

“Holy Unions”

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Happy Valentine’s Day!

On this Sunday after Valentine’s Day,

I want to lift up two things from the heart.

The first thing is to proclaim to a culture that still needs to hear it that this church affirms the holiness of *all* loving relationships, gay or straight, it does not matter in the least.

If you love each other and honor and respect each other, we affirm and celebrate that precious and sacred gift.

Thankfully that’s something we within these walls get to take for granted.

I am so thankful to be a part of this welcoming congregation of respect and mutual appreciation, our home base, our place of safety from which we can reach out and share with the world what we have found to be true and holy.

And the world needs us to do that, as people of faith.

Too many religious people in our community and around the country still believe the Bible condemns homosexuality.

We also have probably heard this kind of Scriptural interpretation.

It’s in the air.

And if you haven’t actually read the Bible, studied its history and its context and actually read the text, how would you know otherwise?

But that’s not what I believe, and that’s not the Bible I’ve gotten to know.

So today, I also want to lift up my conviction that the Bible itself has gotten an incredibly bad rap

in our cultural conversations about sexuality.

I want to walk us through the key passages in the Bible that gay-bashing Christians *say* condemn homosexuality, because I believe those texts have been thoroughly misread and misused.

My hope today is to liberate those texts from false and bigoted readings, to liberate you to have those conversations

with your family, your neighbors,

and to liberate a possibility that the Bible

might nourish you in your spiritual and ethical life.

After all, this is the sacred text

by which the Unitarian and Universalist ancestors of this church oriented their entire lives.

This church grew out of a religious tradition that loved the Bible and loved to wrestle freely with its meanings.

That's a tradition worth preserving.

So let's get going.

There actually aren't that many texts that come up in these debates, and I think we can get to just about all of them.

The first is the biggest: the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Can I see a show of hands—how many of you know this story?

And how many of you were taught that this was a story about homosexuality?

Actually, the scholarly consensus today is that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah isn't about homosexuality at all.

It's about hospitality and how outsiders are treated.¹

The story begins with two angels descending to earth, disguising themselves as men, and visiting the town of Sodom.

When they arrive at the town gate, they meet a man named Lot, Abraham and Sarah's nephew, who himself is more or less a newcomer to the town.

¹ Genesis 19:1–11.

Lot has no idea these guys are angels in disguise,
but he offers them a meal and a place to sleep.

This is what Genesis says happened next:

“But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom,
both young and old, all the people to the last man,
surrounded the house; and they called to Lot,
‘Where are the men who came to you tonight?
Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.’”

“Knowing them,” in this context, means “having sex with them.”

And they are not interested in consent,
as we learn when the story goes on.

Lot refuses to hand over his guests,
and the men of Sodom start to threaten him too.

After all, he’s a newcomer, an outsider, an alien.

So basically the men are demanding to gang-rape the visitors,
who, remember, are angels in disguise.

At this point, the story takes another creepy turn.

Lot tries to cut a deal with the mob.

Leave my guests alone, he says,
and I’ll send out my two virgin daughters instead.

The mob refuses and breaks down the door—
and the angels intervene to save Lot’s family and destroy the city.

That’s the story.

This is the story that too many Christians today—
by no means all, but too many—
read as an anti-gay story.

But please notice that there is nothing whatsoever here
about consensual sex, either gay or straight.

This story has nothing to do
with the kind of loving relationships that we affirm today.
Rather, it’s a story about a community ganging up
to violently assault strangers in their midst.

In the Near East, homosexual rape was a weapon of war.
Soldiers humiliated their enemies by raping them.²
This isn't about sexual preference, but violence and shaming.

You should know, also, that there is a lot of discussion of Sodom
in the other books of the Bible,
and nowhere is it claimed that homosexuality was the sin of Sodom.
The prophetic book of Ezekiel, written in the 6th century BCE,
says, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom:
she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease,
but did not aid the poor and needy.”³
In the Gospels, Jesus says Sodom and Gomorrah
were hostile to visitors—nothing at all about sexuality.⁴
So I would ask, if the Bible itself testifies
that Sodom's sin was turning its back on strangers and poor people,
who are Biblical literalists to say otherwise?
This story is not about gay sexuality at all.
It's about rape and violence and cruelty,
and to me, the fact that some Christians disagree
says way more about their own prejudice
than their interpretive skills.

Now, another tough couple of texts in the Bible
are in the book of Leviticus,
in which God gives Moses a lot of detailed instructions
about the ritual practices the people are supposed to follow.
It tells the Israelites how to make offerings,
and what kind of food is off-limits to them.
It's got rules about farming and crop rotation.
It also talks a lot about sexuality.
So here's Leviticus 18:22:
“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman;

² Jeff Miner and John Tyler Connoley, *The Children Are Free: Reexamining the Biblical Evidence on Same-Sex Relationships* (Indianapolis, IN: Jesus Metropolitan Community Church, 2002), p. 5.

³ Ezekiel 16:49.

⁴ Matthew 10:15; Luke 10:12.

it is an abomination.”

And Leviticus 20:13:

“If a man lies with a male as with a woman,
both of them have committed an abomination;
they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

Now at first this sounds straightforward, right?

Taken out of context, it *sounds* like a blanket condemnation of gay sex.

But let’s stop and analyze what’s really going on in these texts.

There are two points I want to make here.

One has to do with that famous word *abomination*.

The other has to do with

the kind of sexual practices they’re talking about.

So, first of all, I used to think *abomination*

meant something really horrible,

something any sane person would judge as wrong.

But, actually, that’s not what it means at all in the Hebrew Bible.

