

PASSAGES I LOVE TO HATE: “TO LIE WITH A MALE AS WITH A WOMAN”

Leviticus 18:19-30; Acts 8:26-40 (NRSV)

Seventh in the sermon series “Passages I Love to Hate”

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Prayer

Bless us, O God, with a reverent sense of your presence, that your Holy Spirit might comfort, discomfort, or even startle us with the truth of your unbounded love in Jesus Christ. And may words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be found acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Some sermons can be very dogmatic when the word of the Lord is very clear and it is easy to declare “Thus saith the Lord.” This sermon is not one of those. Nor is it offered with a “This is what you should think” admonition. There is no more essential doctrine in our Reformed Presbyterian tradition than the belief that God alone is Lord of the conscience. So I offer this sermon more as an invitation to talk, to listen, to learn, to pray, to study as we seek God’s will together in the struggle to be faithful to the God of justice and mercy embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, and attested to in holy scripture.

I do so with the realization that this is a divisive issue for the church, and not just Idlewild and not just the Presbyterian Church (USA). Some have said that this is the most schismatic issue for the church since slavery and abolition in the 19th century. It has become so divisive that in many corners of the church it has become impossible even to talk about, to engage in civil dialogue, in moral discourse. Yet to ignore it is to violate the mandate of the gospel which affirms that no corner of life is excluded from Christian concern — especially not those having to do with human relationships. And the church, whose foundation is Jesus Christ and the oneness we have in him, ought to be the one place where we can talk about it in a thoughtful, non-emotive way. I hope this sermon sheds more light than heat.

Finally, for those of you who are visiting here or are newcomers to the church, I want you to know that I have preached around 400 sermons here over the past 11 years (no wonder we have air conditioning problems ... that’s a lot of hot air!), but this is the first time I have ever explicitly addressed these difficult passages and issues from the pulpit. Our purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God, to preach Christ and Christ crucified, and to call all of us to faithful obedience to our baptismal vows in every corner of our lives. This text from Leviticus is a passage I

love to hate, and we are better off going through it and not around it because the implications of avoiding it can be deadly.

So let me read to you excerpts from a letter I received from a former parishioner when I left Atlanta and came here to Idlewild. I have her permission to use it, though I have changed the names:

Dear Steve,

I want to thank you for helping Wanda and me find a church home where we felt accepted as a family. As a P.K., church was naturally a big part of my life growing up. Unfortunately, I didn't always see the better sides of people in the church. I actually saw more negatives than positives, and so when I became an adult, I set aside the church. Over 20 years passed before I was able to begin again exploring my spiritual side, so that healing from my past could begin.

Wanda and I originally visited your church because we were looking for some place for her to take her son that was not so anti-tolerant as the churches his dad regularly took him to. I asked a friend what church was most likely, and she suggested my old stomping grounds, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and yours in particular.

So this letter is about faith. Faith in the future, that God has a master plan that will work out to our benefit. Faith that the church will see Wanda and me, and her son, Sam, as a family, not an abomination

This letter is about hope. Hope that the church will someday allow full inclusion into the life of the church for Wanda, for me, and for our family.

Most of all, this letter is about love. The unconditional love that God has for us. Our rather feeble, frequently misguided, and often misinterpreted attempts to emulate that unconditional love towards our fellow human beings. And finally, the love of God and humanity that shows in everything you do.

Now I read that letter because it illustrates for me better than any words I can say, that any consideration of these texts about homosexuality must be conducted in the context of the personal and not just the theoretical. Homosexuality is not preeminently an issue. It is preeminently people. As God does not deal with us abstractly and impersonally, rather as individuals — as one who numbers the hairs on our heads, who hears the beat of our hearts, every splash of our tears, who calls us by name ... so we who are God's must seek in all our strivings to deal with one another in such a fashion. We are talking about people.

Furthermore, we are not just dealing with people "out there." We are talking about our brothers and our sisters and our sons and our daughters and aunts and uncles, and we are talking about our sisters and brothers in Christ like Wanda and Joyce, whose letter I read, whom we

have baptized, and with whom we share Christian fellowship and break bread in the Christian community.

