

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



Finishing the Journey

– Bishop Richard B. Wilke*, United Methodist Church

FINISHING THE JOURNEY: Questions and Answers from United Methodists of Conviction
Chapter Five: What does the Bible call us, as Christians, to do on this issue?

I am amazed at my lifelong ignorance of homosexuality. I have spent my ministry dealing mostly with the uses, misuses, and abuses of sex among heterosexuals. But I did not understand (or worry about) my energetic, popular youth fellowship leaders who did not date. I was grateful for the Wesleyan Service Guild women, some of whom lived together and cared for each other for 50 or 60 years. My grandmother housed schoolteachers who ate at the same table, slept in the same room and prayed together in church. I, like most of society, was caught off guard when some of my young friends, committed to the Lord, active in the church, began to die of AIDS.

So I began to explore Scripture and to talk with homosexuals and their families. I discovered that Sodom was destroyed for its violent inhospitality to strangers. The angry, lustful townspeople were eager to rape, violate, maim, and kill the strangers — be they men or women — who were visiting Lot. The prophet Ezekiel wrote (16:49), “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” Jesus implied that Sodom was guilty of ugly inhospitality in Luke 10:10-12.

The Holiness Code in Leviticus and Deuteronomy was designed to set the Jews apart from the Canaanites. It was not a universal morality. It was peculiar to the Hebrews — and to the times. It reflected one side of the constant tension in Judaism, as well as in all religions, between exclusion and inclusion. For example, no one maimed or castrated could enter the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1), yet Isaiah argued the opposite — that a castrated man who kept Sabbath was welcome (Isaiah 56:4-5). I’ve been fascinated with the fact that the first person converted by Philip the Evangelist was a black man, an African eunuch, forbidden by the Holiness Code to go near the temple (Acts 8:26-40). Also, the Holiness Code prohibited marriage to a Gentile (Ezra, for example, made the Jewish men divorce their non-Jewish wives), yet Ruth the Moabite was honored as King David’s great-grandmother.

Neither Jews nor Christians obey the Holiness Code today. Christians eat shrimp because Jesus said, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (Matthew 15:11). We do not stone those taken in adultery because Jesus said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). No one today would justify killing children who spoke back to their mother or father (Deuteronomy 21:18).

The prophet Isaiah rebelled at the exclusiveness of the Holiness Code, arguing that people should come from all nations — from the north, south, east, and west. “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

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Paul does graphically list sins where women have sex with women, and men with men, but Paul was familiar with only two kinds of homosexual activity: when wealthy Greeks would buy young boys as slaves and play with them sexually, and when part of the Greek-Roman world would go to male and female prostitute/priests as a form of fertility or mystery cult worship. In Romans Chapter 1, Paul was trying to make a point by listing every sin he could think of. He wanted to show that we have all fallen short, that we are all sinners every in need of the atoning grace of God. As I reflect on the list of sins, I know not a day goes by but what I am guilty and in need of grace.

But Jesus and his ministry concern me most. He was nearly killed in his hometown for mentioning that Elisha healed the Assyrian general, Naaman, of leprosy. He was continually condemned for touching the leper, for opening the eyes of blind beggars (who were considered ceremonially unclean), and for talking with a Samaritan woman.

My most soul-shaking scripture is Luke 15:1-2. Jesus drew tax collectors and sinners to himself. Religious leaders grumbled and said, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." When queried, he told stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost boy. His point was this: They were to be brought back into circulation, into community. The context is the inclusive ministry of Jesus for which he was crucified.

As I've said, I've spent a lot of time dealing with people with various sexual issues. I believe sex, like fire, can do a lot of harm and a lot of good. There are many sexual sins — heterosexual and homosexual — that are foreign to faith. Surely our consciences condemn prostitution, pedophilia, rape, promiscuity, and exploitation. But I also believe from scientific data and from conversations with gay men and lesbians and their families, that Christ Jesus can capture the hearts of homosexuals, and can lead them into faithful, stable, and loving relationships.

When I see two men or two women kneeling together to take the holy communion, working diligently for human betterment, and caring for each other across the years, I must pause and believe there is room for them in the household of God. As Fanny Crosby says in her hymn, "There is room at the foot of the cross."

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