

Scripture Readings:

Leviticus 18: 6-29

⁶None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness: I am the LORD....¹⁹You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. ²⁰You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman’s wife, and defile yourself with her. ²¹You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. ²²You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. ²³You 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. ²⁴Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. ²⁵Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. ²⁶But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you.... ²⁹For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. ³⁰So 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.

I Corinthians 6: 9-11

⁹Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

I Timothy 1: 8-11

⁸Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. ⁹This means understanding that 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 or mother, for murderers, ¹⁰fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Romans 1: 18-32

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

...²¹For though they knew God – his eternal power and divine nature -- they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.

²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. ²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and 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. ²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them, but even applaud others who practice them.

Sermon Text:

Any sermon series looking at issues in today’s church could hardly avoid a week on the hot potato of homosexuality. More than a few tears have been shed over this issue as our denomination has struggled with it from the early 1990s, and other churches such as the Anglican and the Presbyterian Church USA are left even more polarized than we are. Where you stand on this issue has become a defining characteristic of your church, much more so today than where you stand on infant baptism or the

charismatic gifts. I actually took a call one day from someone who had phoned into the church anonymously to ask what the Presbyterian Church in Canada thought about homosexuality. People want to know what we think, and yet it's hard to explain to people who are not of the church, *how* a church must think: why, in fact, we can't be directed merely by social trends or emerging science or the self evident justice of equal rights. Why, instead, we must take our cues from texts that are thousands of years old, and test by their light, “any word that comes to us from church, world or inner experience” (Living Faith 5.1). This practice of thinking within a religious tradition, is hard to explain to people outside the church, as well as to many people inside it, and yet it is because we are not condemned merely to *reflect* the culture around us, that we *can* speak God's freeing, healing and saving good news to the world. I believe that God has good news for the homosexual, a freedom that transcends anything to be found in gay pride or positive space. And despite the pain and division which have been stirred up through what we might call the gay challenge to the churches, I believe that there is still the potential of emerging a more faithful and compassionate church because of this awareness.

The gay challenge, like the feminist challenge of which I spoke last week, comes before the church these days because of a cultural revolution, which has been taking place over the past 30-40 years. Whereas the church, in its traditional negativity toward homosexual behaviour used to be very much in line with the cultural consensus, today that negativity is quite at odds with the views of the world around us. I attribute this tremendous shift to five factors: firstly to the media, and particularly Hollywood's intentional campaign to transform our perceptions of homosexuality from something marginal to something mainstream. Secondly, the way that the ideals of lifelong faithfulness in marriage and the inherent connection of sexuality to the procreation of children have been eroded in the heterosexual community, have had a huge effect. Thirdly, there is the economic discovery that gay people, being largely young, urban, professional

and childless have considerable money to spend, and as a market must be courted, not alienated. Fourthly, we have been influenced by the charter of rights and freedoms, which has framed every political matter in Canada in terms of equal rights and discrimination. Fifthly we are impacted by the decision of the medical and scientific communities to normalize homosexuality.

The history of our church’s struggle with the gay challenge, began in the early nineties. In 1988 the United Church of Canada made a landmark decision to ordain practicing homosexuals. Some in our denomination thought that was the end of the world; others thought it was quite a progressive move and pressed us to follow suit. It was clear that we needed a statement defining our doctrine. The statement came in 1996 (read the full statement by going to <http://www.presbyterian.ca/ourfaith/officialdocuments/officialstatements> and opening “Statement on Human Sexuality”). It addressed homosexuality, but in the wider context of human sexuality. In other words, it acknowledged that we are all sexual beings: married or celibate, straight or gay, and as such, the Bible challenges us all to live in obedience to God’s intent for our sexuality. For the married person, this means faithfulness within marriage, for the single person – whether straight or gay – this means abstinence. The statement was adopted with overwhelming approval by the commissioners to that Assembly, and a much more liberal report brought to Assembly by another group in 2004 was defeated (though it continues to be found on our denominational web pages at <http://www.presbyterian.ca/ourfaith/officialdocuments/officialstatements> see “Special Committee on Sexual Orientation”), so the official position of our church is clear.

However, the denomination’s policy was put the test when Darryl MacDonald, a candidate for the ministry in Montreal, was offered a call by the congregation of St. Andrew’s church in Lachine. Before accepting the call he leveled with the congregation about the fact that he was in a gay relationship and

would be sharing the manse with his male partner. The congregation decided to proceed with the call, but the Presbytery was divided as to whether it could be sustained. The case went to General Assembly and was finally settled in 1998 when the congregation left the denomination and called Darryl as their minister. The congregation has subsequently dissolved.

