

The Marriage Debate: Part 2 (8/8/04)

Rev. Gary Cox -- Wichita, Kansas
University Congregational Church

In the Book of Revelation, John of Patmos, writing to one of the churches in Asia, says, "I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. I wish you that you were either cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spit you out of my mouth."

I learned long ago that the easiest way through life is to remain lukewarm, because anything you say that is strong enough to make one person love you will make another person hate you. I've also discovered that the modern pulpit is one of the most lukewarm places in the world. But I also have come to believe that a life without conviction is waste of space and a waste of fresh air.

And so before I deliver this sermon, let me acknowledge that some will be offended. And I accept your right to vehemently disagree with me—we are Congregationalists, after all. I only hope you respect my right—what I view as my duty before God as an ordained minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ—to speak my heart from this pulpit.

Last week we took a not-so-serious look at the institution of marriage. Now, I am a big believer in marriage. I think it is both a foundational institution for human society, and I believe it is a sacred institution, ordained by God. My jesting last week was aimed at those who constantly talk about "biblical" marriage, as if marriage as described in the Bible is the same thing as the institution we so revere and honor today.

That's just not the case. Biblical marriage often involves men with lots of wives, and men with lots of second-tier wives called concubines. Biblical marriage involves dozens of children coming forth from dozens of different women, all fathered by the same man. For all the people who are constantly railing about a return to biblical marriage, and the protection of marriage as we find it in the Bible, all I can say is, "Have you ever read the Bible?"

But today we will be more serious, because the subject matter is more serious; namely, the determination of a large part of our society to pass a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. Now, I know I will be accused of being political from the pulpit when I talk about this. And it is hard to deny that this is a political issue. It is. It's a civil rights issue, which is political.

But it is also a faith issue, because it is people of faith—people loudly professing the Christian faith—who instigate and sustain this issue, claiming divine authority for their political beliefs. This topic is being preached Sunday after Sunday in pulpits all over America, and that conversation has been very one sided. I have no problem with faith playing a role in people's political attitudes. In fact, I consider myself a person whose faith drives his politics. But I also feel I have an obligation to speak out when I feel the Christian faith to which I have dedicated my life is being misrepresented.

I recognize that my thoughts on this matter put me in a minority, not only among most Americans, but certainly in a minority with regard to clergy. But it is important for us as Christians to think these things through, and not to go along with the crowd just because the crowd is noisy, and powerful, and self-righteous about their convictions.

What I say this morning will be based on my understanding of the Christian faith and the Bible. Before that, however, I do want to say something not as a member of the clergy, but as an American citizen. I am disheartened that we have leaders and legislators who are willing to play with the Constitution for political gain. The Constitution is just too important. Gays and lesbians are a minority. They don't have much power. They are misunderstood and in many cases hated. They are an easy target for politicians. But those who are offended by gays and lesbians can state their views, and even pass their laws, without changing the foundational document of our democracy.

The Constitution has served its purpose nobly for over 200 years, establishing a form of government and securing the rights of citizens. We should not decide at this late date to use it as a means of *denying* rights to a group of citizens. We tried it with blacks—realized it was wrong and corrected it. We tried it with women—realized it was wrong and corrected it. There is no need to use that great document—which to many, including me, is as sacred as most scripture—to *deny* rights to anybody.

Before we turn to the Bible, let's consider this as a matter of civil rights—rights of people who have something other than heterosexual orientation. One of our parishioners told me, and was quoted in the newspaper, as saying the problem is with the word "marriage." It is her feeling that most people don't want to deny gays and lesbians the legal rights associated with marriage, but want instead to protect the *word* "marriage," and the traditional institution it represents—the legal and spiritual bond between one man and one woman. Her solution is to call this legal arrangement between same-sex couples "parriage," derived from the word "pair," establishing a different category from marriage, but securing all the rights and privileges of marriage.

I like that—*parriage*! And if she is right—if the problem is with our general feelings about the word "marriage" and not with our feelings about same-sex relationships, her solution will work.

