

October 31, 2021

“Marriage, Sex and Sin”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Selected verses from Song of Solomon; Psalm 139:13-16

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Well, today it's Part Two of my talking about the LGBTQ+ issue and our position here at John Wesley. And I want to continue to talk about how we look at and interpret the Bible. Because, after all, we are trying to discern God's will for our lives and our church. Now last week I gave you a more general overview of the Bible, and shared some examples of how we don't always uphold all the Biblical laws, how “progressive revelation” helps us interpret the Bible as it pertains to our particular time and place, and, most importantly, how Jesus' primary law was the law of love. This week, I want look at what the Bible says about three areas that are central to the LGBTQ+ issue: marriage, sex and sin. And let me preface this sermon by saying that when I talk about same sex relationships, I'm talking about loving, consensual, committed relationships. I'm not talking about promiscuous, wanton sex. That's wrong whether it's homosexual or heterosexual. Our John Wesley declaration and position is based on two people being in a loving relationship.

Now before I get to Scripture, let's first look at what the “official” church stance on sex has been. You know, I'm guessing some of you are feeling a bit uncomfortable hearing the word “sex” from the pulpit. That's because the church has been remiss in talking about it. It's all over television, movies, social media, the internet, work places, even in the Oval Office. But unfortunately, the church has either been silent about sex, or has put it in a bad light. For centuries, the main themes heard out of the pulpit had to do with rules around abstention, adultery and divorce. And still today, some churches remain rigid in their approach to sex. For example, the doctrine of the Catholic Church, the world's largest Christian church, is that sex should be primarily for the procreation of children. Catholics define sexual self-stimulation, non-marital heterosexual intercourse, homosexual intercourse, and other forms of sexual contact as sinful to various degrees. Artificial insemination, sterilization and man-made forms of contraception are also rejected. And the church does not recognize divorce. In summation, with regard to sex, the Catholic Church is still one of the most restrictive world religions.

Now most mainline Protestant churches take a slightly different tact. They recognize the human sexual urge is a gift from God. Our own United Methodist Discipline states, “We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons.” Now – trust me, I recognize the irony in that statement, vs. the statement “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” I'll just leave it there. Now for these mainline churches, sex serves not only the purpose of procreation, but also the purpose of personal

enrichment and fulfillment for two partners, which leads to strengthening and intensifying their emotional and spiritual bond together. Non-coital forms of sex, contraception, and sterilization are considered acceptable. Premarital sex is discouraged though not talked about. And unhappy marriages can be dissolved by divorce.¹ As you see, there is more wiggle room here when it comes to these issues.

So let's first talk about marriage, because the issue of same sex marriage has been divisive. Should two people of the same sex be allowed to marry? Well, think for a moment – how would you define marriage? Many people would say “marriage is between a man and a woman” because of the story in the Book of Genesis and the creation of Adam and Eve. We're told, “Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner. Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” Now this definitely describes marriage between two heterosexuals, which was of course the culture of the time when Genesis was written. But does it really define what marriage is? For those who are married, think of your own marriages. Isn't marriage better defined as a union where two people are helpers and partners just as God described. Two individuals emotionally, spiritually, and physically united, enjoying and caring for each other and for God's creation. And can't two homosexual individuals fit that description. Because if we hold fast to the thinking that marriage is between one man and one woman, how do we rationalize what comes later in the Bible.

Because let's look at some of the Old Testament patriarchs who had more than one wife. Abraham, the patriarch of the Israelites, had two wives. Jacob had two wives. King David, God's most highly favored, had at least eight wives. And King Solomon had seven hundred wives. And on top of that, they had concubines. Jacob had two concubines, David had at least ten, and Solomon had three hundred. Concubines were considered a secondary wife. She was to bear him children and provide for his sexual pleasure. She had rights and protection in the family, but was not of equal standing to the wife or wives. In addition to this, there was a Jewish law that said if a married man dies without having children, his brother was supposed to marry the widow and have children with the widow. So you can see how the concept of marriage as defined by one man and one woman gets a little muddled in the Old Testament.

¹ Sex and Religion, Magnus Hirschfield

But before it looks like I'm proposing polygamy, this is when it is important to look at the Bible in context – what was the culture at that time. Well, had God told Adam and Eve to “Be fruitful and multiply.” But sometimes wives were barren – they couldn't multiply. So to fulfill God's command, it seemed a good thing to have another wife, or concubine or two, to have babies, build a family, create a workforce, increase the size and strength of the tribe. And, remember, this was a patriarchal system. Women had no status – they were uneducated and unskilled. So unmarried women were dependent on family members for survival. If there were no family members, they couldn't provide for themselves. Therefore, becoming a concubine was more suitable than prostitution or homelessness – at least she was cared for. And so there was some leeway around the ‘one man, one woman’ model of marriage.

