

07-22-2018 - Rev. Seth D Jones

“Does the Bible give us permission to fit this day and age? When pressed, how can we refute the idea that the Bible forbids homosexuality in general?”

John Robinson’s words to the Pilgrims as they set out to the New World. He said, “*I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of his Holy Word.*”

What a wonderful insight, and what a relief! This means there is no end to the interpretation of Scripture and there is no ‘right’ reading of Scripture. We are in constant conversation with God’s Word, and God’s Word is continually speaking with and to us. Through this constant conversation about God’s Word, there is also risk. Heresies, threats to the so-called ‘fundamentals’ of the faith, cults of personality are all possibilities with this understanding. What do we do? Enforce conformity? If you are a freedom loving Congregationalist, how is it possible to enforce a ‘correct’ faith (even though early Congregationalists did just that)? Would you even want to?

Our identity - liberal, conservative, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, black, Asian, American, gay, queer, transgender - in the world influences greatly how we interpret and understand the Bible. These identities influence how we understand what God is doing with and through us. They influence how we understand Jesus, his teachings, his death, and his Resurrection. They influence how we understand the presence of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives. I believe these interactions between our daily lives and one another, our identities, and our engagement with Scripture *are all the work of the Holy Spirit.*

Scripture gives us the permission to think like this because this is what Scripture shows us within itself. There is a continual self-reflection and self-editing. There are two versions of the 10 Commandments, in Exodus and Deuteronomy. This is an example of history reinterpreting the word of God from one time to another. We see in Jesus a radical reinterpretation as he presents a new way of understanding the Torah, the Prophets and the History books. This does not make Torah, the Prophets, or the History texts wrong, but it does radically change how we read them. Paul combines verses from the Psalms with the sayings of the Prophets and creates new meanings from the very words of Scripture. Paul does this because the truth of Scripture *demand continual reinterpretation.*

This continual reinterpretation, grounded in the witness of Scripture, is the foundation that allows us to gain new understandings of Scripture for the times we live in. This allows people from all over the world from innumerable backgrounds and multiple identities to understand anew and engage the Word of God. And it is this understanding that allows us to refute the ways Scripture has been interpreted to exclude, condemn, and leave out of God’s grace whole groups of people, especially in our day, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.

Let me begin with a personal story. When I moved from North Carolina to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, I had a hard time at school. I arrived at my new school in the middle of the 3rd grade. Very quickly, I was the target of the bullies at Arlington Heights Elementary School. I

talked weird because I had a thick Southern accent. I may have looked weird because Western Wisconsin is very homogenous and Nordic. And I gravitated to people who were bullied and left out.

I quickly got labeled as 'gay'. At first, I didn't know what the word meant in its slang sense. I only knew it in its original meaning, *happy and excited, keenly alive and exuberant, having or inducing high spirits, brilliant in color* (Merriam-Webster online dictionary). But when a group of kids waited for me one day on the other side of the underpass, knocked me off my bike, and beat me up, I was pretty sure the word didn't mean what I thought it meant. Because, seriously, who wouldn't want to be gay?

Once I found out what the word meant, something changed inside of me. I was mad. I was mad because the language had been screwed up by bullies. And I was mad for all the people who were discredited by the label. And so, from the third grade on, I never rejected the designation of being gay. I paid for it physically all the way up until the 9th grade, which is when I took up weightlifting and bodybuilding.

I tell you this story because I want you to understand why I ally myself with all who would be excluded from full participation in church and society. My allied identity with those who identify as gay in particular has influenced my interpretation of Scripture from a very young age.

Identity is not about what we do; it is about who we are. We want to link other people's identity with their behavior. And while sexual identity is about who we are attracted to so that love might flourish, sexual identity is not about the act of sex. Sex and its expression in a Christian sense is a whole other sermon and this is not about that. Who we love and what we do together do cross over, but it is not the most important thing, as we will see later. In other words, this is not a sermon about who is having sex with who; it is a sermon about the engagement of love in the world as a reflection of God's love for all of God's creation.

With that in mind, I will show you how I refute the idea that the Bible forbids homosexuality. Often, people who are trying to justify some Biblical mandate against who and how people fall in love with one another will focus on 7 verses they say are explicitly against homosexuality. This is backwards. Context is everything and when we isolate single verses and project modern ideas into the past, we do damage to what Scripture is trying to teach. Instead, let's begin where Scripture begins, with the theme of creation.

As with other parts of Scripture, there are two creation stories. The second one begins at Genesis 2:4. In this creation story, the first creation after the earth and the heavens is a man, an *adam*, a 'creature of the dust and the earth'.

Notice this.¹ God did not create a man and a woman, he created a creature of the earth. This tells us something important. It tells us the creation of humankind was an *earthly reality*, **not** a *sexual reality*. At verse 2:18, God realizes that the *adam* is lonely and decides to make him a partner.

Look what God creates for the *adam*. He creates animals and brings them to Adam to see if the animal would be a good partner. Each one, Adam looks at each one and names them - *cow*,

¹ These ideas are well formulated by this video. It is well worth watching:
<https://www.queertheology.com/god-garden-gays-homosexuality-genesis/>

beetle, crow, frog, fox, elk, emu, platypus, okapi, manatee, otter - on and on. None of the animals, though, are a good partner for Adam. So God puts Adam to sleep and pulls out a rib and creates a woman.

