

LOVE—AND DO WHAT YOU WILL

Texts on Sunday, June 26, 2011

Pride Sunday

Genesis 33: 1-10; Romans 14: 1-4, 10-23

The Ayes are 33, the Nays 29! The bill passes. My oh my! Sometimes you win. What pride we share with our fellow citizens in this state today. Why, even Paris and Berlin were rallying in joyful celebration of the new reality in New York. And it's not just this city. My first pastorate was twelve years in Republican Steve Saland's district up north. My second pastorate was a decade in Republican Mark Grisanti's district out west. These public servants both changed their minds to vote for justice and marriage equality. I offer this sermon in gratitude and honor for all people of faith who desire to be lifted up on eagle's wings to the guidance of Holy Spirit reason, opening mind and heart that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Twenty years ago this past spring, I concluded a longish sermon on sexual ethics this way:

Where is the church in all of this? It is torn. But I believe we must begin blessing the committed relationships of gay men and women immediately. I want it to become publicly known that, as a minister in the church of Christ, I will joyfully participate in ceremonies to bless the committed relationships between gay men or women. I will go to homes if necessary. But if the [governing council] of this church should approve, I will do this right here. What earthly or heavenly good can possibly be served by closing the doors of blessing for another day on our brothers and sisters who seek to love one another in faith and hope, and who ask the communion of God and these witnesses to help them on their way? (March 17, 1991)

What happened in that church and community after that sermon is a story we'll leave for another time. But let us go right to the basics. On what grounds can a Christian come to a decision like that, or to support the new law of our state? What's the reason? One answer is, *There is no reason. The Bible condemns homosexual behavior; therefore, case closed. No Christian can support new rules that lift the Biblical judgments.* Let's call that argument the literal approach. It hangs on the letter of the law. Another response might be, *What's the big deal? Jesus says 'Love everybody.' Who needs reasons? Case closed.* Let's call that argument the liberal approach. It hangs on the wish that we can all just get along. The liberals say the literals have no heart. The literals say the liberals have no head. Who ya gonna call?

Now, you have probably heard critical analysis of every word of the Bible that the literals use to exclude gay and lesbian from ordinary life. We are not going there today. The process exhausts energies and changes no minds. Yet Christians who believe in the development of faith as progress from strength

to strength (this is what “progressive Christianity” should mean) ought to be able to reason out their ethical stands on biblical grounds, rather than merely liberal ones. The liberal error—*Can't we all just love everybody?*—has this weakness, that it takes no account of weakness, of sin. Some behaviors need to be judged. Some are worth warning against. From some you must separate yourselves, and not just get along with them! On what grounds do we differentiate good or bad? To be unwilling to take a stand is the liberal error.

The liberal error is to take a stand with too much certainty, to lay hold of a few words of the Bible and ignore whatever it says that weighs against the first opinion. Asked, *On what grounds do you choose condemnation over restraint?* the liberal man will not hear the question. The liberal man refuses to consider whether his attachment to certain verses might be attachment to social customs and prejudices. He therefore will not consider those judgments of the Bible that subvert his prejudice. If on the one hand, the liberal error undermines the integrity of a community by letting anything in and ruling nothing out, the liberal error destroys the community by admitting nothing but itself, and trusting nothing but itself, not even God. Liberal or literal—both refuse their God-given authority—their crown—to test the spirits and distinguish good from evil. There is a more perfect way.

In Romans 14, you heard a perhaps confounding discussion, whether a Christian should eat meat or abstain from meat. The food in question had been ritually sacrificed to Roman gods and then made available for consumption in public settings where Roman citizens were multi-culturally mixing. You know the phrase, *When in Rome, do as the Romans do?* Well, some in the new Christian church thought not. They believed the pagan rituals rendered the meat ritually unclean—not kosher. They stuck with the raw fruits and vegetables, thanks. But others in the new church, including Paul himself, were confident that the rituals had no power; that meat was meat and good to eat. “I am confident in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself,” Paul wrote. And then he said something that re-set the course of religion: “But a thing is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.” In other words, sin and its destructive power arises from your inner motivations, from your inner condition, not from things in themselves.

