Keeps Us Together” written by acclaimed columnist and distinguished PhD of Religious History, Mark Oppenheimer. “Infidelity Keeps Us Together...” who doesn’t want to read *that* story?

Oppenheimer begins his article with a little exposition on the former Congressman Anthony Weiner. He asked his wife, “...which would upset (you) more: to learn that (I’m) sending racy self-portraits to random women, Weiner-style, or to discover (I) was having an actual affair.” Oppenheimer described his wife’s reaction, “she paused, scrunched up her mouth as if she had just bitten a particularly sour lemon and said, “An affair is at least a normal human thing. But tweeting a (racy) picture of your(self) is just weird.”” He theorized on her response, “One explanation is that the Weiner scandal was especially sordid: drawn out, compounded daily by new revelations, covered up with embarrassing lies that made us want to look away. But another possibility is that there was something not weird, but too familiar about Weiner. His style might not be for everyone, but the impulse to be something other than we are in our daily, monogamous lives, the thrill that comes from the illicit rather than the predictable, is something (Oppenheimer) can imagine many couples identify with... It forced many to ask (and respond to) particularly uncomfortable questions, like “what am I capable of doing?” and “what have my neighbors done?” ...Night after night, (Oppenheimer writes)... we think about whether we make unrealistic demands on the institution and on ourselves.”

Moving through the article, this is what else I learned. Apparently more than a quarter of the married population has had at least one full-blown affair. One noted relationship columnist interviewed even offered such ideas as “honesty in infidelity” as help for a less than satisfying, monogamous marriage. Finally, I learned that the prevailing belief is that one person can’t meet all of another’s emotional, spiritual, friendship, and physical needs.

As I read, I thought, “Surely, this is a younger-couple phenomenon and uncharacteristic of people who are, say, of my mother’s era!” I took this theory to the streets of First Pres. One highly

regarded, nearly 70-something couple of our church had this to say. Years ago, after they'd first moved to Ramsey, they went back to their old neighborhood for dinner with friends. They recalled their astonishment when they learned that several of the people on their former block had been having affairs with one another. They couldn't believe that the people who'd been their best friends had had this secret life right under their noses! Knowing this couple and some of their current circle, I had trouble believing it, too. That was my first data point that this was not a 50-something and under concern. The second couple laughed at the notion of extra-marital affairs and spoke of their closeness in all matters and activities of life. I was net even on my poll.

What shouldn't've surprised me, given who was involved, was that couple number two talked more about our conversation after I left their home. They called me the next morning to offer some additional thoughts. They said that for them, an affair would not only violate the marriage vows, it would violate the overall intimacy they've shared for nearly 60 years. Further, they agreed that affairs violate their intimacy with God.

Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran pastor and prolific writer of Christian literature, has a book called, *As for Me and My House*<sup>1</sup>. It's title stems from the passage in Joshua 24 we just read, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Chapter 14 of Wangerin's book critiques how some people prioritize their fleshly selves to their spiritual ones. He names what he sees as the basic self-centeredness of one who clearly believes, whether consciously or unconsciously, "that he or she is the god of the relationship, whose desires are its priorities." Wangerin goes on to name the process through which a one slips over to the dark side to have an extra-marital affair. He says that it's like a drama unfolding that's never really spontaneous or unexpected. The drama might be spiritual or physical, emotional or psychological. It's usually exacerbated by the element of Maybe that creeps into our most casual relationships. "We're only friends" leads to Denial, which eventually becomes a light form of personal Permission to look at someone a little longer, stay in his company for an even more extended conversation than usual, or even care-freely allow him to pat you on the arm without pulling away or saying something clearly identifiable as a No. Drama leads to Maybe, which leads us away from No toward that awfully Slippery Slope.

Wangerin implores a Christian spouse to think of himself less as an individual and more as a person bound-up *in* his spouse so that every encounter with someone else becomes an encounter as a couple, even if your other half is nowhere to be seen. The more we become accustomed to thinking as

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Wangerin, Jr., *As for Me and My House*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990).

a couple and not as an individual, the more we will see the Maybe moments before they become uncomfortable, Permission-filled ones. Wangerin suggests that we look at all of our friends through the eyes of our spouse in order to see more clearly the warning signs in our casual relationships and become unblinded to our vane tendencies.

