

RIC 201 – December 8, 2019

What Does the Bible Say, and What Does This Mean?

WELCOME (10:45 am)

OPENING PRAYER

God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Grant us, we pray, to be grounded and settled in your truth by the coming of your Holy Spirit into our hearts. That which we know not, reveal; that which is wanting in us, fill up; that which we know, confirm; and keep us blameless in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Go around the room: Read through covenant of respect: rules of engagement (from ELCA's "Journey Together Faithfully", 2003)

- *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" — even when they disagree with you.*
- *Be sensitive to the fact that comments received as simply information by some will be received by others as far more personal, perhaps even threatening or hurtful.*
- *Listen as much or more than you talk. Genuine listening is not a passive activity, but an active, demanding one. Listen not only for the content of what is said, but also for the way it is said. Observe carefully the emotion, body language, and other clues about how people are feeling.*
- *When what someone says makes you uncomfortable, try not to be in a hurry to move on in the conversation. Give the other a full hearing and full consideration.*
- *State your own thoughts and feelings honestly. Even passionate conversation can be civil and constructive.*
- *Let people speak for themselves and do not presume to speak for others or know what others believe or think. Therefore, use "I" statements and avoid "You" statements.*
- *Keep an open mind and heart. Try to understand others as much as possible and be attuned to what you might learn. Try to put yourself in another's place. Look for shared values even though there are serious disagreements.*
- *Appreciate each other's faith and faithfulness.*
- *Realize that the Holy Spirit is present and active among all in the conversation. Each participant has a part of the truth you are seeking to discern.*

Today's format: Lecture, Q & A – There is a lot to lay out, please save questions for the end (write down; I may or may not address them between now and the end)

Warning: The Bible contains sexual and graphic content, and I'm going to speak about it.

Invitation: to courage instead of certainty – No matter what you think about this issue, I invite you to consider the other side and see the faithfulness in it. I hope you leave with more questions than answers. That's how growth happens.

Do the hard and holy work: draw your own conclusions – My hope today is to give you an even-handed presentation with multiple viewpoints. I am resisting the temptation to share my own conclusions; you can schedule time to talk with me about those one-on-one if you wish. Two reasons:

- (1) I am doing this to encourage you to wrestle and not fall back on someone else's thinking or authority. When you share your faith, don't just parrot whatever your pastor or teacher thinks. What do *you* believe?
- (2) As St. Paul would say, I don't have a word from the Lord on this.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE, AND HOW DO WE READ IT?

A library, not a book

Multiple voices across multiple centuries and cultures – not a uniform "instruction manual" that dropped pure out of the sky. Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis, pp. 61-63

Limitations and inconsistencies

Can Christians play instruments in worship, use the Internet, or play football? (Lev 11:8)

Mark 16:2 & John 20:1 – was the sun risen or not?

Genesis 1 & 2 – order of creation? Which came first, the chicken or the man?

Karl Barth (attributed): *I take the Bible too seriously to take it literally.*

Trajectories

Genesis 2 (God's garden) – Genesis 11 (human city building) – Revelation 21-22 (city!)

Deuteronomy 23:1 – Isaiah 56:4-5 – Acts 8:26-40 (the fate of eunuchs)

The Authority Question: Sola Scriptura?

Where do we get our authoritative answers? Sola Scriptura?

One example: The Methodist Quadrilateral – Scripture, reason, tradition, experience

Luther at Worms: "...by Scripture and clear reason..."

5 Lutheran Lenses

1. Law & Gospel - God gives us a balance of both. Look for texts that accuse/judge us (law) and comfort/save us (gospel). Texts may function as either or both.

2. What Shows Forth Christ (the manger, not the baby) – We worship Jesus, not the Bible.
3. Scripture Interprets Scripture – Parts are interpreted in view of the whole. We avoid isolating passages as narrow proof texts. As with any literature (letter, book, movie, etc.), some Scripture is more important than other scripture (canon within the canon).
[Aside: why Jehovah's Witnesses don't have birthday parties]
4. The Plain Meaning of the Text – What is the obvious sense of the text to its original hearers/readers?
5. Public Interpretation – What does this text mean for all people, not just for me? Maybe personal, never private

The challenge of exegesis (not eisegesis) – What is the text actually saying rather than what do we want or assume it to be saying? Reading meaning out, not reading meaning in. This is exceptionally hard because we have to suspend our assumptions, and we have so many of them, including ones of which we are not aware.