For most of the next two thousand years, the cultures of the western Christian church persisted in ignoring this word, treating both sin and religious ritual as having magic power. As you head out into this city glad and proud this Pride Sunday, I hope you will go with this life-changing measure set deep in your heart: “A thing is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean . . . The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because

of what they approve.”

Hear the apostle plainly. Those who trust themselves to God through Christ know that things are just things with no magical powers. Such have what Paul calls strong faith. Those who are not “confident in the Lord Jesus,” but lean only on the letter of the law for instruction in every decision have what Paul calls weak faith. It’s flipped from what you may have thought: The literal man is weak in faith; those confident in Christ and freed from legalisms are strong in faith. From this, draw three extraordinary lessons.

The first lesson is about freedom of intellect. Here in Romans 14 we hear the only definition of sin in the whole Bible: “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Every other account of sin in the Bible merely lists sins, but does not explain why a behavior has made the list. This usually presents no difficulty; murder, theft—we get it. Still, if some authority has the list, and you must only listen, and not question, then the list-man has broken in between your relationship to God and self and truth. He is the one you must obey, not God. Such a relationship has fear at its center. A list is like a club in the hand. But now the apostle offers a definition of sin. “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Suddenly, you are released from the domination of the list-man into the power of dialogue and reflection. If sin is the opposite of faith, all at once I am standing directly before my God, who questions me in my stewardship of all things, including my body and my sex. “Are you taking what I have not given?” the Lord asks. You must answer, yet no longer as a terrified slave, but a reasoning subject.

The second lesson is about sin and faithlessness. Here we can correct that liberal error of being too weak in spirit to judge between good and evil. Good arises from trust in God and God’s creation. Evil arises from distrust in God. Sin is not some bad virus installed in the human species, endlessly replicating itself. Sin is the product of fear that I will not get what I want. Is there sexual sin? Of course. What drives it? Faithless fear that I will not receive from the bounty of God what I truly need, my daily bread. In that state of hopelessness that I can be happy apart from things I crave, I take what I want by any means necessary. That is sin, regardless what is taken. If I take sex, but refuse to take the person; if I deceive in the taking, just waiting to break away; if I take a lover, and break my promise to another—these are the conditions of sin, understood through the apostle’s definition. In the silent space of your own moral reckoning, you can figure it out. And yes, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But the second lesson has a second part. Is there sexual virtue? Of course. What moves it? Faith and trust that I can receive from the bounty of God what I truly need. In that confidence, I can be happy with what I am

given. Therefore, if my sexual relations do not deceive, but receive the whole person, the whole other, so far as I am able; if I ask my God to help me guard my promises; if, in a word, I freely give and take with one, then there is no sin. Period. This is the reason that sexual orientation has nothing to do with sin. This is the reason that the church has a positive duty to extend its blessing to all who would love like this. “Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve.”

The third lesson from the apostle may give us all the strangest, longest struggle. You who are strong in faith, Paul says, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Why do you despise your brother or sister?” Remember, a thing is unclean for anyone who thinks it so. “Let us no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a hindrance in the way of another. Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Yes, everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat.” In other words,, have compassion on those who do not understand or experience faith and freedom in God as you do. Do not make them to be evil. Indeed, if you do, see that your own faith is also weak, and that in condemning them, you yourself despair of God, and sin.

Paul, like his Lord, is a wonderful rabbi. He never lets you rest complacent in your pride. He always asks you to use your confidence in God in service of others. You can feel through him that boundless fascination with love to which the Hebrew scriptures turn again and again. Twice in Genesis it happens that a hero of faith—first Jacob, later Joseph—says that to see the face of the once-hated brother is like seeing the face of God. May that day come for us who have hated, who have been hated.

Love is in fact the answer. It’s just not the merely liberal love, which has no skin in the game. Rather, it is love which is “patient and kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; love which does not insist on its own way; and is not resentful; and does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but in the truth—love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Such love is your great gift, your crown, and the whole reason thrumming beneath the movement for marriage equality which we celebrate with great pride today. Go from this place with that word of St. Augustine inscribed on your heart in freedom. Love, and whatever it is you wish, you may do. “Love, and do what you will.”

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