

Gay Marriage: A Position Paper

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Introduction:

The following thoughts are mine and mine alone. They do not reflect the policy of Los Altos United Methodist Church or the United Methodist Denomination. These are not the only positions that can be held by faithful people. I sincerely respect those with differing points of view and am always open to learn. I offer this paper in hopes of encouraging discussion regarding an important topic of the day.

Gay Marriage:

A parishioner writes a question being asked by many of us:

"Pastor Mark: The papers these days are filled with the topic of gay marriage. I recognize that there are those in the church that oppose it, and that this sentiment can be traced to the early church leaders. What I was wondering is whether there is anything in the teachings of Christ which is interpreted as opposition to gay marriage or gay relationships?"

Jesus made no direct references regarding the word "homosexuality". The closest he may have come to such a reference is his use of the term "sinners". The term in general is for anyone outside of the Jewish purity codes including "social and moral outcasts". The term can relate to those with sexual history or behavior disapproved of by the pious. Jesus doesn't make reference to approving of such behavior. The fact that he would go out of his way to have fellowship, conversation and contact with such folk and include them in his invitation to the Kingdom of God, was quite scandalous in his day (Matthew 9:10-13, 11:19, 18:17, 21:31-32). For the pious it put his righteousness into question (Luke 7:36-50). It even disturbed his disciples (John 4).

Much has been made of Jesus' silence regarding homosexuality suggesting that his silence was tacit approval. He is also silent on other topics as well; for example, infanticide, a religious tradition in certain Near Eastern sects so abhorrent to the Jewish faith that it can be assumed Jesus didn't need to talk about it. Homosexual behavior was also seen as abhorrent by the Judeo tradition in first century Palestine. Does Jesus' silence suggest his concurrence with this tradition? Jesus is also from a small village in the Galilee which is a neighbor to a large Roman, cosmopolitan community. Evidence suggests he was well versed in, and exposed to, Greek and Roman ideas and culture. Greek and Roman culture accepted homosexual practice. Does Jesus' silence suggest his assumption of those traditions? You can see why this topic is still heavily debated.*

There would be no understanding in Jesus' world of a "gay marriage" if by "marriage" we mean a legal, public relationship between same gender couples. Marriage was largely a social contract between families

having little to do with modern Northern European ideals of life long romance and fidelity and much more to do with property ownership, social status and lineage. Semantically the word "marriage" has only been understood in reference between a man and a woman. Homosexual behavior was not unknown but the idea of "gay marriage" would be completely foreign to that world view.

The apostle Paul speaks to the issue of homosexuality in a few places in the New Testament (Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9, I Timothy 1:9-11). He comes out of the Judeo tradition which understands male homosexual behavior by Levite priests to be an "abomination" (Lev. 18:22, 20:13). From an ancient society that knew little of publicly open, loving, committed relationships between consenting adults of the same gender, scholars debate* whether the Bible's references to "homosexuals" can be directly translated into modern English. For example, in two of Paul's references the word in Greek translated in English as "homosexual" refers to the term used to describe the exploitative use of young boys in male prostitution not consenting adults.

How We Use the Bible:

Transposing ancient social norms to the 21st century is not just a matter of semantics. We often quote the bible to justify our prejudices, picking and choosing verses to justify our points of view.

Consider how willing many are to quote Leviticus 20:13, "male homosexual behavior is an abomination" as culturally relevant for today while dismissing the second half of the same verse "and they shall be put to death" as the quaint relic of an ancient past.

Politicians, preachers and talk show hosts are quick to use the bible to condemn gays and lesbians while conveniently ignoring much of what else this ancient text has to say about marriage. For example:

-Marriage shall not impede a man's right to take concubines in addition to his wife or wives. (II Sam 5:13; I Kings 11:3; II Chron 11:21)

-A marriage shall be considered valid only if the wife is a virgin. If the wife is not a virgin, she shall be executed. (Deut 22:13-21)

-Marriage of a believer and a nonbeliever is forbidden. (Gen 24:3; Num 25:1-9; Ezra 9:12; Neh 10:30, 2Cor 6:14)

-Divorce is forbidden except in the case of adultery. (Deut 22:19; Matthew 19:1-9, Mark 10:9-12)

-If a married man dies without children, his brother must marry the widow. If the brother refuses to marry the widow, or deliberately does not give her children, he shall pay a fine of one shoe and be otherwise punished in a manner to be determined by law. (Gen. 38:6- 10; Deut 25:5-10)

-Any sexual intercourse outside of marriage is considered "fornication" and those practicing it are not getting into heaven. (I Corinthians 6:9-10, I Thess. 4:3, Rev. 22:15)

In a society that lives with a 50% divorce rate, commonly accepts cohabitation of our adult children before their marriages, cohabitation between consenting seniors due to financial and tax constraints...all of

which the bible would consider "sinful"... it is ironic that the heterosexual majority condemns committed homosexual relationships in part "because the bible says it's a sin"!

