

# What Would Jesus Say?

**Rev. Charles L. Wildman**

**Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ**

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Genesis 1:1-5 "God said, 'Let there be light.'"

Psalms 29 "Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength."

Mark 1:4-11 "You are my beloved."

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## I.

In our faith tradition, we encourage great latitude in conceptualizing personal faith. While respecting all historic creeds, we elevate no creed as a test of faith. We prefer covenants to creeds, thus coming together around our congregation's covenant—a broad formulation of its Christian faith and mission. In addition, we offer the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith as a worthy guide to Christian belief. We believe that faith is a matter of personal searching through study of the historic theological traditions filtered through life experience. Strugglers, we say, may be closer to God than anyone else.

And our principle struggle quite appropriately is with the Old and New Testaments. For the Bible is our central guide to faith and practice. *Scripture is God's Word through human words, images, metaphors, poetry and mythology.* The Bible is the record of our ancestors' mighty faith struggle. Today's lectionary texts are good examples.

Genesis 1 reveals ancient believers' best understanding of the origins of earth-life. We read that Creation began when God imposed order on primeval, non-personal chaos by calling light into existence. Thus an ordered universe was conceived as a divine act of creation. The creation story is intended for serious but not literal reading as we ponder the infinite love and power of God. Psalm 29 is a believer's praise hymn in honor of God's glory and power revealed in a Mediterranean thunderstorm. We see exquisite poetic beauty and vigorous power. Martin Luther adopted this psalm as his own after his frightening conversation experience out in a similar thunderstorm. The psalmist shows us God appearing in the tumult of the incomprehensible elements and manifesting awesome glory. This theophany opens a window on faith for each of us.

Christians find their ultimate guide to God through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ becomes the final test of our ethics and morals. As proclaimed by John the Baptist and seen in Jesus' baptism, we witness in Christ the beloved of God, a glimpse into God's very nature. Now we know that ancient biblical witness must be tested by the earthly experiences, teachings and actions of Jesus. What would Jesus say? must be our central

question when confronting confusing issues. Sometimes applying the Jesus standard changes understandings. Literal readings of some texts simply will not do. In fact, biblical literalism sometimes leads away from God's intention for creation.

## II.

This is what has happened in the area of homosexuality. Texts that purport to condemn homosexuals in fact do no such thing. Misunderstanding these scriptures has done profound damage to gays, lesbians and their families.

A friend from divinity school days in the late 1960's wrote just this Christmas. We knew he had had serious problems in a first failed marriage because we lived across the hall from them. His second marriage also failed. There are children from both marriages. His divinity school career ended abruptly when he switched to medical school. We could not understand why he did not pursue his life-long dream of being a pastor in the United Methodist Church. He dreamt of being a fine preacher. We wondered if his spouse was not sympathetic to the lifestyle of a pastor. He subsequently became a respected physician in a large urban center and today has a fine medical practice. He is single and living alone.

From a portion of his Christmas letter, these words—

I was very confused about my sexuality in high school and college. Subconsciously, I assumed marriage would “cure” me and that I would be a happy heterosexual the rest of my life. It didn't turn out that way. The underlying tension between (my first wife) and me in Divinity School (which you sensed) was in part due to my gay nature.

The real reason I left (divinity school) was I didn't feel I could bear the guilt and shame of being gay and in a Methodist pulpit. We were married eighteen years and (my wife) never knew until I “came out” to her one year ago. What a cleansing experience!

I foolishly tried a “cure” a second time with (name) and it worked for several years, but I finally felt I couldn't live a lie any more and “came out” to (her) two years ago. She and (our daughter) have been very supportive. We lived together sixteen more months sorting out our wishes. We felt it was best to go our separate ways and I got this apartment last February...

The hardest person to “come out” to is yourself—it took me 53 years to accept that it was OK to be gay and that God made me this way. I have been very active in Metropolitan Community Church and can finally thank God for making me gay and Christian (and not feel that is a contradiction in terms). I feel whole and at peace with myself for the first time in my life...

He ends his letter—

I don't mean to burden you with all this, but it is really liberating to finally be honest with your friends.

## III.

On what basis did our friend finally determine that “it is OK to be gay and that God made me this way”? In addition to the support he finds in his new church community, he clearly has found new guidance from scripture. He and others have taken another look at the traditionally damning texts. In the light of Christ, what is God saying to us through them?

Ideas and understandings of sexuality have changed greatly over the centuries. People in biblical times did not share our knowledge or customs of sexuality; we do not share their experience.

There was no romantic dating as we know it. Marriages were arranged by fathers. Women were property of men. The ancients, as MIT’s David Halperin notes,

conceived sexuality in non-sexual term: what was fundamental to their experience of sex was not anything we would regard as essentially sexual, rather, it was something essentially social—namely, the modality of power relations that informed and structured the sexual act. (Dr. Ralph Blair, “The Empty Closet, There are no homosexuals in the Bible,” UCC Home Page)

In studies of sex in history, Stanford classics professor John J. Winkler warns against “reading contemporary concerns and politics into texts and artifacts removed from their social context.”

This is, of course, a basic principle of biblical hermeneutics. Yet, certain Bible verses are continually used to clobber lesbians and gay men today. What are some of these texts?

