

May 20, 2018

“Controversies in the Faith: Human Sexuality”

Colossians 3: 12-15

All scripture quote are from the *Common English Bible*.

Let’s just begin by stating the obvious: the church is greatly divided on the issue of human sexuality as it relates to ministry. It’s uncomfortable and even painful for us to talk about. But the time has come when it is imperative that we face and discuss it, so today I’m going to address the issue of ministry with LGBTQ+ persons.

LGBTQ+ is an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. Some people add “A” for Asexual, and “I” for Intersex. The “+” on the end is to signify that this acronym does not capture all of human sexuality. What our LGBTQ+ siblings have in common, and why they are often referred to in a collective acronym, is that they have been misunderstood, discriminated against, abused, ignored, and even assaulted and murdered because of their sexuality. Unfortunately, the church, and Christians, have been a major source of this mistreatment. This is due to scriptures that many interpret as saying that human sexualities that don’t conform to traditional male/female identities are sinful.

Our denomination has come to a crossroads on this issue. At our 2016 General Conference, delegates reached an impasse. The division of our denomination into pro-LGBTQ+ full inclusion and anti-LGBTQ+ inclusion camps was looking inevitable. So our Council of Bishops called a “pause for prayer.” They formed what they called the Commission on a Way Forward, to study the problem and come up with solutions. That commission worked through 2017 and into this year. Their report is due July 8. In it, the Bishops will say that they favor a plan that keeps our denomination together, while allowing local churches and individual pastors to make their own choices about how to minister with LGBTQ+ persons.

There are also two other plans that have some smaller support within the Council of Bishops. We will be hearing more about all these plans this fall. On February 23-26, 2019, in St. Louis, a special session of the General Conference will meet to vote on a the plans. Whatever decision is made, it will have an impact on us, and we will have decisions to make. So I think it’s important that we begin talking now.

At this time, I’m not going to take a position in regard to what is sinful or not, who should or shouldn’t be included in our ministry, and how the church should respond to this controversy. My goal isn’t the convince anyone of anything, or to change anybody’s mind. Rather, I’m going to present some facts and ask some questions that I hope will help us ponder this issue prayerfully in the months ahead.

The first fact: **according to a Gallup poll of over 1.6 million Americans, 4% of our population identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.** Among those born from 1980 to 1998, the

figure is 7.3%. So, chances are, you already know someone who is from the LGBTQ+ community.

If you still think that's unlikely, let me share another fact. I am aware of nine families from our congregation who have an LGBTQ+ person in their clan. Eight families out of our small congregation! And in the interest of transparency, I will tell you that one of those families is mine. There is a member of the LGBTQ+ community in my clan.

All the stories you hear about LGBTQ+ persons being discriminated against, and even assaulted and murdered hit very close to home for me. This person is a beloved part of my life. In addition to the normal concerns that families have about their young ones growing up, my family lives with the fear in the back of our minds that something terrible could happen to this person just because of who they are. When you hear of LGBTQ+ persons being insulted, denied rights granted to others, and especially being discriminated against by the church and Christians, I am personally and deeply wounded, and I grieve for my beloved family member, who is also deeply wounded.

Another fact: ***the younger generation is much more accepting of LGBTQ persons than the older generation.*** And that impacts their feelings about the church. I did a very unscientific poll of some 20-somethings I know, and asked them the question: How does the church's traditional stance on LGBTQ+ persons impact your relationship to the church and/or God?

It was interesting that the first person to respond to the question gave their reply within ten minutes. All but one of the responses was given within three hours. So the first thing that I learned was that, in contrast to us as a congregation, ***young people want to talk about this.*** It's very important to them, and they are eager to discuss it.

I'm going to share verbatim some of their responses. I apologize if this gets long—I think we need to let their prophetic voices be heard.

*(These responses have been edited for clarity, length and to eliminate identifying information.)*

I struggled for a long time, a REALLY long time, with the idea of God hating someone because of how He made them. It resulted in me refusing to go to church or even think about God because of how confused I was. I strongly believe that if someone within the church would have told me that God doesn't hate gay people and other members of the LGBT community, my faith and relationship with him would be much stronger

Through (my denomination) I've never heard anything bad about gay people. I know that most churches however, don't support lgbtq people. It makes me hesitant to go out and find a church for myself, because I want a church to support me and my beliefs. I'd be much more likely to join a newer church than

one that has been around for a while since newer churches tend to support lgbtq people.

I've struggled with this for a few years, and to me it always seemed a little hypocritical. God has made and created everyone equally, yet the people of the church act as though God hates anyone who isn't straight. It's just confusing, considering they also preach that you should love everyone as God has loved us. This is one of the reasons I actually became an atheist my junior and senior year of high school.

I find the traditional evangelical church's beliefs on gay marriage to be completely regressive... has turned me off completely from attending church. I have many close friends who are gay, lesbian, queer, or transgender. It is completely irresponsible for people who call themselves Christ followers to be anti-LGBT. I think it is based entirely on a misreading of scripture, and not the reality of Jesus's revolutionary love... So who would be the ostracized and hated in our society? I think it would be trans, gay, and black and brown people. If Jesus were alive now, he would spend his time with them, the most oppressed. White evangelicals would probably hate Jesus for that... As I am looking for a future church home, I will be looking for progressive values that impact the community I live in. One that is involved with secular organizations that fight for the rights of the most oppressed. That is what Jesus's mission was, not ridding society of LGBT people.

I've never really been religious, but I definitely think that the way some religions treat the LGBT community is disrespectful and terrible to them. They're people just trying to be who they want to be and people should respect that. I wouldn't want to be a part of a community who didn't.

