

**Sermon from the**



## **Homosexuality is Not a Sin**

The essential problem before the church is not reconciling homosexuality with the bible but to reconcile the continuous abuse and condemnation of gay and lesbian persons with the love of Christ.

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**Read:**

**Galatians 3:28**

In case you may think I am prone to sensationalism, let me confess it has been 14 years since I last addressed this subject from the pulpit. In 1978 the General Assembly of our church had gathered in San Diego. The most significant issue before that assembly and its 600 plus delegates of clergy and elders was the question of homosexuality. Should such persons be ordained as Pastors, Elders, or Deacons in the Presbyterian Church?

So I addressed my own congregation in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. I said, "Yes, they should." I shared all my reasons. I was in agreement with the General Assembly's task force that had made a most comprehensive study of homosexuality, and I tried to be very specific and clear. After the service, an elder I continue to have great respect for, approached me. He said, "Hal, that was well done, and what you said was exactly right, but why did you have to preach a sermon on it?"

He was simply sharing the dominant view of the straight society about gays. We know they exist, but we find the subject distasteful and disturbing and really don't want to know much about them. And to discuss homosexuality in a Sunday morning worship service is uncomfortable, a little like being seen attending an X-rated movie.

Of course, the details of such a subject as this are better discussed in an Adult Forum, and we have been doing just that for several weeks, but the trouble is we can't seem to get all of you into the classroom even though our attendance has been excellent.

But I am not being apologetic. The Sanctuary is the place where we must lift up before God our best struggles with the truth and give honest account of our faith.

It is here we need to know and lift up before God that possibly 5% to 10% of us are homosexuals, and we have made them the least in our family of faith.

We need to realize before God that gays and lesbians are the most discriminated minority in our society. That they have been ostracized, beaten down, and violated so severely that the 20 to 25 million of them in our land have had to crowd into a dark closet, live a hidden, sub-cultured life of fear and non-acceptance. Declared "perverts" by society and the church, they have been driven to higher suicides than the norm; to greater than average alcohol abuse; to hide inside marriages or enlist in religious traditions that required unmarried status; or to lifestyles of great silence.

It is here that we have to lift up before God that our society, as well as the church at-large, treats them as sick and depraved.

They are not.

They are not sick, depraved, or perverted. The evidence, if one cares to look, is to the contrary. But the church has not looked deep enough.

When the General Assembly of our church finished its business in 1978, it defeated the study committee's recommendation and declared:

**"On the basis of our understanding. . . the practice of homosexuality is sin."**

The Assembly said they wanted to make it clear so no one could doubt, even the homosexual Christian, that practicing homosexuality is sinful.

The General Assembly is wrong! So says the Session of this church, and I heartily agree with them. In December, as a Christmas present, not really to homosexuals but really to ourselves, the Session adopted the following policy entitled, “**The Inclusion of Gays and Lesbians.**” It reads in part,

**Acknowledging that the reality of prejudice in the church and society gives gay and lesbian persons reason for uncertainty as to their reception, we of the Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church wish to make clear our real and genuine welcome of all persons. We affirm that gays and lesbians are part of God’s good creation and they, no less than heterosexuals, are meant to enjoy God’s gifts of love, joy, and intimacy. All who seek and receive God’s love are welcomed as full participants in the life and worship of Christ’s church without having to deny or hide their sexual orientation. Therefore, we are gratefully open to the service and leadership of gays and lesbians including those called to ordained positions in our congregation.**

**Our loving welcome is unconditional. We further affirm our commitment, along with the General Assembly of our church, to full civil rights and justice for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, in society and in the church. We will continue to seek more light on the ways in which we can offer our support and our love to all the children of God.**

I had tears in my eyes when I first heard these words read in their proposed form. I felt a sense of liberation from my own homophobia. I felt more honest to be in a Christian church.

How can anything be sin that isn’t chosen, and homosexuality is not chosen. It is something we are constituted with such as left-handedness. Fully constituted, it cannot be cured nor need be. (see footnote) Freud long ago attested that it is as difficult to change the orientation of a homosexual as it would be a heterosexual. He has been proven right.

The condition comes, as does being heterosexual, by a combination of genetic, hormonal, and very early societal development. It is not a disease to be caught or a condition we are reduced to.

Freud was before his time on this issue, but in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of personality disorders as did two years later the American Psychological Association, indicating the naturalness of a homosexual orientation. They counselled it would be a perversion for a gay person to relate to a straight person, and to morally demand a constituted homosexual to be re-orientated would be to cause deep psychic damage to them.

It seems unnatural to most of us but nature has never been so natural as we think it should be. Homosexuality occurs throughout the animal kingdom and throughout history in all cultures in our human family. Instead of condemning it, we should accept it as a natural variant to our human sexuality.