**1) The Sodom and Gomorrah Story, Gen. 19 “...Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.”**

The traditional story is well-known. It goes like this: The two persons who came to Sodom and were offered sanctuary and hospitality by Lot were male angels sent by God to destroy the cities of the plain. The male mob that surrounded Lot’s house and demanded that he produce the two visitors “that we may know them.” This version alleges that (Gen. 19:5) meant by “to know” the intent to commit public homosexual acts on them. Lot’s offering instead of his “two daughters who have not known a man” (Gen. 19:8) demonstrates the desirable but rejected heterosexual alternative. The Lord’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire and brimstone is a seal of God’s condemnation of homosexuality and other wickedness.

However, recent scholarship on this texts presents the thesis that the sin of Sodom had nothing to do with homosexuality. We are dealing with a contested Hebrew verb, to know, the Hebrew word *yadha*. It has been assumed that this word means “know” in the sense of sexual intercourse. In fact, this word is used 943 times in the Old Testament and ordinarily means “to know” in the common sense of that word. Apart from this disputed Genesis 19:5 text (and its derivative in Judges 19:22), *yadha* is used without qualification to mean engage in coitus only ten times out of the 943. And in such cases, aside from the two exceptions just mentioned, it refers to heterosexual intercourse. The verb used in those instances where the Old Testament refers to either homosexual intercourse or bestiality is *shakabh* (not found in this passage).

Linguistically, it is only a rare and singular chance that the verb means homosexual intercourse

in this story. Probably it simply means to know, to identify the strangers, to find out who they are.

What was the sin and wickedness of the cities that brought about destruction? Within the story itself the iniquity is not explicitly identified; and elsewhere in the Old Testament, Sodom becomes a symbol only of destruction. In none of these references is Sodom specifically characterized by sodomy.

**2) Leviticus 18:22 (20:13) “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”**

“Abomination (to’ebah)” is a technical cultic term for what is ritually unclean, such as mixed cloth, pork, and intercourse with menstruating women. It is not about a moral or ethical issue. This Holiness Code (chaps. 17-26) proscribes men “lying the lyings of women.” Such mixing of sex roles was thought to be polluting. But both Jesus and Paul rejected all such ritual distinctions (cf. Mark 7:17-23; Romans 14:14, 20).

**3) Deuteronomy 23:17-18 “None of the daughters...sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute. You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a male prostitute into the house of the Lord our God in payment for any vow, for both of these are abhorrent to the Lord your God.”**

There is no Hebrew derivative of the word “Sodom” in this passage; the King James Bible supplied it erroneously. The Hebrew words here are references to the “holy” female and eunuch priest-prostitutes of the Canaanite fertility cults, of which Israel was to have no part. Louisville Presbyterian Seminary Bible scholar George R. Edwards notes that “no prophet uses the noun for male cult prostitute or discusses the activity such a person pursued. The prophets, in fact, are as silent on the subject of homosexual acts as the whole tradition of the New Testament teaching of Jesus. ..This is a significant silence.”

**4) Romans 1: 26-27 “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”**

Respected biblical scholar Victor Furnish (*The Moral Teaching of Paul*, Rev. ed., Abington, 1985) says that “homosexual practice as such is not the topic under discussion” here. Rather, Paul is ridiculing pagan religious rebellion, saying that the pagans knew God but worshipped idols instead of God. Paul refers to typical practices of the fertility cults involving sex among priestesses and between men and eunuch prostitutes such as served the goddess Aphrodite at Corinth, from where he was writing this letter to the Romans. Their self-castration rites resulted in a bodily “penalty.”

Furnish comments, “Since Paul offered no direct teaching to his own churches on the subject of homosexual conduct, his letters certainly cannot yield any specific answers to the questions being faced in the modern church... For Paul, neither homosexual practice nor heterosexual promiscuity nor any other specific vice is identified as such with ‘sin.’” In Paul’s view, the fundamental sin from which all particular evils derive is idolatry, worshiping what is created rather than the Creator, be that a wooden idol, an ideology, a religious system, or some particular moral code.

**5) 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 “Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” “...the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father and mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which is entrusted to me.”**

The Greek words in these passages for “male prostitutes, sodomites, fornicators” are difficult to translate as this is their first appearance in preserved literature and subsequent authors are reluctant to use them. Scholar Robin Scroggs (*The New Testament and Homosexuality*, Fortress, 1983) thinks that Paul is speaking about pederasty. “There was no other form of male homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world which could come to mind.” Paul may have had in mind effeminate call boys and slave “pet boys,” prepubescent youth who seemed like females. These men had wives for dowries, procreation and the rearing of heirs. That had “pet boys” for sex.

The Bible has nothing specific to say about homosexuality as such. But the Bible has much to say about God’s grace to all people and God’s call to justice and mercy. Christ, the “Beloved One” of God, leads us by word and example to lives of responsible, sacrificial love. Had my seminary friend understood this Bible message over thirty years ago, two fine women and two families might not have been torn apart and the Church today might be benefiting from a brilliant preacher and teacher.

Amen.

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A special resource backgrounding this sermon but not quoted directly is: *Human Sexuality: A Preliminary Study*, The United Church of Christ, United Church Press, NY, 1977