...there's no doubt that it's had a major negative impact on my relationship with the church. I've always tried to find excuses on how the old traditions of the church are outdated or that certain passages are just misinterpreted after thousands of years in order to comfort myself and find some peace in my conflict in religion, but I always felt selfish. How could I stand with an institution that's committed so many violations to basic human rights for so many people? Just ignoring it, and saying "Well that's just old people, whatever," seems incredibly selfish, as it just says that I don't really care about the oppression of the LGBTQA+ community - I just want to ignore the problem and separate myself for my own comfort, regardless of how LGBTQA+ (people) are given absolutely no chance to feel the same comfort in their everyday lives... I simply don't believe we as Christians deserve to live in a bubble of our own privilege and self-righteousness, and have the audacity to look oppressed communities in the eye and say that we don't care about decades and centuries of pain because we choose not to think about it. We are given that choice, but they are not.

...I believe that while some followers of the religion purely believed that it was wrong because it was in the Bible, others in power used this as a scapegoat to punish those who weren't a part of the church and to punish those who they didn't like... some of these reasons, have led me to my belief that the church is both bigoted and hypocritical... This isn't the only reason as to why I'm not religious, but it is a substantial factor. I believe that other like-minded people that have similar stances will also stay wary of certain congregations, if not the whole religion in general.

The church's stance has definitely affected my relationship to god/church as a whole. I think that the church will continue to lose lgbtqia+ people and especially young people if they are not explicit in their acceptance. It's not enough to say "love everyone", it has to be explicit. Coming from (my denomination) when all of the issues around leaving the (denomination) were happening, (it) definitely hurt me a lot, and has impacted my views on the church, but I've also seen radical great people...who have sort of saved my ideas of what church can mean. It's really hard because I grew up religious, and I see the benefits of it all around. But sometimes I feel as if it's done more harm than good.

I think my relationship with the church has definitely been strained because of its viewpoints on sexuality. It was very difficult because growing up I was taught to accept everyone by both my parents, and in church you're always taught to love thy neighbor and I thought that included basically everyone but as I got older I realized that apparently that wasn't the case for many churches. And I feel like knowing people who are homosexual or transgender has made me feel uncomfortable going to church, because I feel like I'm in a way agreeing with the viewpoints of those churches who don't accept and 'love' those people. Even though I know that God would love those people worshiping him, (being) in a place where people I love aren't accepted feels wrong.

I'm sure that we could find young people who have a variety of views, but I was overwhelmed with how consistent the message was from these beloved children of God. ***It breaks my heart that they have been so wounded by the church I love, and that in our efforts to be faithful, we have driven them away from Christ. Could it be that this is evidence that we haven't been as faithful as we thought?***

That's the first question. Here's the second: ***of all the things in the Bible we prayerfully choose not to follow, why have we chosen to literally believe and embody the scriptures regarding homosexuality?***

The Bible contains many, many prohibitions and rules. Scriptures tell us over and over that women are subordinate to men in just about every way. We understand that the Bible is both

divine and human, and that patriarchy was the rule of the day 2000 years ago. So, we don't take these passages literally.

The Bible tells us that menstruating women are unclean, and so is anyone who touches them (Leviticus 15: 19-24). Young women who lose their virginity must be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22: 23-24). Lest we think all the rules are about women, Leviticus 2 tells us that any man with an injury to his genitals cannot be in church; neither can any person born illegitimately, or their relatives to the 10<sup>th</sup> generation (v. 1-2). We learn from Leviticus that any person who is handicapped or has a physical blemish cannot be in church (Leviticus 21: 16-22). I could go on for a long time, but you get the point.

There is much in the Bible that we don't take literally because we know that it was written by human authors who were writing in a certain culture at a particular point in history, and we have learned in the last 2000 years that many things they thought were bad aren't, actually. So why do we continue to cling to the prohibitions about human sexuality? What is so appealing about them that we can't bear to let them go?

Next question: ***What is more important to us—judgment or love?*** We know that our God is a judging God. He looks upon our sin and recognizes it for what it is. He is hurt and angered by all the ways we are disobedient. But he chose to respond by sending his Son to us to die on a cross, so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to him. He chose self-sacrificing love as his ultimate response to human sin and brokenness. So how will we respond to our brothers and sisters, our neighbors of all sexualities? What do we choose to lead with? What is our ultimate answer to the great diversity of humankind?

Last question: Will we choose to die on this hill? ***Is this such an important issue that we will split apart because of it, destroying much of what is good in our denomination?*** It is true that we are divided on this one point of theology, but what about the hungry? the oppressed? those living under violence and injustice? those who need to hear of the love of Jesus?

You remember Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Jesus said:

Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me. v. 34-36

***Jesus didn't say, "Be sure you're correct about all tiny points of theology, and beat up your brothers and sisters with your Bible until they agree with you." He said feed the hungry, give nurture to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner.***

***And, he said, "Go and make disciples." (Matthew 28: 19)***

***So how will we choose to do ministry as we look forward into the future?***

Two more facts to close. First, growth is always uncomfortable. ***Our uneasiness with this topic is evidence that it is a growing edge.*** Our struggle is good, meaningful and purposeful. It's OK to be uncomfortable—it means you are learning and growing. Do your best to welcome and embrace it. That's the best way to work through it and to end with hope and joy.

Finally, as hard as this is, ***we have the best example possible to follow.*** Paul tells us in Colossians 3: 12-15:

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people.

Brothers and sisters, love, peace, patience, humility, forgiveness, gentleness and unity are written into our DNA as disciples of Jesus Christ. We just need to stick with him, as we always do, and the fruits of the Holy Spirit will come upon us.

So let us love each other. Let us listen, forgive, engage with humility, speak with patience and compassion. And let us do it all with unity, a determination to follow our calling to stick together, as Christ's body in this place, serving him and our neighbors with singleness of love.

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