Turn now to texts. Good news: only a few (There are 700+ on economic justice.)

READING THE TEXTS

1. Stories & Later Interpretations

Genesis 9:20-27

Ham has sexual relations with his unconscious father. What is the problem?

- incest
- non consent (rape)
- same sex
- some or all of the above?

Genesis 19:1-10

Sodom's citizens try to rape Lot's visitors. What is the problem? The text doesn't say.

- same sex ("sodomy")
- different species
- gang rape
- general wickedness – Jeremiah 23:14
- inhospitality
- injustice – Isaiah 1:10, 3:9
- some or all of the above?
- to what degree does the gender matter?

Judges 19:22-25 (parenthetically/*briefly*)

In a comparable story, the citizens of Gibeah try to rape a man's guest, so he offers his virgin daughter, who is raped and abused and killed. What is the problem?

- rape
- murder
- most likely not homosexual intent, certainly not consensual – but does that willingness to engage in same sex activity worsen the crime?

Ezekiel 16:49-50; 18:10-13: Here was Sodom's sin:

- pride
- excess of food
- prosperity without helping the poor and needy

Jude 7

- sexual immorality (ekporneusasai)
- unnatural lust: *went after another flesh* – not homosexual, but human/angelic ... but was that known to them? (scholars disagree)

2 Peter 2:6-10

- licentiousness / lawlessness
- depraved lust – what is the nature of the depravity? Homosexuality, rape, human/angel, adultery, or...? Is same-sex relevant to the condemnation or not? (scholars disagree)

2. Laws of Israel: The Holiness Code

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

- abominations (rejected as incompatible with God's nature) include: eating sacrificial leftover, eating unclean food, incest, sex with a menstruating woman, sex with your relative's spouse, child sacrifice to Molech, homosexual sex, bestiality (grouped together)
- Holiness Code is concerned with purity and order (honoring creation) as a key to distinct identity as the community faces transition from wilderness into Canaan
- Holiness Code includes both ritual purity and general ethical categories: no polyester or bacon, no shrimp, no tattoos, love your neighbor as yourself
- What is the problem?
 - concerned with cultic prostitution only? (scholars disagree)
 - concerned with procreation and value of seed? (Genesis 38:8-10)
 - concerned with integrity of creation?
 - concerned with male integrity in a patriarchal world?
- 20:13 seems to infer mutual consent to the act, which is punishable by death

- Acts 15:28-29 (context of Gentiles joining the church, but on what terms? – a big church meeting; decision includes retaining sexual propriety)

Hultgren and Taylor: Mark Allan Powell poses the dilemma well: "The problem for interpreters is to discern which passages speak of what Christians should regard as enduring or universal standards and which reflect matters specific to the culture of Israel." The New Testament church began that process. Thus some purity laws were set aside—most notably those regarding dietary rules and separation of Jews from Gentiles—but others such as the Leviticus laws on incest and adultery have remained in force.

3. New Testament

Romans 1:24-27

- Context: An argument building from Gentiles to Jews leading to 3:23!!
- Gentile section: umbrella of idolatry and its punishment: God gave them up to the consequences of their behaviors
- broad brush, "red meat" familiar to Jewish ears: idolaters and sexual deviants
- Greek vocabulary
 - *chresis* – "usage" or "relations" – probably exploitative and casual, not mutual and reciprocal
 - *physis* – "nature" – can mean one's origins, customs, instincts, conventions or the natural order of things (1 Cor 11:14-15a) – again, scholars disagree
- adds females! – only place in Scripture (everyone is indicted)
- What is the problem?
 - excess – "the most extreme form of heterosexual lust" (V.P. Furnish)
 - homosexual sex itself (inherently wrong)
 - mutual consent or not? – this seems at least to include the possibility; scholars disagree about whether that reality was known to Paul
 - against or beyond nature: a sin against the creator

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

- Context: plea for unity and better behavior among hot mess Corinthian community; specific issues of sleeping with a stepmother, lawsuits, prostitution, various marital issues
- Greek vocabulary
 - *adikoi* – unjust/unrighteous (not just "wrongdoers") – about relationship w/ God
 - *pornoi* – general term, including but not limited to male prostitute (Jude)

