

THE MARGINALIZED AND EXCLUDED GOD'S AFFIRMATION

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Amos 5: 21-24, Mark 1: 40-45.

[See also Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:24-27]

As you all know, our congregation is engaged in a process moving, perhaps, to becoming an 'affirming congregation'.

An affirming congregation is one that aims to be inclusive and welcoming of all kinds of people.

Of course the diversity we are most concerned with just now is that of sexual orientation. All the more appropriate that we should consider this in our season of 'creation time'.

Sexuality, of course, is part of God's good creation. We rejoice that we are created male and female.

As we all know, sexuality is a means by which we humans express intimate love, commitment, and loyalty, deriving from it great pleasure and joy.

And, for the great majority of people, the love of men and women for each other forms the basis for lifelong marriage, and is also the foundation for the procreation and raising of children.

It's all good! Sexuality is the Creator's good and beautiful gift to humanity.

But some people have been excluded from all this, because of their differing sexual orientation, mainly, same-sex attraction. The whole idea of same sex marriage was regarded as ridiculous and laughable until recent years. And many people are still uncomfortable with this idea.

So a large minority of people have been excluded from the joys of intimate love; or if they claimed it for themselves according to their inclinations, they have been shunned or punished by both society and church.

We need to recognize that generally, in biblical times, the whole idea of 'orientation' was not understood. Most people of the ancient world saw it as a sinful or foolish choice, an immoral thing.

But "orientation," as we understand it today, implies something given. Not chosen. People discover their orientation. We don't choose whom we are attracted to.

If you are heterosexual, you did not choose to be attracted to the opposite sex. You've discovered that about yourself, usually at some point in your adolescence. But for people who discover otherwise, usually sometime in their youth, it's a personal crisis, not something they've chosen.

In fact, it's common for young people of homosexual orientation to hate it, and try to change it; they want to fit in, to be "normal."

As a minister I've had a few occasions of homosexual young men who came to speak with me confidentially about this.

I remember one young university student of about 20 – I'll call him Jack. (This was a number of years ago, not someone in Burlington, no someone that any of you knows.) Jack appeared to be an ordinary

masculine young man, not visibly feminine, either in appearance or manner. He was quite strong and athletic, played on a soccer team.

He spilled out his sad story of how he had kept it secret that, since adolescence, he had always been sexually attracted to other boys, and men. He hated it, didn't want it, but that's the way it was. He had prayed about it, tried to change it, but it would not go away.

Then one day he finally blurted it out to his best friend, whom he thought he could trust.

Jack was shaken when his friend reacted with hostility. His friend was shocked and disgusted and told him to stay away from him; then went and spilled the beans to others in their social circle.

All of a sudden Jack was getting the cold shoulder from a number of his old friends; though some expressed sympathy or pity, but he didn't want pity, he wanted respect and true acceptance.

Some people made crude jokes at his expense. In the men's locker room suddenly his team-mates went quiet, or hid themselves when he came in.

In other words, he was very quickly marginalized and excluded socially.

Then he decided he had to tell his parents. It was difficult to come out with it, because he knew they would be shocked. They didn't throw him out of the family, but they were obviously very disappointed with him.

They hoped to have grandchildren from Jack, but even more, they were worried about what their friends would say about their having a gay son. Was it their fault? It would be so embarrassing.

Jack was in despair. His self-esteem was at rock bottom. He began to hate himself.

He talked to a "Christian" friend about it, and was told that the Bible was against homosexuals, that such a thing was a sin, and warned him that if he did anything like that, and died, he'd go to hell.

That's why Jack came to talk to a minister. It was clear that he was considering suicide. Like so many other people in the same position. We know that homosexual young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are four times more likely to commit suicide than other young people.

And why wouldn't they? If all they experience is deprivation, isolation, and humiliation.

Jack decided, before ending his life, to try talking to a minister. "If I kill myself," he asked, "will God reject me too, and send me to hell fire?"

I had several in depth conversations with Jack, during which I assured him, first of all, that his same sex attraction was not that unusual. That he was not alone; there are lots of people like him. Maybe as much as 10% of the population felt the way he did.

I told him he could be proud of who he is. (He laughed ruefully at this.) But I said, "this is what comes naturally to you. It's who you are." I said it's rather like being left handed. It's a minority thing, but it's natural. Don't be ashamed. Be proud."

I told him, doctors no longer regard homosexuality as a mental or psychological illness. It's not something to be healed or cured.

Since he asked, we talked about the Bible. I told him that the God we know in Christ is not hateful and vengeful, looking for people to punish. Jesus came to us from God not to condemn, but to save. I told him that he, Jack, was indeed a beloved child of God. God affirms him as the person that he is.

