

V. "The Bible and Homosexuality"
Acts 10 (selected verses)
Six-Sermon Series: **The Family of God**
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
October 8, 2006

Ethicist Henry David Aiken has identified four levels of moral discourse, the lowest of which really requires no discourse at all. It is the emotive level. On that level, all one has to do is to feel something and then to say what one feels. Using that level of discourse, one can bypass one's brain all together. Often the discourse on the subject of homosexuality, even within the Christian community, stays stuck on this lowest level; yet, is there any issue that cries out more desperately for a thoughtful, non-emotive response?

The debate over whether non-celibate gay and lesbian persons may be ordained as ministers or elders has divided the Presbyterian Church family for thirty years. This past June, the 217th General Assembly of our denomination voted to leave in place the Constitutional requirement that only those who live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness may be ordained. The General Assembly also adopted the report of the Peace, Unity and Purity Task Force, which allows for congregations and presbyteries to apply ordination standards in accordance with the principles of Church Order and in the light of their closer knowledge of the candidates' commitment to Christ. No one was particularly happy with the outcome. Those who favor full inclusion were disappointed and frustrated. Those who oppose full inclusion were disappointed and frustrated. The battle goes on. There are

those who say that the issue of the ordination of gay and lesbian people has the potential to be as schismatic to our Presbyterian church as the issues of slavery and abolition were in the 19th century.

I will tell you that I am weary of the rancor. I find it unfathomable that the church, which has such a compelling mission to fulfill in a world of suffering and hurt, a world in which people are languishing for want of hope and healing, has devoted so much energy to this discussion. And yet, it is an important discussion, not the most important one, but one worthy of our prayerful discernment and attention. Why? Because real people are involved. Real justice is at stake. Real fidelity to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is involved in this issue.

At Morningside we are in the midst of a six-week sermon series on *The Family of God*. I could not do a set of sermons on this subject without giving attention to the approximately 10% of the members of American society who are gay and lesbian. As Professors Brian Childs and George Stroup of Columbia Seminary have said, “Most heterosexual Christians have homosexual acquaintances, relatives, and friends, whether they know it or not.” We are not talking about other people out there somewhere. We are talking about our brothers and daughters and aunts and uncles in our own biological family, and we are talking about our sisters and brothers in Christ with whom we share Christian fellowship and break bread in the Christian community.

We are a family here at Morningside Presbyterian Church. Some of us are straight, and some of us are gay, and none of us is better categorically than

any of the rest of us. We believe by faith that all of us are valued, beloved members of the household of God and that there is a place at Christ's table for all the members of God's family.

I want to say a word of particular respect today to those of you who might disagree with what I have to say this morning. I trust that all of us who have gathered for worship today share a love for God, a love for the Bible, a love for our fellow human beings, and a love for the truth. I know some of you will disagree with me, and I hope that you will offer to me the same level of respect I offer to you. We are all here to allow our understanding and our conscientiousness to be reshaped and reformed by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

I decided yesterday that after church, instead of shaking hands at the door, I will gather with any of you who would like to in the Session Room immediately after worship so that we can have time for informal conversation. Let's talk after church if you would like to. Feel free to go to the Parlor and get a cookie and cup of punch, and then we will have an informal conversation for half an hour. Just remember, the punch is in the Parlor. No "punching" in the Session Room please.

I want to turn now for a brief look at three passages that are most often referred to in the church in the debate over homosexuality. In the church, the Scriptures are our authority for faith and for practice, and so we cannot simply dismiss the Bible and say it is irrelevant in this or in any matter. So, here we go...