It is not that homosexuals do not sin. We all do. We all fall short of the ideal of human sexuality and the Christ ideal as human beings. Being either straight or gay proves nothing about our faith or ethics.

The point is whatever standard of love we hold for heterosexuals, we should hold for gays and lesbians. That is, fidelity, constancy, respect, responsibility, and mutuality. No more, no less.

After 14 years, a new report came to the General Assembly this past June. It, too, after great study, advocated the ordination and full acceptance of homosexuals in the church. In part the report read,

**The Christian gay and lesbian community today values committed and loving relationships in which there are mutuality and respect for one another. This makes the context very different from that of biblical times. Furthermore, in biblical times, current psychological understanding about sexual orientation was unknown. Biblical writers presumed that everyone was heterosexual; therefore, same-sex relationships by persons who were regarded as homosexuals were considered abnormal.**

**The problem in our present struggle stems largely from the refusal of gays and lesbians to be the invisible and silent minority they once were. While they have been a vital part of the church since its inception, they now refuse to be oppressed and maligned by the church that professes the justice, freedom, and grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

**The time has come to embrace more fully the goodness of sexuality, whether it be homosexual or heterosexual. (These) are both God's good gifts of sexual being. What matters morally and ethically is how we live our lives as faithful people, regardless of our sexual orientation. Gay men and lesbians, no less than heterosexuals, are created for lives of joy and passion and intimacy in sexual relationship. Ethical standards that guide heterosexuals in determining love and right-relatedness apply to gay and lesbians as well.**

Sadly, and this is the precipitating reason this church is addressing this issue, the General Assembly again decided to stay with the position of 14 years ago. They said some good things:

- Accept gay and lesbians in church.
- Work to decriminalize all laws against them in society.
- Rid ourselves of the sin of homophobia, the fear and hatred of gays, but . . .
  
- their behavior is still sinful, and only if they repent of their behavior can they be ordained.

Well, it is the church that needs to repent and not the gays! We are telling them we accept you as long as you don't behave the way you are. Pretend otherwise and there won't be any difficulty. Certainly there already is enough hypocrisy in this world, but of all institutions, the church can least afford it. Homophobia must be cleansed from the temple.

I have the highest respect for the General Assembly of our church and readily acknowledge our church government is the best I know of. But this latest decision was more political than theological; more a refection of expediency than the unbounded love of God.

I am convinced, as is our Session, that Jesus would not condemn same-sex relationships if they were expressions of mutual love and fidelity. Let the Sessions and the Presbyteries decide ordination without any prior condemnation of the worth of the individual candidates.

What does the Bible say? Not much. Jesus says nothing about homosexual acts nor do the four gospels. Perhaps, in all the scriptures there are only six passages that in any way deal with it. Yet, nowhere in scripture does the Bible condemn homosexuality as it is understood or practiced today.

There are in the Bible certain homosexual acts condemned, but these are either part of a list of cultural taboos then considered an abomination such as eating pork, wearing garments of two different fabrics, the cross-breeding of cattle, etc., or the reference is to certain sexual practices that are wrong no matter who practices them.

People continue to misuse the scriptures regarding homosexuality as they did to keep blacks and women in their place. But nowhere does the Bible address the now established view that homosexuality is not something chosen or that it can be a creative, meaningful act of love and fidelity.

How then can the church of Jesus Christ, knowing sexual orientation is not chosen and that in most all cases never changes, insist that only heterosexuals can relate sexually and the rest must repress their sexuality the rest of their lives? (When did most of you choose to be heterosexuals?)

The church rightly believes sex is good, healthy, and spiritual. It also believes rightly that celibacy, freely chosen, should be affirmed and is probably the right choice for some individuals. But forcing celibacy on 1/10 of our population is simply punitive and destructive.

Of course, it is not sex that we are affirming with the inclusion of gays and lesbians but persons. But sadly, upon such persons we lay heavy burdens we don't accept for ourselves. Jesus warned us directly against such double standards. (Matthew 23:4)

The gay life is not without difficulty as it is. They are denied the birthing of children, but why should they be denied what the rest of us enjoy between our significant others - love, joy, and intimacy? Such social acceptance will actually increase a higher standard of love and less promiscuity or sexual abuse. Indeed, homophobia is the last major obstacle of prejudice we need to overcome.

Supporting homosexual relations is not a denial of our faith but a deepening of our commitment to God as revealed in Jesus' life. Again, it is about the acceptance of persons which always goes beyond their sexual orientation. Besides, our faith does not make sex the controlling concern of our lives. We are called to first seek God's grace in all of our relationships. This frees us from asking too much of sex or anything else. Sex served as an end in our lives, as an idol, perverts the straight or gay person. We should know that because of our own failures in idolatrous pursuits.

