

ANY REPORTS OF SEX IN HEAVEN MAY BE EXAGGERATED

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Gay Pride Sunday

June 27, 2010

Scripture: Leviticus 20:6-24; Galatians 3:23-29

In an hour or so Dykes on Bikes as they are known will be revving up their engines and roaring past the church, marking the beginning of the 40th annual Gay Pride Parade. The street will be filled with revelers, drag queens in festive plumage, and lots of flesh will be exposed for the next five hours or so; the sidewalks barely passable. Sarah and I and a cast of many volunteers will serve 5000 cups of water to the marchers and float attendants, to Senator Schumer, and Mayor Bloomberg, and Council Speaker Quinn. Of all the great New York parades - Macy's Thanksgiving Day, St. Patrick's Day, Puerto Rican Pride Day - Gay Pride is the only one that comes from other neighborhoods into the Village.

The first year that I was here, when I came to church on this Sunday in June and saw the rainbow flag flying in the North Garden, I realized I wasn't in Kansas any more, or in my case, Missouri. So given the extravaganza of earthly delight and exuberant dancing, whistle blowing, and house and rap music that will shake this venerable and sacred pile of stones all afternoon, we are once again left to wonder about the question, "What would Jesus do? Would Jesus dance or cry? Revel with the revelers, or find a detour and high tail it to Sixth Avenue?"

Christian instruction about human sexuality is never uncomplicated, which is why our General Assembly does so poorly at approving educational materials for children's sex education and struggles with issues about ordination and orientation. In a week's time the Assembly will take up sex and Middle East peace and same gender marriage, and may not do very well with any of those topics.

The culture, in the meantime, moves forward. Employment policies have changed, spousal benefits and family leave have changed, and five states and the District of Columbia now recognize same gender marriage including Iowa of all places. If Iowa has approved can the Second Coming be far away?

There was an *op ed* piece in the Times recently entitled "Gay? Whatever, Dude." The article discussed the fact that in a recent Gallup poll the number of Americans who perceive "gay and lesbian relations" as morally acceptable has crossed the 50% mark. And for the first time

more men hold this view than women. The change in opinion is due to the fact that the percentage of men ages 18-49 who perceived these “relations” as morally acceptable rose by 48% and among those over 50 it rose by 26%.

I suspect a large part of this is due to urban life, the fact that people now openly know, work with, and socialize with self-affirming gay and lesbian people whom they consider friends and do not consider to be aberrant at all. It’s the effect of *Will and Grace* in our homes for eight continuous seasons, and a generation of college graduates who roomed and shared classes with “out” and affirming classmates.

Here at First we baptize on a regular basis the children of our gay couples; those who are married, partnered and single, and all together they stand there at the font where little Teddy Roosevelt, bully man’s man and staunch Republican that he was, once had water poured on his head. They stand there with others who are a wonderful array of the gift of diverse humanity, eight or nine at a time; a couple composed of a woman who is African American and a husband who is White, a Chinese couple, a Korean couple, a husband who is Jewish and a wife who is Presbyterian, a pair of gay dads whose child is the biological offspring of one of them, and a single mom who wanted a child so much that she adopted or who became pregnant in a new fashioned way. It does not faze us as a church one iota.

And why not? First of all because as old John Calvin put it, these are children of the Covenant, and the Covenant has nothing to do with their parentage, because God is Creator of them all. God has claimed them as God’s own, and we dare not stand in the way.

But our inclusive understanding of the gospel is also a way of standing against a tradition of exclusion in the larger church which has been less hospitable to the diversity that we embrace.

We all know that there are about five or six texts of terror in scripture that are often quoted with regard to the particular sinfulness of homosexuality. The Holiness Code in Leviticus makes it plain that for a man to lie with another man as with a woman is an abomination and Leviticus 20 renders a death sentence for it.¹ But then there is no such thing as a misdemeanor in Leviticus 20. Adultery is also a capital crime in that holiness code. And cursing your father or mother, same thing. Off with the heads. And who of us believes it right to enforce that?

