

The Bible and Homosexuality: Romans 1:26-17

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First UMC Baraboo

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I'm going to be both teacher and preacher today. I'm going to teach about the meaning of Romans 1:26-27 (one of the key texts about homosexuality in the Bible). Then I'm going to preach about what the debate about homosexuality means in practice for the life of our church.

It was Paul who wrote the letter to the Romans. He was an observant Jew and was converted in a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ. Remember Christianity was at the start a small sub set of the Jewish community. The Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah became known as Christians. Those who believed the Messiah is yet to come were (and are) Jews. Gradually, Christianity moved outside the circle of Judaism to become a world wide faith and Paul was key in that transformation. For him, Jesus fulfilled the Jewish faith. In his mind, he remained a faithful Jew throughout his life.

Paul's life was dedicated to spreading the gospel, first to Jews and then to the gentile or "pagan" world. "Pagan" means someone who lives in the countryside, but in the Bible "pagan" came to mean those outside the covenant God made at Mt. Sinai. In Paul's time, Jews defined themselves in contrast to pagans. Jews were what pagans were not. Throughout their history, Jews engaged in a constant struggle to be true to the LORD alone and resist the temptation to love anything other than God, resisting the temptation to worship the gods of the pagans, to worship idols.

For Paul, "pagan" was also synonymous with people of the Greek culture living in the town and cities where his missionary travels took him. The Greeks had sexual practices than the Jews. For instance, there was a temple worship that included men having sex with temple prostitutes. In the Greek culture it was consider "normal" for older men to have a mentor relationship with a young man who was often a slave. These relationships had a sexual component. The older men stayed married and they had children and they also had these mentorships.

All this is important in understanding the meaning of Romans 1:26-27. I'm going to read it again: "That's why God abandoned them to degrading lust. Their females traded natural sexual relationship for unnatural sexual relations. Also, in the same way, the males traded natural sexual relations with females, and burned with lust for each other. Males performed shameful actions with males, and they were paid back with the penalty they deserved for their mistake in their own bodies." It sounds like a pretty clear condemnation of homosexual acts by both women and men. But to understand this passage we need to back to the idea of idolatry (worshipping pagan gods).

Idolatry was a huge issue for Jews. The first and second commandments – “you shall have no other gods before me” and “you shall not make for yourself an idol” pointed to the importance of worshipping God alone. When people fail to worship the creator – when people worship other things or other gods, when they practice idolatry, there’s disastrous consequences. Romans chapter 1 is about idolatry. Paul says terrible things happen when we don’t put God first. People know what they should do, they know what is right, but they don’t do it. People should be able to see evidence of God in the natural world (19-21) but they ignored it. Romans 1:20-23 “Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – God’s eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made.” So humans are without excuse. They should know God but they don’t honor God as God, or thank God. Instead their reasoning becomes pointless and their foolish hearts were darkened. While they were claiming to be wise, they made fools of themselves. Here Paul is referring to the story of Adam and Eve – how sin arises when they failed to keep God at the center. Paul says Romans 1:24 “So God gave them up meaning God let them suffer the consequences of their sin, including homosexuality.

For Paul, homosexuality is an example of what happens when people love something other than God. There’s a whole list of other things in Romans 1 that are a result of idolatry too: gossip, envy, murder, craftiness, strife, boasting and rebellion toward parents! But those aren’t our focus today. So what do we make of this passage? To those who say Romans 1:26-27 clearly condemns homosexuality, and therefore so should we, I would say:

#1 N.T. Wright, a Biblical commentator who wrote the introduction to Romans in the Interpreter’s Bible says Paul is making a cultural argument, not an individualistic one. Paul is bringing judgment on the pagan world for their idolatry, as seen in a variety of behaviors. Homosexuality is one of them but not the only one. Idolatry is the main focus here, not human sexuality.

#2 Paul is talking about homosexual acts not homosexual people. Paul is reacting to what he saw as “unnatural” behavior by heterosexuals (these relationships between men I talked about earlier). Paul had no access to modern science. Paul had no way of knowing, as we do today, about the complex interplay between genetics, hormones and environment that make up sexual orientation (the romantic attraction we feel for persons, either of the opposite gender or the same gender).

#3 Paul could not have known about the ground breaking work done in the field of human sexuality in the last 70 years. The American researcher Albert Kinsey for instance, who wrote “Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects.” There is so much

about human sexuality that is explained by the word “spectrum” or “continuum” that Paul could have known nothing about.

