

## NOT AN ISSUE

Romans 8:18-25

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### I.

These words from Paul's letter to the church in Rome are among the most beloved in the Christian tradition. They are words of encouragement in a time of struggle. They are words that say "hold on" when you feel like giving up. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us."

On this Open & Affirming Sunday, which coincides each year with the Colorado Springs PrideFest, may we be encouraged that "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." Children of God, yes you, all of us, the time is not far off when we will see the civil right of marriage extended to all couples, regardless of gender configuration. And this is good news, for as Paul writes, "the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." I've got to be honest, I don't understand all of the nuances of what Paul is trying say, but I do hear this: "Fear not, children of God, for futility will give way to possibility, bondage will give way to freedom, and justice will prevail, for all of creation is in the hands of a just and loving God."

Now you might be saying, that's all fine and good, Preacher, but justice and equality delayed is a tragedy, and I would have to almost agree with you. Because our faith tells us that things worth achieving aren't attained without a struggle. Paul likens this struggle to the work of a woman in labor. "We know," he writes, "that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, be we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, [we] groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." Speaking as a heterosexual male in this still sexist society, I know that I don't groan in the same way some of you do, but I hear your groans as would anyone with ears to hear. And much more importantly, God hears your groans, and groans along with you, because if humankind was made in God's image, then God is as gay as she is straight.

We wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies, that we may belong to the family of God, not constituted by birthright or privilege, but by the overflowing, overwhelming grace of God who adopts us as we are. This is what it means to be saved in hope: to belong, by faith, to the family of God. That's fine, preacher, but when will it happen? To which I can only reply that perhaps it is not so much something that *will* happen, but something that is *already* happening. This is why Paul says "hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for

what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” These words remind me of the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that “Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.” And so, by means of faith, we live now with hope, though groaning as in labor, and eagerly anticipate the arrival of God’s family.

## II.

Therefore, I would like to suggest, perhaps to proclaim, on this Open & Affirming Sunday, 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.

First, on this particular Sunday, we affirm nothing less than the full, God-given humanity of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. This is what I intend to communicate on the sign I will carry in the PrideFest parade today, a message I pilfered from this year’s Chicago Pride Parade held on June 25: “We are *all* born this way.” In 1999, our 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 Open to & Affirming of all people regardless of sexual orientation. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, we mean to say, beloved by God. 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 sense, not an issue.

## III.

The second reason I dare to claim that homosexuality is not an issue is that it is not an issue in our sacred scriptures, the texts of the Bible. This claim may come as a surprise to some of you. It surprised me when I first heard it. I, like some of you, assumed that the Bible is rife with anti-gay rhetoric. But if we look closely, and by “look closely” I mean if we actually *read* the Bible, we find that the word homosexual is not to be found there.

I owe these insights to my teacher and mentor, the Rev. Dr. Peter J. Gomes, who was my preaching professor while in seminary at Harvard Divinity School. Rev. Gomes died earlier this year, and I took his passing into glory as an occasion to revisit his book called “The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart.” Ecclectic and iconoclastic, Peter Gomes was hard to categorize. A registered Republican and self-avowed social conservative, Gomes prayed at Ronald Reagan’s second inaugural and preached for George H.W. Bush at his. 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.” In 1991, while serving as the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church, he came out to the Harvard community in response to gay bashing on campus.

Gomes tells the full story in a chapter called “The Bible and Homosexuality.” In that chapter, he states that “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 the existing prejudice against homosexuality and homosexuals.” Further, he points out that the terms “homosexual” is an invention of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The word did not appear in the King James Version, 400 years old this year, even though there is a consensus among scholars that King James himself was likely gay. Don’t you love the irony? The first time the word appeared in an *English* translation of the Bible was 1946 - again, the result of prejudice, and an inaccurate translation. The people who wrote the Bible, even if they were, as I believe they were, inspired by God, were writing from within their own cultural context and worldview. They had no concept of sexual orientation. In a word, homosexuality is just not an issue in the Bible because it’s not in the Bible.

But wait a second, I can hear you saying now. Preacher, you may be right that the word “homosexual” is not in the Bible, but doesn’t the Bible say that it is wrong it is for men to be intimate with men and women to be intimate with women. Aren’t there many texts that say so? And I would have to say, “No.” As Gomes points out in his chapter, the loud fuss made by those who use the Bible to justify their prejudice can give the impression that the Bible is teeming with anti-gay references. In fact, there are 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 want to share, with the time I have remaining, brief insights on each of these.

First, you’ve all heard the “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” argument which appeals to the first two chapters of Genesis. Gomes responds: “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.” I would take issue with Gomes and suggest that, thanks to modern procedures, a man’s role can be quite limited indeed. Gomes concludes that “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 the people of the town 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, of course. 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. “David’s sin adultery with Bathsheba does not make all heterosexual expressions sinful,” Gomes observes, 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.” As 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 understand that ancient Israel, having arrived in its promised land, adopted a strict standard of behavior to distinguish it from the many nations sharing its geo-political neighborhood. Fine and good for devout Levites over 3000 years ago, but there is no one today who 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, just to mention a few. And the punishment in most cases of violating these laws: death. *Theologically*, there is no reason Christians should follow these laws. As Gomes observes, “To what extent can Christians be said to be bound by these rules of 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?” That’s it for the Old Testament. What remain are three passages (four verses altogether) in the New Testament.

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 states unequivocally, Paul “does not describe the conduct of homosexuals, but rather of heterosexuals who performed homosexual acts.” In fact, Paul may be responding to the common practice in Rome of “an adult male exploiting for sexual purposes a younger male.” As Gomes writes, “All Paul new 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 word “arsenokoitai” in a list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God because they are lawless and disobedient. In the New Testament, this Greek term refers to one who uses their sexual behavior to exploit another person. 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, and we affirm that varying orientations are equally capable of mutuality respect, and love.

That’s it. We’ve covered the whole Bible. Notice Jesus says not a word. As Gomes says, the greatest argument is an argument from silence. Why is our society ignoring the poor and obsessing about sexual orientation? I hope you will join me in affirming that there is no significant precedent in the Christian scriptures to justify prejudice toward our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers. Homosexuality is, in this second sense, not an issue for the Bible, and therefore not an issue for those of us who stake our lives upon the Bible’s witness. Divorce is a bigger issue for the Bible, but we don’t hold out a similar prejudice against divorced people, thank God.

#### IV.

Finally, a story. While in Chicago recently, I was in a course called Preaching as Transformation. We preachers were learning to train our ears to voices in our congregations that were not usually heard. Our professor, a Presbyterian from Georgia, told us about a radicalizing moment in his life. 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, an openly 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 brave prophetic that day that I hope we can hear this morning. Homosexuality is not an issue we can hold at arms length. This struggle is struggle for the full humanity of people who deserve the full range of civil rights offered to all. And this is not only a struggle for the personhood of gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, it is a struggle that Christians need to make into a way of life. Peter Gomes calls homophobia "the last prejudice," but I disagree with him. There are more on the horizon: fear of the immigrant, fear of the poor, fear of the Muslim. And these are not issues either. These are people, God's people, destined for adoption into God's family. Let us not despair, for "we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly - for the poor, for the immigrant, for the Muslim - while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." Amen.