Well, it took him quite awhile to accept all this. Too good to be true, he thought.

But Jack's story shows how important it is that we, as a church community, have a well thought out biblical perspective on sexual orientation. A misuse of the Bible can be very dangerous and destructive to people's lives.

First, we have to acknowledge that certain biblical texts have been used as weapons against sexual orientation minorities. [SCREEN]

For example, in Leviticus 20, [on the screen]: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination, they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." (That's Leviticus 20:13)

That text comes to us from sometime after the 6th century before Christ. A long time ago. But many people still take this text as permission to murder homosexual people.

One thing to keep in mind about this text is that it comes as part of many laws and regulations of ancient Israel that Christians have long since set aside. And which Jesus himself set aside.

The same book of Leviticus forbids the eating of various kinds of food – no pork, bacon or sausage, no shell fish, for example. Baby boys were to be circumcised as a religious ritual.

In Leviticus there are also many detailed laws about sacrifices in the Temple. And also many laws about ritual uncleanness and defilement, and strict regulations about ritual cleansing and washing. We haven't done any of these things since the first century.

In light of Christ, and God's grace in Christ, Christians set all these things aside very early on. Ironically, the one regulation we have kept, historically, is just this one: that people in same sex relationships should be condemned, punished, and even put to death!

Turning now to the New Testament we find very little about homosexuality. But the apostle Paul does speak about same sex relations in very negative terms.

For example, in Romans 1, Paul understood homosexual desire, whether male or female, as the result of the sin of idolatry, or the worship of false gods. Apparently Paul was thinking of the male or female fertility cults that were sometimes part of certain religious practices that existed in the days of the Roman Empire. [SCREEN]

So, says Paul, because of their idolatry, [on the screen]: "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."

So, for Paul, being homosexual was a kind of divine punishment. We notice, though, that Paul does not repeat the text from Leviticus that such people should be put to death.

We note also that Paul speaks of 'passion', so he seems to realize that same sex couples might actually be "in love."

Nevertheless, he considers it a scandalous thing. It's fair to say that Paul had no concept of "sexual orientation" as we understand it today, that is, that same sex attraction is something that comes naturally to quite a lot of people.

Today we know better, through historical studies, and modern psychology and sociology – that various sexual orientations have always existed and still exist everywhere in the world, and have nothing to do with pagan religious cults.

It's notable that we find nothing against homosexuality in the words of the great Hebrew prophets: Nothing against it from Amos or Hosea, or Micah, or Isaiah or Jeremiah.

Nor do we hear any words ascribed to Jesus in which he condemns homosexual activity.

There are, however, biblical texts that are relevant to our thinking about this, even though they don't mention sexuality as such. Let's look at the texts we read this morning, first the prophet Amos.

Amos, an early prophet from about the 8th century before Christ, was primarily concerned with justice and righteousness. These are parallel concepts. Justice here means right relations. It's about fairness, respect and neighbourly love.

These two words interpret each other. To be righteous, to live in right relationships, is to be fair and just. To be 'just' was the main thing about being 'righteous'.

Amos, back there nearly 3000 years ago, was especially concerned about justice for the poor, who are cheated and exploited by the rich. He loudly condemned the rich and powerful people, who, he says,

“sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way...” [Amos 2: 6-8]

Amos says that God hates their solemn assemblies, takes no delight in burnt offerings. “Take away from me the noise of your songs,” he says. “I will not listen to the melody of your harps... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

In other words, God is not pleased by religious rituals (or church services) that are not accompanied by justice.

And we know all too well that people of homosexual orientation have been, and still are, denied justice – by Christians, and by many other peoples as well.

They have been marginalized and excluded down through the centuries, rejected by their families, abandoned by their friends, thrown out of their jobs, restricted about where they could live.

We continue to hear today how they are ridiculed, harassed, beaten up, even murdered. Although the sexual orientation minorities have come a long way in public recognition, it is, even now, still dangerous to be 'out' as gay or lesbian, or transgendered.

I'm sorry to have to tell you something about our shameful Christian history in this respect.

People who were discovered to be, or thought to be, engaged in homosexual practices, were brutally executed, thousands upon thousands of them, for centuries of our Christian history. It still happens in some parts of the world.

Beginning from about the fifth century, and going on throughout the Middle Ages, through the years of the Protestant Reformation, and right down to the 19th century, they were hanged, or burned alive, or drowned in barrels of water, often tortured to obtain confessions. By both Catholics and Protestants.

It often happened to unfortunate youths, innocent lads found to be just fooling around.

It happened to some women too, though fewer of them; more often homosexual women, or women who were unconventional in any way, were burned as witches. Yes, thousands of them!

