

*On the Side of Love*

Acts 11; Matthew 7:

13 January 2008

Last summer the Council at my other church asked me to lead a Bible study and preach a sermon on the Bible and homosexuality. At last, some seven months later, I'm fulfilling the request. I realize that this is a hot topic for some people, and some may feel like I am unfairly springing this issue on you when you just wanted to go to church and worship God, but let me stress again that the council asked me to preach on this. We'd been discussing the then upcoming General Synod, and the fact that there are many families today who are looking for an ONA church in which to raise their children. The Council said, well, why don't you tell us more about this. I offered to do a Bible study, and they said, "Do a sermon too. Not everyone goes to Bible study." So here I am.

And let me further stress that I am not here to declare The Absolute Truth. This is an issue that Christians of good faith can disagree on. After all, we disagree on everything else: the death penalty, abortion, whether women should be ordained, whether Christians should drink alcohol. And as in those cases there are a variety of views, and all of them can be sincere, all can be based on the Bible, all can have valid points to make – and they can all co-exist within Christianity. So I am not here to change your mind or tell you what to believe. I'm here today to show you how one Christian, me, arrived at my views on this issue. As with any of my sermons, you are free to disagree. If you do disagree – or even if you agree! – feel free to tell me that. Explain why you hold your views. I'll probably learn a thing or two! The important thing to me is that regardless of where we each stand on this issue, we are all Christians. Let us remember the wisdom of our German Evangelical forbears, who said, "In essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things charity." Homosexuality is, quite frankly, one of the nonessentials of Christianity. By that I don't mean that it isn't important to some people, but it's just not one of the defining aspects of Christianity. Jesus said nothing at all about the subject, which means there is plenty of room for all views.

So, to tell you my own story. Like most straight people, I never thought about this growing up. I was in college before I met my first real live out gay person. In previous generations, people may never have come out at all but rather remained in the closet all their lives, which meant that straight people had fewer chances to get to know gay folks. In my generation people came out in college. Today's generation comes out in middle school. I will say this: knowing actual live gay people does make a difference, because you find out that they're just like straight people. People that you actually know are not as scary as people you've only heard of.

So I knew some gay people in college, but I still didn't think about it too much in terms of my faith. I had vague feelings and intuitions: it seemed to me that God is about love, so how could loving someone be wrong? But it also seemed to me that the Bible said homosexuality was a sin, an abomination, and I didn't know what to do about that, so I opted not to think about it at all.

But then I went to seminary. The issue cropped up in various ways, and I realized that if I was going to be a minister, I really did need to figure this out. Because what if a church member someday came to me and said, "Pastor, I think I might be gay"? I needed to know what I would say to such a person. So I spent about a year studying the issue and praying about it. I studied the Bible, theology, anthropology, church historians, counselors and psychology. That is not to say I have become an expert, but to say that I am not ignorant about homosexuality. My position is not the only one that can be arrived at after such study, but I want you to know that I did come to it after great study. It is not a whim, or an unthinking response to what is "politically correct."

And in the end I arrived pretty much at the point where I started: God is love. And everything else must be interpreted in this light. The Bible says a great many things, and not everything in it contains the same moral weight. That's where the differences come in Christianity. You can read the Bible and interpret that Christians should never engage in war. You can also read the Bible and interpret that sometimes war is necessary. You can even read it and interpret that God sometimes authorizes war directly. All these views can be arrived at from the Bible, and the differences arise because we give different weight to various passages. That's why we need diversity in nonessentials, and in all things charity!

