

**“The Changing Face of America’s Families (III):  
Can Marriage Be Gay?”**

A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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**Text: Galatians 3: 23-29**

“You must be out of your mind,” the person on the other end of the phone line said this week. That the caller was my mother did not deter me from pressing my point. Of course the topic of gay marriage is controversial; people of good faith hold opposing viewpoints on this matter, and hold those viewpoints deeply. But not to consider gay marriage in a sermon series on changing family life would be irresponsible at a time when it fills the media, captures daily headlines, spurs legislative action, and evokes strong emotions. If we don’t talk about it in church, we essentially surrender the arguments for or against to popular culture, to the media, to talk show hosts and newspaper columnists—and to the religious right.

It will come as no surprise to anyone here that our congregation –and the Presbyterian Church itself—is not of one mind on this issue. If we were to poll our membership, we would discover people representing a wide spectrum of beliefs and understanding. Many of you have weighed in on the topic with me, and from the outset I want to say how much I love being part of a Christian community in which we can disagree without damaging the mutual respect and affection we hold for one another. I look forward to our continuing dialogue, including opportunity for sermon “talk-back” today at 12:30. This sermon is one attempt to express a perspective informed by Christian faith. It is not “the last word” on this matter; I cannot swear that it contains the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. It represents my human effort to give voice to our community’s engagement with this reality, shaped by Scripture, tradition, experience, and knowledge gained through scientific research. It represents what through prayer and study I believe God is calling me to proclaim today.

We begin, as every sermon begins, with the Bible, our authoritative guide for faith and practice. But as we saw with marriage and divorce, homosexuality likewise poses some challenges for the scriptural text. For starters, we note the decided lack of biblical teaching on this matter. A couple of verses in the Hebrew Scriptures, a few more in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, and that’s it. Jesus says nothing about homosexuality. Nothing. But let’s turn to the verses most often cited as prohibiting homosexual behavior.

Among the dozens of calls and e-mails you've sent my way, came one that speaks clearly to the matter of biblical interpretation. Seems this woman with a particular shade of hair color comes home from a shopping trip and boasts to her husband, "I received a compliment on my driving." "Oh? How's that?" he responds. She answers, "When I got back to my car, there was a note on the windshield that said, "Parking fine."

If we only read the words of Scripture, without understanding their context, we run the very real risk of substituting wooden literalism for God's word. Our parking might be fine, so to speak, even brilliant, but we'll remain ignorant of our true condition, and how these ancient words can guide us in the contemporary world to the truth. So we come to the Bible with an inquiring mind: what was the social reality in which these teachings occurred? To whom were they originally addressed? What other biblical texts are applicable?

Leviticus is part of Torah, the Hebrew scriptures that comprise the first five books of our Old Testament. While Leviticus contains some narrative history of the ancient Israelites, it is primarily a book of Law, and outlines with great specificity how the community is to conduct its social and religious life. Central to its concerns is Israel's call to be a distinctive community devoted to the worship and service of the Lord God alone, in contrast to surrounding nations and peoples who worshiped other gods. The laws and directives declared in Leviticus are part of Israel's "holiness code"-- the practices that set them apart from other cultures, reminding them of their chosen status. The problem is, many of these rules seem unintelligible today: why, for example, are the people forbidden from wearing garments made of two kinds of thread, or eating pork, or eating any shellfish (this last, in fact, is described as "an abomination.")? When I was a teenager in the sixties, someone in my church youth group found a verse in Leviticus prohibiting men from cutting their hair and trimming their sideburns, which we tried to use to full advantage with our parents who were always trying to get their sons to cut their hair. (The verse that immediately follows that forbids getting a tattoo, so parents, there is useful material for you too!). Some of the penalties for breaking these laws seem a little drastic too: death by stoning is prescribed for those who blaspheme against the Holy Name of God and those who work on the Sabbath. The point is that the Holiness code of ancient Israel cannot simply be read as binding on people of faith today. The contexts are too dissimilar, and the code itself too conditioned by cultural realities of that time and place to have meaning in ours. Yet it is here, in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus, at the 22<sup>nd</sup> verse that we read the apparent condemnation of homosexuality: *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an*

*abomination*. (the same Hebrew word is used here that described the eating of shellfish). A case could legitimately be made that whatever good purpose this prohibition served back then no longer applies.

Part of the problem lies in translation. Biblical scholars disagree about precise definitions of words, but there are several that English language versions translate uniformly as “homosexuality,” including pedophilia, ritual prostitution, and abusive use of power in relationships. In the letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul makes reference to “degrading passions” as evidence of human sinfulness....along with gossip, envy, boastfulness, and a rebellious attitude toward one’s parents. And Paul is quick to remind the church to avoid judgmentalism, for “all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory.”