Now many people will go to the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 19, as proof that marriage is between one man and one woman. The Pharisees come to Jesus and ask if it was okay for a man to divorce his wife. In response, Jesus quotes that passage from Genesis, “At the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. They shall be joined together into one flesh. And since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together.” But if we look closely at this discussion, we see that the issue here is not marriage. The issue is divorce. Jesus says that God allowed for divorce because of the hardness of men's heart. And then he goes on to say that anyone who gets divorced and marries someone else commits adultery. So it's really those who are divorced, or married someone who is divorced – like me – who should be concerned with what Jesus said here. And I'll say more about this passage later.

Now, do you see how over time God has allowed space and grace to make room for how we define marriage. Because I'm going to go back to my original question – what is marriage? Is it a social construct? A legal contract? I like what St. Augustine said about three chief “goods of marriage.” They were... permanence, faithfulness and fruitfulness. And so, I would suggest that God's intention for marriage was that it be a love relationship – a kinship, a oneness, a caring commitment to each other that encompasses the entire being of both persons. And if that is God's intent, then why can't two people of the same sex enter into that covenant?

Which leads me to the topic of sex, which, for many people leads to the topic of sin. But let's start with sex. You heard those beautiful passages from the Song of Solomon today. They are beautiful words spoken between two people in love. God meant for sex to be an expression of love. It's an intimacy, a

sharing, a bonding that creates a oneness. And so the question becomes – is sex between two males or two females a sin? Well, let me say that sex between a male and female can be sin. Sex abuse is a sin. Sex trafficking is a sin. Adultery is a sin. Rape is a sin. Those non-loving sex acts between heterosexuals are a sin – an abomination. But let’s look at some of the passages often quoted when speaking against homosexuality. People will often go right to the verse I mentioned last week that reads, “If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death.” Now, this is found in Leviticus, where Moses is laying down the various laws about how the Israelites are supposed to live. So what might Moses have been thinking about and addressing when he wrote this particular law? For that, let’s look at the background and context. There are two places in the Hebrew Bible which refer to men lying with men. One, in Genesis there is the story of God sending two angels, messengers in the form of men, to the city of Sodom – an evil city that God was about to destroy. Lot, Abraham’s nephew, invited them to stay with him. Genesis then tells us that men from all over the city surrounded the house and called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we might know them.” That’s the Biblical euphemism for having sex. But Lot refused, saying, “No – don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But not the men – they are under the protection of my roof.” Again – the culture of the time. This is the patriarchal world where women had a much more subservient status, and somehow Lot felt justified giving up his daughters to be raped. And you see, that’s what this story is about – rape. It’s not about a loving, committed relationship between individuals. It’s about a group of angry men seeking to demonstrate their power and humiliate and denigrate these strangers. And you could see how Moses would want to forbid this kind of abominable behavior.

Another issue of the time is that the Israelites were trying to separate themselves from pagan tribes and their practices. The worship of pagan gods involved performing sexual acts with both female and male prostitutes. It appears to have been a fertility ritual, or perhaps sex for pay to help support the pagan temple. Whatever it was, it wasn’t men in a loving, committed relationship – it was idolatry, promiscuity and abuse. So again, it seems likely that Moses was addressing this, because he even says later on in Deuteronomy that “none of your daughters or sons shall be a temple prostitute.”

Now let’s go to Romans, another scripture people often quote, when Paul is talking about unrighteous behavior. He writes, “God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up their natural relations with

women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men.” Here again, Paul seems to be addressing similar concerns as Moses. Worship of pagan gods and temple prostitution was still going on. And, at that time pederasty was common – which was the practice of older men in authority taking on young boys as students and lovers. It was male abuse of their power and authority. We’ve seen this happen in our own time – in the Catholic church. And yes, that is sin, an abomination, and it should be condemned. But Paul is not talking about a loving, committed relationship. Because, you see, for Paul, that was not an option at that time.

And therein lies, what I believe, is the heart of the problem. In that ancient culture, there was not an understanding that someone could have a different sexual orientation or identity. They did not have the same understanding of physiology, psychology, biology, that we have today. So the idea of homosexual love would never have crossed their mind. Let me share a couple examples of the culture to show what I mean.