Now, this tells us something interesting about the first so-called man, doesn't it? Adam was both sexes at the same time. When Adam sees Eve for the first time, he (now he is really a he) sees something of himself in the her that Eve is. The dust creature, the *adam*, says, "*This one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.*" This is still not a sexual reality, but is an earthly reality that has become a companionship reality.

There are two things to be seen here:

First, Adam is given the ability to *choose* who his partner will be. Adam could have chosen anything, but he *chose* the woman. So while Adam had no choice but to be who he was because of his created self, and Eve had no choice in who she was in her created self, they were empowered by God to choose one another.

Second, Adam is the first of a whole plethora of animals and creation. God creates a massive, thriving, swarming diversity for the sake of Adam. Creation is all about the diversity of God's imagination. I like to call it the *polymorphous diversity of God's creation*, where *polymorphous* means the multiple and various ways life will find a way to thrive and survive in any given environment.

Do you see how this is a story about the vast diversity of creation and our ability to choose?

Why then wouldn't the same be true in the most intimate and personal areas of our lives? And why wouldn't that choice mirror the diversity of God's creation?

This is why I chose the Song of Songs for our reading today. The lovers in this poem can only talk about their love in relation to the vast diversity of creation itself. In the story, which is a kind of recasting of Adam and Eve as a love poem, there is a radical equality. The language is daring, and filled with double entendres and the intimate physicality of love.

Listen to the language here:

*'Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;*

¹¹ *for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.*

¹² *The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land.*

¹³ *The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.*

*Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away. (Song of Songs 2:10-13)*

Do you hear how the language of love, at least in this verse, calls us *up* to God's good creation? When we engage the physicality and creative energy of how love is trying to make its way in the world, we are called to arise to it. We are not descending into chaos; rather we are rising up into the diversity of God's love in the world. When we arise into love, Creation responds as if it were re-created all over again.

The language of love is important, and one way to read Scripture is as a text on how God's love is trying to express itself in Creation, in our conflicts, in our hearts and minds, in our relationships. How we talk about love matters and how we think about these things will change what we say.

We get into trouble in our thinking and what we say about what we think. We confuse categories and ideas, and substitute one thing for another, then call it 'right' or 'truth' or 'God's way', and expect everyone to conform to our construct for them.

Jesus in our teaching from Matthew tells us it is not we put into our mouths that is important; it is what is in our hearts and what comes out of our mouths that matter. The heart, he says, is the source of all evil and malice, and it is from there that we say things and do things that destroy lives, destroy identities, destroy ... love. What we say and what we do matters greatly if we choose to align ourselves with God's love in Creation and through Jesus Christ. Perhaps, part of Jesus' work, and the reason he says "*It is finished*" from the Cross is because Jesus wants to return us all to that pristine perception of God's creation, a creation where we were created to choose love and companionship from the whole plethora of God's created beings.

So now, when we begin our interpretation from the flourishing, thriving, swarming diversity of God's creation, words mean different things in Scripture. The word *homosexuality* was not a word in the world until the late 1800s. The word that is translated that way in the Greek - *arsenokoitai* - is only used once in all of Scripture and no one really knows what it means. It has something to do with older men and young boys and temple prostitution. If we are beginning with the goodness of creation and the earthiness of our being and the quality of God's love, then these words, like *adultery*, *fornication*, and *arsenokoitai* (*the Greek word translated to homosexual*) mean something very different now.

If God's concern is the diversity of life expressing itself in love, then anything which undermines and challenges that diversity and that love are against not only God, but also creation itself. And so, the commandments and injunctions can only be about how we use people rather than love them. Adultery becomes a word that is not about sex, but about the transgression of promises made to and with another person, not regarding our promises as worthy of another. Fornication is not about love-making, but is about using our bodies in such a way that we reduce the dignity of another person. *Arsenokoitai* is the devaluing of young men for the sake of sex. Using people rather than loving people.

My refutation of using the Bible to condemn people in the LGBTQ community is not based on particular verses, but on the theme of Scripture itself. Beginning with creation, you can see the words we have applied to who loves who cannot be interpreted in the way many of us have interpreted them. Read from God's thriving, diverse creation, there is no condemnation of

lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer people anywhere. The only condemnation is how we interfere with the expression of God's love in God's good creation.

Love and its expression in Scripture is always about building up, suffering with the other, making room for the flourishing of the life of self and other for their mutual benefit, bringing dignity to the undignified. Like the old BJ Thomas song says,

*Using things and loving people
Thats the way its got to be
Using things and loving people
Look around and you can see
That loving things and using people
Only leads to misery
Using things and loving people
Thats the way its got to be*

So my question for all of you is this: *Do you want to walk into the world looking for the infinite diversity of God's creation and share in God's love for all creatures; or do you want all that diversity and expression and love to conform to your worldview?* One frees us and others to love more deeply; the other limits the expression of God's love through us.

I choose God's diversity and love.

Amen.