

A sermon preached by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 12, 2012, Epiphany 6, dedicated to all the children, teens, men and women who lived and died never having heard an affirming word from the pulpits of Christian churches in relation to their sexual orientation, and always to the glory of God!

“Homosexuality and the Bible: Time to Stop the Bible Beatings”

(Part I of II in the sermon series “It’s About Time”)

**Genesis 19:1-9, Acts 10:34-43;
Mark 1:40-45**

Prejudice against homosexual persons is alive and well - and it is sickening. Across the global Christian communion, there are huge pockets of prejudice in which it is acceptable or worse - encouraged - to scorn, condemn and judge persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered(LGBT).

In all too many places, LGBT persons and those falsely attacked for being gay - are ridiculed, mocked, beaten, judged, jailed and even murdered because they have a sexual orientation other than straight or heterosexual. In Ohio alone in the past six months, there have been a growing number of incidents of “gay bashing” in our public schools and in local communities. Sadly, prejudice against the gay community is justified most often by a simple statement, “**Homosexuality is a sin. It says so in the Bible.**” This is so wrong. Through the generations, people have based justification of war, slavery

and in recent year's homosexual prejudice on "the Bible."

Before I begin today, I want to very clear - at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, you and your loved ones are safe here. You are loved here- whether you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or straight. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are truly welcome here.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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As a straight, white, middle-aged clergyman, some of you may wonder why I am speaking about "Homosexuality and the Bible and the Church (next week)." I have to speak about it. For one thing, most of the problems caused by the church against gay people can find their roots in men whose profile as stated above is strikingly similar.

I am a *Recovering Liberal Christian Homophobe (an RLCH)*. An RLCH can be defined as a "*Christian who proclaims he is an accepting Christian but inwardly is scared of homosexuality and persons who are GLBT.*" The key operational word is "recovering." For the first 34 years of my life, I would say nice things about gay people, but inwardly I wanted nothing to do with gay people. That changed when I lost my high school friend Jason Wright to AIDS. He never told me he was dying because he felt in his heart what was in my heart and that I would judge him - unto death.

For the last 20 years, day by day, I have walked a journey of acceptance and love for persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. As a heterosexual Christian and a pastor, this has often been eye-opening experience. It has been an adventure. My trek has taken a rather rambling route. But on this path I have met Jews, Muslims, and

Christians, agnostics and atheists of all ages and races who have shared their stories with me and opened my eyes by so doing. I have witnessed depression, despair and death as well as renewed hope, revival and resurrection.

I have walked the final hours with men dying of AIDS who have been cast out of the church because they were gay. I held their hands as they died and they found peace in feeling they were indeed "reconciled to their Savior." Lesbians have told me their stories of rejection and alienation from "Christian" parents and family members who looked them in the eye and spoke to them as though they were dead. Bisexuals have told me of their faithful struggles to live and love one partner, even while feeling attracted to people of both genders. Persons who are transgendered and transsexual have told me of their struggles to become alive to the person they always knew they were.

Many times, I have not understood the fullness of what I have heard. However, I have listened and asked questions - some of them ridiculous, all of them sincere. I have wept and held on to others. Many times, the only immediate connection I have felt was our common humanity and often our common baptism in Christ. I always realized we had much more in common than different. Every time I have listened, I have realized God's love and grace was always sufficient. And that was truly enough.

Through most of this journey, I have not felt worthy to be graced by the immensity of love and the integrity of faith I have witnessed in these stories of pain, suffering and loneliness. God has blessed me with countless opportunities to listen and learn. I have learned a lot.

I have learned that in our sanctuary today and every week, there are many people with a variety of expressions of sexual orientation. And in this variety of expressions that is a range of beliefs and ways of expressing them. I have learned to acknowledge and celebrate this variety. Just as there are

hues and colors of race, beautiful mixtures of ethnicity and a vast range of multi-cultural backgrounds at First Church, so too are there varieties of sexual orientations.

We should not be afraid. We should never be prejudice or judgmental. Every person here must commitment himself or herself to overcome and outlive the statement: "**We are 'they' to 'them' and 'they' are 'them' to 'us.'**"

I have learned that the word "homosexual" was the creation of a 19th century German psychologist who labeled homosexuality a disease. Trying to prove the pathological nature of homosexuality, science spent more than 100 years of research and came up empty. In 1973, (now 39 years ago) even while facing extreme protest from the religious right (some things never change), the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, declaring that it is not "in itself a psychiatric disorder."

