

This morning I will be making something of an exception to my general unwritten policy—to not need to preach on contemporary “hot button” socio-political issues which have a capacity for bringing a lot of heat and smoke and passion and friction to a congregation but not always a lot of light.

But I’m not going to wimp out now; we’ve come to the third and final of my sermons on human sexuality and I want to address the broader socio-political sexual and gender issues swirling in the Church and the culture.

I take very seriously the God-ordained authority this pulpit among you in this sanctuary confers, as I do the awesome privilege and responsibility of presuming to proclaim the Word of God. But I also try to keep some perspective: you don’t need my opinion, or even my interpretation, of Jesus on every political issue which comes along in the headlines. Not because Jesus doesn’t think political opinions and actions are essential elements of our Christian life—on the contrary.

So we each strive to continue to accept our own responsibility for understanding Jesus and His gospel, and the great privilege of allowing His Holy Spirit to speak to us, to interpret the living God and His convictions into our awareness; to mold our lives and our politics into conformity with His worldview, His priorities—rather than *vice versa*. Our relationship to God thru the Holy Spirit is meant to shape our political convictions, our political lives, as surely as every other element of our lives. Otherwise, if we are not intentionally molding our lives after Jesus, we will unintentionally be molding our lives in the shape of whatever the culture tells us. (Imagine—otherwise intelligent Americans by the tens of millions having their values and character shaped every day by Hollywood movie stars and screenwriters and their assorted agendas; by pop singers and their record labels; by whichever newscaster has managed to make it into primetime; by this or that political pundit; by the advertisers with the biggest ad budgets. By whomever can afford to pay the money to buy our eyes and our ears in the media. And mostly we as a people are not even comprehending this is what’s happening.)

(I hope you know the rules in our Congregational tradition. We have an unwritten agreement: when I preach I strive to be faithful to God, so I don’t have to worry about how you all might react. When you listen you strive to be faithful to God, so you don’t have to worry about whether you always agree with me or not. I do appreciate our character as a congregation: I love the fact that we have passionate liberal Democrats and passionate conservative Republicans and everything in between. Sometimes in the same study groups, year after year. We don’t need to agree on everything; we just need to strive to be faithful to our Lord, and trust that others are doing the same. What a great example you are living out, for the wider Church, the Body of Christ, and also for our fractious society in 2007!)

You all know that questions of human sexuality have been influencing the political arena for at least the last decade; some of you know the same “hot button” questions have been influencing the landscape of the Christian denominations to an even greater degree. The very definition of marriage and family; the acceptance of gay and lesbian and other lifestyles into the mainstream; the rights of various configurations of family to adopt children and benefit from the legal status long reserved for married

husband and wife; even the definition of male and female and “gender” (a recent category which bypasses the old-fashioned definition of male and female depending upon which parts you are born with) are open to redefinition, with huge social consequences. Broad social issues which were once self-evident are being vigorously renegotiated.

These issues no less affect the Church. The Episcopalians here and the Anglican Communion worldwide still walk week-to-week on the brink of being totally split apart following the ordination of Bishop Gene Robinson in 2003, who had been married with children and then divorced in order to enter into a committed gay relationship. (When I was in Seminary in the early 90’s the PCUSA [the largest Presbyterian denomination] was debating the suitability of ordaining practicing gay and lesbian pastors. They still are.) Every mainline denomination faces crucial issues of self-identity and challenges to its core over, of all things, how we understand the politics of human sexuality. Not the identity of Christ or the Trinity of God, not our relationship to one another in Christian unity, not our understanding of the Bible or other theological disputes—it’s human sexuality which threatens the unity of the Church so deeply.

Our own UCC is no exception. The Search Committee which called Heather to be our Associate Pastor learned that our co-Conference Minister, in speaking to Cass, the head of the Committee, indicated loud and clear that there is one overriding issue of concern to our UCC national leadership when it comes to placing pastors. The primary concern expressed to Cass, is not how to re-build the local church, how to pray, how to teach Bible Studies more effectively, how to become more creative and passionate in our Worship Service, how to teach our children better to love God, or even how to get more politically involved. The one thing Dan Romero emphasized to Cass, is that we should become an “Open and Affirming” congregation, which I believe (I’ve checked the UCC website very thoroughly and it’s hard to find specifics—but I believe it means we should go on record and proclaim loud and clear that we as a congregation are “open” to persons of every sexual orientation and lifestyle, and that we “affirm” the choice of all persons to express their God-given sexuality as they choose. (More on this in a moment. Our UCC does not speak of homosexuality as much as it does “GLBT issues”—Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered persons.)

