

“What Does Scripture Say about Sex, Gender and Sexuality”

Mountain View UMC - October 7, 2018

First of all, I want to just begin by naming that 25 minutes is not very long (I preached for 45 minutes this morning...) even the 75 minutes from the three of us is an inadequate length of time to properly address this topic from any one of our perspectives let alone, all three. I also want to begin by acknowledging this is an emotional, charged and very personal topic for most people. Although I will sharing about scripture and interpretation and translation, I am very conscious of the fact that we are talking about people (really all people) and how we are called to behave as people who follow Jesus Christ.

Now, before we can tackle the question of “What does the Bible say...?” we must first think about why we care and what will we do with our answer. I care because I believe the Bible to be the primary authority on everything in my life and that it communicates God’s perfect will for me as a believer and follower of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It would be understandable for you to assume that I’ve always thought this... and that I always approached this topic from the same perspective. But that is not the case. If I had been asked to join this panel seven years ago, it would have been to represent the exact opposite perspective than I do today. But nearly six years ago, at a particularly low point in my life, I experienced what I can only describe to you good methodists as a Wesley-like Heart-Strangely-Warmed-Moment. I had a personal encounter with God... and that encounter transformed me; it turned me inside out and launched me into re-examining everything I had ever believed. One of the most transformative things that came from that was my re-engaging these two questions (Why do I care? & What will I do with my answer?) You see, ultimately it was not more knowledge or the discovery of new passages that changed my understanding of what the Bible says about sex, gender and sexuality. It was my conviction about the authority of the Bible that changed, not the content. Ultimately, I believe that what the Bible says, is what God says and therefore I will conform my life to it’s teaching regardless of how society feels and more importantly, regardless of how I feel. You might think to yourself that there wouldn’t be much to conform to a traditional understanding of the Bible for a white, heterosexual, Christian male in America. But the truth is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is incredibly challenging and costly for everyone. If you believe the Gospel just slots in nicely without change your life, than I don’t believe we are talking about the same Gospel.

So with that in the background, let us turn to the question of the day: What does the Bible say about sex, gender and sexuality? The first thing I want to say about this is that scripture makes it clear that sex was God's idea. In fact, Genesis 1:27-28... "...be fruitful and multiply" is the first commandment ever given to the newly created human beings. (the first step to multiplying in fruitfulness is sex) Not only does God command them to have sex, but he commands them to have a lot of sex... "...fill the earth and subdue it..." Sex was God's idea... now it doesn't say this anywhere in scripture that I've found but I also think God is good enough to have made it intentionally fun.

The Bible says to me that sex was God's idea and therefore it is good. I believe the Bible also makes it clear that God created a specific context for sex and that context is monogamous marriage. There are a lot of passages I could lift out for this but I want to illustrate this with the words of Jesus, in Matthew 15:17-20.

- 1) defilement comes from the heart... the metaphorical location of emotion/feeling
- 2) his list is not exhaustive but representative... among them are two sexual defilements (adultery & fornication/sexual immorality)
- 3) fornication = gk porneia; from pernao = "to sell off" or the selling off (surrendering) sexual purity
- 4) porneia - is a catch all term for any sexual activity outside of marriage

Marriage is the God-designed context for sex. Now a couple chapters later in Matthew 19, Jesus talks again about marriage, this time in response to a trap question from the Pharisees:

- 1) the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus
- 2) Jesus is poking fun at these pharisees... "Have you not read..." then quotes Genesis 1
- 3) He quotes Genesis 1, pointing out that God intentionally creates this complimenting binary of male and female
- 4) Then he quotes Genesis 2, "...for this reason..."
- 5) Summary: because we have male and female we have this thing called marriage.
- 6) Disciples question if they should get married and Jesus immediately starts talking about eunuch (the professionally celibate)

Conclusion:

- 1) Sex is God's good idea in the proper context of marriage between one man and one woman. And the only alternative is celibacy.
- 2) Sex is not a necessary ingredient in human fulfillment... Jesus Christ was the most fully human life ever lived and he was single and celibate. (despite Dan Brown's imagination)

The Big Six:

It is important for me to make clear that even without these six passages, I believe we can know what the Bible and therefore God has to say about sexuality. I believe what I believe about sexuality because I believe what I believe about marriage. Even though Jesus doesn't explicitly address homosexuality in scripture, he does include it in what he teaches about sex and marriage.

