



## Pilgrimage to Understanding

**Rev. George Booth**

**Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ**

**Arlington, Virginia**

**January 31, 1982**

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."

---

Following the tragic airliner crash on the 14th Street bridge, we were told that "when the little black box is found," we would probably know the answer to the nagging questions, Why did the plane crash? Who was responsible?

In the search for answers to the questions many of us have about homosexuality, there will be no little black box. We must decide, perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow, about important attitudes and actions that affect the lives of other people and of ourselves. This will not be easy, but it must be done.

This sermon is part of the public debate that surrounds those questions. It comes at this particular time because the Potomac Association is being called together next month to determine whether a young woman shall be ordained into the United Church of Christ. When asked, as part of an early interview, she has said that she is lesbian. But even if that had not come before us in this manner, we all know that sooner or later many of us individually or all of us together will have to answer this hard question: What sort of acceptance or rejection am I to give to a homosexual person?

Someone has worded it in this way. We are being forced to reaffirm or revise our judgment of God's judgment. And we must do that without all the answers. I certainly have no little black box for you. I have only some personal and pastoral experiences, some rather carefully developed thoughts, and some convictions, which I share with you because I believe they can be helpful.

In preparing this sermon, I realize that one thing sets me and my experience apart from many of you. I come to this issue largely as a clergyman and pastor. I see the issue through the eyes of parents, young people, and colleagues, and from reading books and attending seminars on

pastoral counseling. As such, even if I want to, I am unable to avoid dealing with it or continuing to think about it simply in traditional stereotypes. But then, each of us comes to the issue from a different place.

If this is a typical congregation, some of you are gay or in families with gay people. Some of you have had painful experiences in accepting homosexuality. For some the very name conjures up anger, fear, or loathing. You are embarrassed to hear it spoken from the pulpit. Others have come to a new respect and appreciation for the lives of gay persons as you have watched them mature in self acceptance. All these attitudes are out there. I know. And at one time I have been in most of these places.

It may all have started with me when Mickey beat me up on the front steps of Fryeburg Grammar School and called me a sissy. Actually, he hit me with a geography book and shoved me into a snow bank. That's when I learned that boys better learn to act in a certain way at the risk of ostracism. I am quite sure I did not learn that at home. But I learned it, and although I don't know that I ever took part in the jokes and teasing of boys who were artistic or musical (I was neither!) or in the host of ways that childhood society expresses its scorn, the point was surely not lost on me. I learned.

The unnamable mystery that surrounded the suicide of a fellow student my freshman year at college; the threats and temptations seen in isolated Army life; the slowly developed image of "real" men who do not show the gentler emotions or nourish the more sensual responses to colors, clothes, touch, taste; these are things I learned from the culture about me.

And this culture taught me in the very marrow of my bones this one simple fact: Homosexuals are by definition queer, repulsive, sinful, and sick. They are to be resisted, rejected, and if possible, rooted out; ridiculed, caricatured and physically abused; frozen out of normal fellowship, and denied any expression of their sexuality; forced by society to live too often a sleazy, underground existence in constant fear of being found out.

In dealing with this, what help were biblical insights or psychological and medical diagnoses? They tended to produce, in hushed tones, the necessary proof that all this was true. People who rarely consulted the Bible for anything, let alone as judgment over their own lives, were quick to point out that the word sodomy comes from the ancient city named in Genesis where Abraham's nephew Lot offered to throw his teenage daughters to the wolfish rape of men outside who had demanded that he release his angel guests to them.

This gallant act of hospitality was overlooked, as centuries of homophobic exegetes found in that old story a true "word from the Lord" on how to treat people whose sexual orientation deviates from the norm. You will notice we did not read that story in our Scripture this morning. For those of you who wish to read two differing interpretations of it, I invite you to pick up copies of the papers used yesterday at our seminar.

Looking back now, I can see how established prejudices get read back through Scripture to provide the necessary authority for their particular point of view. Examples of this abound in the recent past, as the Church has struggled to deal with questions of race, slavery, or the place of women. People who knew how they felt about homosexuality found confirmation in Scripture. But things are changing, and I too have changed. Questions have been raised by many people whose experience belies the stereotype. We have been forced to look freshly at biblical insights and at clinical data. There is, fortunately, a wealth of both available to anyone, and it makes fascinating reading. For is there any reason why insights and knowledge in the field of sexuality should not be subject to growth and even change, as knowledge changes and increases in every other field of human exploration?