None of this controversy is coincidental. These politics of sexuality are not just about what consenting adults, or pastors or bishops, do in the privacy of their own bedrooms. These questions define a series of less obvious assumptions which go right to the heart of our understanding of Christian faith.

For liberal churches, the elevation of practicing gay priest Gene Robinson to be bishop represents a triumph. Liberals understand that Jesus preached a gospel of inclusive, no-questions-asked acceptance and love. Jesus reached out to the outcasts, the “undesirables” in His ministry. To many liberals the core of the gospel is this message of the good news of the inclusive love of God reaching out to all persons. This core message, this timeless good news, supersedes the ancient prohibitions and their distinctions of how everyone should behave. To liberals the consecration of a gay bishop is a courageous act of a church boldly acting out its understanding of the gospel. (The leadership of our own UCC shares this position; into the UCC in the Golden Gate Association (SF) was ordained the first openly gay pastor in any denomination, the Rev. William Johnson, back in 1972.)

For conservative churches, elevating a practicing gay priest to bishop represents just the opposite. Sexual ethics, moral principles, conservatives believe, are given by God and remain timeless and unchangeable. Human preferences come and go into style, but they are merely human opinions and could never change the standards of God. Human opinions, in fact, need to be changed by the standards of God. Conservatives generally believe that an openly gay bishop is yet one more symbol of a church gone very wrong.

Questions of our sexuality uncover the fact that liberals and conservatives differ in their ways of understanding the purpose of religious institutions, their ways of interpreting and understanding the authority of the Bible; their ways of understanding what is most central in the gospel, the message of Jesus; and in their ways of understanding the essence of the Church. No wonder the disagreements in churches and denominations run so deeply.

What does the Bible have to say? Both liberals and conservatives agree the Bible is a good place to start (though in a different way.) You won't be surprised to hear that liberals and conservatives come to different conclusions about what the Bible says and what it means. Conservatives point to numerous specific prohibition against homosexual expression, consistent in the Old and New Testaments. (For example, in addition to our text this morning, from Leviticus 18:22: "You [a male] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." That's what the Bible says. But both sides can play the proof-texting game: liberals would point to the next chapter of Leviticus, [19:19] "You shall not wear a garment made of two different materials." That's what the Bible says. Liberals would ask, "so you conservatives never wear a cotton-polyester blend t-shirt, or you upscale conservatives never a blazer made from wool and cashmere?" Where's the consistency? Why do you take the Bible so seriously and literally when it suits you, and then decide other things it says are unimportant?"

Liberals have spent a good deal of time and ink trying to explain that the Bible really doesn't say what I think, generally, it says. (I am not aware of it saying anything positive anywhere about homosexual relations.) They argue that sexual orientation was an unknown concept in the Bible, and that of course if you are born heterosexual/straight and pursue homosexual acts, that would be unnatural by definition. They argue that what the New Testament decries is not consenting gay or lesbian sexual expression but pederasty, a practice current in that era involving men and boys. They argue from silence, that Jesus didn't make a big deal out of homosexuality. In my opinion, the liberals do not quite make this case. The Bible is, on the whole, against homosexual sex. Just as it is against, on the whole, heterosexual sex outside of a covenant commitment, which Jesus defines as a marriage commitment, almost always for a lifetime, between a woman and a man.

Marriage then, as I understand it, is by definition between a woman and a man, in an estate ordained by God. Any efforts to redefine marriage are a case of category confusion gone awry. But this does not mean what a lot of folks seem to want it to mean.