Actually, *abomination* in the Bible almost always means,
contrary to proper religious practice.

That isn’t the same thing as horrible or always wrong,
not by a long shot.

For example, Leviticus also says eating the meat of so-called “unclean”
animals (what today we would call “non-kosher”) is an abomination.⁵

That means it’s against Israelite ritual practice,
not that it’s evil or inherently wrong.

It’s just something the Israelites aren’t supposed to do.

Likewise, the historical books of the Bible label some of the religious
practices of other peoples as abominations, like building idols.

Again, this isn’t evil;

it’s just something the Israelites aren’t supposed to do.

So, OK, *abomination* doesn’t mean morally wrong or evil.

⁵ Leviticus 20:25.

Second, and this is even more important, most liberal Biblical scholars today believe that the sexual practices Leviticus is talking about are very specific kinds of homosexual behavior that have almost nothing to do with gay relationships today. The book of Leviticus is all about keeping the Israelites from acting like their old neighbors in Egypt and their new neighbors in Canaan. And what was going on in Egypt and Canaan was ritual prostitution in the temples. Some men, as well as women, served as temple prostitutes in rituals that were supposed to support fertility and personal immortality. As far as we know, that is the kind of sex Leviticus is talking about.

And, as I said, that really has nothing to do with the kind of sexual relationships we have today. When we look at the cultural context, as best we understand it, Leviticus says only that it's against the Israelite religion for an Israelite man to have sex with a temple prostitute. It does *not* say *all* sex between two men is bad.

Moving into the Christian Scriptures, one of the letters of Paul mentions male homosexuality in a negative light, but again we're pretty sure it has to do with temple prostitution rather than homosexuality in general.⁶

And that is pretty much it for the whole Bible. There's hardly any mention in the Bible of sex or romantic relationships between women, with the possible exception of Ruth and Naomi, which is a lovely and very interesting story we'll look at another day.

⁶ Romans 1:21–28. See Miner and Connoley, pp. 12–16.

Aside from the passages we've already dealt with,
there's really no place else in the Bible
that criticizes or judges male homosexual behavior at all.
So what we've got so far is—*nothing*.
And that's the good news!

The next big question is, does the Bible have anything positive to say
about gay people? And here the answer is, yes—it absolutely does!
There are at least two stories about men who love men in the Bible,
and rather famous stories at that.

Do you remember David?

David was the shepherd boy in the Hebrew Bible who killed Goliath
He was also deeply in love with Jonathan, the son of King Saul.

They love each other at first sight;
they are heartbroken when politics force them to separate.

When Jonathan is killed in battle,

David weeps and sings to him,
“greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.”⁷

David, who went on to become
the most famous of all the kings of Israel,
was in love with a man,
openly in love,
openly grieving at his death.

The second story is not quite so obvious,
but when you take a look it's quite wonderful.
This is the story from the Gospel of Matthew
that we heard in the reading today,
the story of Jesus healing the servant of the centurion.
It begins with a Roman centurion, a military officer,
approaching Jesus and saying,

⁷ 2 Samuel 1:26.

‘Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed,
in terrible distress.’

The key word here is *servant*.

The word in the original Greek is *pais*.

This is a word that can mean a few different things.

It *could* mean “son” or “boy,” or it could also mean “servant.”

We can be pretty sure the centurion is talking about his servant,
not his son, because this story is told in the Gospel of Luke as well,
and Luke’s version has the centurion using a Greek phrase that means
“honored slave.”

So the person who’s sick is the servant or the slave of the centurion,
and an *honored* servant at that.

Now, that word *pais* also has a third meaning.

In the Greco-Roman cultural context,
if you were a man who wanted a love relationship with another man,
it was accepted that you could buy a servant or slave to be your lover.
And the word for that person was *pais*—
“a servant who is his master’s male lover.”

Put this together with the fact that this is the only story in the Gospels
of someone asking for healing for a servant, a social inferior,
and it begins to seem very likely that the centurion’s servant
was not an ordinary household servant, but his lover,⁸
someone he cared for deeply enough
to run out into the street in front of everybody
and beg Jesus to heal him—
a Roman military commander,
one of the most powerful people in the town,
begging this poor Jewish guy, not even a Roman citizen,
to heal his lover.

And what does Jesus say?

He says simply, ‘I will come and cure him.’

⁸ Miner and Connoley, pp. 47–49.

No hesitation, no need to think about it—simply, ‘I will cure him.’
In fact he praises the centurion for having so much faith in him.
He says,

‘Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.
I tell you, many will come from east and west
and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob
in the kingdom of heaven...’

Jesus is saying there is a place in the kingdom of heaven,
in the company of the children of Israel,
for this Roman military officer,
this man who trusted him to heal his lover.

And [Matthew tells us] to the centurion Jesus said,
‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’
And the servant was healed in that hour.

And again I ask you:
If Jesus chose to heal a gay man’s lover
and to hold that man up as an example of faith,
who is any Christian to say otherwise?

Now we here don’t need to be told
that every person’s love is precious.
This is something we know very deeply.
But I hope we *can* leave here with a deeper respect for the Bible,
this text that has been sacred to so many for so long.
If we come to it with an open mind and heart,
it can be one of our closest allies and wisest teachers.
It can connect us to our brothers and sisters
in other religious traditions—
it can help us talk to them and share our light with them.
And that is just what we can do—
that’s what our world is calling us to do in *our* time.

I'll give the last word to the Gospel of Matthew:

You are the light of the world....

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand,

and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine....

May it be so.

Amen and blessed be.