Take slavery. Over two hundred verses in the Bible refer to slavery – in both the Old and New Testaments. Biblical law allowed for slavery including selling your own children into slavery. And Biblical law gave permission to beat your slaves. For thousands of years, people owned slaves, and it was the perfectly acceptable norm. So for the Biblical authors, they couldn’t conceive of a world without slavery. It wasn’t even on their radar. And so, instead of calling slavery an abomination, they condoned it. But – and this is important. Does that mean it’s God’s will that one human being owns and enslaves another? Since it’s in the Bible. I think we would all agree the answer is NO! But that was the culture at that time, and the culture influenced scripture. But now we are enlightened, and realize that enslaving someone else is not God’s will.

Here’s a more modern day example – from my own lifetime. When I was in grade school, it was thought that if a kid was left-handed, they were abnormal. I remember teachers trying to change some of my friends into being right handed. At that time, they didn’t have the concept that being left-handed was innately who the person was. But now we are enlightened, and realize that God has created some people to be left-handed. That’s God’s will.

And so I think, that for many of us the problem is that we cannot imagine desiring to have sex with someone of the same gender. That’s not even on our radar. And because we cannot imagine it, we think same sex acts are abnormal or even wrong. But let me tell you – I can’t imagine or conceive of

what it is like to look at a raw piece of marble stone, and, with a hammer and chisel turn it into a magnificent statue of David. But just because I cannot conceive of that, doesn't mean that carving marble is wrong. It just means I'm not wired to be a sculptor. We are all wired differently. But, as we heard today, we are all wonderfully created. We are all wonderfully created. Even those with a sexual orientation and identity different than our own.

Now I want to go back to that passage from Matthew and Jesus' comments on marriage and divorce. After the Pharisees leave, his disciples press him even further on the teaching regarding marriage, adultery and divorce, by asking the question, "Is it better not to marry in the first place?" To stay celibate? And this is where I find Jesus' answer to be very telling. He says, "Not everyone can do this, but only those to whom it is given." And then he uses the example of eunuchs – someone outside the perceived sexual "norm." And he says, "There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Did you hear his first example – "there are eunuchs who have been eunuchs from birth." In other words – they were made that way, made that way from birth, by God. Their sexual identity is innately who they are. Now, is sex between a man and woman God's predominant creation paradigm – yes, I believe so. It's estimated that ninety-five percent of the population is heterosexual. But it seems to me that in this passage, Jesus leaves room for someone to follow a less common, but equally legitimate path.

And one more thing. Sin. What really is sin? Isn't it something we do that separates us from God? Something that harms our relationship with God, our relationship with others? Acting wrongly, rebelling against God's will. Yet – what is God's will. Well Jesus put it rather succinctly – we are to "love God with our whole heart and mind and soul. And we are to love each other as we love ourselves." And so if it is God's will that we love one another, let me ask – what is the harm, the sin, in two men or two women loving each other and wanting to show that love – emotionally, spiritually and physically?

So, in the end, how do we handle this tension of claiming the Bible as the authority in our lives, and yet there being some things in the Bible that are inconsistent with what we believe to be good and right and loving? I think Bishop Robert Barron puts it so well when he says we need to distinguish between what is in the Bible and what the Bible teaches. Let me say that again. We must distinguish between what is

in the Bible and what the Bible teaches. He writes, “Written over (the course of) a thousand years, but embodying traditions that go back much further, the biblical books carry with them an awful lot of cultural baggage from the ancient world. In the Bible we can find ideas about the cosmos, medicine, disease control, and the weather that are clearly outmoded, and we can find cultural practices such as the denigration of women, the marginalization of children, slavery, etc. that are patently wrong! These things are undoubtedly in the Bible, but they are not, I would argue, what the Bible is teaching. In order to discover the true doctrine of the Scriptures, we have to attend, not to particular passages taken out of context, but rather to the overarching themes and patterns within the Bible as a whole.”²

And I think we would all agree that the primary overarching theme of the Bible is love. Jesus Christ himself said so. “Love God and love others. On these two commandments hang all the laws.” Yes, reading, understanding and interpreting the Bible is complex. But following God’s law of love shouldn’t be. As John Wesley said, “Though we may not all think alike, may we not all love alike?” Amen.

*With thanks to Rev. Adam Hamilton from his book, “Making Sense of the Bible.” Copyright 2014

² Bishop Robert Baron – Word of Fire Bible