The matter which Darryl put to the test was whether someone could be proudly and unrepentantly and actively homosexual and still be a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. To that the church answered “no”. In a similar way our church has ministers who are alcoholics, but it expects them at least to be engaged in the struggle against their addiction. It would not do at all to have an alcoholic minister proclaiming from the pulpit: “I am an alcoholic, and I’m proud of it. Moreover if any of you want to be alcoholics I’ll stand up and affirm you.” So Darryl put to the test whether we actually consider homosexual behaviour to be a sin. You see when the United Church allowed for gay ordination in 1988 it said that “where a candidate meets the other criteria for ordination, including “profession of faith in Christ and obedience to him” homosexuality is not, in itself, to be regarded as a barrier.” Clearly the United Church believes you *can* be living in obedience to Christ while practicing a homosexual lifestyle. In other words, it has concluded that homosexual practice is *not* a sin. *Our* difficulty is that, looking at the Biblical texts, we cannot see any warrant for that view. I mean, you’ve heard those texts read this morning. Do they seem ambiguous to you? This, of course, leads on to our position on gay marriage. If God is teaching us that homosexual practice is a sin, how can one of God’s ministers possibly stand there and invoke God’s blessing on it? God does not bless our sin; he save us from it.

The Bible doesn’t say an awful lot on homosexuality, but what it does say is *consistent* across the Old and New Testaments with no dissenting voice; it is not only negative but *strongly* negative; and it is *comprehensive* in forbidding both male and female homosexual practice. It would be a whole lot easier for us

to maintain this position today if God had given us *reasons why* homosexuality is so wrong – reasons that engaged our experience of *some* homosexual relationships, at least, as being loving, and committed and fulfilling. God doesn’t give us a lot of insight into *why* he calls homosexual practice an abomination, and calls for such strong deterrents to be set around it, but we can make some surmises based on what Paul says about its being unnatural, and from the context in which it arises both in Romans and in Leviticus – namely in the context of full-blown idolatry.

The argument from Romans, I think, is the most revealing as to the logic of why the Bible considers homosexual practice to be wrong. Paul starts off in Romans 1 by saying that there is enough of a revelation of God in creation that nobody can claim ignorance of God as an excuse for disobedience. Our problem is not ignorance but rebellion. We see in the creation something of the nature of the God we must worship, but we turn from *that* God and worship instead the inert gods we fashion with our own hands. We exchange a living relationship for the dead forms of idolatrous religion. This kind of religion cannot give life, it cannot exalt us; it can only carry us down deeper into the darkening of our mind, into superstition, until we are as spiritual dead as the idols that we worship. Paul wants an illustration that will really grab the attention of his readers and present in a graphic way what it means to rebel against the Creator, whose nature and whose ways are in some measure discernable by all directly from the creation. So he says: consider human sexuality. There’s a created purpose for *that* which is evident from the complementary nature of the male and female sexual organs. In the God-appointed context of marriage and family life, sexual activity is life-giving and life-sustaining. But homosexuality rebels against that direction, replacing the Creator’s judgment about what is good, with our human judgment, defying those sexual roles that we can read right out of the creation. Such a fateful move cannot lead us upward to life, rather it commits us to a downward course that spirals away into death

(Read Richard Hay’s very helpful exegesis of this key passage in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, pp. 383-389).

Paul does not back up the claim he makes, as we might want him to, that homosexual practice is death-dealing rather than life-giving. In Paul’s culture it was understood; in our culture we tend to assume that any fulfillment of our sexual desires is life-affirming, while any denial of them means we might as well be dead! But is this true? I don’t believe it’s true that heterosexuals flourish when they indulge their sexual desires outside of the context God intended for them in marriage, nor does the society flourish which is so permissive as to let them. In the 1930s, British anthropologist J.D. Unwin studied 86 cultures that stretched across 5,000 years. He found, without exception, when they restricted sex to marriage, they thrived. Alternatively he found that not one culture survived more than three generations after turning sexually permissive. (Paul Stand “Cause and Effect: the benefits of traditional marriage.” The Christian Broadcasting Network). When you think that permissiveness really took hold in our culture in the 60s and that a generation is approximately 20 years, then our culture is due to crash and burn around the year 2020.

The research on cultures that embrace homosexuality is likewise very discouraging. Despite the recent spate of homosexuals rushing to the altar, and despite a heterosexual divorce rate that stands at over 50%, a number of studies over the past two decades suggest that homosexual relationships, especially among males, are still much more prone than heterosexual ones to infidelity and short tenure. According to one study, 79% of so-called monogamous gays had been unfaithful to their primary partner. That’s as compared to 19% of lesbians, and 10% of married heterosexuals. The percent of male homosexuals living in monogamous relationships just for the preceding year was only between 10 and 25%, whereas 80% of the total male population was monogamous over the same 12 month period. In a study of some 2500 gay men, average age 38, 57% had had more than 30 male sexual partners, and 35% had had more than 100. Again, that

is greatly in advance of their heterosexual counterparts. (This research is quoted in Robert Gagnon’s book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp 452-460).