The majority often interprets biblical injunctions regarding divorce, sex outside of marriage and inter-faith marriage within the context of the original history of the bible. Only fringe groups would argue for polygamy, death to non-virgin women or a brother-in-law's responsibility to marry the widow based on what the "bible says". Those Christian denominations willing to include the divorced, inter-faith marriages and those sexually active outside of marriage within their ministry do so arguing that biblical proscriptions against such tolerance are no longer applicable in the modern context. But when it comes to homosexuality almost no religious organizations are willing to suggest that same tolerance.

The official policy of the United Methodist denomination opposes gay and lesbian "marriage" and the ordination of gay and lesbians as clergy. These policies have been affirmed by wide majority of votes at its General Conferences, the governing body of the church, since 1974. This opposition to full inclusion of gay and lesbian people is based largely on a rationale of a biblical interpretation which is capricious, arbitrary and hypocritical.

Biblical Interpretation:

Both liberals and conservatives will pick and choose their favorite biblical texts to justify their causes and bias. (One could fairly argue that that is exactly what I am doing in this article!) The challenge of faith is to use the bible to hear the living word of God (John 1:1-14, 5:39-40) not simply as a gauntlet in a theological debate.

Over and over again the bible describes how God brings a new message to his people.

In Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount he says, "...do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18). Immediately following this admonition, Jesus re-interprets Old Testament scripture, including three of the Ten Commandments, in radically new ways (Matthew 5:21-45):

"You have heard it said...'You shall not murder'...but I say to you that if you are angry...you will be liable to judgment..."

"You have heard it said...'You shall not commit adultery'...but I say that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart..."

"It was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce'. But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife...causes her to commit adultery..."

"You have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'...but I say, turn the other cheek..."

"You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."

Clearly Jesus' new interpretation "fulfills" the "jot and tittle" (Matthew 5:18 KJV) of the law and the prophets. He refuses a literal interpretation of these Old Testament scriptures. Rather he is able to discern the truth within them and apply it in new and urgent ways for his generation.

Throughout the gospels Jesus interprets Old Testament scripture in ways far beyond the conventional wisdom of his day. He feeds his disciples on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8, Mark 2:23-28, Luke 6:1-5). He heals the sick on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6, Luke 6:6-11, John 9). He disputes with the orthodox of his day the written traditions of purity laws in Leviticus (15:11-f, 22:1-16) regarding what does and does not defile a person (Matthew 15:10-20, Mark 7:1-23).

Jesus, the "word made flesh" (John 1:14), is not the only one in the New Testament to re-shape the meaning of scripture held as the inspired words of God.

Luke, the writer of Acts, reports how Peter is given a vision by God re-interpreting age-old dietary laws regarding what could and could not be eaten (Acts 10:9-16). Paul, himself a Jew, passionately asserts that circumcision, the essential ritual of initiation for the Jewish people as ordained by God to Abraham (Genesis 17:1-27), is no longer the sign of the covenant between the righteous and God (Galatians 5:1-12, 6:11-16).

Although Jesus does not speak directly to the issue of homosexuality or gay marriage his teachings and example are germane. Our Lord clearly and consistently teaches us that holy scriptures are not an end in themselves but a means to hear the spirit of a just, loving and living God. They are not to be used to justify fear, hatred or an empty self-righteousness.

God did not stop speaking when the canon, the 66 books authorized as Holy Scriptures, was formulated in the 4th century AD. If the bible teaches us anything it is that the spirit of God is on the move with his people throughout history and the changing conditions they face. For example:

-The bible codifies and regulates slavery as an institution. Jesus says nothing directly against the institution and the apostle Paul supports it outright. Yet in the 18th century Christians inspired by the living word heard a new message from God and sacrificed to begin a movement that ended slavery within 200 years.

