

**Christ in Community: Human Sexuality and Gender**  
**Romans 5:1-11**  
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**March 19, 2017**

I believe that one of the core questions of our denomination today of declining and aging membership is how can we create space and openness for all people both in our denomination and in our church? We struggle with providing meaningful worship experiences for new people. We struggle with our desire to blame those who aren't here as being not religious enough or too involved in other activities rather than trying to find out what would help them where they are. This is not just a problem those of us in this room have, it is a problem the church in the US has, especially the mainline church.

One of the central struggles of our church in this century has been about how we fulfill our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world especially as that call relates to LGBTQi people; the other has been about abortion. Both sexual issues. Why have those been the most divisive issues? Why haven't we battled over war, hunger, poor education, or human trafficking with the same ferocity?

Today, because of its deep divisions over this issue the United Methodist Church has a commission called "A Way Forward" formed by the 2016 General Conference to study the issue of unity and human sexuality. Its mission is (in part):

The Commission will bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church, with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions.... The matters of human

sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition. The work is meant to inform deliberation across the whole church and to help the Council of Bishops in their service to the next General Conference in finding a way forward.<sup>1</sup>

There will be a special General Conference called by the bishops in February or March, 2019 to vote on whatever recommendations the Way Forward Commission brings to the conference. Many people believe that this will result in a change in the structure of the church, at a minimum and the breaking up of the church at the extreme end of the options. The commission is formed of 32 Methodists from 8 countries, including lay, clergy, 3 bishops as moderators and people who hold beliefs in every place on the question of sexuality. As an issue that will no doubt change our church in ways that are unexpected and not apparent at the moment, this is an important issue to discuss.

Our Christian faith is inherently public or political because it concerns how we order our lives in relation to the good of others—in relation to neighbors, strangers and enemies. Discipleship is about following Jesus, who embodies the reign of God; it is about living into God's social order "on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus's message was profoundly political. It called into question the entire order of the kingdom of Caesar. So whenever we confront such a divisive issue we need to think about what would Jesus do, examining the views we have developed over the years, whether or not those views were informed by religious beliefs or cultural norms.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward-about-us>

It is fair to say that the 2 most profound and consistent teachings found in our Bible are to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Love is the ethical basis of biblical teaching – love that is not exploitative, does not seek to dominate, is responsible, mutual and caring. Our moral position then must be to apply Jesus's love ethic to any great ethical or moral question we encounter. We can challenge young and old, gay and straight, men and women to question their behaviors in the light of love and keeping in mind the requirements of fidelity, honesty, responsibility and genuine concern for the best interests of the other and of society as a whole.

We know that the Methodist church split in 1844 over the issue of slavery. People, faithful Christians, on both sides of the issue could recite biblical texts to justify their own positions. Slavery was everywhere in the time of the writing of the New Testament yet there is no overt condemnation of it. People who wanted to justify slavery would point to that. So it is in the debate about homosexuality. Homosexuality was openly practiced in the time of Jesus -- it was often in the form of pederasty – an older and a younger man and perhaps the younger man or boy was a slave. Jesus never spoke about the practice of homosexuality. Yet we have a long Christian tradition that adamantly says it is against God's will and should be condemned. Why? There are 7 verses in the Bible that condemn some sort of homosexual behavior. There is also a celebration of heterosexuality in the Bible, but I don't think we can use that as proof that homosexual behavior is condemned. Where are we left when we apply the love test to this issue? How are we to understand our ethics in the light of seeking the best interests of others, ourselves and the God we serve? How do we love our neighbor as ourselves?

I believe God is never found in the condemnation of entire groups of people or the demonstrations of zealous rule minding we sometimes see called "true religion." Committed

Christians can disagree on the biblical teachings regarding homosexuality, that is true. But committed Christians cannot disagree on Jesus's commandment to love God and one another. Another commandment we can all agree on is "don't judge, so you won't be judged." (Matthew 7:1) I also personally believe that homosexuality is something you are born with and therefore, it is not a "learned" behavior or any more changeable than one's heterosexual orientation is.

Although it is a little tedious, I am going to list the verses for you today that deal with homosexual behavior. There are only a few. I could not do this with the scriptures dealing with love or with the scriptures dealing with money. Those are too numerous!

Many people believe that the Bible condemns homosexual behavior and many believe this profoundly, but cannot cite any verses. So here they are.

1. Genesis 19:1-29, Sodom. The sin here was gang rape of angels, not homosexuality.

Notice that there is no condemnation of the offer of Lot's 2 daughters to the mob.

There is another example of this type of behavior in the book of Judges.

2. Genesis 9:20-27, Ham. This passage describes Ham seeing his father, Noah's, nakedness and not doing the right thing. His brothers did and covered the sleeping Noah up with a cloak. This probably has more to do with Ham trying to subjugate and humiliate his father to try to gain control over him rather than actual homosexual love, but if it did involve that it would involve incest as well.

3. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. "There are only two verses in the entire Hebrew Bible that explicitly deal with homosexuality and they are both found in the book of Leviticus in a section known as the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26). When the Hebrew word

“holiness” is used, a better translation would be the word “separate.” Thus, “I, Yahweh your God, am separate (holy); therefore, you be separate (holy)” (Leviticus 19:2, trans. Miguel De La Torre). The Israelites were called to be separate from the Canaanites who previously occupied the land....Those who violated Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (specifically the latter) were to be put to death. If we were to read the Bible literally, should we put all gay men to death? But the injunction does not end with gay men: The Bible calls for the death of those committing adultery (Leviticus 20:10, NIV),<sup>2</sup> brides who on their wedding night were discovered not to be virgins (Deuteronomy 22:13-21, NRSV), disrespectful teenagers (Leviticus 20:9) and blasphemers (Leviticus 24:15, NRSV). We usually ignore passages like killing disrespectful teenagers — and we should. But why do we ignore that verse and not the two that mention homosexuality? Putting this question aside, we also need to ask if these two verses are really dealing with homosexuality. Because the word “homosexual” does not exist in the biblical Hebrew language. This passage may have more to do with the Canaanite practice of temple prostitution and that it is a sin to lie with a male temple prostitute because it would have been an act of worship in the Canaanite religion and does not promote the separation from the Canaanites the Hebrews were supposed to be practicing.

4. Deuteronomy 22:5 is a prohibition against men wearing women’s clothing and a woman wearing man’s clothing. Most biblical scholars say these passages are aimed at keeping women in their places; preserving Jewish tradition by prohibiting priests from donning female clothing as they did in other religions; and by stopping the

mixing of categories which is something the entire purity code in the Bible strives form. This prohibition has a lot to do with preserving the traditional social order. The purity codes were always against mixing categories which is why it was against the code to wear clothing with mixed fibers, something we no longer adhere to.

5. Romans 1: 26-27, being true to our nature. "For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due." (Rom 1:26-27 NKJ)

The apostle Paul is writing about idolatry. This is not a text about homosexuality but about exchanging what is natural for the unnatural. If this passage is read with a heterosexual bias, it is easy to assume that the term "unnatural" is a reference to homosexuality. But that wasn't Paul's concern. He was more concerned with those slaves who were forced into homosexual acts by their owner or younger men who were preyed upon by older men, which, as I said, was a common practice in Paul's day. When Paul mentions women abstaining from unnatural practices we again assume he was talking about homosexuality, but he might have been talking about women who refused to go along with the patriarchal order of society, we simply do not know.

6. 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, exclusion of sexual abusers. Here we come to a couple of words Paul uses to condemn homosexual practices. One of the words is used nowhere else in the Bible or Greek literature that scholars have

discovered and we do not exactly know what it means. So our translation of “Homosexual” for these words is difficult. Quoting one biblical scholar, Miguel de la Torre, “When we consider that there were more than a thousand prostitutes (male and female) working in Corinth out of the Temple of Aphrodite and that male prostitution was extensively practiced in Greece, could 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy possibly be passages referring to these male prostitutes —specifically, male prostitutes who were still boys? What these biblical passages are condemning is pedophilia and male prostitution (as opposed to female prostitution which seems to be taken for granted) not a loving relationship between men. We do a disservice to the biblical passage if we [do not understand that the historical] context in which it was written was vastly different than our own.”<sup>2</sup>

All biblical texts reflect the concerns of ancient Israelites and the first Christians. They were trying to conform their lives to experience God’s grace just as we are. But we need to understand that all scriptures do indeed reflect cultural situations we do not fully understand. We must try to understand these cultures as best we can and glean what are God’s timeless teachings from the cultural layers reflected in the texts. These are the texts used to vehemently declare that we cannot allow LGBTQi people to participate fully in the life of the church, but we fail to consider the context. While diverse viewpoints emerge when we do understand the context, it is vital to consider what the context is. That is why I love Wesley’s quadrilateral – the use of Scripture, reason, tradition and experience, all to inform our religious

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 84.

and ethical beliefs. We need to use all 4 sides of that quadrilateral to try to discern God's plan for creation or at least our little part of that creation.

Many people feel cut off from the church because of their perspective on a controversial issue. Many do not understand the biblical teachings on issues that trouble them. One pastor quoted her Old Testament professor as saying, "If you read the scriptures and are comfortable, you have misunderstood them."<sup>3</sup> I pray that the divisiveness over this issue, the exclusion of gay people will eventually give way in the church through God's grace to a recognition of God's drive for wholeness and hope in the world. I pray that the United Methodist Church will not divide, but will find a way to enlarge the already big tent in which we live.

Next week we will talk again about sexuality but using more stories and ideas for things we can do in this time of discernment and turmoil.

Paul wrote in Romans: Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Rom 5:1-2) That is my prayer for the Christian church – that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we continue to walk in faith together. Amen

Let us pray: Gracious God, help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness. Empower us to stand together, to walk

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<sup>3</sup> Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong, The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 194.

together, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect. Teach us to abide in your love. Amen.