

NOT AN ISSUE

Acts 16: 9 – 15

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
May 26, 2019 – 6th Sunday of Easter / Pride Sunday

I.

This coming Saturday, members of this congregation will be marching in the Sonoma County Pride Parade.

We will join members of at least two other United Church of Christ congregations.

We will be people of a variety of ages – gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, transgender, asexual, gender queer, questioning.

While marching, we will be singing This Little Light of Mine and We Are Marching in the Light of God.

As Christians, we will be showing our pride not in spite of our faith, but as an expression of it.

If you can't be there in body, I hope you'll join us in spirit.

In the Book of Acts we learn that from the beginning, the Christian church is in the business of crossing established barriers.

The passage we heard today from the Book of Acts is the story of one such crossing. The apostle Paul was in the town of Troas in Asia Minor on the west coast of what is now the country of Turkey.

Paul and his companions were frustrated because no one there seemed to be responding to the good news they were sharing.

In the midst of his discouragement, Paul had a vision. At night.

In the vision, a figure appeared and said, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

You need to know that Macedonia is what we would call Greece today.

And Greece is in Europe, on a different continent than Turkey.

In other words, this is the story of the early church crossing an intercontinental boundary for the first time.

Not only that, this is the story of the first person in Europe to respond to the Christian gospel.

And that first person is a woman named Lydia, the first European Christian.

She is the head of her household, an entrepreneur dealing in purple cloth.

Resisting the prevailing religion of Roman culture, she became a benefactor of the struggling early church.

Crossing barriers. Bringing good news. Sharing the love. That is the church at its best.

On this Pride Sunday, want to cross a barrier, bring good news, and share the love by talking about homosexuality.

I am here to proclaim that *homosexuality*, with which certain segments of our society and world have been obsessed in recent decades, is not an issue any longer.

And I would like to affirm in three ways how we might say that homosexuality is not an issue.

II.

First, on this Pride Sunday, we affirm nothing less than the full, God-given humanity of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

This is what we will be communicating with our massive rainbow flag, that God is love and God created us to love who we love.

In 1999, this congregation joined a growing number of United Church of Christ congregations who came out of the closet of heterosexist doctrine to proclaim that we are not only Open to but Affirming of *all* people regardless of sexual orientation.

We have endeavored to leave our bigotry behind, and to move on to the weightier matters to which we are being summoned.

Homosexuality is, in this first important sense, not an issue.

III.

The second reason that homosexuality is not an issue, is that it is not an issue in the Bible.

This may come as a surprise to some of you.

I once assumed that the Bible is rife with anti-gay rhetoric.

But then I *read* the Bible.

And I found out that there is nothing in the Bible to justify prejudice against gay, lesbian, or bisexual people.

The Rev. Dr. Peter J. Gomes was my preaching professor while in seminary at Harvard Divinity School.

Dr. Gomes, who died in 2011, was hard to categorize.

An African-American Baptist from Plymouth, Massachusetts, he loved everything British, including the Church of England, and on occasion referred to himself as an "Afro-Saxon."

A registered Republican and social conservative, Gomes prayed at Ronald Reagan's second inaugural and preached for George H.W. Bush at his.

Then in 1991, while serving as the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals, he came out to the Harvard community in response to a spate of gay bashing on campus.

Gomes tells the full story in "The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart."

In a chapter called "The Bible and Homosexuality," Gomes writes:

"No credible case against homosexuality or homosexuals can be made from the Bible unless one chooses to read scripture in a way that simply sustains existing prejudice."

Gomes teaches that the term "homosexual" is an invention of the late 19th century.

The word first appeared in an *English* translation of the Bible in 1946.

It was an inaccurate and prejudiced translation of a Greek word I'll mention later.

The people who wrote and compiled the Bible, writing from within their own cultural contexts, had no concept of sexual orientation per se.

In a word, homosexuality is not an issue in the Bible because it's not in the Bible.

"Hold on," some of you would say. "Aren't there a whole bunch of places in the Bible that say it is wrong for men to be sexual with men and women to be sexual with women?"

And I would respond to you, saying, "No, there are not."

As Gomes points out, the loud fuss made by those who use the Bible to justify their prejudice gives the impression that the Bible is teeming with anti-gay references.

But there are actually only seven passages "to which people appeal in seeking the Bible's teaching on homosexuality," four in the Old Testament and three in the New.

Because there are so few, I can take a little time to share brief insights into each of them.

Many of you have heard the "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" argument referring to Genesis 2.

Peter Gomes responds in this way: "The authors of Genesis were intent upon answering the question, 'Where do we come from?' Then, as now, the only plausible answer is from the union of a man and a woman."

We could take issue with Gomes to point out that, thanks to modern procedures, a man's role in that "union" can be quite limited indeed.

Gomes concludes: "The creation story is the basis and not the end of human diversity, and thus to regard it as excluding everything it does not mention is to place too great a burden on the text and its writers, and too little responsibility upon the intelligence of the readers, and upon the varieties of human experience."

