

HOMOSEXUALITY, THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH

“There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female;
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28

I have not wanted to conceal or camouflage the concern upon which we will be focusing this morning. Hence, the candid sermon title: “Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church”. But before I get into it, I’d like you to know, not only what this sermon is about, but why I am preaching it.

Since 1976 when the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church appointed a Task Force to study “Christian approaches to homosexuality”, this issue has been before our denomination – especially the question as to whether or not persons of homosexual orientation may be ordained as ministers, elders, or deacons. In 1978, after receiving the report of its Task Force, the General Assembly rejected one of the key recommendations and declared that the ordination of ‘unrepentant’ homosexuals is inappropriate. According to this decision, it does not matter if people are in every other respect fit for ordination of ‘unrepentant’ society – and in the Presbyterian Church specifically – and are in every other respect fit for ordination, if they are homosexual, and if they are honest about it, they are disqualified. At the same time, the General Assembly urged the Church to welcome homosexual persons of faith into membership. And the Assembly went on to condemn what it called the ‘sin’ of homophobia: the treatment of gay and lesbian persons with ‘contempt, hatred and fear’. That there is inconsistency and self-contradiction in the General Assembly’s statement is obvious. At best, it manages to “straddle the fence”. And it seems to some of us, to be itself a fearful response to the issue. What’s becoming clear, as the years go by, is that the question of “Christian approaches to homosexuality” have still not been answered.

For its part, our Session has been wrestling with this issue, off and on, since 1980 when some of our members, who are homosexual, asked the Session to clarify their status within this church in response to the General Assembly’s action. The Session has studied the Bible, read and heard from experts, and talked with homosexual church members and their families. As a result, the Session has come to the view that “the issue of discrimination against homosexuals in society – and in the Presbyterian Church specifically – must be faced”. It appointed its own Task Force and charged it to “recommend specific initiatives” that can and should be taken “in working for an inclusive Church”. That Task Force asked for this sermon and I agreed to preach it.

Frankly, I would have preferred a different forum – where questions might be asked and discussion might take place. In other words, I’d rather do this in a classroom than from the pulpit. The trouble is, we can’t seem to get some of you into the classroom. Yet we know that most Christians are woefully uninformed about homosexuality and confused about “Christian approaches” to it. So, even though I’d prefer another forum, I’ve decided to do the best I can with this one.

Let me take a moment for one other introductory comment. I know that some of you are not where I am as regards this issue. I wasn’t always where I am today! I ask you to hear me out. If, having done so, you have questions, concerns, or disagreements, be sure that I am ready and willing to listen to you – as, indeed, are all the members of S

Whenever the issue of homosexuality is raised in the church, one of the first questions is: What does the Bible say? The answer is: not much. Homosexuality is not a great concern of the Scriptures. Try to remember that whenever you hear Christian fundamentalists railing against it.

In the Old Testament, there is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. But most scholars today find that story to be an indictment, not of homosexuality, but of inhospitality. Wherever, in the rest of the Bible, there is a reference to the destruction of Sodom, it is that vein. As in the case of Ezekial, for example, who declares: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy".

In the Book of Leviticus, we are given a law prohibiting homosexual behavior on the part of males. Such behavior is labelled "an abomination". But those who like to use this text as an excuse for rejecting and even punishing homosexuals, fail to point out all the other things which the Levitical Code considers "abominations" which don't bother us at all. Eating pork, for instance, or cross-breeding cattle, or sowing two kinds of seed in the same field, or wearing "a garment of cloth made of two kinds of stuff". According to Leviticus, if that coat or dress you're wearing today is a mixture of wool and cotton, you are in deep trouble! As Casey Stengel used to say, "You can look it up!": -- Leviticus, Chapter 19, verse 19.

All these prohibitions, which seem silly to us, appear in the Levitical Code for one reason. At the time, the Hebrew people were a tiny minority surrounded on all sides by pagan culture. They were concerned to preserve their identity as unique people of faith. And so, many things commonplace in non-Hebrew societies, including homosexual behavior, were prohibited. The question that has to be asked is this: On what basis do Christians today ignore all these so-called "abominations" except one – the one concerning homosexuality?

As for the New Testament, Jesus is not reported to have said anything about the subject. He said a great deal, as you know, about various sins and temptations. He spoke about the dangers of wealth, about a censorious and unforgiving spirit, about adultery, about pride and hypocrisy. If homosexuality were as great an evil as some say, one would think Jesus might have mentioned it. But he didn't.

Paul does speak to the issue, in two or three places. Again, however, it is not something that preoccupies him. An a careful study of what Paul does say, leads the respected New Testament scholar, Robin Scroggs, to conclude that what Paul was against was a very specific form of homosexual behavior, namely, the solicitation and use of your boys as passive partners in homosexual activity. Such exploitation of your males was not uncommon in Paul's day. Just as in our society it's not uncommon for teenage runaways who are female to be preyed upon and turned into prostitutes. "But," as Scroggs says, 'nothing could be further from the model aspired to be the gay community today.'