And so we turn to scripture for guidance. That sounds easy, doesn't it? And for some it is easy. Take the five or six verses in a cursory reading of the entire Bible that seem to speak to homosexuality and one could conclude that it condemns homosexuality unequivocally. End of discussion. But it is a mistake to look to the Bible to close a discussion; the Bible seeks to open one.

You see, the Bible is violated whenever it is used as a catalogue of proof texts to support my own prejudice. Everybody knows, I assume, that there are passages of scripture which can be, and often have been, used in support of slavery, of brutal war, of women keeping their heads covered and their mouths shut in church. Now, it is no more legitimate to pick and choose those passages of scripture which seem to point to an anti-homosexual bias than it is to pick and choose those passages which seem to support an anti-woman or pro-slavery bias.

What we need to remember is that the revelation of God is in the person of Jesus Christ. It is a revelation which, to be sure, comes to us through the Scriptures which mirror also the cultural mores and biases of their day. (Paul's teaching that women should keep their heads covered in church, for example.) Therefore, any proper interpretation of Scripture needs to take its cues, not from isolated passages here and there, but from the total revelation of Jesus' life — teaching, death, and resurrection...the life study of which, incidentally, reveals not a word about homosexuality. The fact is, Jesus simply never mentioned it.

What we do have are some problematic texts in Leviticus. "You shall not lie with a male as a woman; it is an abomination." (Lev. 18:22) There is another text that calls for the death penalty for anyone who breaks that admonition. That seems clear, doesn't it? But in that same code, called "the Holiness Code," we find instructions about what times of the month are appropriate and what times of the month are inappropriate for sexual relations. In the same code, those who curse their parents shall be stoned to death. (Lev. 20:9, Deut. 21:18-21. There are prohibitions against wearing clothes made of two different materials (I plead guilty!) and against shaving (I'd be safe there!). Others who are condemned are those who are blind or lame, or those with a broken foot or hand, or a man with a blemish in his eyes (Lev. 21:18-20). These and many other actions are condemned because they defy purity and weaken the cultural identification of the people of Israel in the promised land. So great was the principle of ritual and ethnic purity that to violate it was in most cases to warrant the sentence of death.¹

We need to understand the context that led to the Holiness Code (the need to set themselves apart, to be pure, to procreate), but we also need to understand that we are no longer bound by the rules of the code. Both Jesus and Paul found the details of ritual purity irrelevant. They were both concerned with the purity of heart.

The other Old Testament passage often used in discussions of homosexuality is the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19. I won't go into the whole gory story, except to say that when we

interpret a story such as this one, we need first of all to see how it was interpreted in scripture, not how the church interprets it now, because it is at least possible that the church has imposed its own bias. That's especially true in how the church has historically treated women.

Whenever the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is referred to in the Bible, the sin of homosexuality is never mentioned. When Ezekiel or Isaiah or Jesus mention the sin of Sodom, they allude to the sin of pride, idleness, neglect of the poor; Jesus referred to the sin of inhospitality. It was a wicked place, but nowhere does the Bible state that homosexuality was the wickedness in question.²

As we turn to the New Testament, we find Paul writing in Romans (1:26ff) of "dishonorable passions" and natural and unnatural relations, and it is clear that throughout the history of the interpretation of those passages, the assumption has been that he is referring to homosexual relationships. Recent scholarship has suggested that Paul, who assumed the heterosexuality of all persons, is not talking about homosexuality as an orientation, but only about male prostitution and pedophilia,³ which were a part of the culture of heterosexuality in both Rome and Corinth, and it is in the context of idolatry.