Second, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.

Two strangers - the text calls them "angels," - came to the city of Sodom, to the nephew of Abraham, called Lot.

When some men of Sodom find out about the strangers, they show up at Lot's door and tell him he'd better send out the strangers so that they may know them.

That's "know" in the biblical sense, in case you missed it.

As Gomes points out, "the conventional knowledge is that the city of Sodom was destroyed because its inhabitants practiced homosexuality."

In fact, the heterosexual men of Sodom were practicing an ancient and heinous form of warfare whereby a victor would humiliate a defeated soldier by raping him in public.

Thus, the sin of Sodom was the violation of the laws of hospitality toward these strangers, not homosexuality.

This is Jesus' interpretation of Sodom when, in Matthew chapter 10, he tells his disciples to shake the dust off their feet when they are denied hospitality.

"David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba does not make all heterosexual expressions sinful," so let us stop making the same mistake with the story of Sodom.

Next are two verses in the Book of Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13) which state that it is an abomination for a male "to lie with a male as with a female."

(A lesbian friend of mine once said, "I guess the Levites were okay with lesbians.")

When reading the Holiness Code of Leviticus, we need to remember that ancient Israel was a small and vulnerable society, threatened by pressures of acculturation.

To survive, Israel adopted formal standards of behavior to differentiate from the nations sharing its geo-political neighborhood.

That was fine and good for devout Levites living 2500 years ago, but virtually no one today lives by the letter of these laws which forbid cattle inbreeding, sowing fields with two kinds of seed, and wearing garments of two kinds of materials.

No round haircuts, no tattoos, no touching a menstruating woman, no eating pork or shellfish.

And the punishment in most cases of violating these laws: death.

Theologically, there is no reason Christians should follow these laws.

Peter Gomes asks, "To what extent can Christians be said to be bound by the Holiness Code when even Saint Paul, himself a Jew and an heir of this very code, says that the Gentiles, that is, the non-Jewish Christians, have the gift of the Holy Spirit without the necessity of the Law of Israel?"

And, with that, we've covered the passages in the Old Testament that are used to sustain a prejudicial belief about homosexuality.

Turning to the New Testament, we find three passages, four verses altogether.

IV.

In the first chapter of Romans, verses 26 and 27, Paul writes about the fallen nature of humankind, saying that "women exchanged natural relations for unnatural," and likewise men.

Peter Gomes observes that Paul “does not [here] describe the conduct of homosexuals, but rather of heterosexuals who performed homosexual acts.” As Gomes writes, “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.”

Finally, both First Corinthians 6:9 and First Timothy 1:10 include the Greek word “arseno-koi-tai” in a list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God because they are lawless and disobedient.

The term refers to one who uses their sexual behavior to exploit another person. Paul may be responding to the common practice in Rome of “an adult male exploiting for sexual purposes a younger male.”

It in no way refers to homosexuality, which we understand to mean a sexual *orientation*, like heterosexuality.

Sexuality is part of what it means to be human.

We must affirm that a variety of orientations are equally capable of mutuality, respect, and love.

That’s it. We’ve covered the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments.

Notice Jesus says not a word.

The greatest argument is an argument from silence.

When Jesus speaks, he speaks of justice for the oppressed, healing of the sick, forgiveness of debts

Why is our society ignoring the poor and obsessing about pelvic issues?

I hope you will join me in affirming that there is no precedent in the Christian scriptures to justify prejudice toward gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

Homosexuality is, in this second sense, not an issue.

It is not an issue for the Bible, and therefore not an issue for those of us who stake our lives upon the biblical narrative.

Divorce is a bigger issue for the Bible, but we don’t hold out a similar prejudice against divorced people, thank God.

V.

Finally, a story. While in studying in Chicago, I was in a course called Preaching as Transformation.

We were learning to train our ears to hear voices in our congregations that are not usually heard.

Our professor, a Presbyterian from Georgia, told the story about what he called “a radicalizing moment” in his life.

A radicalizing moment is a moment that changes everything.

A series of conversations about the "issue of homosexuality" were taking place on the campus of the seminary where he taught.

During one of the conversations, a gay student announced he couldn't participate in these conversations any longer.

"Why is that?" asked the faculty member mediating the discussion.

"Because I am not an 'issue,' I am a person."

That student spoke a bold truth that day that I hope we can hear this morning.

Homosexuality is not an issue we can hold at arms length.

Our struggle is the struggle for the full humanity of people created in God's image.

This is a struggle that we Christians need to make into a way of life.

Peter Gomes calls homophobia "the last prejudice," but I disagree with him there.

We live in a time of renewed fear and prejudice: fear of the immigrant, of the Muslim, of the mentally ill; prejudice against women, against Jews, against the poor.

And these are not issues either.

These are people, God's people, deserving of mutuality, love, and respect.

In this moment, it is as if a figure is standing, arms wide open, on the other side of a roiling sea, saying to the church "Come over and help us."

By God's grace, that is what the church will do, because that is who we are, who we were created to be. Amen.