I believe the Scriptures also teach that there are various gradations of love, of commitment, of relationship. "Homosexual" and "heterosexual" are not the only lenses thru which to evaluate relationships, and not always the best. It's not so simple as to conclude that gay relationships are sinful and heterosexual married relationships are holy. There is obviously a huge difference in the eyes of God between a faithful married

couple, a man and a woman, who nurture a marvelous family and celebrate joyfully together their 50th Wedding anniversary, surrounded by loving children and grandchildren, and a man and a woman who are legally married but who routinely engage in extra-marital affairs. Both heterosexual. There is a huge difference between a lesbian couple living together, faithful exclusively to each other for decades, and a young man in a big city pursuing a suicidal gay lifestyle of serial random sexual hookups. Both homosexual. (And we know “straight” women and men can pursue that lifestyle as well.)

A committed love, an exclusive love, a lifelong love with one partner is something pleasing to God, I believe—a lot more pleasing to God than relationships which use others, which hurt others, which fail to recognize one’s partner as a man or woman created in the image of God and therefore to be revered as a whole person. To recognize committed, covenanted, lifelong relationships between two adults as a “civil union” makes sense to me. These are a good thing. It’s just that a marriage—a committed, covenanted lifelong relationship—is by definition between a man and a woman.

However I might choose to evaluate relationships does not change the love of Jesus for every human being, and His compassion toward every one. (I learned in one hair-raising first week during my chaplaincy among persons with AIDS—almost all “GLBT”—and had it confirmed during the next year I spent among them—how sexual confusion and promiscuity is related to deeper identity confusion; how people behave sexually mirrors how they understand themselves at a deep level; how folks tend to try to medicate or anesthetize deep-seated pain and brokenness in all sorts of destructive behaviors. But we don’t need to be gay, or straight, to go looking for love in all the wrong places; we don’t need to be gay, or straight, to try to divert our inner sense of emptiness or shame with counterfeit substitutes for healing relationship with Jesus Christ the Redeemer—we just need to be human to be tempted in these ways.)

Jesus comes alongside each one, in our individual brokenness and pain, to offer to befriend us, to begin the lifelong process of healing, to invite us Home. To take sides, to label others, to judge others by their behaviors rather than as children of God is not honoring to our Lord.

Both conservatives and liberals can be guilty of falling short, of acting out a double standard. Conservatives often tend to judge gays or lesbians or bisexuals or transgendered persons as sinners disobedient to God, end of story, and focus on homosexuality as a big sin, a sin more outrageous than others. (Interesting how we tend to focus mostly on those sins which afflict others—have you noticed? And why do you suppose folks have a whole lot of misplaced energy for particular shortcomings they see and want to harangue in others...?)

Liberals often tend to want to give persons not heterosexual a free pass: “how they live is their business, they’ve been misunderstood enough, and no one else in the church or anywhere else has any business in commenting.” End of story. It is true that I have no particular interest in what others do in their spare time, but when a denomination asks its churches to carte blanche welcome and then to affirm any behavior of any person in it, regardless of how destructive it may be to the person or to others, that’s muddleheaded. (This is why I have no particular desire for this church to pursue the “Open and Affirming” agenda so ardently advanced by our denominational leaders. As a colony of heaven with allegiance to a Kingdom and a “King” beyond this earthly

dimension, we are indeed responsible for looking out for one another in the colony, for abiding lovingly within Kingdom principles. I have no right to discard those principles—I did not invent them nor vote on them; they are not mine to repudiate. They are ours to strive to obey, and encourage others to obey, when we commit our lives to Jesus. You cannot defeat reality, in the end, no matter your persuasion. So this not just about sexuality. It would be muddleheaded for the Church to vote to accept and affirm alcoholics and every choice and lifestyle they may choose to pursue, *carte blanche*, because their behavior is their own business and nobody else has any business in commenting. Just as it would be muddleheaded for the Church to decide to “affirm” hypocritical pastors, and that every choice and lifestyle (about girlfriends on the side, living in the manse) I might decide to pursue in your manse is none of your business. When we love one another, then we belong to one another in Christ, and we don’t give anyone a free pass! I hope you love me and my family, and yourselves, this congregation, a lot more than that!)