[Read Romans 1:18-32]

There isn’t certain correspondence between biblical descriptions of homosexuality and a contemporary understanding of homosexuality as an innate affectional orientation toward members of one’s own gender. In other words, you can’t draw a line directly between these biblical verses and modern reality. What is compelling about the Romans text is not its ambiguous condemnation of homosexuality, but its powerful assessment of the common condition of sinfulness, and the universal need for salvation and new life.

If the texts seeming to deal with homosexuality are ambiguous at best, where do we turn for biblical guidance on this matter? God’s truth is not divided, and does not contradict itself. The apostle Paul, who excluded women from church leadership positions and urged slaves to be subject to their masters, would nevertheless proclaim a larger truth, one rooted not in ever-changing cultural practice and sensibility, but in the eternal love of God. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul declares that divine love embodied in Jesus Christ renders human categories meaningless. Hear God’s word in the third chapter at the 23<sup>rd</sup> verse: [Read Galatians 3:23-29]

*Marriage is a vital social institution. The exclusive commitment of two individuals to each other nurtures love and mutual support. It brings stability to our society.* I doubt that anyone would disagree with that viewpoint, unless they knew that it is from the majority opinion written by Chief Justice Margaret Marshall of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, in the state’s 4-3 decision to legitimize same-sex marriage. The fact is, “gay marriage” is built from the same bricks as heterosexual marriage: love and commitment and the community’s recognition and support of such a union. The question is whether or not our society is ready to institutionalize that broader definition. Marshall continues, *For those who choose to marry, and for their children, marriage provides an*

*abundance of legal, financial and social benefits.* According to some sources, there are over one thousand federal and 400 state benefits and privileges that married couples enjoy [Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, cited in the *Plain Dealer*, November 22, 2003]. Gay and lesbian persons aren't asking for special rights; they want the same rights, and not be treated as "separate but equal" in a civil union short of marriage.

Can marriage be gay? As we consider this subject, let us keep from reducing it to an "issue." It's not something that affects "those people" but is something that touches us all. Gays and lesbians are our sons and daughters, our siblings, our co-workers, the persons with whom you share a pew on Sunday morning. Today I am thankful for the witness you will hear by a church member with personal experience in this area.

[WITNESS BY WALT KALBERER AND USED WITH PERMISSION]

**I was raised a Missouri Synod Lutheran. In confirmation classes we were taught that every word of the Bible was true. God created the Earth in six days, six 24-hour days, as supposedly, neither the Earth nor the Sun have changed their axis. This religion was male oriented, easy, and it required very little thought. It made things either black or white---had no room for gray and it permitted no interpretation. All we had to do was to memorize verses and recite them when requested with little if any discussion. This environment made it easy for someone to become quote "HOMOPHOBIC" or at least have a HOMOPHOBIC mindset.**

**But in checking Webster the definition of homophobic is "irrational fear, hatred for, or aversion to our discrimination against homosexuality, or homosexuals". Now, I don't hate anyone nor do I have an irrational fear for anything. I may dislike certain things or conditions. But my background certainly made it easy for me to believe that sexuality was an individuals "Choice".**

**In the middle 50's we lived in Warren, Ohio, and we had the pleasure of living across the street from great neighbors. We both were members of First Presbyterian Church in Warren. They had a daughter and a son. Jack was a super lad but there was just something different about him, like his finger and hand movements, even his speech was affected. In those years we said that Jack was very effeminate. He was an exceptional artist and an excellent baby sitter for our daughters. He could talk**

freely with my wife, Jean, much more so than with his own parents. After college Jack moved to New York and about that time we moved to Cleveland. He continued to call Jean and discuss any number of things and in one of these conversations he told her he had AIDS. The last 3 to 4 weeks of his life his parents brought him to the Cleveland Clinic, as they couldn't face the stigma of putting him into the hospital in Warren. For the last week of Jack's life his supervisor from New York came to sit with him. She sat with him for hours on end, like 14 to 16 hours per day. This sacrifice on her part spoke volumes about Jack. One night as I was driving her back to our home I made the comment "HOW COULD HE! And I'll never forget her answer, "Mr. Kalberer, you just don't understand, it's what turns you on that counts". That comment kept haunting me. It's what turns you on that counts.

