

## Perfect Love Casts out Fear

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The worship leaders have asked me to address the issue of homophobia. Speaking as one member of the Divinity School community, I want to commend them for their initiative in seeking to look at this issue. It is my impression that, as a general statement, the students are ahead of us faculty in promoting discussion of this matter which increasingly fills both religious and secular headlines. This is an issue that is not going to go away. Indeed, all of us here gathered will have finished our ministries and gone to our eternal reward long before the church reaches any kind of resolution on this troubling issue. But we must make a beginning.

Being a professor, I cannot resist the temptation to begin by defining the word homophobia. The first element *homo*, means "the same," as in *homoousios*, that familiar word from the Nicene creed, meaning the same – *homo* – substance – *ousia*. The second element, *phobia*, is a familiar one and of course means fear. So homophobia literally means fear of the same, which doesn't make a lot of sense. But it has come to stand for what should probably be homosexaphobia, fear of homosexuality and of homosexual persons. That is the dry dictionary meaning.

For a more existential definition, we need only to sense the emotional atmosphere in this room at this minute. The silent tension, the avoidance of the eyes of the people across the room. The sincere regret that you may feel that you picked today of all days to attend chapel. Real fear. We need no dictionary definition.

If the topic is so awkward and fear inducing, why talk about it? The answer is obvious: because the church out there, in its individual and corporate units, the church out there, that we hope to serve, is in turmoil over this issue. Item: At the biennial meeting of the American Baptist Churches in Charleston, West Virginia, in June 1991, the delegates adopted a Statement of Concern, which, if endorsed by the governing board of denomination, would move toward effectively preventing even the discussion of any view on this matter contrary to the prevailing one. A very interesting reaction seeing that Baptists have traditionally fought, bled, and died for freedom of conscience and the right to express that conscience. Item: Last December the Orchard Hill Episcopal Church outside Pittsburgh voted overwhelmingly to leave the Episcopal Church because the denomination had refused to ban the possible ordination of gay and lesbian priests. Item: The Downtown United Presbyterian Church of Rochester, as you may know from the media, has called an openly lesbian woman as one of its co-pastors. This has touched off a national firestorm of controversy in the Presbyterian Church. No matter what your personal views on this subject, you are going to live out your ministerial lives dealing with it at one level or another. You perhaps have a new appreciation for the ancient Chinese curse which goes: "May you live in interesting times."

One of the major reasons that we who claim the Christian tradition have such fear around this issue is that we are fearful of sexuality in general. A couple of years ago I heard a lecture on sexuality. The speaker was James Nelson, a UCC seminary professor who has written as much as anyone about the relationship of Christianity to sexuality. He pointed out that our heritage sends us a number of double

messages. Here are a couple of them: “God made our sexuality. That’s why we never talk about it.” Another one is: “Sex is dirty. Save it for the one you love.” But the effects of this particularly American tradition are not funny. You may be aware that the US has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the industrialized world. What is *not* so widely known is that our teen-agers are no more sexually active than teen-agers of other nations. It is just that in our society, we have chosen silence and avoidance on the subject of sexuality rather than realistic confrontation. We would rather have children having children than to talk openly about birth control and other sexual matters.

Matters of sexuality do not necessarily have to have this pall of silence over them; it is something that we choose. It took me 20 years of teaching Old Testament before I finally decided to stop being embarrassed by the open and matter-of-fact way that sexuality is dealt with there. Eventually it dawned on me that maybe the Old Testament was right and that we with our silence and fear are the ones out of step with God’s design. However the creation of woman and man in Genesis 2 is to be understood, at the very least it is presented there as the origin of sexual attraction. “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves – or clings – to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” It would be inconceivable to an Israelite hearer or reader of those words in Genesis 2 that this was talking of anything other than sexual intercourse. The idea that sexual knowledge does not enter human experience until after the fall in Genesis 3 is a Christian reading of that text that is forced onto the Eden story by later, Greek-influenced theologizing.

And what on earth do we do with the Song of Solomon? Go read it sometime. Traditional Christian theology, instead of reading this song literally as a luscious poem extolling the glories of sexual love, has turned somersaults around it, allegorizing it, twisting it, exegizing it to turn it into something “spiritual.” But in fact it *is* an exuberant love poem, and it stands in judgment upon us for our fear and silence about sexual matters. How many churches today have programs for their young people to present a Christian perspective on what for many of them is the most urgent concern in their lives? Very few, because in so doing they would have to actually talk about sex – in the *church*. And so we abdicate our central role of moral instruction about sexual and family matters to society – movies, TV, the advertising industry, and society’s pervasive homophobia. The ancient Hebrews would be horrified at our backwardness.

But this is where we are. We are paralyzed about talking about traditional sexual matters. And so, understandably, we are absolutely traumatized when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. Think of the language we use about it: It is, we say, unnatural, an emotive word that we seldom try to define. We call it disgusting, perverted, revolting. It is, we say, an abomination. That is rather a curious expression. Is there any stronger word in our vocabulary to describe human conduct? But how often does anyone say that murder is an abomination? Or that rape, or incest, or domestic violence against women is an abomination? No, we usually reserve that most powerful word in our vocabulary to describe love, a love that can be as caring and as faithful and as lasting as any that exists in a traditional marriage, and yet is labelled with this most horrendous of words, just because it exists between two people who happen to be of the same sex. Surely it doesn’t take a trained psychologist to conclude that the scale of our reaction is out of all proportion to the provocation. What is it that we are so afraid of?

Why should we care about all this? Why should we use good chapel time to look into this painful subject? What does this have to do with the Christian faith or with our role as ministers?