#4 Paul does not condemn loving, committed, mutually respectful same sex relationships. These too were not part of his experience.

#5 as we interpret Romans 1:26-27 its important to remember that proponents of slavery used statements from the Bible – including the writings of Paul – to condone slavery. Today we universally agree slavery is immoral and unacceptable. I believe in time we will see the relatively few statements in the Bible condemning homosexuality in a similar way: as a product of a culture and time that is not our own.

Now, to begin to connect Paul’s writings to what all this means for us, let me say I’m not “anti-Paul.” He was a complex figure who wrote one of the most eloquent passages affirming equality in Christ in the Bible: Galatians 3:28 “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” And he wrote 1 Corinthians 6:20. It’s there on the cover of your bulletin. Paul was wrong about homosexuality but he was right in saying bodies matter. He affirmed the resurrection of the body in 1 Corinthians 15. 1 Corinthians 6:20 affirms that our love for God can’t be separated from our embodied human existence. Contained within Paul’s letters is the idea of our bodies as a source of blessing. That blessing connects with our mission in the world today.

You have an insert today in your bulletin which talks about the current debate over homosexuality in our denomination. You’ll see mention of a special General Conference planned in 2019 for UMC to resolve it’s difference over human sexuality. In that insert you’ll see my views about this issue – my support of the Reconciling Ministries Team and in light of the Book of Discipline barring pastors from doing same sex weddings, you’ll see my decision to refer any requests for same sex weddings to other local clergy, as our entire denomination comes to an understanding of how we’ll deal with this and related issues. I commend a video by Tom Berlin about how this debate is playing out in our denomination. You can find the link on our web site under worship. At the end of his video he talks about the need to resolve this issue for the sake of the mission of the UMC: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. There are some who say our disagreements on human sexuality hinder our mission work; that those who defy church law and do same sex marriages are driving people out of the UMC. Other say there is nothing more important mission work than ending discriminatory language in the Book of Discipline regarding LGBTQ persons .

Our mission as a church is “Helping People ‘Say Yes’ to God.” When people help people ‘say yes’ to God, we help them do two things. Experience the blessings of God and pass them on to others. We are blessed to be a blessing. In the children’s story, I told about the blessing God pronounced at creation. It was very good. You are

good. Our bodies are good, as well as our minds, our emotions, our souls . The social Creed of the United Methodist Church affirms the goodness of creation. Human sexuality is part of that goodness. We as a church are here to let others know they are blessed, and experience that blessing in worship and devotion (in public and private way). And we give people the chance to bless others. Paige Gocekermann today will tell us about one way we can bless others. As a church and as individuals our purpose is to bless others, each in our own way, large or small.

There are LGBTQ people who the UM church has baptized, has nurtured in the faith in youth group and Confirmation; yet we tell them if God calls them to ministry they can't serve. And we tell them if they find the love of their lives, they can't have their relationship blessed here. That's wrong. These are things that can be changed only at General Conference.

But there are choices we as a church make, based on our understanding of where God is calling us. Are we called as a church to make sure our LGBTQ members, friends and people in the community know they are blessed by God too? If we do, then we need to be intentional and public about that. That's what the Reconciling Ministries team is asking us to consider. Whether we take on this outreach, this mission in a public and intentional way, will be your decision as a church. It's not up to me; the church belongs to the laity. You know where I stand on these issues. I see this both as a justice issue and as a pastoral issue. You as a church need to search your hearts and ask 'is this a passion for you too? Does your heart break for those who have been judged by the church as unworthy because of their sexual orientation? Do you yearn to bless them?'

In the end, this debate about human sexuality is about mission. Together we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Paul, for his passion at spreading the gospel to people who were different from himself. He preached to Jew and Gentiles. If he hadn't done that, if Christianity had remained a sub set of Judaism, we couldn't be here today. He did things that made him uncomfortable, things that were risky, bold, in order to let the 'pagans' know God wanted to bless them too. We are the ones who now get to carry on in Paul's tradition. How is Paul's passion reflected in our own? As we 'help people 'say yes' to God' – who are the ones we are reaching out to? Who are the ones we are called to tell the good news: the blessing of God, Creator Redeemer and Sustainer, is upon them too? I invite you to ponder these questions, to listen for what the Spirit is saying and then be ready to respond.

Thanks be to God who gives them the victory through our LORD Jesus Christ. Amen.