The first story usually cited in this debate is the story of Sodom found in the 19th chapter of Genesis. Dr. Jack Rogers did a much more thorough job with this on Thursday night in his presentation in our Fellowship Hall, but for those of you who were not there, let me remind you of how the story goes: The men of Sodom surround a house in which Lot and his guests are staying, and they demand that Lot bring out the male guests to them so that they may “know them.” This is an expression that is sometimes, though not always used in Hebrew to mean, “to have sexual relations.” This is a sordid story and it gets more so, because right after this demand is made, Lot’s response to the demand is to say, “No, I will not send my guests out to you, but I would like to offer you my virgin daughters in place of the ones you’ve asked for.” Lot is not someone we would put at the top of our Most Admired Morality List. To make a very difficult story blessedly short, a scuffle breaks out, the angels, (the guests are really angels at Lot’s house) snatch Lot out of the melee and pull him back into the house, the men of Sodom are struck blind, and then Lot, his family, and the guests escape as the fire and brimstone begin to fall.

It is not an easy story. It is a violent story in which one finds little high moral ground. But as we try to interpret it, we need to at least look first at how the story is interpreted in other places in Scripture, before we begin to impose our own assumptions on it. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is referred to rather frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament, but never is the sin of homosexuality ever mentioned in association with it. Sodom’s other sins are mentioned: pride, neglect of the poor, lust run amok. These kinds of things are referred to, but never is homosexuality, not in Ezekiel or Isaiah or any of the prophets. When Jesus

mentions the destruction of Sodom in Matthew's Gospel, he speaks of the sin of inhospitality. He says to his disciples, "If anyone will not receive you or your words, shake the dust off your feet and as you leave that house or town, I tell you, it will be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town [that did not receive you graciously.]" (Matthew 10:15)

This is not to say that the Bible anywhere excuses or tolerates the behavior of the men of Sodom toward the angels who were Lot's guests. The Scriptures condemn sexual aggression. The Scriptures condemn exploitation of strangers, but neither is used synonymously with homosexuality in the Bible.

Another problematic passage is the 18th Chapter of Leviticus, which contains a number of sexual prohibitions: prohibitions against sexual relationships between people of the same sex, against incest, against adultery, against having sexual relations during certain times of the month. This is the 18th chapter of a nine-chapter passage that contains the Holiness Code. This code grew out of the society's concern to establish guidelines for rituals and behavior that would distinguish the Israelites from the Canaanites. There are rules about whether or not you can trim your beard. There are rules about what you can eat, what animal flesh can and cannot be eaten, and what foods can be eaten together. (The story of Cornelius and the sheet coming from heaven had to do with animals that were unclean in terms of Jewish food rituals.) The 24th chapter of Leviticus requires that people who use blasphemy against God are to be put to death by stoning.

It is difficult to distinguish among these rules as to which are rules for ever and ever and which are applicable in this particular context of the history of Israel thousands of years ago.

In the book of Romans (1:28ff) in the New Testament, Paul writes of “dishonorable passions” and “natural and unnatural relations.” Clearly, throughout the history of the interpretation of this passage, the assumption was that Paul was referring to homosexual relationships, and he well might have been. There are, however, many reputable scholars who suggest that Paul was not talking about homosexuality per se, but was writing against male prostitution and pedophilia, two common practices in the Roman culture of the day.

Two other problematic New Testament passages are I Timothy 2, and I Corinthians 5. There are interpretive challenges with these texts as well. The problems come, at least in part, because of the fact that the contemporary church is asking the Bible questions that simply were not being addressed by the cultures in which the Scriptures were written. No one was asking the writers of the Bible what they thought of same sex relationships that were based on mutuality and respect and characterized by fidelity and commitment, for example.

In the pre-scientific world in which the Bible was written, the purpose of sex was procreation. Infant mortality was high, and as many babies as possible needed to be born to tend the sheep and till the fields. Babies were essential for the survival of the family. I think it is safe to assume that the writers of Scripture operated on the premise that heterosexuality on everybody's part

for the purpose of procreation was essential to the survival of the human race. One of the ironies of our time is that a great threat to the human race is a lack of population control in many parts of the world.