To summarize, the, the Bible has very little to say about homosexuality, and what it does say isn't very helpful. The Bible is concerned only with homosexual behavior and, even then, with very specific and demeaning kinds of behavior. The Bible has nothing to say about homosexual orientation – for the simple reason that when the Bible was written, nothing was known about that. It was assumed that everybody was naturally heterosexual. Now we know that matters are more complicated. Some people – estimates range from five to ten percent of the population – are of a homosexual orientation. Why this is so is not clear. It may have something to do with genetics. Environmental factors may play a role. Whatever the cause of the homosexual orientation, there seems to be no way to change it. The psychologist, John Money, a leading authority on character development, claims that it is not possible to

force a change from homosexual to heterosexual “any more than it is possible to change a heterosexual into a homosexual”.

Paul seems to have assumed, not only that homosexuality was “unnatural” – which we now know, for some, is not so. He also assumed that all homosexual behavior was exploitive, demeaning. He seems not to have considered the possibility of caring adult homosexual relationships. All of which leads Robin Scroggs, the New Testament scholar and himself a heterosexual, to say: “Biblical judgements against homosexuality are not relevant to today’s debate. They should no longer be used in denominational discussions about homosexuality, should in no way be a weapon to justify refusal of ordination, not because the Bible is not authoritative, but simply because it does not address the issues involved.”

Is the Bible, then, of no use to us in our effort to know how to respond to the issue of homosexuality? As Paul himself might say, by no means!

We need to remember that what we are dealing with is not just an issue – homosexuality – but persons who happen, among other things, to be homosexual. They are persons, first and foremost. And within this community of faith, they are Christian persons. They trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They love his Church as much as the rest of us. They are as morally sensitive as anybody else. Do they need forgiveness? Of course. Who doesn’t? But what they don’t need forgiveness for is who they are. What they needs, as all of us do, is understanding and compassion – and a little help in their struggle for justice. For, homosexual people continue to experience hostility and discrimination. Some have been frozen out of their families. Many live in fear. All have experienced rejection.

The basic issue is how we treat our fellow human beings. And, as we heard earlier, the Bible has a lot to say about what that means. “Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God . . . Whoever does not love does not know God . . . If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear . . .”

As for Paul, I submit that what he has to say in Galatians has far more bearing on the issue of homosexuality and the Church than the two or three obscure, very specific, references he makes to homosexual behavior. The purpose of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is to say that it is our faith in Christ that makes us Christians. Nothing matters but our faith. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul does not pretend that distinctions among people to not exit. He says that they don’t matter. We could name a hundred things that make people different from one another: their color, their health, their wealth, their politics, their nationality, their age, their marital status – and their sexual orientation. But Paul is saying, whatever the differences among people, in the church they don’t matter. “You are all one in Christ Jesus.” You are God’s children and you are all in need of God’s saving grace.

I long for the time when our denomination will catch up to Paul’s understanding of the Church, as much as I long for the time when it will grow beyond Paul’s understanding of homosexuality. As regards ordination, I hope we can get to the point – and soon – when, in deciding who should be ordained, we don’t ask about a candidate’s sexual orientation any more than we do about his or her wealth or occupation, or color, or age. I hope we can reach the point where we are concerned only with a person’s faith, character, commitment, and wisdom.

Lest there be any doubt, let me say that, certainly, concerns about sexual behavior are important. Of course Paul is right in denouncing the exploitation of children. Of course pornography and promiscuity are concerns. But – and hear me now – these are as much heterosexual, as homosexual, concerns. Any sexual behavior that exploits or demeans another human being is wrong. But this can, and does, happen in marriage as well as out of it, it happens among straights as well as among gays and lesbians. Listen for a moment to the wisdom of the late theologian Helmut Thielicke: “The primary moral problem, he said, “Is not sex within marriage vs. sex outside marriage, or sex within a heterosexual vs. sex within a homosexual relationship. The problem is sex as a depersonalizing force vs. sex as the fulfillment of a human relationship.” Bold as that statement may seem to some, I think Thielicke is right. The issue we need most to worry about is how our sexuality can contribute to the fulfillment of personhood – our own and others. If we get that right, a lot of other things will take care of themselves.

There is much more that could be said, but my time has run out. Let me, in concluding, mention four things that all of us can do. I’ll even use a word that I rarely employ in a sermon and say that here are four things we ought to do.

First, we ought to enlighten ourselves. We’ve had to do that with other issues; we ought to do it with this one. We had to do it when Copernicus showed us that the earth revolves around the sun and not vice versa. We had to do it when Darwin taught us about evolution. It’s time to do it with the issue of homosexuality. We ought to dispel the misunderstandings and myths and learn the truth. We ought to enlighten ourselves.

Second, we ought to examine our own prejudices and fears. Most of us have them, even those of us who have sought to enlighten ourselves. Let us face up to them and get rid of them.

Third, we ought to work for an inclusive Church. I, for one, do not wish us to become preoccupied with this issue. And, as far as I can tell, our homosexual members don’t want that either. At the same time, we will need to persist, for there is much ignorance and prejudice to overcome.

Fourth and last, here in Third Church we ought to be a community where all people of faith – where all people of faith – are welcomed and cared for. For only so can we in truthfulness call ourselves the Body of Christ,

PRAYER: Where in these human words we have heard your Word, O God, help us to receive it with thanksgiving to the edification of our lives. Assist us day by day to wisely and warmly live out the love to which we have been called. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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