Two rather simple but important findings have affected my whole attitude toward the biblical and clinical authority regarding this issue. One is what certainly all of us here have long ago accepted. Scripture, taken as a whole, offers a multiplicity of views on human behavior, conditioned to some extent by the place and time in which it was written. God's revelation, read through the biblical story, is alive and dynamic, changing with changing times and therefore creating tensions and even contradictions. The Holiness Code of Leviticus should be read this way and in its entirety (Chs. 17-28) before picking and choosing a particular text to condemn a particular practice.

For instance, procreation was essential to this little nation of Jews surrounded by their enemies, but it is not our problem in the same way today. Holiness for the Jew meant separation, at the penalty of death, from the surrounding pagan idolatries. It was a patriarchal society they lived in, a world that had no understanding at all of how conception takes place or of psycho-sexual orientations. They considered unclean any slight deviation from acts whose purpose was planting a male seed in a female garden.

The other finding comes from psychiatry. It seems to be a more generally accepted theory today that people find their sexual orientation to be a matter over which they have little or no control. Over behavior, yes, but over orientation, no. Though this is still argued in some circles, it is the vast consensus of gay people and those who work with gay people. Where the subtle shift takes place is a mystery but it seems very doubtful indeed that the old whipping horses—cold, distant fathers, overprotective mothers, or another predatory homosexual—have had much to do with a person's sexual orientation.

This raises a very strange question in my mind about creation. If a large number of human beings come into the world with a bias in their sexual orientation toward persons of the same sex, what does this say about the Creator? Does the Creator make that many mistakes? Where is "quality control"? Or, is there in the "natural" order of creation as wide a range of human sexual differences as there obviously is in colors, sizes, shapes, and mental and emotional responses?

In which case it may well be we who have tried to draw a fixed line between “normal” and “abnormal.” And in which case we are now being asked whether we can still reaffirm, or must we revise, our traditional human judgment of God’s judgment.

I particularly want to speak of this issue, not just from personal experience or biblical and medical insights, but from a pastoral point of view. I have been there when couples have separated because one was gay, and I have known that they were good people, not evil, not sick. I have shared as parents painfully describe their child’s search for sexual identity and the moving moment when both parent and child have come to affirm one another. But I have also witnessed the result of acts of exploitation, and violence involving people of the opposite sex: rape, adultery, child and spouse abuse.

I have participated countless times in the many ways that church and society nourish and strengthen heterosexual love: sex education, courtship, premarital counseling, marriage ceremonies and vows, and the church’s blessing on their life together. Through all these we are saying to heterosexual couples, we support you and wish you well and stand behind you in your struggles and rejoice with you in your victories. And yet consider, given all this, one of three such commitments breaks up. Consider too that it is from within these family groups that most of the violent attacks against persons takes place.

Now consider that when I as a pastor meet with gay persons who want in their hearts to live a committed, loving, and responsible life, as many do, there does not exist in our society or in our church a single means to celebrate, nourish, and strengthen such a relationship. Almost everything works to promote the very illicit, short-term, and irresponsible relations that have become the image for many of us of the gay life.

I am convinced that psychiatric theories, supported all too often by theological doctrine, have done great damage and brought unnecessary pain to many people. It is part of my pastoral work to undo that where possible. For instance, a cruel burden has been placed on parents by the popular theory that homosexuality develops in a boy from a cold and distant father and an aggressive and possessive mother.

But there is a perfectly logical alternative theory to explain those instances where this observation can be made. It goes like this: a boy is born with homosexual tendencies. His father becomes uncomfortable seeing the absence of the “manly” qualities that society has taught him to instill in his son. It becomes increasingly hard to relate to his own boy, and he is in fact angry and upset. The mother in the meantime sees the absence of aggressive traits in her son and notices he is often abandoned or abused by childhood peers. She steps in to protect him, as any mother would.