The point is, that if stable marriage-type relationships help a civilization to stay alive, and promiscuity causes societies to die, then homosexual relationships are arrayed on the side of death rather than of life. The homosexual population also experiences a life expectancy twenty five to thirty years less than the population as a whole. Particular problems, apart from AIDS, include liver disease, bowel disease, rectal cancer and suicide (Gagnon, pp 474-476). Paul’s Jewish audience had a cultural memory of the way that the sexually promiscuous Canaanite civilization had dissolved before their eyes. They knew the ancient legends about the dramatic demise of Sodom and Gomorrah. They saw all around them the decayed and decaying morality and society of Rome. They did not need to be convinced that honouring God’s intended use for our sexuality led to life, while violating this intent led to death. It seems that empirical evidence in our own day is supporting the same conclusion.

But it’s hard for us moderns to look at this question in relation to the life and death of civilizations. That’s the way the Bible looks at it, but we moderns are so concerned with the individual! What will it mean to the homosexual *person* to be told they must go through life with a part of themselves unfulfilled? What’s more, stopping the practice does not mean stopping the desire, and in the Bible’s view, that desire, while not actual sin, can never be encouraged or approved. There’s nothing in the Bible that comes close to encouragement for gay pride, so does holding this view condemn those with a homosexual orientation to a life of self-loathing – a life of gay shame? These questions begin to hint at the pastoral dimensions of the gay challenge to the church. What good news have we for the homosexual?

Well first of all we have the same good news that goes out to each and every sinner redeemed by grace: that we are separated from our sin by the love of God made effective for us in the work

of Christ on the cross. Sin used to define us, but now our standing in Christ defines us. This is true liberty from the idolatry of sex which is so prevalent in our culture. Our culture says you must be a virile heterosexual man, or a sensuous heterosexual woman or a hot gay man, built and beautiful, or an alluring lesbian, strong, sweet and saucy. “Gay pride” and churches that dub themselves “affirming congregations” buy right into that, because your sexuality is always an issue. People look for you, arm in arm with your gay partner, so they can make a point of showing just how tolerant they are and how up to date. Maybe you’ll get put on a committee and asked to speak from “the queer perspective.” Most gay people I know don’t want to be a poster-boy for gay rights, they just want to be left in peace. In the absence of a life-partner, what they need are friends, both male and female – people who are willing to see beyond the labels and the stereotypes and appreciate the person that they are. Churches like ours have good news for gay people because we can say: you know what? – you are a whole lot more than just your sexuality.

In the second place Christianity unlike the Judaism from which it sprang is not inseparably tied to marriage and procreation. In Judaism there is only one status approved by God – that of being married with children. Consider then how revolutionary it must have been when Christians began to worship a man who, by all accounts was single and childless. ...How revolutionary that most of the New Testament should be written by a man who reflects on his singleness saying: “I wish all of you were like I am” (I Corinthians 7: 7-8). The Christian church has always had a place and a vocation for single people. There is nothing like finding a vocation, to fill up whatever is left unfulfilled by the lack of a sexual partner. Again my experience of gay people in the church is that they make a tremendous contribution: if you want someone who can see all sides of an issue, who can intuit around a room in a meeting what other people are thinking and feeling, then ask the gay person. If you want someone who is compassionate, who can deliver pastoral care out of the depths of the experience of

suffering and struggle, then ask the gay person. If you want someone who is willing to serve in the church, quietly and in all sorts of practical, socially-relevant ways, then ask the gay person. The church gives to gay people the opportunity to be something so much more than a *sexually gratified* person. It offers them the opportunity to be a *sanctified* person, a person who shows the rest of us, through the pain of being bedeviled and demonized, what it can look like to be a saint.

This sermon is entitled “the gay challenge to the church,” but actually I think gay people challenge the church in three ways: firstly, they challenge us to make up our minds about homosexuality and the Bible, secondly as a group with particular spiritual needs they challenge us to think about what ministry – what pastoral care – to homosexual people might look like, and thirdly, since many so abundantly prove to us that they are indeed numbered among the saints and belong here in the house of God, they challenge us to greater obedience in submitting to Christ, whatever unruly desires *we* may have, sexual or otherwise.

Now unto him who loved us and who washed us from each spot and stain, be honour and glory in the church, both now and forever.