

What I know about knowing and being known

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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Apparently there's something in the water out here in Chicago's western suburbs, where [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) and I both serve as pastors in the UCC. Or maybe it was our mid-nineties Midwestern adolescence, when we were both experiencing the embraces of young men, years before we both married wonderful men, men who now enjoy a fierce fantasy football rivalry.

Katherine and I have both written extensively about our marriages. Like her, I've been married for more than a decade—and as with her, my beloved spouse was neither my first love nor my first sexual partner. That's kind of a crazy thing to say in public, for clergywomen like us, but our candor serves a purpose: we reflect on our most intimate relationships and experiences in order to offer insight to others.

Yet our experiences are different—and so are our insights. The sex Katherine had before marriage mostly left her awash in shame. I mostly had fun.

I grew up active in mainline Protestant church life. Despite this (or because of it), I was largely spared any purity rhetoric. I didn't even hear about abstinence-only sex ed until it came up in a public policy course in college. My own sexual initiation was guided by attentive and appreciative boyfriends, solid public school health curricula, and *Beverly Hills 90210*—which is to say it was pretty shameless.

I've been thinking about shame, guilt, and sex for a while now, as I've worked on my book [Good Christian Sex](#) and talked with Katherine about hers, [Very Married](#), which [the Century excerpted this week](#). We are friends, good ones, and we have a great deal in common. But we have our differences—one of which Katherine alludes to in her book excerpt:

I completely infuriated a liberal Christian friend recently by telling her that I suspect I might actually believe that sex is for married people.

That friend was me.

My objection is not to fidelity, or marriage, or marital sex. I delight in the ability to be vulnerable with my spouse, to grow and share in covenant love, just as Katherine does with hers.

But I don't believe that something magical transpires in the moment of making vows. In my understanding, marriage is a human institution, not a sacrament. Now, Christians rightly interpret the purposes of marriage through the lens of faith, and it can certainly be a means of grace. But so can sexual relationships that manifest mutual vulnerability, justice, and pleasure—even, I'd argue, separate from the marriage covenant. What's more, marriage is not a panacea, not itself a sufficient norm for holy and good Christian sex.

Katherine writes about her really terrible early experiences with sexual relationships, and of the night-and-day contrast with the trusting and loving relationship she has now. I don't deny her experience. But not everyone's experience follows this pattern. Premarital sex is not a monolithic activity of consistent theological or moral import—and marriage isn't always redemptive.

I admire Katherine's apologia of marriage, and I'm grateful she was willing to turn her reflective gaze on her own. For my book I instead looked mostly at my earlier years. As I reflected on my memories—and on those of others I surveyed—what impressed me was the variety of feelings, the range of experiences, the learning curve of late adolescence and young adulthood. I pursued pleasure with boys I cared about and trusted. I came to know my body and theirs, and I came to recognize my ability to love others—and my agency in making decisions about my body and my heart.

I also managed on occasion to sin against myself and others: treating them as less than *Thous*, throwing myself into relationships that were wrong for me. But all this, the good and the bad, happened while I was single. So what was it that rendered some experiences joyful and holy and others decidedly less so? What norm, if not marital status, will hold?

Jesus tends to lift this up as an all-purpose guide: love God, and love your neighbor. Does love always require waiting, putting off the desire to know and be known? Is the love of God and others necessarily opposed to the love of self? [Christine Gudorf notes](#) that “sex is perhaps one of the best life arenas for demonstrating that self and other are not naturally hostile. Their relationship is much more complex.” Maybe

that complex and creative relationship is actually of God.

Given the history of anti-intellectualism in American Christianity, it requires no great leap to suggest that some things are not for knowing, that knowledge of good and evil is counter to the will of God. But we should resist such a simplistic reading of Genesis. Knowledge, especially self-knowledge, empowers people to make good decisions. Knowing what we like, how we love, what we need to feel safe, our patterns in seeking intimacy: such questions are rightly explored before making a lifelong commitment. Some such knowledge will be sought and found in sexual activity, and I think that's okay.

Of course, all I have is my testimony. But I can say without a doubt that my ability to be faithful, to embrace and celebrate monogamy with my husband, has been strengthened immeasurably by the fact that I chose him, our marriage, and our life together not out of curiosity but freely, willingly, knowingly.