-The bible relegates women to second class citizenship at best, the status of property at worst. Yet in the 19th and 20th centuries Christians inspired by the living word heard a new message from God and fought for universal suffrage and equal rights for all genders.

God is speaking a new word for us today regarding those with sexual orientations different than the majority. The Jesus that welcomes "the sinner" to his table and invites the outcast into the kingdom of God

would urge us not to use the bible as the basis to exclude and discriminate.

Equal Rights:

Refusing to offer the same legal protections and status for committed gay and lesbian relationships as heterosexual is blatant social discrimination. Law abiding, tax paying and contributing citizens of our country should be afforded equal rights under the law regardless of their sexual orientation. Whether the majority likes it or not gays and lesbians serve in our military, teach our children and preach in our pulpits; often hiding their orientation to do so.

A marriage license has always and only been a legal contract regulated by the state to insure fiscal, property and lineage rights between two adults. The issuance of a marriage license by the state and county has never "sanctified" anything. (Was the state of Nevada "sanctifying" Brittney Spears' 48 hour marriage to her boy friend when it issued them a piece of paper?) Government, especially under a constitution separating church from state, has no business defining what is sacred about anything, let alone the relationship between two consenting adults. Political rhetoric insisting that the government must protect the "sanctity of marriage" by openly discriminating against the rights of a minority in our society is hollow and politically self serving. Half of marriage licenses in our society will be revoked by divorce. We flock to be entertained by movies, TV, books and music that assume if not promote "fornication" and adultery. To suggest that "gay marriage" threatens the "sanctity" of heterosexual relationships is the height of hypocrisy and prejudice.

It's debatable whether the churches "sanctify" a marriage when officiating a wedding ceremony. Certainly the church, and those present, can recognize a holy moment and intention when a couple publicly vows commitment and love, asking God's blessing for the same. A church's cooperation or the priest's prayer cannot confer "sacredness" to the couple. If it did, weddings performed in churches would never end in divorce or be fouled by sin. Rather it is God and God alone who confers sacredness to a couple's intention at the moment of their vows and in their relationship as they love, honor and cherish each other over a life time.

The United States of America does not require all couples wishing to be married to hold ceremonies in religious institutions. All are required to pay for a state or county license. Heterosexual couples have the option to have a civil ceremony without religious connotations.

Religious bodies should have the right to determine who and how they will celebrate a marriage, including our own United Methodist denomination which prohibits gay marriage. But government has no business legislating discrimination against any law abiding, consenting adult. Government should offer the same legal protections and responsibilities in the marriage license for homosexual committed relationships as they do for heterosexual couples.

The heterosexual majority may find homosexual behavior and culture strange or repulsive. That is no basis for social discrimination.

We've been down this road too many times before in America when religious and political bias has been used to justify the majority's fears by restricting the rights of others.

Conclusions:

It is difficult at best to project 21st century ethics regarding sexual orientation onto Jesus or the leaders of the early church. They faced an entirely different world view and context. However Jesus' vision of the "reign of God" in which all are included to experience God's grace, forgiveness, peace and justice have inspired two millennia of the faithful and still does so today.

Jesus would be the first to honor and celebrate sacred scripture and use it to encounter the living God. By teaching and example he suggests biblical literalism and manipulation cuts the community off from the living word.

To use the bible as the justification to discriminate against a minority within our society is wrong. God may be speaking a new word to us today as we once again wrestle with our prejudices regarding gay marriage.

I am one of a minority of United Methodist clergy who yearn for the day when gay and lesbian people are fully included in the life, ministry and worship of our church. I also understand that such a day is in the distance due to the hatred, fear and prejudice our society has for these children of God. It took centuries for the church and society to change its policies towards slavery, people of color and the role and status of women; social concerns in which we still have a long way to go.

It is unjust that we should discriminate against committed, consenting gay and lesbian adults based on biblical tradition when we openly use that same biblical tradition to no longer discriminate against the divorced and those sexually active before and after marriage. I fully support according the same rights and responsibilities to civil unions for consensual, committed relationships between adults of the same gender. And I pray for the day we can celebrate their unions as "holy" in United Methodist churches.

* Note the work of Paul A. Mickey in Of Sacred Worth (Abingdon, 1991) and Robin Scroggs in The New Testament and Homosexuality (Fortress, 1983) as examples of responsible scholarship from the "right" and "left", respectively, in this debate.