

Sermon Series: Praying Our Way Forward: LGBTQ Issue Facing the UMC
Sermon: A Biblical Perspective
Genesis 1:26-28; John 3:16-17; Romans 1:24-32; 6:5-14
Salem United Methodist Church; October 21, 2018
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

Ever since 1972 when the General Conference inserted this phrase into the United Methodist Church's *Book of Discipline*, "We do not condone the practices of homosexuality and consider it incompatible with Christian teaching," there has been disagreement with this statement. Currently the United Methodist Church sees those who are homosexuals as having "sacred worth" but the church still upholds homosexuality as incompatible with Christian teaching. The denomination does not condone marriage for same sex couples and we do not ordain "self-avowed" homosexuals. After forty-five years of disagreeing, the denomination is striving to find a way to remain united while accepting different points of view. Next week we will get into more details concerning the three options the church is considering, but today, we are examining how we view the authority of scripture, that is, how we interpret the Bible which influences where we land on the subject of same sex relationships.

Everything we read or listen to, such as books, newspapers, podcasts, articles, newscasts, we interpret through our own lens of experiences and knowledge. We either accept what is written or said; or we read or listen through a lens of critical thinking. We interpret what is written in the Bible similarly. For those who accept what is written, they will claim this is God's word, "God said it so I believe it." I've heard one biblical literalist say, "It's cut and dry. You either believe the Bible or you don't." For biblical literalists, any interpretation of God's word is putting human meaning onto God's word which is viewed as an abomination. From this viewpoint, God speaks and the writers wrote down what God said. From this viewpoint God does not make mistakes so the Bible is inerrant in both matters of science and faith. For those who subscribe to the inerrancy of scripture, God created everything in six twenty-four hour days. Whether they will admit it or not, even biblical literalists pick and choose which scriptures they follow literally.

Another way to interpret scripture is through the lens of critical thinking. This methodology looks at the Bible contextually which includes researching when a particular book of the Bible was written, to whom it was written, and why it was written. Biblical criticism will examine the culture during that time period and how that may have influenced the author's writing. Understanding the context of the writing assists us in understanding the text's meaning back then and for us today. From this interpretation, the Bible is viewed as the Word of God that is still breathing new life into us through the ancient texts. As we look at a particular text we can ask ourselves, "What does this passage tell us about God? What does this passage tell us about humans? And what does this passage tell us about the relationship between God and humans?" As we answer these questions each of us will bring our own personal experience and reasoning to the text.

So how do you interpret scripture? Do you agree that God said it so I believe it? Or do you view scripture as open to interpretation? Most of us, if we are honest with ourselves have a foot in both camps. Or at least a big toe in one camp and a foot in another. There are some scriptures that we view as uncompromising while we admit that there are passages of scripture that make no sense. Yet there are other scriptures that when we bring ourselves to the text our hearts are strangely warmed and through these words we are connected to the Holy. A scripture that speaks to me may not be the same scripture that speaks to you. And what speaks to you may not be the same scripture that speaks to someone else which can lead us into interesting discussions and even disagreements on interpretations.

Disagreeing over the interpretation of scripture is nothing new. There were those who disagreed with how Jesus interpreted scriptures. When Jesus read the passage from Isaiah in his hometown synagogue and interpreted that he was fulfilling this passage, his listeners threatened to kill him. Throughout his ministry the experts on the Jewish law challenged Jesus on his interpretation of the law. Then after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension his followers tried to make sense of what happened. They drew upon the only scripture they had, the Hebrew texts, and searched for a connection between their scripture and Jesus as the promised Messiah. Some made this connection. Others saw God doing something new with no connection with the Hebrew texts. The first argument in the church was between the Jerusalem disciples and Paul. They wrestled with the question: Can Gentiles become Christians without first becoming Jews. They had no scriptures to uphold either argument.

Interpreting scripture throughout history has either pulled people of faith together or separated us. Because of differences in interpretations not all Christians agree on what baptism is, the meaning of the Lord's Supper, and even which day of the week we honor as Sabbath. In regards to baptism, some subscribe to a believer's baptism where the one being baptized professes their faith in Christ while others view it as a Covenant between God and us. Even how we use water in baptism is based on biblical interpretation. In regards to the Lord's Supper, some view The Lord's Supper as a time to remember what Christ has done for us. Others view it as God through Christ offering us grace while still others view it as partaking in the actual body and blood of Christ. All of these different practices of the church are based on different biblical interpretations.

