

Open and Affirming - Journey to Understanding

Rev. Charles L. Wildman
Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ
Arlington, Virginia
September 19, 1999

Exodus 16:2-25 “It is the bread that the Lord has given...”

Psalm 1-5:1-6, 37-45 “Remember the wonderful works God has done.”

Matthew 20:1-16 “Are you envious because I am generous?”

I.

Few issues have troubled and challenged the religious community more than homosexuality. For some, the debate has all of the fire and significance of the American Civil Rights Movement. For others, there is no parallel. Because sexuality is highly personal, any discussion is fraught with fear and defensiveness. It is difficult for us to discuss such private issues.

Yet we must. Christians are committed to discerning how the Lord would have them live in all realms of their lives. Human sexuality is central to all of life. We have too long shortchanged this discussion and left our children and adults rudderless in troubled seas. In so doing, we also have perpetrated injustice against gay and lesbian family members, church members and colleagues.

In a sense, I have been composing this sermon since 1977. In that year, our United Church of Christ published one of the finest primers on the topic ever available. *Human Sexuality: A Preliminary Study* (United Church Press) was received with gratitude by the Eleventh General Synod and recommended for study by all of our churches. I was fortunate to be an advance reader and reactor to this comprehensive biblical and theological document.

That assignment paralleled my own struggle with the gay-lesbian agenda. As a heterosexual, I found the topic emotionally unpleasant. And, I was troubled about what seemed like contradictory teachings from scripture and tradition. The summer of 1998, I read and reread the 77 Report and a stack of newer work from all sides of the biblical, theological and psychological arguments. I wrestled, walked, and prayed.

I have paid serious attention to Christian authors, such as the renowned Brit John Stott (*Same Sex Partnerships*) who interprets the Sodom and Gomorrah Story from Genesis 19 as clear condemnation of homosexuality. I have struggled through Stanley Grenz’s thoughtful piece, *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, as well as the work of Marion Soards, *Scripture and Homosexuality—Biblical Authority and the Church Today*. I have read and personally

dialogued with James Nelson, UCC pastor and emeritus ethicist from United Theological Seminary in Minneapolis. Bill Johnson, the first gay seminarian to be ordained in our denomination, now on our national staff, has spoken at Rock Spring and is a colleague with whom I have had countless conversations. I have struggled with the assertions of Dr. Paul Cameron, psychologist of the sexual reorientation school. Paul and I lived in Lincoln, NE at the same time and now again here in Washington. In contrast to Cameron and his colleagues is the work of the American Psychological Association, The Menninger Foundation (where I studied) and other esteemed investigators who persuasively argue that sexual orientation is genetically assigned, not voluntary selected.

II.

I have had other teachers, too. May I introduce them to you?

Wade and Peg, much loved members of a congregation I once served, asked to speak with me after an adult study session. Quietly, they shared about their daughter, Trudy, a social worker in another part of the country. Her parents worried about her when she was a small girl because she was not like her contemporaries. Whereas they loved to play with dolls and dress in frilly things, Trudy rejected doll gifts, liked jeans and sandlot baseball with the guys. Later, when girl friends talked about guys, Trudy remained aloof and showed no interest in dating. Teen years saw one painful argument after another as the parents tried to show their concern. "Leave me alone!" became their daughter's refrain. As a college student on a distant campus, Trudy attempted suicide several times, received good counseling and eventually self-identified as a lesbian. Today, she is a highly regarded social worker and happily brings her long-time partner to her parents' home for holidays. Her parents are grateful that their daughter has found fulfillment through a gentle, sincere covenant commitment to her partner.

Meet John Shepherd. Long time Rock Springers will recall that John grew up in this congregation and was organist here for a time. Before his death several years ago, John made an audio tape on what it was like to grow up in a suburban congregation as a gay youth. With affection for Rock Spring and many wonderful Sunday School teachers, John shared his loneliness and his unmet yearning to discuss with adults what he was feeling. Increasingly alienated by a congregation of apparently traditional families, John felt strange and out of place. He subsequently found some peace at First Congregational UCC, an early open and affirming congregation. Regrettably, he contracted AIDS before disease prevention measures became well-known.

Many here knew David Kamens, another child of Rock Spring. With care and nervousness, David and his family shared with us during worship one memorable Sunday about David's homosexuality and his diagnosis as HIV/Positive. David became a nationally regarded young adult AIDS educator, appearing on Oprah Winfrey and other television shows as well as in

countless high schools across the land. As his health failed, he spoke with me many times about his illness and his sexuality, regretting that he did not find understanding of his sexual orientation early enough to be responsible in his decision-making as a gay male. David yearned for others to learn from his mistakes. In his illness, David and his family received much love from Rock Spring. His memorial service here in 1992 saw an inspiring outpouring of love and support from Congregation. Filmed for television, the video has been used throughout the nation as a model of how a congregation can minister to a family affected by AIDS. Since that time, there have been other AIDS memorial services for children of our Rock Spring family. But illness is only one facet of the gay/lesbian journey. Through the years human beings have coped with many sexually-transmitted diseases. This experience is not unique to any population. Countless gay and lesbian individuals, like Trudy, and like some of you who are Rock Spring members today, live in long-term, committed, monogamous relationships, holding good jobs, buying homes, enjoying quality family life, parenting children.