The trickiest task of doing Christian ethics from a Scriptural base is separating that which is culture bound from that which is fundamental to the faith in any age. Surely, the least we can say about this complex issue is that we need to do better than simple proof-texting. This matter of inclusion of gays and lesbians is a matter that will best be served not by pointing to Levitical laws buried back of the Holiness Code, but in looking at the bigger picture of God's relationship with human beings, the portrait of God that we see most clearly in Jesus Christ. Even the earliest faith community had trouble with this one.

When you listen to the history of the early church, you never hear God saying to the original members of the Christian Movement, "You are exactly right to exclude those people who are different from you." The picture the Bible gives us is a God who is grabbing the faith community by the neck and dragging it toward a new understanding of the essential inclusiveness of divine grace. When you look at the Book of Acts, you see a church with its hands on its hips saying, "Are you telling us we're supposed to include the Gentiles in the promises of grace? We are supposed to eat at the same table with people who eat food that is unclean?" It is a sobering picture, a reminder of our tendency to make distinctions between people and of God's unwillingness to make similar kinds of distinctions.

If you plan to go home this afternoon and get out your Bible and see where I went wrong today, I hope you will look at Genesis 19, Leviticus 18, Romans 1:26, I Corinthians 5, and I Timothy 2. But do not stop until you have spent some time in the 10th and 11th chapters of the Book of Acts. Re-read Peter's sermon "Truly," he says, "I perceive that God shows no partiality, but that in every nation, anyone who fears God and does right is acceptable in God's sight."

If the early church leaders had had their way, the Christian circle would have remained closed, and the spread of the Gospel would have stopped at the city limits of Jerusalem. Whatever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about, it is at least about the power of God to change believers' minds about who is in and who is out. Among the many reasons I am thankful to be a Presbyterian, none is more important to me than my confidence that God is constantly reforming, reshaping and enlightening the mind of the church, so that the church's mind can more clearly reflect the mind of Christ. Christ is the central character of Scripture. Christ is its best interpreter. "Interpret the Bible through the lens of his redemptive life and ministry," Dr. Rogers advised.

And remember. Not a single word about homosexuality is to be found in the teachings of Jesus in any of the four Gospels.

Jesus was one whose eyes were always open, whose heart was always open to those on the margins, the categorically excluded – the Samaritans, the women of his day, the tax collectors, people who had been beaten up and left in the ditch.

My favorite story in all the Bible is told in this little children's book I have had for years. *The Lost Sheep* is about the shepherd who one night counted his flock and had 99 out of the 100; one was missing. The shepherd couldn't stand it. He looked and looked until he found the one who was lost and brought him home.

***The Lost Sheep* by Kenneth N. Taylor**

The shepherd watches his sheep in the field. They are eating grass. The lambs are playing. But one lamb is walking away. The little lamb walks away too far! The shepherd does not notice that the lamb has gone. On my! The lamb is going to fall into this hole and hurt his leg. Now the shepherd stands up. It is getting dark. He gathers his sheep together to lead them home. He counts the sheep. One, two, three, four,... Suddenly he notices that one of his lambs is missing! Right away the shepherd leaves his flock and starts searching for the lost lamb. Finally, after a long time, he finds it, lying very still. Its leg is broken. It is very lonely. The good shepherd gently picks up the lamb and carries it home. The little lamb has been saved! Jesus said, "I am like the shepherd in the story." And we are like the sheep. Jesus looks for any of His lambs who get lost. He will find you if you let Him.

The church that has been entrusted with the message of the Good Shepherd ought to be in the finding business, in the embracing business. We ought not to be in the rejecting and sending away business.

We ought to remember what Jesus said, “Let those who are without sin cast the first stone.”

We ought to respect the human dignity of all people and at least consider the fact that people really don't choose their sexual identity. We are how we are, the way God made us. How we act out our sexual identity is a matter of moral consequence for all of us. Homosexual, heterosexual: morality matters, but it is an intellectual mistake of the highest order to assume that we should associate a specific sexual identity with sexual sin. Heterosexual persons can be just as sinful with their sexual behavior as homosexual people can.

