

REV. MALCOLM HIMSCHOOT SERMON
PLYMOUTH – FT. COLLINS
Sep. 23, 2007 - 9:00/10:45
Text: Isaiah 56:3-5 / Matthew 19:11-12
Title: How Jesus Read the Bible

Churches have had more conflict around sexuality, in my lifetime, than around any other subject. Churches are always in conflict – they should be, in order to be changing, and growing, and relevant to different ages.

It's not easy. But there are ways of doing conflict well that bring out the best among differing convictions, that promote justice and that actually build relationships as people share their differing experiences. And there are ways of half-doing conflict, *inflicting* harm on one another instead of *conflicting* together.

Conflict is worth doing well. In government, we have structures to help conflict happen: legislative, judicial, sometimes party caucuses and conventions. In families, we have not structures but persons with authority – whoever's the parent – to hold the relationships while people work out how they need to be different, and where they need to find common ground.

In churches, we have the Bible. The Bible is our authority, more than either persons or structures. Any conflict we do involves Scripture, as something beyond us that reaches generations ahead and extends generations back, calling us always to become more Christlike people.

The UCC, through the General Synod of 1985, took a theological position about the church's inclusion and affirmation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and the ONA movement was born. Open 'n Affirming. In 2003 the General Synod took a position about the worth and dignity of transgender people as well. Our story of those Synods is a witness to local churches throughout the country, and to members of other denominations and communions as well. ONA cites the liberation narrative of Scripture and the love-of-neighbors found in the gospels.

Scripture can be confusing, though, so it's important to really learn something about it. How do we read the Bible?

Just recently I heard a story of three different women, waiting in line at the same microphone. It was their turn to speak, one by one, to a gathered assembly of thousands of people who would vote on matters guiding church life. It was not a UCC gathering, but this story could well be ours... The woman who went first carried a Bible in her hands. It was one of those tote Bibles with a colorful cover. She stepped to the microphone and opened the Bible. She opened it to Romans 1, to the language of exclusion and profanity, language that has hurt many same-gender loving people in our context. She read from Romans 1, closed the Bible and sat down.

The second woman in line to speak was a person with commitments to an LGBT-affirming position. She was lesbian and she had heard those verses before. She had forgotten her Bible, however, and as she was next in line to speak, now she wanted one, to be able to read Romans 2: that part where it says “When you judge others, you condemn yourself.” This woman looked to the third woman in line and saw that she was sitting with a Bible in her lap. This Bible too had a patterned tote cover, color-coordinated with the first.

It dawned on the middle woman that a whole series of people was prepared to stand to oppose lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender welcome. She was wearing a rainbow shawl and a pride pin. But she decided to ask her pewmate anyway: “May I borrow your Bible?” she asked.

The answer came: “No.” Responding protectively, the woman covered her Bible with one hand and pointed with the other. “Do you even have a Bible?”

Deep breath. “Yes, I do, but it’s at the back of the room. If I go get it I will lose my place in line. May I borrow your Bible?”

The woman was shaking tearfully. She knew that, if she let her neighbor read from her Bible, something she didn’t agree with would be read. But if she said “no, I cannot share my Bible with you,” then she was going against her core beliefs. Whose Bible is it?

The fact is, both Romans 1 and Romans 2 are in Scripture. You may have heard those passages before. “Give thanks that you’re not messed-up like the Gentiles... but you know, do not judge because Jesus taught us not to.” The ambivalence of the text shows the complicated social location of the author, somewhere between interpretations of purity and autonomy from his primary culture, and a radically new message of evangelism, engagement and inclusion for the Greeks. This author was wrestling with received tradition and a still-speaking God.

Anyway. After a moment the woman with the colorful Bible passed it to her opponent, and remained there weeping. After the policy session the lesbian-identified woman approached the other out in the hall. “Are you okay?” she asked. “No, I’m not okay,” she said. “Get away from me. I’m like you, and I’m so afraid.”

All of a sudden the color-coordinated Bible covers made sense in a new way, and it was a wonder people hadn’t noticed before that these two devout women were each half of a pair – companions who were trying to live out the impossible - to love, but not to love – trying to somehow hate themselves for the glory of God.