Executions went on well into the 19th century; in England in that century some sixty men were hanged for the crime of homosexual acts. Only in 1861 was the death penalty for this crime abolished in England and replaced with life imprisonment.

In Canada, since 1841, homosexual acts were punishable by the death penalty or life imprisonment, and this remained on the books until 1954. In 1969, homosexual acts between consenting adults over 21 years of age were decriminalized (following Pierre Trudeau's famous declaration that "the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation").

It is remarkable how, for so many centuries, this particular thing was more severely punished than almost any sin or crime.

We may wonder: What would account for the fury and ferocity against homosexual love? I suppose that the majority, being of heterosexual orientation, found the thought of homosexual practices extremely distasteful.

But more than that, among men, both in the past, and even today, homosexual love seemed an offense against manliness.

There's a considerable literature about this. That a man would allow himself to take a female role in sex relations; that he would choose to be like a woman in any way, was felt to be disgusting.

Being proud of their masculinity and strength, proud of their dominance in society, many men have tended to look down upon women as weak. So a man who is in any way like a woman, is contemptible. Deserving of harsh punishment.

Certainly not all men feel this way, and I think that generally men's attitudes have been changing for the better, especially among younger men.

But I'm sorry to say that men's disgust and violence toward male homosexuals has been linked to misogyny, or contempt for women. That is, male sexism and homophobia are closely connected.

There was also an element of fear, (literally, homo-phobia), exacerbated by another biblical text. In Genesis 19 we hear of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, where allegedly homosexual acts were followed by the fierce judgment of God.

We are told that sulphur and fire fell from heaven upon those towns, utterly destroying them and all their inhabitants. When a woman, while escaping, looked back upon the fire, she was turned into a pillar of salt. So says Genesis 19.

So homosexual acts were called the "sin of sodomy," and those who practiced it were "sodomites." In the middle ages, people feared that, if sodomy was tolerated, their town might be destroyed, just as Sodom and Gomorrah were.

Actually, if you look closely at that text – Genesis 19 – you'll see that it's certainly not about same-sex orientation or same-sex love. Sad to say, this is a text about gang rape, which is, truly, a disgusting thing that often happens in warfare, where homosexual assault is a way to humiliate enemies and foreigners.

Nevertheless, this story was used down through the centuries, by both Catholics and Protestants, as a justification for the execution of so-called "sodomites."

Now we find a contrast to all this in this morning's reading from the gospel of Mark about Jesus and the leper, (even though there's nothing about sexuality in this text).

Of course I'm not suggesting that homosexual folk are like lepers. Not at all. Leprosy is a contagious disease, and homosexuality is not a disease, nor is it contagious. Today, leprosy can be cured. Homosexuality does not need to be cured.

What they do have in common is that both have been taken as grounds for exclusion and rejection.

As you may know, leprosy is a neurological disease, at its worst, results in the loss of body parts. A truly horrible disease. We have a medical cure for it now, but ancient people could do nothing about it.

We read in Leviticus that a leper would show himself to a priest, who would offer a sacrifice, a guilt offering for the victim. Then the person would be expected to isolate, usually to live within a leper colony, cut off from normal community and family life, regarded as "unclean," and condemned by God.

If lepers came anywhere close to regular people, they were obliged to cry out "Unclean, unclean!" to warn away anyone from coming close.

But when this leper kneels before Jesus asking for healing, he does not send him away. He has compassion on him.

As the text says, very deliberately: "Jesus reached out his hand and touched him." Mark makes a special point of it: "he reached out his hand and touched him."

This was an act of courage. Because, by touching him Jesus made himself ritually unclean. By touching him, therefore, he took a chance on being defiled, displeasing to God, and perhaps infected with the same disease.

This reminds us that on many other occasions Jesus intentionally, compassionately, touched people – the blind, the lame, the woman with an issue of blood. He set aside the rules against defilement, and touched them with love. They were made whole.

This, I suggest, is the attitude we must take with anyone who is marginalized or excluded – whether it be homosexual folk, or AIDS victims, or homeless people, prisoners, or anyone at all who has been excluded from human community.

We touch them with respect and dignity, welcome and accept them fully into family and community, and rejoice with them when they find the love that they seek.

Well, we've come a long way in the last 50 years or so in our understanding and treatment of sexual orientation minorities, including recently trans-gendered people. We still have a long way to go before they are accepted and fully embraced by society at large.

I'm happy to say that our friend Jack eventually decided to affirm his own life, to make new friends, and eventually to find the love of his life. When he was married to another man a few years later, in a United Church, his parents were there behind him as his most ardent supporters.