

8-7-2022 Sermon "Unclobbering the New Testament Passages"

Do you wonder, as I always have, what Jesus was writing on the ground in this story?

The story never shares the content.

I wonder, was he writing a to-do list, or a shopping list?

Or, since it says that he remained in the Temple teaching, might he have been writing a lesson plan?

Or perhaps, like us, he was preparing to bless the backpacks of his disciples.

Maybe, it was just idle doodling in the dirt while he listened to the legal experts and Pharisees once again try to trap him with some question on the law.

Maybe he was thinking that they were misquoting the law from Leviticus 20 that actually said, "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife...**both** the adulterer and the adultress are to be put to death," (Lev. 20:10, NIV)

and wondering why they didn't bring the guilty **man** before him as well.

Or maybe he was thinking that they obviously didn't listen to him when he said on another occasion, "Do not judge and you will not be judged.

Do not condemn and you will not be condemned." (Lk 6:37, NIV).

We don't know what he was writing, but we do know that he came up with a pretty darned effective and pithy one-liner in the process: "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone."

Yahtzee! What a line! And following it, Jesus returns to writing in the dirt, while the legal experts and Pharisees slowly drift away, tails between their legs, leaving only Jesus and the woman.

When all have gone Jesus said to her, "Where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?" to which she replied, "No one, sir."

And Jesus concludes the conversation saying, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore."

"Neither do I condemn you," he proclaims.

Jesus doesn't condemn us. In fact, John 3:16 and 17, which should always be read together, says,

*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. **17** God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (Jn 3:16-17, CEB).*

So, if Jesus didn't come to judge us, and the church is supposed to be the **body** of Christ in the world, why does the church seem so insistent on judging others?

Hmmmm. That's a **rhetorical** question for you to think about - no response needed.

We are in week three of our five-week series on "The Bible, Sexuality, and the United Methodist Church."

Let's recap what we've talked about so far:

In week one I shared with you the idea that most people view or interpret the Bible in one of 3 ways:

1) Literally and with authority - i.e. "the Bible says it, I believe it"

2) Seriously but not literally and with authority - which is how United Methodist doctrine addresses scripture, and

3) Without authority of any kind, it's just a book

We talked about how we view some passages as *prescriptive*, meaning they describe God's will for all people for all time, or as *descriptive*, meaning they describe something in a particular situation or context for that time but does not describe God's will for all people for all time, and looked at a couple of examples.

We talked scripture as "inspired by God," and that that does not mean dictated by God, but rather that God breathed life into the writing and continues to breathe life into our reading and interpretation of scripture, introducing as well the doctrine of *progressive revelation*, which tells us, even **assures** us, that God is not done speaking to us.

We talked about John Wesley's approach to scripture, Wesley's Quadrilateral, which says that while Scripture is

primary, we best interpret scripture through the lenses of tradition, reason, and experience.

And finally in week one I introduced you to the term “clobber passages” for the six verses of scripture, out of over 31,000 in all of the Bible, that purport to condemn homosexuality.

Last week, Lucy took on the Old Testament clobber passages, particularly the one from Genesis that she suggested be renamed the story of “Lot’s Extravagant Generosity,” but that’s better known as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

She pointed out that this passage is not about homosexuality at all, but is about violence, rape, masculine humiliation and a complete abandonment by the men of this town of God’s call to be hospitable and welcoming to the stranger, showing that while various passages of scripture proclaim different things as being

the sin of Sodom, **none** of them say it was homosexuality.

She shared that the idea of heterosexuality and homosexuality as sexual orientations, first proposed in the late 19th century, was foreign to the biblical authors, and that in that culture the point of sexual relations was for procreation, period.

Even sex for pleasure was secondary to the need to make babies both to support families and to grow this **tribe** of Israelites into the **nation** that God had promised Abram. Any sexual act that wasn't for the primary purpose of procreation, any "wasting of seed" as it was seen, was *toevah*, or an abomination.

Lucy also shared how that word, *toevah*, found in the Holiness Code in the Book of Leviticus, did not have the

same meaning then as the word used in English translations, *abomination*.

While our understanding of abomination carries with it images of vile or immoral behavior, even sin, the meaning of the Hebrew word *toevah* was simply crossing a cultural boundary created in order to keep the people of Israel separate, different from the many pagan cultures that surrounded them.

So this week, we move to the three “clobber passages” found in the New Testament, making a one thousand year leap from the culture of the ancient Israelites to the Greco-Roman world of the first century.