For the past 30 years, geneticists have been unraveling DNA codes that show some people are born gay. Like so many questions of nature and nurture, all the evidence isn't in on how one becomes gay or lesbian. The complexities of environment and biology work together as they do in anyone's life. Many of you have heard me quote Dr. Johnson of Masters and Johnson, who when asked why and how someone becomes homosexual responded, *"I don't understand how someone becomes heterosexual and I have been studying that all my life. How do you expect me to explain how someone becomes homosexual?"*

I've learned that "homosexuality" is an orientation not a lifestyle or a choice. There are a number of persons who have homosexual feelings, but do not act on their feelings. In their classic *Sexual Preference*, researchers Alfred Bell, Martin Weinberg and Kiefer Hammersmith of Indian University's Alfred Kinsey Institute for Sex Research repeatedly underscored one main point: *"Homosexual feelings appear to*

play a more important role than do homosexual behaviors in the development of sexual orientation" (Sexual Preference, p. 188).

Feelings always precede behavior.

Through the years, some people have quoted testimonies of "ex-gay" ministries when speaking to me of people "converted" from their homosexual orientation. Yet, in anonymous interviews, the founders and leaders of ex-gay ministries (persons who publicly claim to be "cured" of their homosexuality) have most often admitted this truth - their feelings or orientation never disappeared. Rather, they sublimated their desires to act on their feelings.

In reality, these supposed, "ex-gays" are really "celibate gays" who are choosing to serve God in this way. I have honored and embraced persons when they have chosen this path while acknowledging the reality of their true feelings, just as I have honored and celebrated people who have come out and made the painfully difficult decision to be honest and open about their sexual orientation. These ministries play upon the emotions of spouses and parents who are trying to change their children or partners. It is wrong to lie, manipulate people and make money on their genuine relational struggles.

Through all of this growth, the one thing I have heard consistently is: ***"The Bible says homosexuality is a sin and I can't go against the Bible."*** I am sick and tired of hearing this line from those who have fled into the bunkers of their prejudice. No survivalist could survive in a bunker with seven crumbs to sustain them. That is exactly what has happened.

So what does the Bible say about the homosexuality?

For all the church pronouncements, all the entrenched and embedded believers, all the crazy sermons on the subject and for all the family members and friends who have hit some of us over the head with this line, it may surprise you, but the Bible does not have much at all to say about homosexuality. It appears the Bible really is not very interested in the topic. **It is**

much to do about nothing!

In the original texts of Hebrew, Greek, Syrian and Aramaic, "homosexuality" is **NEVER** used. The word does not even appear in the Bible until 1946 in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Depending on your Bible of choice (and many conservative Christians pick the New King James Version BECAUSE "homosexuality" appears there), you may not even see the word and its cognates.

There are actually seven primary passages of scripture that are most often rolled out in arguments to prove the Bible calls homosexuality a sin. There are four in the Hebrew scriptures (Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, and Dt. 23:17-18) and three in Christian scriptures (Romans 1:18-32, I Corinthians 6:1-8 and I Timothy 1:9-10). These texts speak against same sex acts in very negative ways. Each text is related to adultery, promiscuity, violence, and/or idolatrous worship. None addresses covenanted and loving relationships.

Before looking more closely, I need to add that these seven passages could easily fit onto one page out of 1,100 pages of the Bible - thus making up less than 1/10th of 1% of the Holy Scripture God has given us. Do you know what the first and second most written about topics in the Bible are: #1 is how we care for the poor and #2 is how we are stewards of our resources and of the earth given to our care! How we care for the poor and God's earth is what the Bible cares most about. If these compassionate concerns are good enough for God to spend thousands of passages addressing, don't you think the church needs to put its energy here as well?

Anyway, here we go . . .