However, I know that with some of my more religiously zealous friends, they would not accept this new term, because they just can't get past what they believe is the biblical injunction against same-sex relationships. And so now I will take off my "American citizen" hat and put on my "Bible-reading Christian clergy" hat.

Last week, we saw the folly in trying to make the ancient Levitical Code from the Bible the law of the land. We considered all the problems that creates, like deciding what a fair price is for our daughters when we sell them into slavery, and determining what method of capital punishment we should use for those who break a variety of laws, such as working on Sundays or getting haircuts.

But the Bible is foundational to the Christian faith, so let's look at those biblical passages Christians use to condemn homosexuality, and see if there is any way a person could confess the Christian faith, and not condemn same-sex marriage.

There are five sets of texts from the Bible that people use to condemn homosexuality. First, there is the creation story from the Book of Genesis; second, there is the story of Sodom and Gomorra, found in the 19th chapter of Genesis and also in Judges and Ezekiel; third, there is the Holiness Code found in Leviticus; fourth, Paul's letter to the Romans; and fifth, Paul's list of vices, found in both 1st Corinthians and 1st Timothy. We'll examine each of these five texts.

By now we've all seen the bumper stickers and heard the wise-cracking fundamentalists saying, "God made Adam and *Eve*, not Adam and *Steve*." This is probably the weakest biblical argument against same-sex relationships. There is no condemnation here—only the fact that homosexual behavior is not mentioned. Well, neither is friendship, but that doesn't mean friendship is immoral. Don't get me wrong. People who condemn gays and lesbians have plenty of ammunition in the Bible; but reciting the Genesis creation account makes for a pretty weak argument.

But then we have Sodom and Gomorrah. In the 19th chapter of Genesis, God destroys both of those cities because of their wickedness. What was the nature of this wickedness? There has been an historic assumption that the sin was homosexuality, and that led to the term sodomy, derived from the name of one of the cities—Sodom. But nowhere in the Bible does it say this.

Sodom is referred to throughout the Old Testament as a place of wickedness. According to some books, the sin of Sodom was pride. According to Ezekiel, the sin of Sodom was laziness and ignoring the poor. Jesus, in both Matthew and Luke, is under the impression that God destroyed Sodom because the people were not hospitable to strangers. But nowhere does the Bible say the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah involved same-sex relationships.

The next example cited to repudiate homosexuality is Leviticus. I'll quote from that book. Leviticus 18:22 reads, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." And Leviticus 20:13 says, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, they shall be put to death."

There is no dancing around those statements. The Levitical Code from the Hebrew Bible condemns same-sex relationships. Now, of the 613 laws in the Torah, we Christians choose to ignore about 590 of them; after all, we cut our hair, and we don't sell our daughters into slavery, and we don't put our children to death if they swear.

These ancient laws must be placed in their historical context. The Hebrew people had arrived in Canaan, declared that God had promised them that land several hundred years previously, and went about establishing their religion in the land. The Hebrews were not to worship the Canaanite gods. Those gods were worshipped in temples, and it was common practice for male prostitutes to serve at those temples. The very strict laws in the Hebrew Bible were established to set the Hebrew people apart from the Canaanites, and male prostitution was not something acceptable in Hebrew culture. Please understand there was no concept of sexual orientation. There was no concept that two people of the same sex might live in a committed relationship with one another. The behavior being condemned was behavior that needed to be condemned—male prostitution.

This does not mean that the Hebrew Bible condones same-sex behavior—far from it. But the fact is, the behavior under attack in Leviticus is behavior that even those of us who are entirely accepting of gays and lesbians continue to find sinful. It had nothing to do with love, and everything to do with the perversion of religion through the abuse of sexuality.

And now we go to the New Testament, and the writings of Paul. I'll quote from Romans: "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men

committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

But listen as Paul describes the people who are engaging in this behavior. They are “filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

We all have friends who are gay and lesbian, and if your experience is anything like mine, that description is about as far from the truth as you could possibly get. Paul is describing some very bad people. Paul is describing people who have done everything they possibly can to turn away from God, including turning away from their *natural* sexual orientation to satisfy their lustful natures.