But before we do that let’s dig a little more deeply into something Lucy spoke on last week about the presence of the word “homosexual” in the Bible.

As we've said, the word "homosexual" first appeared in scripture in 1946, in a new translation of the Revised Standard Version (the RSV) that came out that year. In that work, the translation committee changed the Greek word "*arsenokoitai*," previously translated as "male prostitutes," "sodomites," or others, to "homosexual."

I provided our Monday evening study group a copy of an article about how that came about, and how, when that translation decision was challenged by a seminary student, the committee admitted their mistake and rescinded their decision, stating that the original text should **not** have been rendered as "homosexual."

Unfortunately, the committee's contract with the publisher allowed no changes for at least ten years.

In that intervening 10 years, other translations, including the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New International Version (NIV) and the Living Bible were

created, using this now rescinded RSV translation as their basis, so the inaccurate translation became even more widespread.

Before it was retracted, the first place the word “homosexual” was was in 1 Corinthians 6:9. Here’s how that passage reads in full in the New American Standard Bible.

*...do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, **10** nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor those habitually drunk, nor verbal abusers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10, NASB)*

Bear with me while we dig into the etymological weeds. There are two Greek words at issue here.

The first is the word *malakoi*, commonly translated into English as “male prostitute,” but in the Greek **usually** meant “soft,” or sometimes “effeminate.”

Temple prostitution, both male and female, was common in the ancient Greco-Roman pagan world, as archaeologists have documented.

At the same time, it was also not uncommon for some powerful adult males to take on young, often pre-pubescent boys as sexual partners, or more correctly, as sex slaves, a practice known as *pederasty*, which, until the RSV translation came along in 1946, was another common English word used to translate *malakoi*.

Pederasty and homosexuality are two very different and unrelated things.

The second word at issue here is *arsenokoitai*, which has historically been translated to English as “sodomite.”

However, this is a compound word in Greek, from *arsen*, which means "male," and *koitai*, which means "bed," and is used only one other time in scripture, in the clobber passage in 1 Timothy that we'll examine in a moment. It is found in no other places outside of scripture either until **much later**.

Scholars believe this word was either made up by Paul, or was perhaps a slang term in use at the time that he incorporated.

Note that the word has no linguistic connection to the city of Sodom, even though it was often translated into English as "sodomite."

Clearly, translators have, over the years, had a very difficult time dealing with these two words.

Knowing that "context is everything," what is the larger context in which Paul is writing?

What's the bigger point he wants to make?

This letter to the church at Corinth is seeking to quell disputes between factions in this specific congregation.

As Colby Martin summarizes in his book, *Unclobber:*

Rethinking our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality,

"Paul launches chapter 5 by condemning a man in the church for sleeping with...his stepmother.

He then moves to chapter 6 by expressing disgust that the church is seeking outside legal counsel to deal with economic internal affairs, that is, they were suing one another... Finally, he returns to sexual conduct by reminding them that their bodies are temples of God, and if they sleep around, like with prostitutes, they join their bodies, and hence, Christ's body, to others.

Paul wraps up in chapter 7 by taking the church back to middle school via basic sex Ed 101, describing marriage, celibacy, and abstinence.

“So the flow goes like this: sexual immorality, then financial exploitation, and ending with sexual immorality *combined* with exploitation.

These two themes are intertwined, and that's key to understanding what Paul might have been talking about in [this] clobber passage.”¹

Let me read to you the larger section which includes this “clobber passage.”

But rather than read it to you from the NASB translation, I want to read to you from the Message version, which is not a direct translation from the original Greek, but rather a paraphrase.

¹ Martin, Colby, *Unclobber: Rethinking our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2022, Louisville, KY, 158-59.

I do this, not because it changes what Paul is saying, but because it makes the larger conflict easier to understand in context than do other translations.

I simply want you to more easily understand the issue Paul is addressing.

6 1-4 *And how dare you take each other to court!*

When you think you have been wronged, does it make any sense to go before a court that knows nothing of God's ways instead of a family of Christians?

The day is coming when the world is going to stand before a jury made up of followers of Jesus.

If someday you are going to rule on the world's fate, wouldn't it be a good idea to practice on some of these smaller cases? Why, we're even going to judge angels!

So why not these everyday affairs?

As these disagreements and wrongs surface, why would

you ever entrust them to the judgment of people you don't trust in any other way?