This debate wasn’t *about* the Bible at all, but *within* the pages of the Bible. Throughout the Bible are stories of bondage and decay, and throughout the Bible are stories of trust and deliverance. Romans 1. Romans 2.

In Jesus' time there were two Bibles too. At least two strands of belief and action within the Scriptures that would have justified completely different [theological] attitudes toward a variety of people. One of the Scriptures we read, from Isaiah, about the eunuch. There were other passages in the Bible that condemned the eunuch as an outsider.¹ But this passage, in Isaiah, talks about how nobody should say to the eunuch, "You are cut off." They are a part of God's covenant.

Isaiah decides to say something about these folks, who are not standardly male nor standardly female, who did not have a place in the reproductive family tree. And when he does, he makes the circle around God's people wider and more inclusive. "Thus says the Lord: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.'" Isaiah 56:3-5.

500 years later, Jesus taught the Scriptures to people gathered around him. Would Jesus quote Deuteronomy, where the eunuchs were outcast, or would he quote Isaiah, where the eunuchs were included? Would eunuchs be blessed or doomed, cherished or stigmatized, welcomed "in my house and within my walls" or "not permitted to enter the assembly of the Lord"? How did Jesus read the Bible?

Well... Jesus, in his ministry, did not say a single thing about lesbians or gay men. He did not preach on same-gender or some-other-gender romantic orientation. He did not define marriage or family in the way we think of today. When he did say something about sexual diversity, it was about eunuchs. We do well to understand this passage in the context of the values that Jesus did spend a lot of time with: status, power, poverty, and wealth, and the true nature of reversal in the kingdom of God.

Matthew 19:11-12. Jesus says, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

Jesus – in his ministry – echoed, not Deuteronomistic prohibitions on who could and who could not enter the Temple, but Isaiah's message of prophetic inclusion. God's covenant community is created, not by ancestry, or by adherence to social norms, but by participation in the faith relationship. Eunuchs could be, not just tolerated in this community, but exemplars of it.

We might wonder exactly what a eunuch is. Given that eunuchs were people who may have been wounded in war, disabled by illness or cancer, or just born different, I'm not going to spend time trying to pin down their historical identities with the justification of contemporary science. The important thing is that eunuchs are within the realm of experience – that's enough for Jesus. There have been different experiences throughout

¹ See, for example, Deuteronomy 23:1.

history. But that Jesus would talk about something so intimate, and so shunned, gives us more freedom to talk about our lives, and anything we experience.

Whatever else they were, back then, eunuchs were not well-thought-of people. Deirdre Good, a biblical scholar, reminds us that Jesus lived in a society based on stratified wealth and the inheritance of that wealth. In a social order based on family lineage, eunuchs were in the same position as children and slaves. They had no heirs and no possessions to bring them honor in this life. By giving a teaching that encourages people to be like the eunuch, Jesus is saying that our only honor has to come from God, not from paternity or inheritance or compulsory heterosexuality.

Jesus' message was to build the kind of community that reflects the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' family values derive from this core message: relationship with God. In this community, children and slaves and eunuchs have as much dignity and as much sacred worth and as much honor as Jesus himself had. He left no biological heirs, according to tradition. But he transformed the spiritual lives of people around him, all of whom were heir to the divine inheritance. "Don't worry about who your earthly father is," he said. "You have only one Father – your Father in heaven."

The way Jesus read the Bible, we are all children of God. Oppressing the spirit of anybody leads to bondage and decay. What leads to trust and deliverance is releasing our hold on our own status, perfection, excess, dominance or oppression.

There are so many conflicts worth having in society today, including in the church, and we need the Bible to talk them out. There are so many conflicts that are opportunities for justice and relationship. We need to read the Bible the way Jesus read the Bible – with nothing to lose, and sacred community to gain.

In Jesus' ministry, sex and gender arise as they relate to other themes in Scripture. Jesus isn't afraid of sexuality. He doesn't ask the question, "Are these kind of people or those kind of people in or out?" He asks the question, "Can our embodied experience lead us to pay attention to the faith relationship? Can what we learn from another person lead us to trust and risk and healing and wholeness and reliance on God for transformation?"

May it be so. Amen.