The renowned theologian, John Cobb, who supports homosexual relations and the ordination of gay persons, reminds us of something very basic about our faith no matter who we are:.

**The righteous life is one in which sexual enjoyment is subordinated to other ends. We do not live in order to savor delicate tastes, to have emotional highs, or to enjoy sexual or religious ecstasies. These may come to us in the course of working with others toward the upbuilding of human community in anticipation of God's reign. If so, we have cause for gratitude. It we seek God's reign first, much else may be added to us. But this does not justify seeking first these other goods.**

The late German theologian Helmut Thieliecke, in the main a conservative theologian, put sexual behavior in the right perspective:

**The primary moral problem is not sex within marriage vs. sex outside of marriage, or sex within a heterosexual relationship vs. sex within a homosexual relationship. The problem is sex as a depersonalizing force vs. sex as the fulfillment of a human relationship.**

But in the U.S, half our states still consider same sex acts a crime, and most churches judge them sinful even if they are acts of mutual love.

We all are aware that St. Paul did struggle with his understanding of sexuality. Some of his writings do not come up to Jesus' teaching about the full equality of women or how we must be able to embrace the leper, and the leper in our day, we must admit, is the homosexual.

But Paul sometimes rode to great heights on the wings of the Holy Spirit. We sometimes do, too, in spite of ourselves. He did it in the 12th chapter of Romans and the 13th chapter of I Corinthians and again in the 3rd chapter of his letter to the Galatians when he wrote -

**In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one.**

There is no question in my mind, and in a great many in Christ's church today, that we must translate and add to this passage saying,

**In Christ there is no longer straight or gay, for in him we are all one.**

Yes, there are great justice reasons for us to support gay persons in our city. I like Sheriff Leis for some reasons, but I'll send him this sermon with a personal note regarding our church's position on homosexuality which he does not share.

But I recently read David Rankin's views on this matter, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a community I once served as a Pastor. He writes,

**Recently, the mayor of Grand Rapids would not issue a manifesto for Gay Pride Day. Irish Day is okay. Furniture Day is okay. Mickey Mouse Day is okay. But no Day for a hounded and harassed community. What hypocrisy!**

**Is he proud of the plays in our theatres, by Oscar Wilde or Tennessee Williams - homosexuals?**

**Is he proud of the music in our concert halls, by Horowitz or Bernstein - homosexuals?**

**Is he proud of the art in our museums, by DaVinci, or Michelangelo, or Pollack - homosexuals?**

**Is he proud of the literature in our schools, by Auden, or Whitman, or Maughm - homosexuals?**

**I know he is proud of The King James Version of the Bible, but that was commissioned by a homosexual; and I am reminded each Christmas that he is proud of The Nutcracker Suite, but that was composed by a homosexual.**

**Actually the mayor could not issue any manifesto that would be more meaningful to everyone.**

Finally, one further point. The terrible tragedy of AIDS has been devastating in the gay community. Five worship services have been held in this church for those who have been so effected and their families. Their stories are filled with great grief, but surprisingly goodness and grace have often been their testimony. AIDS, of course, despite what many have said, is not God's wrath on homosexuality. Actually, when it comes to AIDS, Lesbian sex is safest of all sex! But what the AIDS epidemic may do, is for us to finally get to know the gay community, and to understand them beyond all the notoriously false myths about them that keep us from accepting them.

At least, we can hope!

But, for goodness sake, let us not look at gay persons with any pity! They are not depraved sinners or mentally ill. They are not a threat to our well being or society's. In the main, they are wonderful, loving, normal, creative, wholesome persons. They have enriched the church, and we must give them more leadership. They are our parents, children, brothers, and sisters.

They are, as the Session of this church has said, a **“part of God's good creation.”** And we want them to be wholly a part of this church.

#### **7/15/95 ADDENDUM**

In 1994 the American Medical Association called a halt to aversion therapy, the various methods trying to change a person's sexual orientation. It encouraged doctors to have a “nonjudgmental recognition of sexual orientation and behavior . . .”

Writing in the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, (1994, Vol. 62, No. 2), Douglas Halderman finds “No evidence indication psychotherapeutic and religions conversion therapies are effective in changing sexual orientation.” Her writes:

**“Ethicists object to conversion therapy on two grounds: first, that it constitutes a cure for a condition that has been judged not to be an illness, and second, that it reinforces a prejudicial and unjustified devaluation of homosexuality.”**

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Editor's note (added May, 1998)

Mt. Auburn Church kindly provided this text in electronic format. Jim Tiefenthal converted it to 8-1/2 x 11 inch format.