Paul is another matter. There is no Hebrew or Greek word for homosexuality as such, and scholars have argued persuasively that Paul never knew what we might understand as a modern gay relationship of

equal partners in an enduring commitment. What Paul knew of same gender sex was the male rape of military conquest, the child *paideia* of aristocratic Greek pedagogy which today would be considered child molestation. Those were the pictures of same sex activity that Paul abhorred and for good reason.

Jesus, unlike Paul, had absolutely nothing to say about homosexuality. He did, on the other hand, say enough to make all of us uncomfortable about divorce, and looking lustfully at another, and condemning the sexual behavior of others. And if we squirm at Jesus' teachings about heterosexual relationships we squirm even more at the thought of discussing in any way Jesus' own sexuality, though Nikos Kazantzakis and Dan Brown and a host of recent authors have made a lot of money suggesting that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were an item.

The fact of the matter is that the gospel writers had more important issues than sexuality to convey. Rack it up to my age, but sexual orientation does not seem to me to be the defining characteristic of who we are before God.

What I think there is to say about Jesus' teachings on sexuality have to do with the way in which we might characterize the larger sweep and movement of the gospel to which Jesus bore witness. It bears the weight of an openness and grace about it that is precursor to that scene I mentioned a moment ago at our own baptismal font, where people who love one another stand committed to living a life that expresses the love of Christ in it and who promise to share that with their children, and to live it in their own lives.

It's not that sexuality is not important. It is important. It is a powerful force that drives us in life, which attracts us, which makes us passionate about living and about one another. It's also a very complicated force in our lives and it gets us into a lot of difficulty. But God didn't create our sexuality for nothing, and like everything else in the creation once it was made, God stepped back and thought about what God had made and said, "That's good." So sex is important and it's a good part of the Creation.

Now, having said that, I have to acknowledge that there is in scripture a puzzling passage that I have wondered about for some time. It's that passage from Galatians that we read a moment ago in which Paul is discussing the situation in which we find ourselves *in Christ*, a phrase which is particularly linked to the issue of being freed from the law.

In other words, prior to Christ, we were bound to the law, the law of Moses. But since our baptism, we are *in Christ*, a phrase which means that we are partakers of a new self understanding, one which pertains to this life and endures beyond it.

And how does Paul describe it? “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

One in Christ Jesus, Paul says. No longer Jew or Greek? Sounds right. No national distinctions, cultural or social differences. Those are unnecessary for we are one in Christ.

No longer slave or free? That’s a relief. No one’s personhood or humanity can be subjugated to another’s will. All that is past as well.

But no longer male and female? That is something that is odd to consider. Paul recognized that men and women were different in appearance and temperament and style. At his low points he had very clear roles in mind for women in marriage, ones that did not bear the full weight of grace inherent in the gospel. But here, in Galatians, in this passage we have Paul at his best, opening new categories and thinking in new ways about what it is to be human, every bit as much as being a man or a woman.

I love Garrison Keillor’s characterization of the folks at Lake Wobegone, “where the women are strong, the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” There’s a kind of gentle gender bending there that’s refreshing.

And while I don’t think Paul was gender bending quite like Garrison Keillor, I do think he was saying that in Christ, we are a new creation and have become a new community, and so our thinking about one another must change. The distinctions about sexuality that have so occupied our attention are less important in God’s kingdom, not unimportant, but less so because we are one in Christ. And in Christ we look more at the heart and soul and spirit of others, and less at gender or gender attraction.

Richard Hays of Duke University in his commentary on Galatians remarks,

If the church is to be a sign and foretaste of the new creation, it must be a community in which gender distinctions – like the ethnic and social distinctions noted in the first two parts of the formula - have lost their power to divide and oppress. This does not mean that those who are in Christ cease to be men or

women... Rather, it means that these distinctions are no longer the determinative identity markers, no longer ground for status or exclusion.²

And if gender distinctions must go, so must gender attraction distinctions.

The good news is that a new community of welcome and unity is called into being in Christ, and the church is meant to be that community *here* and *now*, as we will be *then* and *there* in God's closer presence.