- *malakoi* – soft ones (sometimes tr. effeminate, passive partners)
- *arsenokoitai* – male + bed: a term picked up or coined by Paul influenced by Greek translations of Leviticus passages (sometimes tr. active partners) English translations vary widely: *homosexuals, sexual perverts, effeminate/abusers, catamites/sodomites, male prostitutes/sodomites...*
- What is the problem?
 - genital expression outside of opposite gender marriage (7:1-6)
 - pederasty?
 - prostitution?
 - any same sex activity?
- Union with Christ or with a prostitute? (6:13-16)

1 Timothy 1:9-10

- Context: Deutero-Pauline refresher on the role and value of the law for those who need it: *the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful...*
- Greek vocabulary
 - *pornoi & arsenokoitai* again
 - *andrapodistai*: one who acquires persons for use by others (slave dealer, kidnapper)
- Interpret these together or separately?
 - Together: the dealer acquires the first for the second – specific actors in sex trade industry with exploitation, no reciprocity or mutual consent
 - Separately: general sexual deviance; some form of active homosexual actor; kidnapper – all breakers of different commandments against theft & adultery

THE BIG PICTURE

Scripture forbids same-sex sexual activity for two reasons (Gomes):

1. The Gentiles do it. (This gets overturned in the NT.)
2. It is a sin against nature. (What if homosexuality is natural? The Bible assumes the earth is flat...not the most reliable source of scientific facts)

The Silence of the Lamb

Jesus says nothing about this issue. There is disagreement about the significance of this: Jesus didn't prohibit it, or Jesus implicitly prohibited it along with other Jewish leaders.

- Jesus tightens, rather than loosens, sexual ethics (Mk 10) & legal demands (Mt 5)
- Jesus expands adultery to a sin that either men or women can commit
- John 8:1-11 – no condemnation; *go and sin no more*
- All biblical commentators are now arguing out of silence

Orientation: Arguing out of silence

- The Bible does not imagine the possibility of homosexual orientation (or round earth) – *homosexuality* is a term dating only from the late 1800s
- Only same sex sexual activity is condemned, but strongly and unanimously; it is never affirmed
- There are no definitively positive examples of homosexual relationships in the Bible (David/Jonathan & Jesus/disciple [philos] are eisegesis)
- Human heterosexual relationships are celebrated in Scripture as a gift from God (Gen 2, Song of Songs) yet discouraged but tolerated by Paul (1 Cor. 7)
- All human sexuality is flawed (3:23)

Trajectories: Possible Analogies (apples to apples?)

- Slavery
- Inclusion of Gentiles
- Women in church leadership
- Divorce and remarriage
- Incest

No one has an airtight biblical case. There are holes in every argument. It is not cut & dried.

Hultgren & Taylor: The difference between interpreters should not be understood as a conflict between those who seek to be "true to Scripture" and those who seek to "twist the Bible" to their own liking. The disagreements are genuine. Nor is one approach intrinsically more "conservative" and the other more "liberal." It is instructive here to recall that in his translation of the New Testament in 1521 Martin Luther translated arsenokoitai as Knabenschänder (pederasts), which is often considered today the "liberal" ("innovative" or "revisionist") rendering of the word, but he translated malakoi as Weichlinge (which can mean "weaklings," "soft ones," even "effeminate ones"), which could be considered the "conservative" (KJV) rendering. This illustrates how labels like "conservative" and "liberal" are both meaningless and inappropriate.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What is sin, and how should the church respond to it?
 - condition or behavior or both?
 - forgiveness leads to repentance

- What is marriage?
 - an economic transaction involving male property
 - a male – female partnership
 - how many people are involved?
 - a bad idea (Paul & Jesus)
 - a good idea (Proverbs and Hebrews authors)
 - a hedge against greater immorality (Luther)
- What is the Bible's witness and authority?
- Is homosexuality natural, and on what terms? (Nature is both good and fallen.)
- What is God's hope for God's children who are LGBTQ+?
- What do I believe? What are the strengths and the shortcomings of my position?
- How does Christ compel me to treat others who differ from or disagree with me?

"BOUND CONSCIENCE": AN UNEASY PEACE

The ELCA is in a theologically nuanced version of "agree to disagree" with a non-hierarchical structure that recognizes the difficulty of this issue and gives congregations to follow the dictates of their consciences in different directions while calling us to remain in Communion because our unity is in Christ, not in like-mindedness.

CONVERSATION / Q & A

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Bell, Rob. What Is the Bible?: How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel About Everything. Harper One, 2019.

Gagnon, Robert A.J. and Via, Dan O. Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views. Fortress Press, 2003.

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Siker, Jeffrey ed. Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate. Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.