Also, our interpretation of scriptures has evolved over time. For instance, today we no longer subscribe to slavery, however there was a time that both slave owners and abolitionists upheld specific biblical texts in either support of slavery or freeing slaves. Another example is the biblical interpretation on the role of women. Certain interpretation of biblical passages have been used to oppress women while other passages have upheld that God views both men and women as equals. Jesus both honored women and had women followers. The Apostle Paul both instructed women to be silent in particular churches, yet in other churches Paul had women as leaders. How we interpret these scriptures either allows women to hold leadership positions in the church or not, and allows them to be ordained or not. Also, some churches uphold biblical verses that claim divorce is a sin, while others recognize that all marriages are not loving and holy, and subscribe that God's grace is available to those who need to break their marriage vows. Then how do we interpret scripture on the subject of homosexuality?

I have printed two sheets of verses. One sheet lists verses that are often quoted to prove homosexuality is a sin. And one sheet lists scriptures that uphold God's inclusiveness for each person. There is not time for an in depth study in this sermon, but we will look at a few of these scriptures. Genesis 1:26-28 is listed on both sheets. Those who claim homosexuality is a sin refer to these verses along with Genesis 2:21-25. Their claim is that God created heterosexuality when the male and female were created. God did not create only male or only female. Those who see this scripture as inclusive focus on God creating each person in the image of God, therefore, everyone regardless of sexual orientation is made in the image of God. Those who claim homosexuality as a sin will interpret what happened in the city of Sodom as the male residents wanting to rape Lot and his men. Those with this viewpoint will also refer to the listed passages in Leviticus as well as the listed passages written by Paul in Romans, I Corinthians, and Timothy. Interestingly, the Gospels are silent when it comes to homosexuality. Jesus did not address the subject.

Those who do not claim homosexuality as a sin will interpret these scriptures differently. In the Sodom passage, they will point to the word, "know," as not always interpreted as having carnal knowledge of another. So the citizens of Sodom may have wanted Lot and his men to come out so they could kill them. Also, note that this passage condones sex trafficking of virgins. If we are reading this passage literally, do we support this? Those who claim that homosexuality is not a sin will interpret the laws of Leviticus differently, too. One interpretation is that God is preparing the Hebrews to live in the Promised Land. They were to hold to a higher moral standard than the Canaanites, such as keeping the Sabbath, not worshipping idols, and honoring one's parents. They were to eat differently, wear different clothes, have different hairstyles, and farm differently. Laws around what was appropriate sexual behavior were given to protect both their ritual and ethnic purity. Violators were punished by death. Do we kill people today for their immoral sexual behavior? The laws in Leviticus were designed to assist the Hebrews to build a new nation on a new frontier by being different from their neighbors.

Let's look at Romans 1. Those who view homosexuality as a sin will uphold verses 26 and 27. Those who don't will interpret this entire passage as God being upset with those who turn their backs on God by worshipping themselves and caught up in their own egos and pleasures. One interpreter wrote that Paul was not condemning homosexuality, but condemning heterosexuals who were behaving like homosexuals to satisfy their carnal desires. And when Paul speaks about male prostitutes in I Corinthians he is condemning lust, greed, and sexual exploitation, such as an adult male exploiting a young male.

Since we cannot do an in depth study of these scriptures this morning, I commend them to you to read, study, and pray. In closing, I offer you something to think about. One day when Velma was reading John 3:16-17 she saw this text differently than ever before. These verses are often quoted to convince people to believe in Jesus. As she read verse 16 the word, "whosoever," drew her attention. She said, "The Bible says "whosoever believeth in him." It doesn't say whosoever except....Anyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life. God accepts us as we are." Then she read verse 17 and thought, "If Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, who am I to condemn anyone? Jesus said I am to love my neighbor no matter who my neighbor is."

My purpose is not to convince anyone to one way of thinking, but to offer us something to think about, to ponder, and to pray. I invite us to read passages I selected on both sheets, study them, and discuss them with someone. The more we listen to another's point of view, the more we will come to an understanding and perhaps we can agree to disagree and remain one united church. If anyone is interested in digging deeper into the scriptures, our history, and what UMC believes, I am willing to facilitate such a group.

In conclusion, reflect on these words of Paul from Romans 6. "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." What do they mean to you?

Resources: *The Good Book* by Peter Gomes; *Unafraid and Unashamed: Facing the Future of United Methodism* by Wil Cantrell; wesleyancovenant.org; "10 Passages That Teach a Christian Perspective on Homosexuality," by Layton Williams, 6-08-2017, sojo.net.