There are 31, 102 verses in the KJV of the Bible and of those, there are these six passages that seem to directly address our topic; three in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament. I intend to touch on these six briefly, knowing I am not able to do a comprehensive look at all of them but with the understanding that these reinforce my conclusions but are not the foundation of my understanding of the Bible's teaching on this subject.

Genesis 19

The first time we encounter this topic explicitly comes in Genesis 19 where we find the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by God. In Chapter 19, we find that two angels disguised as men have come to Sodom looking for just 10 righteous people to justify sparing the city. They come to stay with Lot, when a crowd of men from the city surround Lot's house. It is lost in our english translation but the Hebrew in this passage clearly indicates that the crowd demands to "know them" sexually. This is made even more clear by Lot's deplorable offering of his own daughters for the men to "know" instead. This demand from the men of Sodom is evidence enough to prompt God to destroy the city. It is important to note that, although Sodom over the years has become particularly associated with this sinful scene, it is not the only sin of the city. Isaiah charges them with oppression. Jeremiah claims they are guilty of adultery, lying and aiding and abetting criminals. Ezekiel charges them with arrogance, complacency and indifference to the poor. While it is not the only sin, this passage makes it clear that at least one of their sins involved a form of homosexual practice. You may be thinking to yourself... that's really about gang rape and not a consensual act. But it is clear from other passages of scripture that their sexual sin was not limited to this episode in Genesis 19. In Jude verse 7 we read... (read passage) They pursued unnatural lust, that go against the nature of our creation (we encounter this again when we talk about Paul's writings) and Jude uses a form of the same greek word (porneia) we encountered in Matthew 15, translated here "sexual immorality."

Leviticus 18 & 20

If you're like me, Leviticus is not a book of the Bible we tend to hang out in very much. I have read the Bible through on several occasions and I'm usually fine through Genesis and Exodus,

but it is somewhere in Leviticus that I begin to question my resolve to accomplish such a task. Leviticus is known as the “Priest’s Manual” and it deals with holiness and purity codes of the ancient Hebrews. Among its many topics it contains an outlining of the sexual ethics commanded by God. Among the many provisions in that sexual ethics we read in 18:22... (read passage) and in 20:13 we have a repetition of this command along with the prescribed punishment (Read passage). In both passages the homosexual practices described are called an “abomination.” This term is often applied to idolatry, leading some to suggest that it is referring to pagan temple prostitution. Two things about that suggestion: 1) the language used, describes the prohibited activity in general terms. Nothing about the language suggests the limited context of temple prostitution; 2) both passages appear in a larger listing of sexual sins. The list in Leviticus 18 is designed with intention to outline a variety of sexual relationships, prohibiting them in increasing deviation from the ideal picture outlined in Genesis 1 & 2. (blood relatives -> married relatives -> multiple related partners -> vs. 22 -> sex with animals). And in this longer list of sexual sins, there is nothing to indicate a limiting context on any of them, making it less likely that a limited context would apply to just one case.

Now the other objection to these passages gets raised in creative ways at general conference when someone submits legislation to adopt some of the other prohibitions in Leviticus along with advocating for the prescribed punishments. It is important to acknowledge that our Christian relationship to the Old Testament Law is not a yes or no proposition. For example in Mathew 15 and Mark 7 Jesus is seen to have declared all foods clean. In fact in Mark’s account (vs. 19) he adds the editorial insight “Thus he declared all foods clean.” In Matthew 5:17-20 we read... (read passage). Jesus comes to fulfill the law, not abolish it. In some cases he explicitly teaches a new understanding (like food codes) and in others he reiterates the law (even strengthening) like in Matthew 19 where he reaffirms the design for marriage from Genesis.