These same scholars do a lot of word studies and sociological studies of the ancient near east and come to similar conclusions about the two other New Testament passages traditionally associated with homosexuality, I Timothy 2 and I Corinthians 5. A very careful reading of the Greek in the Timothy text shows that what is being condemned is a very specific form of pederasty in which young boys were enslaved for sexual purposes, and one can hardly argue with the evil it represents.⁴

These are difficult hermeneutical problems, stemming from the fact that the contemporary church is asking the Scripture questions the culture in which the Scriptures were written did not ask. There is no doubt that Paul condemned pederasty, and male prostitution, those same sex relationships in which there is oppression or power exerted against the will of another human being. But what is patently unknown to Paul and to the ancient world of the Bible was the concept of orientation, mutual same-sex relationships in which there are expressions of constancy, faithfulness, trust, and commitment.⁵

That's it. Those are the references in scripture to homosexuality. So where does that leave us? Certainly, at the very least we can say that we need a higher order of Christian ethics than proof-texting provides; that is, taking one verse out of context and making it gospel. It is an issue that will be best served, not by pointing to Levitical laws buried deep in the back of the Bible, but in looking at the bigger picture of the ways of how God relates with human beings. God rarely, if ever, contentedly pats the community of faith on the back and says, "You're absolutely right to keep things pure, exclude those people. My grace was just for you and for people like you and not for those other people." The picture the Bible gives us of God is a picture of God who is always having to go around grabbing the faith community by the neck

and prodding it, sometimes kicking and screaming, toward a new understanding of the essential inclusiveness of divine grace.⁶

That's the story of the early church in Acts. Notice how the Holy Spirit continually broadens that community's understanding of how wide and deep God's love extends. There were 11 frightened apostles, they added one to the mix. Then at Pentecost the Spirit included Jews from all over the known world, Parthians, Medes, Elamites and the rest. And then in today's story you have Philip traveling in the desert taking the gospel to the (gasp!) Samaritans and he met up with an Ethiopian eunuch from Queen Candace's court.

Now the Torah, the Jewish law, forbade eunuchs from even entering the assembly of the Lord. (Deut. 23:1) because of their sexual difference. This man happened to be reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip explained to him that the person Isaiah was talking about was Jesus Christ, and this good news moved him to the core.

They come up on some water. Now, remember, this is in the desert. There is no water in the desert. Luke, who wrote this, felt this was a "God-thing." And the eunuch asked Philip "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" It's an interesting way to phrase the question, but yes, there was something. The law. The fact that he was sexually unfit.

But Philip was shaped more by the Spirit than by the law; more by the love of Jesus Christ than the legalism of Moses. And Philip baptized the eunuch and the eunuch went on his way rejoicing. And then just a few chapters later Peter has a vision, a dream, that leads him to sit down and eat with a (double gasp!) Gentile, which the law clearly forbade. But not the Holy Spirit. Peter concluded: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God" You and I are here today because those early church leaders were not bound by the old interpretations of the law, but were open to a new thing God's Spirit was doing because of the revelation in Jesus Christ.

So let me conclude by making some suggestions about how we might direct our discussions and thoughts and hearts as we reclaim our own baptism and struggle to be faithful, especially in light of the changes our denomination has made in more inclusive, but in some ways more strict, ordination standards.

I've already made the first suggestion, and that is to pay attention to the broad and sweeping movement of the Bible which describes a direction for the creation that God has set in motion. And I see from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 the shaping and forming of a God who creates the world, loves it, and who reconciles, sacrifices, and covenants with the earth and its people, moving us toward a unity and peace that we have not fully achieved. The watershed event, of course, in the unfolding story of God's creative work among us was Jesus Christ, God's limitless expression of love and sacrifice given to us as a gift given to draw all people to himself.

Let's not get hung up on things that are not central to that gospel. Rather, may we be open to the Spirit's leading us to a more loving and merciful interpretation. We do that with a certain amount of humility, because we always have to be open to the possibility that we might be wrong. The church has been wrong in the past about many things. And it was not a rejection of scripture when the church finally took a decisive stand against slavery. It was an affirmation of the mind of Christ doing a new thing in our midst. The church was wrong for 2,000 years about the role of women, and when we finally attained a new understanding about the gifts of women for leadership in the church, we were not denying the authority of scripture. We believe that Jesus Christ was doing a new thing in our midst. You never know!