5-6 *I say this as bluntly as I can to wake you up to the stupidity of what you're doing.*

Is it possible that there isn't one levelheaded person among you who can make fair decisions when disagreements and disputes come up? I don't believe it.

And here you are taking each other to court before people who don't even believe in God! How can they render justice if they don't believe in the God of justice?

And here's the clobber passage as provided by The Message,

9-11 *Don't you realize that this is not the way to live? Unjust people who don't care about God will not be joining in his kingdom. Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex, use and abuse the earth and everything in it, don't qualify as citizens in God's kingdom. (1 Cor. 6:1-10, MSG)*

So while The Message doesn't use the word "homosexual," it does make it easier to understand that the larger issue Paul is addressing here is not sex, or even sexual practices, but abusive interactions, transactions, and relationships in general.

Perhaps what Paul is condemning here using *arsenokoitai* is any type of coercion or abuse, including sexual.

Regardless, knowing that Paul had no concept of either homosexuality or heterosexuality as innate orientations, we know he couldn't have been talking about what we

understand to be committed, monogamous, and faithful relationships of **any** kind.

The second clobber passage is from 1 Timothy 1:10, and I'll only touch on this briefly because it is minor. In this letter, the author is talking about the teaching of unsound doctrine.

And as included in the NASB writes,

*Just as I urged you...to remain on at Ephesus so that you would instruct certain people not to teach strange doctrines, **4** nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to useless speculation rather than advance the plan of God, which is by faith, so I urge you now. **5** But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from a sincere faith. **6** Some people have strayed from these things and have turned aside to fruitless discussion, **7** wanting to be*

teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions.

8 *But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and worldly, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10 for the sexually immoral, homosexuals, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, 11 according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted. (1 Tim. 1:3-11, NASB)*

So here the author lists for Timothy those for whom the Law was written, and includes homosexuals,

alongside murderers, slave traders, liars, and perjurers, which seems like comparing apples to oranges.

The word *arsenokoitai* is translated *homosexual* **here** where it was translated *sodomite* in Corinthians.

PAUSE

The last clobber passage in the New Testament is in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 1:26-27.

First, the context.

And again, quoting from Colby Martin's writing on this passage,

"From historical sources **other than** the Bible, we know the sociopolitical climate of Rome just prior to when Paul wrote this letter [in the mid 50s AD.]

In the year 49 AD, the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because the Jews were “constantly rioting because of Christ...”

So between AD 49 and 54 (when Claudius eventually died), the Jewish people - including Jewish Christians - were expelled from the city.

This made a significant impact on the house churches in Rome.

Prior to AD 49, the churches would have been a mixture of Jewish **and** Gentile Christians, but for a five-year period, the churches consisted of only Gentiles.

Without their Jewish members, the churches were bound to experience change.

So when the edict ended upon Claudius’ death and the Jewish Christians returned home, there would have been inevitable conflict with regard to how the churches were run, who was in charge, and so on.

“It is to this conflicted community, fractured along ethnic lines, that Paul wrote his letter.”²

And Martin continues that Paul’s goal here was to reconcile the Jewish and Gentile Christians at God’s Table.

“Paul was pushing, pulling, and at times kicking the fractured community toward reconciliation, with repeated admonishments to not judge one another but to live in harmony (see Rom 12:5).

Only when we hold this backdrop for Romans in our minds as we read the text will we ensure that we give ourselves the best opportunity to understand what Paul was saying and why.”³

² Ibid, 116-17.

³ Ibid, 117-18.

So when we look at the larger passage, Romans 1:18-32, we find Paul talking first about how people have turned away from God, from God's divine blessing and power, and have instead taken up idols, or, as Eugene Peterson phrases it in the Message,

They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand. (Rom. 1:23, MSG)

As Rev. Rob Fuquay points out in our video study, the order of the events is important.

"Same sex intercourse is the **consequence** of the people's **disobedience**, not the other way around in which the disobedience was the result of the same sex activity.

To Paul, the real sin here was the initial turning away from God."⁴

So in the actual passage, after stating that the people had turned away from God, Romans 1:26-27 says,

26 *That's why God abandoned them to degrading lust.*

Their females traded natural sexual relations for unnatural sexual relations.

27 *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. (CEB)

⁴ Fuquay, Robert, *The Bible, Sexuality, and the United Methodist Church* video series, session 4, The Richard and Julia Wilke Institute for Discipleship at Southwestern College, 2019.