Genesis 19:1-9 - The story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 18:16-33, God sends two angels to the city of Sodom to find 10 righteous people so that God might spare the city from utter destruction. When the angels arrive, Abraham's brother Lot befriends them and brings them to his home. Later

that night, Lot's house is surrounded by all the men of Sodom, old and young, who demand that Lot bring the visitors out so that they "might know them." Lot pleads with the crowd on behalf of the angels and then offers them his two virgin daughters, suggesting that the crowd would do with his daughters what they please.

This is an extremely strange passage to say the least. Without actually studying the passage, a large number of Christians assume that the sin of Sodom (for which the city is later wiped out) is homosexuality. This assumption is based completely on the belief that "*to know*" is a euphemism for "*sexual intercourse*." Although "to know" does refer to sexual intercourse in 10 other Biblical passages, in an additional 933 passages "to know" has no sexual connotation whatsoever. Evidence here suggests that it means "knowledge" or "acquaintance," not sexual abuse or homosexual rape. If this is so, then "the sin of Sodom" is not male-to-male intercourse but **inhospitality. Therefore, the true sin of Sodom is being inhospitable.**

I know I am right about this. I know because the Old Testament prophets, Jesus our Savior and Peter and even (little) Jude agree with me - not with all too many gay-bashing preachers - that Sodom's sin is not homosexual rape.

Isaiah 1:10, 3:9, Jeremiah 23:14 and Ezekiel 16:49 all say God was angry at Sodom because the people were proud and prosperous and they refused to aid the poor and needy. Whether you like it or not, God had decided to wipe out Sodom long before the city's men showed up at Lot's house. In the New Testament, Peter and Jude mention Sodom - but in general, reference to what happens when people live un-godly lives. Paul never refers to Sodom in any of his 13 letters. In Matthew 10:15, Jesus says that if a town refuses the disciples hospitality, they should shake off the dust and move on. The story of Sodom is really about wickedness, greed and self-centered people who refuse to aid the poor and care for the strangers in their gates.

God was angry because people behaved badly not because they were gay. Nevertheless, to this day, we still refer to our civil laws as "sodomy laws" and certain acts as sodomizing, even though these laws have nothing to do with hospitality. We continue to misuse the word and create more prejudice and misunderstanding as a result.

In Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, and Dt. 23:17-18, homogenitality is condemned. But it is crucial to note that the real concern for Jewish law was about impurity and wasting the seed of life. They were addressing pagan and Canaanite practices, which encouraged sex for pleasure not for reproduction. We cannot make a mistake in reading these texts, however. The laws exact a punishment of offenders and in Leviticus 20 such condemned to death.

I have two questions related to this: First, if we follow these laws and put people to death for homogenital acts, will we also stone children for speaking back to their parents, call for husbands and wives to abstain from sex except during fertile periods, and for that matter produce harvest at the edge of the field for the poor?

This is very important! The 613 Levitical and Deuteronomic laws make no distinction between moral laws and ceremonial laws. How then, would we choose to enforce one law over another? Second, didn't Jesus say he had come, not to destroy the law, but **to fulfill** the law? Didn't Jesus' fulfillment of the law focus on two laws: *"To love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself?"* How then, does any Christian have an ounce of integrity focusing on Jewish laws against homogenitality when Jesus clarified this question for us almost 2,000 years ago?

Speaking of Jesus, let's look at the New Testament. **Jesus said absolutely nothing about same-sex relations. Nada. Nichts. Zero.** While he never stopped talking about use

of money, our stewardship, our care of the poor, living right in relationship to neighbors, he never breathed a mumbling word about same-sex relations. Why was he silent on this when his words were recorded about everything else? Well, either same sex issues were not an issue for Jesus or he simply chose not to "go there" or both. Biblical literalistic homophobes do cartwheels trying to put words in Jesus' mouth on this issue, but they look and sound ridiculous when they do. Jesus said NOTHING!