Several of our church families have shared with me the marvelous journeys of their gay children, as have clergy colleagues. One senior pastor speaks often about his gay son, living in a committed relationship, fulfilled and happy. Another colleague follows his son's career in professional theater through Europe and beyond, happy to see him fulfilled and artistically productive. Gone now are the parent's agonizing concerns for why their offspring suffered so as an adolescent.

Meet Eric, the son of Mary Borhek. Eric grew up in a Lutheran pastor's home. His mother wrote of their journey as a family, through disbelief and fear and ostracism by their congregation to today when Eric lives with his partner in a committed long-term relationship. In *My Son Eric* (The Pilgrim Press, NY, 1979), Mary shares the story of a mother struggling to accept her gay son and discovering herself. If you read no other book on this topic, read this one!

There are so many other people I would like you to meet. Each has graced my life and enabled me to consider the issue of same-sex relationships with understanding. A comment of one gay male, respected in his field and celibate because he has not found a life partner, is worthy of consideration. He said,

Do you think for one minute that anyone would chose to be gay or lesbian? Why would anyone voluntarily endure the pain that being gay involves? Would anyone willingly go through the alienation from family, the ostracism from many social circles? Would you want to hide who you are from work colleagues in order to get or keep a good job? I would give anything to be straight! But I am not straight. God made me homosexual. I have finally accepted that. Now, God says "be responsible and be happy as who I have created you to be!" Can the Church live with that?

III.

Can the Church live with that?—A central question that pushes me back to scripture and theology. In our fall forums, we will look at scripture with clergy representatives of two opposing viewpoints.

Does the Bible condemn homosexuality? Yes, and no. The Bible is a collection of books, a library if you will. It was not written by a single author but hundreds of faithfuls. The Bible is the oral tradition of ancient desert Hebrews. It is their hymns, their poetry, their mythology some of which was adapted from pagan cult worship. The Bible is prophetic social justice, thundering warning, sweet assurance. It is the witness to One whom some Jews called Messiah and Christians call “Savior.” It is the record of the early church as it struggled with 1st Century realities.

This library was written in several languages at different times. All verses are colored by the cultural context of writers and editors and even transcribers. All witness to God’s activity in human history. All are testimony to monotheism, One God, Creator, Sustainer, and Future of all life.

Thus, we wrestle with contexts, language, and theologies. A major battleground has been that story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Some feel that the tale clearly shows God’s condemnation of homosexuality. Others see the problem as fear-driven mob rule against outsiders. Other Old Testament stories have similar problems.

In the New Testament, many reference to the Apostle Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality. Considering his cultural context of Greek temple prostitution, Paul’s word carries weight. But what about Jesus? It is interesting that little is mentioned about Jesus in most books on this topic. Yet, when we Christians have a dispute with scripture, our final authority must be Jesus’ life and teachings.

Jesus speaks very little to the specific question of same-sex unions. But he speaks at great length on the sacredness of human relationships, of marriage, of covenant relationship, of faithfulness to one’s mate “for better or worse...” Jesus’ principle concern is that his people refrain from sexual license, pornographic indulgence, the use of other people as objects for one’s personal satisfaction. Jesus’ life and teaching is about faithfulness to God expressed in lives of gratitude and service. We are to model in our personal relationships Christ’s relationship with God and his loving affirmation of all people. We are to care unconditionally for one another in committed love bonds, creating stable societies and emotional security.

Jesus values each of us individually as unique and beautiful children of God. As we learn from his parable of vineyard workers in today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus’ love goes way beyond simple justice. He calls all people to live like the precious beings we are, thus reflecting God’s love in this life. Jesus spends most of his time with those whom his society views as questionable characters—tax collectors, the Samaritan woman, the woman with a twelve-year hemorrhage,

the lepers, the uneducated. He is especially hard on temple leaders who abuse their people by false interpretations of the Law.

In this, he models God's love for a small band of Hebrew slaves in Egypt yearning to be free. Through trial and rejoicing, our Lord strives to lead each of us out of bondage, through the wilderness into a new, incredibly fulfilling relationship with the One who created us, and with our sisters and brothers in faith.

As I review Jesus' life and teachings, with careful consideration to key Old and New Testament texts and traditions, it seems to me that

- God has created a whole garden of people with many similarities but also many distinctions—male and female, some 4-10% homosexual and bisexual.
- We have no choice in being born who we are. That was God's doing. Our choice is to fulfill our God-given uniqueness to God's glory.
- God's desire for everyone is fulfillment in life and the maximizing of the gifts that each has been given. As a parent, I want the best for my children, including in the area of sexuality and relationship. I have no right to deny them the fulfillment I have known through a responsible committed love relationship.
- The Church dare not turn its back on its central mission of promoting the peace and justice and fulfillment of each person. The Church is called to affirm all persons and to offer each the guidance to build their faithful lives. If that means for some a same-sex covenant love relationship, the Church has every reason to bless and encourage that bond for all that it is and can be.
- The Church must continue to affirm responsible, monogamous love bonds that endure through the years, "for better or for worse." Sexual promiscuity of whatever kind is anathema to God's will and way for creation.

Our carefully planned Open and Affirming Forum Series this fall and winter will allow all of us ample opportunity for honest learning and sharing. Profound appreciation is due the planners. Please join me in participating in these sessions. Honest, balanced presentations are promised.

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As the Hebrews grew tired and hungry and discouraged in the wilderness, the Lord answered Moses' plea and provided bread. In our journey to understanding, the Lord will provide us good bread—the bread of insight and courage, of honesty and of love, and of direction to the Promised Land.

Amen.

