

The Scriptures and the Church on Homosexuality

Ps 23 and Romans 1:18-28 – Sermon Text = Rom 1:26-27

500, 507, 497, 476

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also 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 of their error.

(Romans 1:26-27)

Why on earth would we tackle an issue this controversial?
The places of gays and lesbians in the work and word of God
has disturbed and divided other denominations for years.
We all know of people who have been distressed and hurt
by the intensity and bitterness of the this debate within the church.
I have good friends on both sides of the debate.
At times during the preparation of this sermon,
I felt like Paul looks in this powerful painting by Rembrandt –
tired, thoughtful, and not writing anything.



Again, as we've seen in many of the artistic representations of Paul,
there are swords in the painting.
Interesting in this image is the fact that there are two swords,
hanging on the wall in the background and crossed.
You will remember that the sword image comes from Ephesians
and symbolizes the Word of God.
Could it be that, even in Paul's time, faithful people struggled with the challenge
of dealing with various readings and interpretations of the Scriptures?

The answer is an obvious 'Yes.'
Jesus argued with the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees
about the right way of reading the Jewish Scriptures.
Paul continued that tradition with his Jewish opponents
and with his fellow Christians.
Throughout the history of the church,
Men and women of good conscience and intent
have searched the Scriptures earnestly in community
to discern God's will for their work and witness in their world.
That is a big part of the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst.
As Jesus told his disciples, recorded in John's Gospel (16:12-15):

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

This is a fundamental principle for Presbyterians.
To draw on one of the bumper-sticker phrases
from our roots in the Reformation work and witness of John Calvin,
we are "reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God."
That Word, as the ordination vows in our denomination
for both teaching and ruling elders make clear,
is the living presence of Jesus Christ in our midst,
through the continual work of the Holy Spirit.
We worship a living God, not a book.
That book, a collection of books actually,
with many voices from many ages,
has authority only as the Holy Spirit uses it
to help the Christian community discern God's will
for its particular time and place.

I want to read the preamble that was read at my ordination in 1978,
And continues to be read at every ordination
of teaching elders, or ministers, in our denomination.
A similar preamble, with a different description of specific responsibilities,
is read prior to ruling elders taking their ordination vows.
This is the best concise summary of how Canadian Presbyterians tackle
difficult issues in the life and witness of the church
in its particular age and place.

All ministries of the Church proceed from and are sustained by the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Prophet, Priest and King, the Minister of the covenant of grace.

By the operation of God's Word and Spirit, the Church is gathered, equipped, and sent out to participate in this ministry. All members of the Church are called to share the Gospel with the world, and to offer to the Father the worship and service that are due to the Creator from the creation, through Christ, the only Mediator, until he comes again. That the Church may be continually renewed and nurtured for ministry, Christ furnishes the Church with pastors and teachers. He requires and enables the Church to discern and to confirm by ordination those whom he calls to this pastoral and teaching office. The standards of his Church he entrusts in a special degree of responsibility to their care.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada is bound only to Jesus Christ, the Church's King and Head. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as the written Word of God, testifying to Christ the living Word, are the canon of all doctrine, by which Christ rules our faith and life. We acknowledge our historic continuity with the Holy Catholic Church and our doctrinal heritage in the ecumenical creeds, and the confessions of the Reformation. Our subordinate standards are the Westminster Confession of Faith as adopted in 1875 and 1889, the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation of 1954, Living Faith (Foi Vivant) as adopted in 1998, and such doctrine as the Church, in obedience to Scripture and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in the Church's continuing function of reformulating the faith.

So, in the months ahead, this is the process we will engage in.

We will be discerning, in obedience to Scripture
and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit,
whether it is time for the church to reformulate its confession
on the matter of the place of gays and lesbians in the work and word
of the God of the Gospel.

The issue has emerged for us here at Brentwood
because the highest court of our church, the General Assembly,
responded this June to 23 overtures on this topic.

An overture, in essence, is a request from a congregation,
presbytery, or synod to reconsider a position or practice of our church.

To ensure full consideration, the Assembly has referred all these overtures
to the Church Doctrine Committee and the Life & Mission Agency.

The Assembly tested out a process
devised by three respected theologians of our church,
Pat Dutcher-Walls (VST), Dale Woods (PC), and Kevin Livingston (Tyndale).

It convenes conversations around four questions
and seeks to determine the range of thought and feeling
within the denomination.

It depends on creating open, safe and respectful space for these conversations.

It assumes that the Holy Spirit works best
to guide the church in the reformulation of its faith
through such conversations.

Here are the questions:

- 1. When you consider the issues around human sexuality and sexual orientation in the PCC, what do you most hope for?*
- 2. When you consider the issues around human sexuality and sexual orientation in the PCC, what are your greatest fears?*
- 3. What, for you, are the greatest issues/concerns around human sexuality and sexual orientation? How have these issues impacted or affected your own life and relationships, or conversations you have had? What feelings do you have about these impacts?*
- 4. What qualities and values of the gospel should we try to express in considering the issues of human sexuality and sexual orientation in the PCC?*

I was at the Assembly this year when this exercise was done
and had the privilege to sit in at one of the tables.
The conversation was open, safe, and respectful.
It is a good process to get this consideration started at this official level.

The Assembly has asked congregations to engage in this process this fall.
We are in conversations with Gordon and St. Aidan's,
our closest neighbouring Presbyterian congregations,
about setting up these conversations together
some time in November.
We'll keep you posted on those plans,
probably with a decision on when and where in September.

You will notice that I have not taken a position on this matter in this sermon.
That is intentional.
We are a denomination that takes its name from the process
by which we live and witness together as a church.
'Presbyterian' comes from the Greek word 'presbyteros.'
In our understanding, it points to the council of elders
that governed many of the churches in the New Testament.
It takes a community to discern God's will for the work of the church.

So, I will listen, learn, and contribute as the conversation unfolds.
I have some views and I still have a lot of questions.
I like the questions and the process.
I think participating in the process fully
is the best contribution I can model and make
as I assume my special degree of responsibility for the standards of Christ's church.
I'm curious to see where the Spirit will lead us on this tough issue.

Let us pray with and for each other continually
as work with God to clarify his will for the church
on the issues involved in human sexuality and sexual orientation.