The second suggestion would be to listen, I mean really listen, to each other, especially with people who are different. As I have said before, one of the greatest gifts Idlewild has is our wide diversity of opinions, experiences, theologies and interpretations. That's how I grow spiritually. And I have done a lot of listening over the past few months. Here is what I have heard:

- I have heard, without exception, a sincere desire, to live into the vision that we believe God has given us, that Idlewild be a community in which all who enter might find a home. We may differ on strategies, but there has been unanimity about us being a church that welcomes all. Without exception — young, old, new member, longtime member — there has not been one person that I have heard who has objected to that vision. I thank God for that, and for you.
- I have heard a lot of fear expressed — fear over the unknown, fear over lessening the authority of scripture, fear about losing members if we open our doors more widely, fear about the effects controversial issues such as this might have on giving, and active participation. Fear about what our friends in other churches might think. And I have some of those fears as well. We need to listen to those who voice their concerns, and to be attentive to our own fears. And what I have found when I have examined my own fears, my greatest fear is not being faithful to Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior.
- I have heard of another fear that I needed to hear. This highlights the importance of listening to others who might be different from us — this was the fear that gays often have when they enter a church for the first time. I have learned that it is terribly hard and scary. Will I be accepted? Will I get the Bible thrown at me? Will they see me as an abomination? If I bring my child to be baptized, will they baptize her? It took Joyce 20 years to enter a church after some bad experiences. It's a whole different set of fears that long-time members might have. But they are fears and need to be listened to every bit as much as the fears I expressed earlier.

A third suggestion would be that we not only listen to each other, but our reformed tradition reminds us that God also speaks to us through disciplines other than the purely theological, which is to say, we need to listen to the expertise from other professions. Is homosexuality an

illness? Nearly forty years ago the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. Is it a choice? The most persuasive data that comes from the scientific community is that gays and lesbians appear to have no more choice as to their sexual orientation than to most heterosexual people.⁷ What that means to me is that the God we know in Jesus Christ would hardly bring one into being, if God did not also intend that person's worth to be guaranteed and held in sacred trust in the world in which God made.

The final suggestion is that there should be a single, ethical standard for all people: gays and straights, men and women, married and single. Any infidelity on the part of anybody, be they homosexual or heterosexual, is not in line with the Christian gospel. The abuse of one's sexuality, the idolatry of sex, promiscuity, using other people for the sole purpose of sexual gratification, whether a person is gay or straight, I hope we are all in agreement that that is clearly wrong, and those kinds of behavior are sinful. Put more positively, the single standard for all relationships should be based upon mutuality, commitment, constancy, trust, and love.

That's what I have to offer about these difficult passages I love to hate. As I said at the beginning, the consequences of not taking them seriously and through the lens of Jesus Christ can be deadly. At least one-third of all teenage suicides are due to their struggles with sexuality, and fears of rejection by family, friends, and church, and bullying.

I have to be open to the possibility that I might be wrong. I don't think I am, but I might be, because the church has been wrong about plenty of issues through the years, and therefore what it boils down to for me is that in my search for more understanding and answers to these difficult questions — if I err, I am going to err on the side of acceptance, not condemnation; if I err, I am going to err on the side of compassion, not doctrine; I am going to err on the side of grace, and not law. For that unconditional grace is what the Scripture means when it says we are to love one another ... even as God has loved us.

I hope I have been faithful to my Lord and Savior, and our foundation as a church, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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Leviticus 18: 19-30

19 You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. **20** You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her. **21** You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord. **22** You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. **23** You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion. **24** Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. **25** Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. **26** But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you **27** (for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled); **28** otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. **29** For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. **30** So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the Lord your God.

Acts 8: 26-40

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) **27** So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. **29** Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." **30** So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" **31** He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. **32** Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. **33** In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." **34** The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" **35** Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. **36** As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" **37 38** He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. **39** When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. **40** But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

¹ Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. New York: Morrow and Co., 1996, p. 154.