Enough now of what I happen to believe. Let’s turn to the text this morning, and look at what Paul believed. As usual, Paul makes a highly logical, tightly argued case. “I am not ashamed of the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...” [1:16] God provides the love, the invitation to wholeness, to life in His Kingdom. We grab hold of His renewing mercy, His invitation, by trusting in Him.

But wait; there’s a problem, Paul notes. Not everybody does accept His invitation, His new life freely offered. Why not? Paul exposes the great problem, then and now, for us humans: one of the central themes in Romans. Although the evidence of the glory of God, the Creator is all around us—here in holding a newborn baby, in our next heartbeat, in our own self-consciousness; here in looking out over Catalina to a breathtaking sunset, in peering into the heavens on a clear starlit night—we humans are always free to ignore all this evidence and to fail to acknowledge the true God.

But choosing not to worship the true God does not mean we worship no God; it means we are vulnerable to worshiping any and every false God. (To claim to believe in no God is tantamount to declaring oneself *de facto* God. Imagine me worshiping myself: a particularly inadequate idol!) “If we don’t stand for something we may fall for anything.” John Calvin noted our human hearts are little idol factories perpetually churning our idol after idol—anything but submit ourselves, body, soul, mind, and heart to the living God!)

There are consequences to worshiping false gods, Paul continues. God doesn’t cast us into hell; the “wrath of God” consists of God simply letting us do our thing, giving us more rope to live out our fantasies. (Three times in our text we heard: ...”God gave them up to...”; that is, “God just got out of the way and let them go...”) Paul clearly associates our willful immorality, our human wickedness, with homosexual behavior.

Can you believe it, good church-going Christians, there are people out there so corrupt they would pursue same-sex sexual behavior? They know better, they have enough knowledge to worship God, yet they are so demented they would “do things which should not be done”?

Can you believe God would allow their minds to become so debased they would seek after their own interests, they would covet things other people have, a newer

kitchen, a nicer car, a higher salary? Can you believe there are people out there who do not build up the unity of the church, who do not much care to work with the poor, who do not come to worship God publicly every Sunday, who think first of themselves, who don't always obey their parents, who make decisions from their own personal short-term perspective and don't even pray and fast to seek the will of God and obey God 100% in how they live their lives?

“Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others...”
Therefore, good church-goers, we are as guilty as those we tend to condemn...

Gotcha. (Paul sure gets me every time I ponder this principle.) Paul has set us up so deftly...how quick we are to point the finger, to cast stones, to notice the faults of our mate, of the conservatives, the liberals, the gays, the straights, of everyone else around us, to blame others first.

He reminds us not to look down on “homosexuals” or “bisexuals” or “transsexuals” or “heterosexuals”. We are all “sexuals;” all created in the image of God by God for intimacy, for relationship, communion—with one another and with Him. [This insight and expression from Andy Crouch, in his article “Before the Deluge.”] Each of us “sexuals” has a tendency toward a sexual orientation which inclines toward our own interest, our own pleasures, our own unwillingness to open up and trust another fully—a human spouse or the God who loves us. We are all needing to learn about vulnerability and boundaries, about how to love more wisely and more fully. We have all been given these bodies, which include our sexual nature. We may use them recklessly to use or hurt or “rip off” others, seeking our own pleasure, or we may use them to bless and delight another in committed covenant relationship, and so enrich ourselves in the process.

The point is not to read the Bible looking for loopholes, trying to vindicate my lifestyle or my perspective. Would Paul's argument end any differently if we could prove that he was or was not aware of the possibility of committed relationships between same-gendered, sexually oriented adults? To read Paul looking for loopholes, looking to justify our own position, is totally to miss his main point.

Why bother with the small stuff? We have something so much more significant, so much more central, so much bigger than rhetorical loopholes or “prooftexts” for one side or the other. God offers us forgiveness in Jesus the Christ. God offers us a new life, every one. Whatever our sin, whatever our brokenness, whatever our gender, whatever our pain, whatever our guilt, whatever our politics or proclivities: God offers us every one mercy and freedom, true freedom, in the name of the Redeemer of the world, Jesus the Christ.

“In the end, we Christians have no loopholes to offer—only forgiveness and new life in Christ.” [Gerhard O Forde.]

Romans 1:16—2:1

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die--yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.