One other question that intrigues me about that idea of Paul that there is no longer male and female in Christ is the obvious. "Does this mean that there is no sex in heaven?" You say, "Why ask such a stupid question?"

Well you may remember that after the attack on the World Trade Center, now nine years ago, (can it have been so long?) there was a report that those who carried out the attacks were promised 72 virgins in paradise for their martyrdom. The myth has since been debunked as urban legend because the Quran does not promise such a thing at all.

There is no reference to 72 virgins in heaven anywhere in Muslim holy writ though there is a reference in one hadith to the fact that the Prophet Muhammad was once heard to say, "The smallest reward for the people of paradise is an abode where there are 80,000 servants and 72 wives, over which stands a dome decorated with pearls, aquamarine, and ruby, as wide as the distance from Al-Jabiyyah to Sana'a."³

There are, however, a number of references to sensual delights in paradise that can be found in Muslim teaching, but all of them are written from a man's perspective, and to that extent, Muslim visions of paradise are more for the pleasure of men than for the delight of women.

Comparatively speaking, there is no Christian expectation of sex in heaven, in fact all the energy of sexual attraction seems to be absent from the Christian view of paradise altogether. Take for instance Jesus' answer to the complicated question posed by the Sadducees who wondered about the marital status of a woman who had been married seven times to one husband and six of his brothers in succession.

"Don't be silly," Jesus answered them, "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."⁴ And we all know the angels are kind of sexless.

Frankly, I've never been all that interested in the question of whether there is sex in heaven, sex after death. If my counseling is any indication of people's experience in life, there is already enough of a

challenge to keep the fire lit in the years after marriage and certainly after children. Maybe we can leave it to God to deal with the sexual issues of heaven, and we can focus on trying to sort out as much as we can here on earth in the meantime.

It was St. Augustine in the 5th Century who in his 7th Sermon on I John, uttered the famous words, “Dilige et quod vis fac.” Love God and then do what you will. Many a person has taken seriously the second half of that instruction, the part about doing what you will while ignoring the first part about loving God. And in a day of religious fanaticism, we have to be careful about the loving God part too, because there are true believers who say they love God who are blowing themselves and a lot of other people to smithereens in a way that exemplifies anything but the love of God, to my way of thinking.

But maybe Augustine is helpful nonetheless. Because he tells us if not what Jesus would do, at least what one of his most faithful followers did, old Augustine, who knew plenty of earthly delight in his youth, who prayed, “O Lord make me chaste, but not yet.” Love God, he said, and then do what you will, because what you will will have the grace and goodness of God in it.

In the meantime we work to build a community in which we do not exclude one another but welcome one another without concern for social distinctions, ethnic backgrounds, racial identities or affectional orientation. We do it not because it’s politically correct, or because the culture is moving us in that direction, or even because it’s the path of least resistance. We do it because in Christ, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.”

So what would Jesus do on Gay Pride Day? Would he ride a float and dance in a speedo? Would he come down the street with a bullhorn like Senator Schumer and say hi to all his admirers? Would he be among the Brazilian or Peruvian fan dancers? Would he march with the Gay NYPD officers? I don’t know.

What I do know is that he cast no judgment on tax collectors or any whom his society deemed disreputable. He saved a woman with a bad reputation on more than one occasion, saved one of them from death, and he warned the scribes and Pharisees that people they thought had no place in heaven were dancing on floats entering into the pearly gates way ahead of them.

Maybe he would stand behind the barricades today on Fifth Avenue and watch and wave and laugh and enjoy himself. Maybe he would say that some folks were probably going a bit too far.

But to tell you the truth what I think he would really do is get out on the street and offer his children 5000 cups of water.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2010.

¹ Leviticus 20:13

² Richard Hays, *Galatians: The New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. XI. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000) 273.

³ This hadith is quoted by Ibn Kathir (died 1373 CE) in his Koranic commentary (Tafsir) of Surah Al-Rahman (55), verse 72

⁴ Matthew 22:30