Or take another hallowed psychiatric theory: homosexuals are psychopathological and therefore misfits in society. Turn it around. Homosexual persons are declared sick or sinful by all groups

in society. Everywhere, everyone adds to the negative image. From childhood he/she receives signals, direct or distant, that say there is something wrong with you. What better way to develop a low self image, to become one's own self-fulfilling prophecy of failure? James Nelson writes

An ethic of the Gospel ought never forget that moral responsibility is intrinsically related to self-acceptance, and that self-acceptance is intrinsically related to acceptance by significant others and, ultimately by God. Gay persons in our society have been told by their families that they do not belong to them, by the church that they are desperate sinners because of their sexual orientation, by the medical profession that they are sick, and by the law that they are criminals. In the face of such rejection the amazing thing is that so many are emotionally stable and sexually responsible.

So, finally, some personal faith affirmations that I make at this point of my pilgrimage. I invite you to hear them but to make your own as you make your own pilgrimage.

- *Creation.* Human beings come from their Creator in a myriad variety of sizes, shapes, colors, and emotional and sexual orientations. Homosexual and heterosexual persons all hear God's word pronounced over all creation: It is good.
- *Full Equality.* There is for me no longer any more reason to deny complete equality as a human being to a homosexual person than to a person of another race or class or sex. What God has called clean, as Peter learned in his dream recounted in the book of Acts (Ch. 10), we should not call unclean.
- *Sin,* I believe, infects us all, but no one is by birth and nature more of a sinner than someone else. Sin is a breaking of the relationship of trust and love between human beings and with God. Certainly society's attitude toward gay persons has been to break that relationship again and again. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone (John 8:1-11).
- *Jesus Christ* is the one in whom is fully present our new humanity, our membership in the kingdom of God. He both forecasts that life and himself lives it out. It is not easy for me to draw much knowledge of my sexuality, however, from him. His life is as much a model for a celibate or even a homosexual person as it is for an active heterosexual person like myself. Which is right because clearly his concern is for wholeness of life, hence his works of healing that repudiate ancient legalisms (Mark 3:1-5), and for the quality of relationships that made him disregard the labels that prejudice placed on people (Mark 2:14-17). None of these things have much to do, for me, with sexual orientation. They have a great deal to do with behavior—both sexual and otherwise.

- *Life in the Community of the Holy Spirit*, as Paul described it, is defined by a part of that same old Holiness Code, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:14). Behavior involves a rejection of the “works of the flesh, ... immorality, impurity, licentiousness ... enmity, jealousy, anger, selfishness”; and by the adoption of the “fruits of the Spirit, ...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:17-23). As far as I can tell, the struggle between the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit goes on in each one of us with varying degrees of fervor and success. It may even be that a society built and nourished daily by the media in the familiar macho images of raw sex and violence can learn a bit from many of our gay brothers and sisters about love, peace, patience, gentleness....

That is about where I come out. I have a couple of concluding thoughts. One is a word to those of you who find much of what I am saying offensive. Please remember this: You will, in the course of a day’s conversation—or at a church coffee hour—be speaking to gay people or parents of gay people. They won’t have distinguishing marks like skin color, strange names, or physical handicaps, so you may be unaware that by your own conversation, you may deeply hurt—and do great injustice to—someone you care about.

And one other word. For me, the position I take in all this says to a gay person: You are a full, moral, and responsible person. Society, therefore, has a right to expect you to be moral and responsible in the way you live out your whole life, including your sexuality. Faithfulness and commitment are part of the Holiness Code for you, as for anyone.

Some of you will be supported, some offended, and some informed by what you have heard here. There is no neat little sentence with which I can bring us all together anymore than there is a little black box to give us all the answers. We have a long way to go on this particular pilgrimage, and it’s better for none of us to sound too wise or too final. I can only hope to have allayed some fears and created a somewhat more open space for further discussion.

Let’s close by paraphrasing Paul’s previous words to the Galatians in the words of that little song about a very tough and unsentimental kind of love:

We will work with each other  
 We will work side by side  
 And we’ll guard each one’s dignity  
 And save each one’s pride  
 ...And together we’ll spread the news  
 That God is in our land,  
 And they’ll know we are Christians

By our love

Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love!

Amen.

James Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978).

I suggest you read a book like this one, which I will be glad to loan. Mary V. Borhek, *My Son Eric* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979).