Those who wield this passage as a weapon to clobber LGBTQ folks usually focus on the words “natural” and “unnatural,” and the phrase “shameful actions.”

It’s worth noting that in some translations it says “shame**less** acts.”

How one word can be translated as both “shameful” and “shameless” and be intended to mean the same thing is a quirk of the English language.

The word translated from Greek as either “shameful” or “shameless” is *atimia*.

While some translations attach moral implications to this word, in actual Greek usage it was not so much about being morally reprehensible, as it was about being “culturally shameful.”

It was about dishonor.

Additionally, if used in a court of law, if something was deemed *atimia* here, it was because it had no value or worth.

To commit *atimia* was to engage in a behavior that had no value and would bring shame and dishonor upon you.

It was a violation of a cultural custom.

Its use, and misuse, is not unlike that associated with the word *toevah*.

Regarding the issue of "natural" or "unnatural," the Greek words here are *kata phusis*, "according to nature," and *para phusis*, "against nature."

So in this cultural era, what was considered sex that was "against nature" or *para phusis*?

Well, **any** sexual relations, heterosexual **or** homosexual, not for the purpose of procreation was considered "against nature."

“Illustrating this point,” the early church father
“Augustine wrote that a man having sex with a
prostitute, while not praise worthy in the slightest, was
nonetheless ‘according to nature.’

It was not moral, but at least it was natural.

Then he said, “But if one has relations even with one's
wife in a part of the body which was not made for
begetting children,

such relations are against nature and indecent.”⁵

There’s no need to elaborate as to what he was talking
about here.

The other way in which sex was considered “unnatural”
for men, was if the man acted like a woman.

⁵ Ibid, 131.

That is, if the man took a subservient position in sexual relations or was penetrated in sexual relations.

Why? Because in this male-dominated culture women were inferior.

Women were property. Women were to be subservient.

Women were penetrated so that they could serve as the vessel for the complete life seed the man planted within her.

This was the idea behind the word *malakoi* meaning "soft" or "effeminate."

This is why male rape, as threatened in Sodom, was used by the victors against the vanquished in this age - to both exert power and shame by making the loser like a woman.

And while this is the only passage that even hints at - without actually saying - that women engaging in same-

sex relations is unnatural, we can extrapolate that what would be considered “unnatural” sexual relations for a woman would also include any sexual activity that would not lead to procreation, as well as any kind of sexual activity where the woman might abandon her culturally expected role as the inferior sexual partner of a man.

PAUSE

So, while this paragraph from Romans has been used as a bludgeon to justify discrimination against LGBTQ people for centuries, it’s more than a little ironic that the larger context of the letter is to share the joyful good news of the God’s saving grace.

In closing, I think if Paul had had any concept of human sexuality as innate orientations with which we are born, I believe these letters would look very different.

In nearly all of these passages Paul places homosexual behavior in the context of events that cause abuse, harm, or deception.

Could it be that that is the only way Paul ever observed male homosexual behavior, in forms like pederasty, rape, and other abusive ways?

Would he have addressed it differently, or perhaps not mentioned it at all, if he'd **had** any understanding of sexual orientation and lived in a time when people demonstrated all the ideals of a loving, faithful, and monogamous relationship?

We can never know.

What we do know is that Paul had a very narrow view of homosexual behavior, and that Paul was a product of his time.

As with their not having an accurate biological understanding that both a sperm and an egg are required to create human life, Paul didn't know what he didn't know.

In the various writings attributed to Paul, there are other commands that we no longer adhere to today: not mixing seeds in a field, not wearing clothing made of two different materials, not eating shellfish - all of which were also called abominations.

We also find the command for slaves to obey their masters, and that women are to keep silent in church;

passages that for centuries were used to support slavery and the subjugation of women.

He even recommended that Christians not get married unless they simply couldn't restrain their sexual urges.

Now there's a good reason to get married!

Just as he had no understanding of sexual orientation, Paul could never have conceived that people would still be reading his letters 2000 years later.

He couldn't conceive that we would even be here 2000 years later, as he believed that Christ's second coming was to happen at any time.

Paul's letters were written for specific congregations in order to address particular issues in **their** context, not as the broad theological treatises that some consider them to be.

For these reasons, as well as those I've shared today, it's my belief that Paul's teachings around homosexuality should be considered *descriptive* of that particular time and culture, but **not** *prescriptive* describing God's will for all people for all time.

Next week we'll look at what it means, as Christians, to view this subject through the lens of Jesus as the Word of God. Amen.