Elsewhere in the New Testament Paul condemns sodomites. Most reputable commentaries agree that a sodomite was a male prostitute, and had nothing to do with modern concepts of homosexuality. In summarizing Paul’s writings on this subject, Peter Gomes says that the behavior Paul condemns was, “willful, lustful, exploitive, avaricious, self-deceiving, self-absorbed, and thus idolatrous.”

We have now considered all the biblical injunctions against homosexuality. Now friends, I know a lot of people have difficulty with this issue. But I don’t. And I’ll tell you somebody else that evidently had no problem with it. Listen now, as I say to you every single word Jesus ever said on this subject...

He never mentioned it. The Christ; the Son of God; the Messiah; the one who was killed for pointing out our self-righteousness and our sins—and there were plenty of sins he did point out—pride, greed, envy, anger, judging others—the one we call Lord had every opportunity to weigh in on this subject and did not.

Maybe he knew something others did not. Maybe he understood human nature better than his contemporaries, and better than many of *our* contemporaries. Maybe he understood that human beings do not choose their sexual orientation any more than they choose their race or their sex or the color of their eyes.

Friends, I do not understand sexual orientation. I really don’t. I am thrilled that I was born heterosexual. I like having a wonderful wife, and beautiful children, and I appreciate the acceptance I receive in this world for simply being who I am. But I did not choose. Listen, because this is important. There was never a time in my life when as a young man I found myself attracted to both males and females, and made a conscious decision only to pursue relationships with people of the opposite sex. It never happened. I did not choose my sexual orientation.

I admit it makes me wonder about people who insist that sexual orientation is a choice. Did *they* choose? If so, I assume that means they are bisexual, which is fine with me, because I don’t understand that any more than I understand any other sexual orientation.

But there *are* a few things I know. I know that the highest suicide demographic in our society is gay men between 16 and 25. I wonder why that is? Do we really believe it is because they are upset with themselves for making the wrong choice? Or is it they find they cannot live in a world where they are hated simply for being who they are?

And what about church? It seems to me that the one place in this hate-filled world a gay or lesbian person should be able to go and be accepted exactly as they are

is the Christian Church; and yet that is the very institution that leads the battle against them! That is the place where they find more hatred than anywhere else in society.

Hey, I'm not naïve. When I learn of the behavior that takes place in the gay bath houses in San Francisco, I am just as repulsed as I am by the behavior at any house of ill repute right here in Wichita. And when a person who has a same-sex orientation changes partners as often as I change my shirt, I am as disgusted by that promiscuity as I am when the heterosexual men I know treat sex like some sort of athletic event, keeping score as they go along.

But the answer to the problem of promiscuity is not to outlaw marriage... or parriage... or whatever we want to call it. Because if two people are in love, and are willing to commit their lives to one another, and live with fidelity in spiritual unity, who has the right to stand in the way?

Well, I know I am in the minority on this subject. But it is one of the few subjects about which I feel passionately enough to speak out publicly, beyond the walls of this church. I just don't think there is any room in this world for prejudice. For centuries we were prejudice against blacks, citing the Bible as justification for our bigotry; but we finally got over that. From the dawn of civilization we were prejudice against women, but now, finally, just in the past century, we have started getting over that.

I think the reason some folks are so adamant that we maintain our stand against gays and lesbians is that we're running out of people to discriminate against. What is a white, heterosexual male of European descent to do?

Well, I have an idea on that subject. How about if we evolve? How about if we look not to the letter of the law but to the spirit of Jesus to help us decide who is in and who is out with regard to God's grace? And we may make mistakes along the way. We may have some explaining to do when we look back on our lives. It may be that God will say, "You accepted those you should not have accepted. You cared for those you should have shunned. You loved those who were not deserving of your love."

But I don't think it works that way. And at the end of our days, I hope God says to each and every one of us, "At practically every turn you erred on the side of love, acceptance, understanding and compassion..."

"Good job."

Rev. Dr. Gary Cox, Sr. Minister
University Congregational Church
9209 E. 29th Street North
Wichita, KS 67206
316-634-0430
www.ucchurch.org