² I realize that I have not dealt with objections surrounding the creation stories in Genesis. Jeffery Siker points out that “Heterosexuality may be the dominant forms of sexuality, but it does not follow that it is the only form of appropriate sexuality.” The creation story is not as much a paradigm about marriage as it is about the establishment of human society. It is the basis and not the end of human diversity. See Siker, “How to decide? Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion,” in *Theology Today*, Vol 52, No. 2, July 1994, p. 226.

³ See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. Following Rom. 1:26 there is a list of “every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice; full of envy, murder, strife..” and more. Then Paul concludes with something we often forget at the beginning of Romans 2: “Therefore, you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” And he sums up in verse 11: “For God shows no partiality.”

⁴ The words here translated “immoral persons” and “sexual perverts” are “ pornos,” meaning prostitute, and “arsenokoites,” meaning the active pederast. See Dale Martin, “Arsenokoites and Malokos: Meanings and Consequences,” in Robert L. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, p. 129.

⁵ Gomes, op.cit., p. 158. Gomes adds: “All Paul knew of homosexuality was the debauched pagan expression of it. He cannot be condemned for that ignorance, but neither should his ignorance be an excuse for our own.”

⁶ William Willimon, *Acts—The Interpretation Series*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988. P. 93 ff.

⁷ Starting with Chandler Burr’s article in the March, 1993 issues of the Atlantic Monthly, “Homosexuality and Biology,” this is increasingly the scientific community’s consensus. In addition, it would be hard to imagine that people would choose a sexual orientation that would open themselves up to rejection and abuse by family, church, and society.

Selected Bibliography on the Bible and Homosexuality

John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. This was a ground breaking historical study that make it one of the most extensive treatments of this subject.

Robert Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. A range of voices that are engaged in biblically responsible and constructive debates regarding sexual ethics and behavior, edited by a Professor of New Testament at McCormick Theological Seminary.

Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996. The late chaplain at Harvard urges readers to take a new look at “the good book,” and his chapter 8, “The Bible and Homosexuality: The Last Prejudice” is especially helpful and readable.

Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really says about Homosexuality*. New Mexico: Alamo Square Press, 2004. A respected theologian and Roman Catholic priest explains in a clear and brief fashion new insights of recent scholarship.

William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006. An outstanding analysis of the religious/biblical, legal and political issues over committed gay couples in a democratic society, looking a pros and cons. Very comprehensive, by a professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, an ordained Presbyterian (USA), and also an attorney at law.

John J. McNeill, S.J. *The Church and the Homosexual*. Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, Inc., 1976. One of the first attempts to fully examine the Catholic Church's traditional attitudes toward homosexuality. Well documented, both biblically and scientifically.

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* San Francisco: Harper/San Francisco, 1994. First published in 1978 and then updated, it looks at homosexuality from scientific, psychological, and biblical perspectives.

James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1978. This was a formative book for much of the later scholarship, by a professor of Christian Ethics at United Theological Seminary.

Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Exploding the Myths, Heal the Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. If I had one book to recommend for Presbyterians, this would be it. Written by an evangelical professor, formerly at Fuller Seminary, then at San Francisco Seminary, and a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA), he writes of his evolution on this subject, and contrasts biblical interpretations on issues of slavery and women with how we have dealt with homosexuality.

Jeffrey Siker, editor, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994. Respected biblical scholars offer contrasting insights into these texts.

Ted A. Smith, Editor, *Frequently Asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues*. San Francisco: The Covenant Network of Presbyterians, 2006. This book is exactly what the title implies. It is easy to read, with some of the leading theologians of our denomination weighing in on the questions that we face about the texts, about baptism, theology and more. Only 120 pages. Can be ordered through the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.

Walter Wink, editor. *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999. A highly regarded group of Christians address the moral imperatives about homosexuality.

A video, available in the Idlewild library: *Turning Points: Stories of Life and Change in the Church*. Covenant Network of Presbyterians, 2006. Four segments of one hour each detail a particular story of transformation, with helpful commentary by theologians like Walter Brueggemann and Beverly Gaventa. This is for those still trying to discern the role Christ calls us to take in the church. www.covenantnetwork.org.