Let us not allow the Mark Foley scandal to blind us to the fact that there are many heterosexual men who are obsessed with young people. *Dateline NBC* has run nauseating story after nauseating story about adult men who set up dates with 10, 11, and 12 year old girls. Sin is sin; God doesn't like it, no matter who commits it, whether we are heterosexual or homosexual. Sexual exploitation, sexual violence is never good, but let us not commit the sin of demeaning the whole category of human beings who are made in the image of God and are just as likely and capable of living honorable lives as anyone else.

Wayne Oates was a great Baptist preacher and pastoral counselor. He wrote of his conversion to the Christian faith: “After my conversion I felt a divine imperative never to think of any human being as inferior to me or to think of any human being as being superior to me. Since my conversion to Christianity, my calling has been to take off the cheap price tags people

place on themselves and ask their permission to bestow upon them the price tag that God has placed on us.” (*The Struggle to Be Free*) What is the price tag? If you are a human being, you are precious to God. You are worth the life of God’s own Son. That is the message of the Bible.

A final word about marriage and how I believe in it, and how I believe it ought to be offered to all people, straight and gay. I believe it ought to be offered for Biblical reasons. Adam and Eve are the Biblical sign that God’s purpose in creation was companionship. The Book of Genesis puts it clearly and eloquently, “God looked upon the creatures that God had made and said, “It is not good for that human being to be alone.”

I believe that marriage ought to be available to all people who want to make a lifetime commitment in God’s name for societal reasons. I believe it is good for all of society. No one has expressed this in a more cogent way for me than the conservative columnist David Brooks who wrote in *The New York Times* “The conservative course must not be to banish gay people from making marriage commitments. The conservative course ought to be to expect gay people to make marriage commitments. We should insist on it. We should regard it as scandalous that two people can claim to love each other and not want to sanctify their love with marriage and fidelity. When liberals argue for gay marriage they sound like it’s a really good employment benefits plan or they frame it as a civil rights issue. But marriage is not like that. It is going to be up to conservatives to make the important moral case for marriage including marriage among people who are gay. Not making it means drifting further into a culture of contingency,

which, when it comes to intimate and sacred relationships, is an abomination.”

I know that 70-80% of Americans disagree with me on this matter. Perhaps the majority of you do too. Not long ago, I myself was in a different place, but through what I believe to be the grace of God, I am growing as a human being, growing in my understanding of the family of God, growing in my belief in the awesome power of Christ to change minds and human hearts.

I close with a story from the first year of my ministry. A wonderful, interesting young woman began to visit the church that I was serving. Over time, she and I began to talk about her life, about how she had spent some arduous months at a retreat center in Europe trying to overcome what she believed to be the sin of her sexuality. About how she'd known all her life that she was lesbian, but she had no word for it when she was a little girl. About how in her conservative Christian upbringing, she had been taught that homosexuality both in terms of orientation and practice was an affront to the Almighty. She had tried very hard to change who she was, and she couldn't, and she was depressed. She would come to see me and ask me how God could possibly love her or accept her as she was. One day, she left my office and went home and took a revolver and tried to take her own life. By the grace of God, she survived. And she became whole in body and spirit. She went on to love herself and another person who became her life partner. This person is the founder of the Atlanta Interfaith AIDS Network and Common Ground, for which we cook every month. She taught me that whenever the Christian faith is turned into a weapon of destruction and meanness rather than a means of grace, Christ himself has been betrayed.

For 27 years I have grown in my understanding that as a Christian pastor I must work for a church that is as generous and just as God's grace and to work to end church policy and practices that are hard-edged and unkind. I am on my journey. You are on your journey. May God go with us all the way.

Benediction:

Go out into the world in peace;
have courage;
hold on to what is good;
return no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted;
support the weak, and help the suffering;
honor everyone;
love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.