I believe that there's an opportunity to carry this logic one step further. We could begin to examine all of our own behaviors through the eyes of Christ who binds us all together. Then we will have an increased chance to recognize and lean away from anything we might otherwise choose to hide from Christ. Then we would see that it's not simply a finger pointing about who's having a torrid affair and more of a self-examination of where in our lives each of us is prioritizing our creaturely existence over our spiritual call as Christians. It becomes less of a witch hunt and more of an exploration of our creaturely tendencies in so many facets of our lives, from our personal relationships to our activities to our most important relationship with God.

As we think back on our Second Testament Reading, we'll recall the Apostle Paul's frequent use of the words, human flesh. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant Theologian Paul Tillich would say that the Apostle's use of the word "Human flesh" is less about the human body and more about the body as "a temple of the Spirit."<sup>2</sup> Considering human flesh as the temple of the spirit means to consider all of those "natural human inclinations, personal\* desires, personal\* needs, personal\* ways of thinking, the aim of our\* will, the character of our\*feeling, in so far as (they are) separated from the Spirit (of God) and (are) hostile to it." The Apostle Paul's metaphor of the flesh as temple of the spirit becomes applicable in any of the choices we have before us that call us to differentiate between the ways of the world and the way our lives in Jesus Christ should be. His metaphor of the flesh becomes a metaphor for all of those times we direct our human nature toward gratification or adoration of the self over gratification or adoration of the divine. It becomes a metaphor for all of our personal choices that direct our creativity toward glorification of anything or anyone other than God.

When was it that we lingered over the newspaper rather than get ourselves to worship here or even on vacation? When was it that we began to eat in a restaurant before we said a prayer? When was it that we engaged in backstabbing chatter, joked at another's expense, or walked hurriedly past a crying man?

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955). Chapter 16.

\* *Gender neutral words have been substituted for Tillich's male gendered ones.*

At the root of our fleshly inclinations is our natural, human tendency toward sin over which we can feel powerless, especially when our spiritual armor is weakened by a less than fluid – open, honest, constantly flowing - relationship with those we love most – most importantly, God. We might begin to confront this natural human tendency by looking for patterns in our past when we've allowed our fleshly selves to dominate our spiritual selves. Then we will better be able to see in the future how one slight Consideration could become Maybe the next time. Or how a lingering Maybe in our lives could easily slip into a Misstep if we don't take care. This process of checks will hopefully interrupt the potential for a *series* of Missteps to become a pattern of inappropriate activity that leads to habits of sinfulness that look nothing like anything Christ would have tolerated at all.

In other words, I think it's time for us to interrupt our infidelity to one another and to God. It's time for us to interrupt our infidelity and bring ourselves back to when we were not only faithful to those with whom we have a legal bond but also all of those with whom God has bound us in spiritual relationship through the sheer truth of our existence on this planet with one another as God's children.

Since I'm your pastor, you have to expect that I'm going to suggest that we begin to interrupt our fleshly tendencies by examining our lives in the church. Let's more faithfully engage in purposeful, Christian activity when a clearly secular option is before us. Let's more faithfully engage in more purposeful Christian conversation over clearly less Christian ones that tempt us. Let's more graciously, generously, and faithfully respond to others who might have a tad bit of trouble communicating with grace, generosity or outward signs of faith.

None of us is immune to the problem; each of us has room to interrupt our faithless behavior and become more faithful in our relationships with one another and with our God. You and I can begin today to interrupt our infidelity toward our Lord and all of his people and move closer and closer toward unification in the spirit with our creator and those with whom he has drawn us into community. In the process, as hard as it might be, as can thank God for those situations in life that lead us to wonder where we might also be falling short of our spiritual calling and seize the moment to begin afresh that day with a new life with the Lord. In the end, we will live our lives in peace.