Romans 1: 26-27

As we turn to the New Testament, we find ourselves in the opening chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. It is important to understand the purpose of Paul’s writing here. He writes to the church in Rome outlining his comprehensive understanding of the Gospel and a critical part of that Gospel is his point that we are all sinners. By chapter 3 he is making the case that all (Jews & gentiles alike) “...have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” (Romans 3: 23) Now, in Chapter 1:26-27... (read passage) We encounter once again this idea of natural verses unnatural. In this case, Paul says that the gentiles have exchanged “natural intercourse for unnatural.” Some have suggested that this language refers to naturally heterosexual people exchanging that for what would be unnatural for them. Therefore, if someone feels “naturally” attracted to people of the same sex, this passage might suggest that it would be a

sin to exchange that for heterosexual intercourse. But this argument overlooks the context of this passage. Paul is not referring to individual natures in that sense. In the preceding verses, Paul makes the argument that God's nature has been revealed in creation itself, and the gentiles have "exchanged" the truth about God for lies "worshiping the creature rather than the creator." And then he writes, "For this reason..." In other words, as a result of this giving up the naturally revealed God for a lie, the gentiles have given up natural intercourse for unnatural. So, Paul is saying that they are going against the fixed natural way of creation that reveals the creator. We exchange God's design for our own passions. But, even as Paul applies this to his example in Chapter 1, it is essential that we hear it in the context that we all exchange God's design for our own passions in many pervasive ways.

1 Corinthians 6: 9-10

Here, we again find ourselves in the writings of Paul and we have a list of sinful behavior that will prevent wrongdoers from inheriting the Kingdom of God. Right away, we must note an issue of translation. NRSV = "male prostitutes, sodomites"; ESV = "men who practice homosexuality"; NASB = homosexuals; KJV = effeminate, and abusers of themselves with mankind" First there are actually two greek words being translated here. The first is "malakoi" which literally means "the soft ones" In classical extra-biblical literature it can be used as a pejorative for effeminate men, or for the passive partner in a relationship between a man and a young boy or it can refer to male prostitution. By itself, malakoi would be more mysterious. It is most likely that Paul is using this as a broad term referring to the passive partner in homosexual intercourse especially when we consider it's pairing with the second greek word he uses, "arsenokoitai." As far as we know, this is the first use of this greek term. Paul has essentially coined a new word by smashing two other greek words together: "asren" meaning male and "koites" literally "bed." These two words are not chosen at random. They are the two greek words used in the Septuagint to translate our passages from Leviticus 18 & 20. When paired with "malakoi" it indicates that Paul is referring to both the passive and active partners in homosexual sex.

Two things that are really important for us to glean from this passage:

- 1) This sin is included in a much larger list of sins and therefore is not unique. Our society and our church's lopsided focus on this particular sin might make it seem unique, but Paul is clearly using it as one example of how human beings are corrupted by the fall among a myriad of ways we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. So it is a great distortion for us to single out homosexual practice.
- 2) In the midst of this sin, just like every other, repentance is possible. (read 6:11)

1 Timothy 1: 9-10

Finally, Paul writes to Timothy and in chapter 1 we again find a list of sins that are "...contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God..." Among those sins we encounter "sodomites" (NRSV) That is the same term Paul coined in 1 Corinthians and he seems to be using it as a catch-all term to refer to homosexual behavior.

Concluding Remarks

I am deeply aware that these passages are going to be painful for many of us to read and hear. I am also aware that when we take passages like these out of the context of the Gospel as a whole, we can do immeasurable harm in the name of truth. I think one of the most profound challenges we find in the Gospel writings is the measuring stick we find in Jesus as described by John's gospel as being full of grace and truth. When we come full of grace alone, we risk compromising truth. But when we come full of truth alone, we forget that everyone of us has a desperate need for grace. Our challenge is to speak the truth in love.

- 1) sex was God's good idea and was designed only for the context of marriage between one man and one woman.
- 2) I believe the Bible is clear about the practice of homosexuality because I believe it is clear about sex and marriage
- 3) the Big Six, although not without their complexities and mystery, support that overall Biblical narrative about sex and marriage.

I told you why I care... now what do I do with my answer?

First, I focus primarily on applying the whole of that sexual ethic to my own life, acknowledging that I fall short of the glory of God and am in desperate need of God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ.

Second, I seek to treat every person that I meet as though they were worth Jesus dying for.

Finally, I do my very best to preach the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ, knowing that it truly is hard news for everyone lost in our sin... but that it is ultimately Good News.