Several years later our youngest daughter came home for the weekend from Boston with an invite. "Mom, Dad how would you like to attend Sue and my Commitment Ceremony? She continued with "We are going to have it", and she stopped, meaning WE'D LIKE YOU TO COME BUT and she didn't have to say the rest. At this point Jean didn't know what to do for or with me. In her infinite wisdom she went to Jody LeFort, one of our ministers at the time. Jody's suggestion was for Jean to encourage me to attend PFLAG (Parents, Friends, and Family of Lesbians and Gays) meeting. Jean offered to go with me. They had their meetings in the basement of the Methodist Church downtown. During these meetings we would sit around in a circle and talk freely about why we were there. When my turn came I would discuss my problem in attending Lisa's Commitment Ceremony and the others would discuss their situation. I learned about a Lutheran Minister who couldn't come out because he was afraid of losing his job. I met a young married woman with two children who was thinking of leaving her minister husband because of her lesbian orientation. I met a young Jewish lad whose mother was pestering him to marry a young Jewish girl and give her grandchildren and all he could say was "I don't want a young woman, (and he used the Jewish term for young women) I need a young man". As I listened every week to their comments all I could think was AND THIS IS A CHOICE? THIS HAS TO BE GENETIC. AND IF THIS IS THE CASE - THEN IT IS GOD DRIVEN!

At the end of one of these sessions, as we were leaving, a young attractive girl from the group was waiting for us at the door and

**asked if we could talk. She pleaded that I should make every effort to attend the Commitment Ceremony as our daughter needed all of our LOVE and support and I could never relive this event. She continued stating that there would be a major void if Dad weren't there and even I might regret not being there for the rest of my life. In all of this it finally occurred to me that someone was trying hard to send me a message and it was about time I listened.**

**I (we) did go to celebrate Lisa and Sue's Commitment Ceremony and I am glad that I did. It was a beautiful ceremony.**

**I have learned a lot in my time. One of the most important items is that anything in extreme or excess is wrong including my earlier ultra or maybe just conservative bias. But even more important is that FAMILY LOVE and SUPPORT must be paramount in these situations.**

**Should any of you be going through a similar situation I'd be delighted to take you to lunch and try to help you through it. Just give me a call. There is room for growth in all of us. THANKS BE TO GOD.**

This moving testimony puts human faces on the more disembodied debate in courts and legislatures and church assemblies. It reveals what is finally at stake in this discussion, and lo and behold, we see that it is love, and the depth, the height, the strength, and the mystery of the human heart. Marriage builds a house for love, a foundation and structure to transform that house into a home. Because we humans love imperfectly, marriage provides a promise of faithfulness that calls us to love even when we don't feel loving. Marriage, as a colleague put it, turns "the habit of being together into a habit of the heart" [the Right Rev. Peter Short, moderator of the United Church of Canada, cited in the *Globe and Mail*, January 30, 2004]. Shall this disciplined lifestyle, this transformative state, yes, this spiritual blessing be denied gay and lesbian persons?

We spent some time with the biblical material on homosexuality because it is most often cited in arguments against gay marriage. Proponents of a constitutional amendment to ban it speak of the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman. But I wonder whether the sacredness of the bond is derived from the genders of the couple, or from the commitment two persons make before God and a human community to seek the other's well-being "till death do them part." The Church has traditionally emphasized marriage as the context for bearing

and raising children, and no one would dispute the importance of a loving, stable home for that daunting and fulfilling task. But families, finally, are made, not born, and may be formed through adoption or remarriage as well as through the birth of children. In a world in which so many children already born are vulnerable and at-risk, I am puzzled by those who question the benefit of placing them in a home headed by two loving mothers or two loving fathers.

Marriage may well be one of society's most enduring institutions, but it has by no means remained the same, instead flexing and stretching in order to serve a variety of community needs throughout history. Perhaps gay marriage is but one more change that reflects its essential resilience that needs no defense. "It is not good that the human remain alone," God declared at the dawn of creation. We were made in love and for love, for relationship and family no matter what our sexual orientation.

Friends, if the sermon today has made you uncomfortable, that's okay. It's made me uncomfortable too, but I think that discomfort is often the starting point for growth. Love is the behavioral standard for people of faith in all relationships. We who are Christian look to Jesus as the one who embodied Divine love. We learn to love by following his example. It will lead us, as it did his disciples, to some surprising places. Loving our enemies. Loving the outsider. Love not as a warm, fuzzy feeling, but as a conscious decision, to act for the good of another. Led by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul widened his heart to declare an end to designations that divide the human family. If Paul could change, why not you or me? Let's listen and learn, study and pray, until with Paul we can affirm that in Christ, there is no longer male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free---and may I be so bold as to add "gay or straight" ---for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

TO THE GLORY OF GOD FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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