In Psych. 101 we learned that fear arises from what we perceive to be a threat, and that most of us find the unknown threatening. So threat begets fear, and fear begets hostility, and hostility begets anger, and anger begets violence. Therefore, to put it bluntly, to the extent that the church does not work to

reduce the fear surrounding this issue, the church is contributing to the violence directed toward gay and lesbian persons. Let me illustrate the problem.

In January of 1990, James Zappalorti, a 44-year-old Staten Island gay man was harassed by two young men who called him 'faggot' and 'queer' while he was shopping at a neighborhood deli. Later they followed Zappalorti, a mentally disabled Vietnam vet, to his nearby hut on the beach, slashed his throat, and stabbed him to death. The killers were apprehended and in his confession, one of the said, "Because Zappalorti was homosexual, he got what he deserved." Two women campers in Pennsylvania were violently attacked and one killed by a man who thought they were lesbian. A man, 28, killed two other men in Los Vegas because he thought they were homosexual. When asked why he had done this, he said he wasn't sure but, "The thought that I would be doing some good for our society crossed my mind." When people list the victims of the Nazi holocaust in Germany, they seldom mention that a quarter of a million homosexual men were rounded up by the Nazis and executed. A poll taken in the waning days of the Soviet Union revealed that fully a third of the people sampled felt that lesbians and gays should be exterminated.

And violence need not be physical. Consider this: A person's sexual orientation seems, at least in part, to be genetically determined and is apparently fixed at a very early age. Also it appears regularly in a fairly steady percentage of the population. This means that if you are acquainted with at least 12 to 15 young people, the probabilities are virtually certain that at least one of that number is lesbian or gay. And this will be the case whether you are black or white, or whether you live in Rochester or in rural Iowa. This means that there are hundreds of thousands of young people going through the painful stages of adolescence, dealing with the sexual awakening of their bodies and finding that they are sexually oriented toward their own sex. Where do they go? To whom do they turn when all they hear is faggot, queer, dyke, fairy? There is no help from the church, for as we have seen, the church is afraid of sex in *any* form. Is it any wonder that 30% of teenage suicides are estimated to be grounded in issues of sexual orientation?

Sometimes the violence takes the form of simply doing nothing. The science of epidemiology is concerned with finding and attacking new diseases, isolating the carriers, and quarantining them until all cases of the disease disappear. Some horrendous scourges – diseases that strike and kill within 24 hours – have been eliminated in this way. Research has shown that the AIDS epidemic in this country could have been greatly contained, kept to the lower levels that prevail in the European countries, if these epidemiological practices had been instituted when the first AIDS cases appeared. But in the beginning, it was only gay men who were dying of the disease, and so it wasn't considered worth the trouble.

Now all of us would deplore physical violence against lesbian and gay persons, and might listen sympathetically to a teenager struggling with her sexual identity, but there is that nagging voice inside us that asks, "Isn't there something in the Bible?" Indeed there is, and we heard it read earlier in all its lapidary harshness: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." Why does this verse and one or two like it have such mythic power over the church? Would we say, "Yes, I deplore violence against Jews", but I remind you that the Jewish crowd shouted before Pilate, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Would we say, "Well, of course I'm against human slavery, but doesn't it say there somewhere in I Peter, 'Slaves, be submissive to your masters'?" Or would we say, "Well yes, I'm for equality for women, but still be should never forget that in I Timothy it says, 'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men'." To answer my own rhetorical questions, "No, we would not say these things", because we know that sometimes – and I say this as one who has given his life to the study of scripture –

sometimes the Bible is part of the problem and not part of the solution. One of the most moving expressions of this realization that I have ever read was in the conclusion of a student exegesis paper. The student, an African American woman, was struggling with the realization that her beloved Bible nowhere condemns the institution of human slavery. She wrote: "The Bible says, 'Slaves, be obedient to your masters' and 'Be subject to rulers,' and 'Thou shalt not steal.' Yet we esteem as heroes women and men like Harriet Tubman and Denmark Vesey who were disobedient to their 'masters.' Broke the law by taking their freedom, and 'stole' other slaves to freedom when they were 'legally' the property of their 'masters.' . . . Something," she concludes, "in us knows that the *words* cannot always capture and effectively communicate the will of the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us."

So don't be afraid to let go of Lev. 20 and Lev. 18 and Romans 1. The recitation of these passages encourages and seems to give permission to those whose violence would horrify any of us. They help to nourish the soil from which ugly things emerge – hatred and cruelty. And fear.

"What are we afraid of?" Something that we are afraid to look at is rarely as frightening in reality as our imaginings about it. Why do lesbians and gays choose to be that way? They don't. It is something they are given, like red hair or left-handedness. Are gays and lesbians child molesters? Studies say it isn't so. Do people become homosexual by being seduced by an older person of the same sex? Massive research by Bell, Weinberg and Hammersmith shows that *that* is not the case. Are male homosexuals psychological cripples who had a weak father and dominant mother? No. Do girls become lesbians because they choose their fathers as role models? No. Why are there more lesbians and gays now than there used to be? There aren't. They are just more visible, like the handicapped in our society who are now more visible because access for the handicapped is increasing. Aren't lesbians and gays morally bankrupt? Well, in the last ten years, working with a justice task-force of the local presbytery, I've met a number of homosexual persons. At least in my unscientific sample, I have found them to be sober, solid, God-fearing, tax-paying, boringly conventional citizens

It is a terrible thing to live one's life in fear. It is worse when the fear has no substance and is based on a nonexistent threat. Fear divides and leads to violence. Love unites and leads to peace. And perfect love casts out fear. Sisters and brothers, let us love one another. For if we do not love the brother or sister that we have seen, how can we love God, whom we have not seen?