

UNITED METHODIST

Sermon on Marriage Equality
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Text: selections from I John 3 and 4. Using the Epistle's references to God as love.

Grace be yours and peace from Jesus Christ our Lord.

I. Along with Sally Poland, Jim Young, Bishop Cliff Ives and about 100 others, I am part of the New England Conference's Retired Reconciling Clergy. We are committed to bring about the full inclusion of homosexuals in the United Methodist Church, the Christian community and our society in general.

My position is essentially based on scripture and I will try to respond to those who emphasize different scriptures, particularly Leviticus, but I want to begin in the same place that scripture begins: with stories.

1. My friend Harry is someone I have known since Seminary days. He is a gifted church musician and composer – several of his hymn tunes are in the UM Hymnal and other Hymnals. One night, during our Seminary time, he came to my room to tell me about his being gay. He said that as a teen he came to that self-understanding and he took the step of telling his family. Their response was to take him to a psychologist to “change him”. The psychologist used aversion therapy – subjecting Harry to images of homosexual acts accompanied by shock treatments. The idea was to give him an aversion to homosexuality or homosexual acts.

Instead, his aversion was to his parents and extended family. They have never fully reconciled, though some truce has occurred.

Why do we do this to people? Is this reflective of a God of Love? A God of inclusion? Is this what the God of Jesus Christ wants from us?

2. Jeff was one of my Interns while I was serving in Watertown, Mass. He was talented and led the youth groups. Jeff was from the West Ohio Conference and a student at BU. He was engaged, but his conversation about that was more about the fact that West Ohio demanded that a Pastor be married in order to be Ordained.

I knew about such restrictions as my own Bishop in Philadelphia had the same requirement, even sending unmarried clergy to churches with lots of eligible women! Something that is prohibited now.

Jeff completed his year with us, graduated and went back to West Ohio. But instead of getting married and Ordained, he broke his engagement, left the Conference and went to San Francisco to minister to AIDS patients. I met Jeff recently at a funeral where we were co-officiating. He is still active in AIDS ministry, happily partnered – but lost to the UMC. God is using his skills, but at what cost to the Church?

3. Kenny was one of my finest Interns, also at Watertown; second only to Elaine Stanovsky, and she is a Bishop now. His ministry was with Young Adults. He was open with me about his sexuality, but said that he could live with UM rules, which basically require a gay or lesbian Pastor to be quiet about it.

After his graduation, he went back to Baltimore-Washington Conference as a Probationary Elder. He was assigned a small church outside Silver Spring. Within 3 years, it was one of the fastest growing churches in the Conference and Ken was ready for Ordination as an Elder.

He withdrew instead.

He found he had to be honest with himself and live his life in a committed relationship, something the UMC would not permit.

Is this God's will or Church law?

4. Finally, Jane. A delightful young girl in our congregation in Somerset, Mass. She grew into a fine young woman, head of the Social Justice Committee of the Church and active throughout Church life. But in her 20's she put on lots of weight and began cutting herself. Clearly depressed.

Finally, at about 30, she met someone and discovered her own sexuality. Today, they are married and living together in Colorado, where they have adopted two severely disabled children, providing a wonderful home for them. And no one else was likely to do so.

She no longer attends the UMC.

II. I believe our sexuality is on a continuum, all of us on a line from strongly heterosexual to strongly homosexual, with most somewhere in between. It is a genetic given, a gift of the God who creates us all.

But as I say this, I know that I must respond to the critics who point to Biblical injunctions against homosexuality.

First, Scripture knows nothing of homosexuality as part of our nature. For the writers 3,000 plus years ago, homosexuality was always an aberration, a perverse act by someone who is otherwise heterosexual in violation of their own nature.

Not only that, they were also acting promiscuously, since the requirement was that everyone be married.

And the New Testament adds the sin of idolatry, because Paul in at least one instance is clearly referring to temple prostitution.

So, homosexuality for Biblical writers was **always** contrary to nature, promiscuous and often idolatrous. We would all be against these

But add to this the threat for people 3,500 years ago to their very survival. All sex had to be about procreation. Villages were a handful of people; even major cities were a few thousand at most. Forget the numbers bandied about in Scripture, they are for effect and do not reflect the sparseness of the population. Thus, polygamy is sanctioned for Abraham, Jacob. Thus, Lot is not condemned for impregnating his two daughters. But Onan is executed for "spilling his seed".

This is not the cultural understanding of our own day and generation.

III. I believe in a God of inclusion, who calls all people into relationship: relationship with God, with the community and as a deepest experience of that relationship, intimate monogamous partnership, heterosexual or homosexual.

Now I understand that others disagree – and they will point to scripture. I get that. But why such vitriol, such hatred, such venom spewed out by those who oppose inclusiveness?

I had trouble working that out until I had the chance to be at the Legislative hearings on Marriage Equality in Augusta, where I had the privilege of testifying. There, as I listened to the opposition, and their increasing anger, I began to draw some conclusions – of course imputing motivation to anyone else is always dangerous and must be tentative, but I believe I am justified by what I heard there.

My conclusion is this: Homosexual unions threaten the ancient concept of the superiority of the male. Throughout Christian history – and Islamic as well – we have been taught that men are superior. It was even written into the U.S. Constitution: who was allowed to vote? White men of property. It is only in the 20th century that women are allowed to vote in this country; if you know someone who is 90, they have been alive longer than women have been permitted to vote.

Indeed, a woman was considered property in Scripture, belonging first to her father, then husband or brother. Adultery could not be committed against a woman – it was a property crime against another man!

Even now, it is the assumption that white male is the “norm” for the Supreme Court, as though to be white male is to be objective and without a biased background, the proper and appropriate choice for the Supremes. Anyone else is a “special case.” Nonsense when spoken aloud, but it is the unspoken bias.

We long referred to the male as head of the house, the decision maker. Anything else is “henpecked”; we wonder “who wears the pants in that family?”

Well, who wears the pants in a same sex relationship? I suggest to you that the issue is really not so much about homosexuality – though it is that in part – but about mutuality and equality; it is about overturning male hegemony. And that is why it is so emotional.

I believe God affirms mutual, loving, respectful relationships based on equality, whether hetero- or homo- sexual. That is the key, rather than the gender of the partners.

IV. Now, I may be wrong. I may be wrong about the ideology; I may be wrong about God and God’s inclusive love.

However, I would rather be wrong on the side of inclusion, mutuality and relationship, than be on the side of exclusion and judgmentalism.

The God I worship does not exclude and calls on me to be inclusive, accepting and loving of God’s children, acknowledging their full humanity regardless of sexuality. It is not gender that matters but a willingness to live in committed relationship. Thus, I must act with my colleagues to witness to that commitment and it is why I am part of the Reconciling Clergy. And I pray that the United Methodist Church will come to this position and allow its pastors and members to live as I believe God means us to live. Amen.