So here is my more complex explanation of my view, based on my interpretation of the Bible: Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. For that matter, he had almost nothing to say about heterosexuality either, except that he wasn't in favor of divorce – and many of us today manage to disagree even with him about that! Instead, Jesus had a lot to say about love. You've been hearing my sermons for two/seven years now so hopefully this part is starting to sound familiar. God is absolute, never-ending love. God is radical forgiveness and extravagant welcome. Throughout his ministry, Jesus time and time again said that those whom the religious establishment said were unclean, impure, sinners, unworthy – that all of these were in fact welcome and could be full members of the people of God. He picked lepers, Samaritans, women and gentiles, tax-collectors and prostitutes. The fact that we no longer view these people as automatic sinners is a testimony to how successful Jesus was, but make no mistake: these people were the gays of their day. The religious establishment had perfectly legitimate reasons for excluding them, all based on the laws in the book of Leviticus and what is known as the Holiness Code.

There are two kinds of laws in Leviticus: moral laws such as *Thou shalt not kill* and holiness laws such as *Thou shalt not wear mixed cotton/polyester t-shirts*. The gay stuff is part of the Holiness Code. This is legitimate Biblical scholarship. It is *not* part of the moral code, although people today think of it as a moral issue. I'll go into it in more detail in the bible study if you're interested, but trust me, this is a fact: the gay stuff in the Bible is not about morality but about keeping kosher.

And the kosher thing is significant because it was a huge issue in the early church. Did gentiles and tax-collectors have to become good practicing kosher Jews in order to be Christian? Did they have to keep the Holiness Code? Well, Peter had a vision about a cloth lowered from heaven and every unclean, non-kosher food on it. And God said, "What I have cleansed, you must not call unclean." Now, Peter's vision was *not* about dietary laws. It was about people, as becomes clear if you read chapter eleven in its entirety. The conclusion Peter draws from this is that those people whom the Holiness Code considers unclean are in fact declared clean by God, so they no longer need to keep kosher. My question then is this: if we as Christians no longer have to keep the Holiness Code, then how can we expect gay people to? All of us have been declared clean, including gays.

But that's not to say there is no morality at stake. Instead, the new Holiness Code, if you will, is this: it's not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but what comes out. Or stated another way, by their fruits you will know them. Time and again Jesus says that a person can look like a good, moral, upstanding religious person on the outside, but they might bear evil fruit. And a person may look like the worst sinner in the world, but they might in fact bear good fruit.

And what are those fruits? Paul tells us in Galatians. The evil fruits are things like licentiousness, idolatry, strife, jealousy, anger, quarreling. The good fruits are things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and so on. (Gal. 5:19-23) And he wraps up with this verse, which is extremely important: *against these there is no law*. What that says to me is that being gay or straight is no virtue or vice in itself. Rather, all people must be judged by the fruit they bear. In the case of couples, what fruit does their relationship bear? Now there are certainly gay people who fail by these standards,

but then straight people have Britney Spears. On the other hand there are many straights and many gays who bear good fruit. And what does Paul say? Against these there is no law.

Other people can read the same Bible and end up in a different place, and that's fine. Paul says we must each work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, and this is what I have worked out. It's not a matter of convenience. It's not a matter of picking and choosing which parts of the Bible I like. It's not about being politically correct. As Martin Luther said, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

There are two epilogues to this story: First is that a couple of months after I reached this conclusion, I got a call from my sister. She said, "Rita, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but I'm bisexual." I have to confess that my first thought was, "Oh thank God I don't have to go back and change my beliefs now!" I tell you this because I've had members of a previous church tell me it was important for them to know that I arrived at my beliefs before my sister came out to me. Often it is only when a family member comes out to them that people change their beliefs. I don't think there's anything wrong with that; it just means something you previously had no experience with now has become very personal. But some people said it was important to them to know I believed this first, so I pass it on to you.

The second thing, and I said this to the church council at the other church is that while I absolutely fully and 100% believe Christians can disagree on this, and I have no problems at all with this church not being ONA. I love this church, I'm proud to be your pastor, and I brag about you all the time. But I will not be here forever, and I am a mother now. Any church I serve in the future will almost have to be ONA because of my son. He has a gay aunt. He will have gay friends. He might be gay himself. I want him to grow up in a church where he will know that regardless of his orientation, he is fully welcome as a beloved child of God.