Our beloved Apostle Paul was not silent. While he did not mention Sodom (which actually confirms my hospitality theory), he did talk about male-to-male sex. In his landmark book in 1983, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, Union Seminary New Testament Professor Robin Scroggs offers the position that Paul was speaking not against male-to-male sex per se, but against pederasty - which literally means men having sex with boys or young teens. Pederasty was an open and common practice in many Hellenistic cities in Paul's time. This was a form of abuse and rape, not mutual love. I would hope all of us would join Paul in opposing such abusive use of power and sex. Scroggs writes: "*What the New Testament was against was the image of homosexuality as pederasty and primarily here in its more sordid and dehumanizing dimensions.*" (Scroggs, p. 127)

The late Dr. Peter J. Gomes of Harvard's Memorial Parish adds in *The Good Book*, "*Paul is not writing about homosexuality in Romans . . . He is writing about the fallen nature of humankind.*" (Gomes, p. 155) Paul is concerned that passions are emotions out of control. Dishonorable passions disorder God's purpose. The shameful acts that Paul brings into focus involve lust, avarice, exploitation, power and abuse. These are evil qualities in the human condition, not qualities to be associated only with homosexual persons. I hope and pray that when you consider loving relationships - whatever the orientation of your relationships may be - you always do so with a heart of love, gentleness and mutuality. With any other heart, you will find yourself condemned by Paul, and

ultimately God. While I have not fully addressed Paul's writings, I hope I have opened a door to new understanding in our greatest apostle's writings.

I like what Scroggs says in conclusion to his book 29 years ago: "*Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant for today's debate. They can no longer be used in denominational discussions about homosexuality, and should in no way be a weapon to justify refusal of ordination, not because the Bible is not authoritative, but simply because it does not address the issues involved.*" (Scroggs, p. 127)

That powerful conclusion was reached 17 years ago by the late conservative theologian John Stott in an article in *Christianity Today*. Stott told readers to stop using biblical texts to prop up their arguments against persons who were homosexual. The case cannot be made, Stott said. (Quoted in a lecture by Virginia Ramey Mollencott, 3/4/95).

William Sloan Coffin put it this way, "*The problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages that appear to condemn it, but rather how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Jesus Christ! I do not think it can be done.*"

(The spoken sermon and the printed text of the sermon varied greatly at this point. Please refer to the website - www.first-church.org - for our recording of the sermon for or call the office to have a CD sent to you - 614-228-1741)

Thank you for listening to these reflections on "the much ado about nothing" texts. In Acts 10:34-43, Peter is converted as he realizes "God shows no partiality." God loves all his children the same. Ironically, this is the text we have each Easter Sunday - read in Roman Catholic and Protestant churches across the globe - many of whom have such tremendous partiality against their LGBT sons and daughters. Is it Jesus' cosmic sense of humor to present a text, which calls us into true relationships with God and one another? I

don't know, but I smile each time I read the text. Because Peter comes to realize that we truly are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord! There is no prejudice and no partiality.

Besides the passage of loving God and neighbor as self, there are so many stories in the New Testament that speak of love and grace. That is Jesus' gift to us all. In the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke, Jesus answers the question, "Who is my neighbor?" by telling the story of a Samaritan's compassion for wounded traveler.

I am sure many people were offended when Jesus chose the Samaritan as his model for loving behavior. Taught to despise and fear their neighbors in Samaria, Jesus' Jewish audience must have found it hard to swallow "good" and "Samaritan" in the same story. John 4:9 tells us that Samaritans were people with whom one should not associate. In Luke 9:54, Samaritans were those whom the fire of heaven was justifiably called down upon. Didn't Jesus know this? What was he thinking? Why didn't he give his people a positive role model from within their own Jewish faith?

All too many people treat gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons like the Jews in Jesus' crowd treated the Samaritans. Yet, like the Samaritan, I have seen sons and daughters kneel in compassion and love beside the sick beds and death beds of parents who have rejected them. I have seen gay Christians offer themselves in love to co-workers, family members and fellow Christians who have shunned them and spoken hate and disdain for them. I have witnessed GLBT Christians love unconditionally those who have hated them with homophobic hearts, minds and words.

I have felt such unconditional love from those I had abandoned and forsaken years and years ago. I stand here today, like the man saved from death by the Samaritan so many years ago to tell you we must welcome the Good Samaritans home. They are good. They are our neighbors. They are our brothers, our sisters, perhaps our parents or our

friends. They should no longer be treated like lepers. They and their partners need not be quarantined and kept away at the holidays. They have no disease. We must welcome them home with hearts of love and arms wide open. This is what God requires. This is what Jesus calls us to do. This is the Biblical commandment of God in Christ Jesus our Lord: *“Love one another as I have loved you.”* Amen.

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