

“What Does the Bible Say about Homosexuality?”

Genesis 19:1-26; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Part V of VI in the sermon series “Then and Now”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

August 25, 2024

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“What Does the Bible Say about Homosexuality?”

Genesis 19:1-26; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, Columbus Ohio, August 25, 2024, dedicated to Tim Holt and G. Dene Barnard as they enter eternal life and to all the LGBTQ+ children, teens, and adults who have never heard an affirming word from the pulpits of Christian churches throughout time and always to the glory of God!

It was Christmas Eve, in 2014, when a woman came up following everyone's exit from the 11am service – now early Christmas morning. She just had to tell me something she had carried for many years. She had come to church the Sunday I preached in the Spring of 1994 on Homosexuality and the Bible. She had prepared to end her life by suicide that Sunday afternoon. She had the plan and the means. She said, “That sermon literally saved my life.” Can you please preach it again? I did. And now I preach this updated version one last time.

Before I begin, I want to share this beautiful definition from the United Church of Christ Coalition of Open and Affirming churches. LGBTQ+ is a shorthand for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning.” The word “queer” has often been adopted by people who don't want to be constrained by the identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The plus symbol reflects the diversity of sexual and gender identities in the human family.

Thanks be to God for 350,000+ members of the United Church of Christ who are members of the 1800+ United Church of Christ congregations who are Open and Affirming....

+++++

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

+++++

In my ministry, I have been blessed to be the pastor of two United Church of Christ congregations as they went through the process of becoming Open and Affirming. In 1995, North Congregational UCC became the 194th out of 1800+ and in 2002, First Congregational became the 451st of 1800+. Our two Columbus congregations were the first congregations south of the greater Cleveland Metro area to be ONA in Ohio. North Congregational was the sixth Ohio congregation out of 450 congregations at that time – to vote for Open and Affirming. I am deeply grateful to have been pastor of two ONA churches for the last 29 years.

Through all of this growth, the one thing I have heard consistently as push back from moderate and conservative Christians goes like this: *“The Bible says homosexuality is a sin and we can’t go against the Bible.”* I wish to address those who have retreated into the Alamo of their ignorance and prejudice by declaring, *“The Bible says homosexuality is a sin and we can’t go against the Bible.”* If I could wave a wand over this, I would. I would say, “this is the last time I will preach on this...” But, I know it won’t be because hate has home in anti-LGBTQ+ people’s minds and hearts – especially those calling themselves Christians.

So, here we go... **What does the Bible say about Homosexuality?** This may surprise many of you, but the Bible doesn’t have much to say about

homosexuality. It appears the Bible really isn't very interested in the topic. In the original texts of Hebrew, Greek, Syrian, and Aramaic "homosexuality" is NEVER used. The word doesn't 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 JUST BECAUSE "homosexuality" appears there), you may not see the word and its cognates.

There are seven primary passages of scripture – four in the Jewish 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) which are most often rolled out in arguments against homosexuality. These texts speak against same sex acts in very negative ways. Each is related to adultery, promiscuity, violence, and idolatrous worship. Before studying these more closely, I need to add that these seven passages could easily fit onto one page out of 1100 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!

Poverty, Stewardship, and Care for the Earth. If these compassionate concerns are good enough for God to spend thousands of passages addressing don't you think the church needs to put all its energy here as well?

Anyway, here we go . . . Genesis 19:1-26 – the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 18:16-33, God sends two angels to the city of Sodom to find ten 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 a strange and horrible passage to say the least. As Leslie and Saturn read it, the passage cries out to us, “Did we just read that Lot offered his virgin daughters to crowd intending to do harm and said, ‘do with them what you like?’” This is sick. Let’s proceed.

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 ten Biblical passages, in an additional 933 passages (including this one) “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.

Pay attention now, because the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, Peter and Jude **agree with me** – not with Franklin Graham, Rod Parsley, or any other local or national pastor who uses this passage to bash LGBTQ+ people. Sodom’s sin is not homosexual rape. Isaiah 1:10, 3:9, Jeremiah 23:14 and Ezekiel 16:49 all the passages 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. Is it any wonder? 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 as a result.

In the three laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy **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 and stood in direct reaction to pagan and Canaanite practices. 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. My question is – has any one in Judaism been killed for “wasting their seed?” The answer is no – at least for the first 5784 years of history in the faith.

We need to remember something about the 613 laws found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The laws make no distinction between Moral Laws and Ceremonial Laws. So how would you choose to enforce one law over another?

For example – if we follow these laws and put people to death for homogenital acts, will we also follow the Levitical law of stoning our children for disobedience? Will we demand all husbands and wives abstain from sex except during fertile periods? And are we going to put people to death for not harvesting at the edge of the field to feed the poor? If you enforce one of these you enforce all of these. Friends, this is preposterous. If you don't believe me – ask a rabbi.

Second, Jesus said he came to fulfill the laws not to destroy them. Did not Jesus' fulfillment of the law focus on two primary 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 homogenital acts when Jesus has clarified this question through the law of loving your neighbor? Are you with me?

Speaking of Jesus, let's look at the New Testament . . . Jesus says absolutely nothing about same sex relations. Nada. Nichts. Zero. While he addresses

stewardship, poverty, care for the poor, healing, living right in relationship to neighbors any number of times, he never breathes a mumbling word about same sexual relations. Why is he silent? Well, either same sex issues were not an issue for Jesus, or he simply chose not to “go there” or both. Either he wasn’t interested, or his silence showed he was already open and affirming.

Our beloved Apostle Paul was not silent. While he didn’t 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). Peter J. Gomes 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 dishonor God’s purpose. The shameful acts that Paul brings into focus involve lust, avarice, exploitation, power and abuse. These are the worst qualities in the human condition, not qualities to be associated only with homosexual persons only. That is absurd.

I hope and pray that when each of 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 judged by God. While I have not fully addressed Paul’s writings, I hope I have opened a door to new understanding in our greatest evangelist’s writings. I like what Scroggs says in conclusion to his book 41 years ago: “*Biblical judgments against*

homosexuality, are not relevant for today's debate. They no longer can 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 31 years ago by conservative theologian John Stott in an article in *Christianity Today*. Stott told readers in 1993 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."*

I have preaching on this for 30 years. I say to you now what I said in 1994. **The Bible is not interested in Homosexuality.** So where does the fascination with using the Bible to beat people up, using a Gospel Gun to shoot down our LGBTQ+ come from? I believe it comes from people who are hung up on their own struggles with their own sexuality – and then weaponize their issues in ways that hurt other people. The issue isn't God's problem. It is a problem for humanity.

If we have washed away this struggle like the ocean washes away the sands of time, where does this leave us? It brings us back to the only thing that matters – the two laws Jesus merges into one as our reason for living and serving God: *"love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself?"* As such, we must fight against unjust laws that harm our LGBTQ+ children and youth – our neighbors. It means we must establish laws and safety nets for our neighbors of all generations who have been harmed by the injustice surrounding gay bashing and hate. And as the Church, we need to open our hearts and arms to all who have been injured and harmed by hate because of their orientation and gender identities.

For all who are here or who are listening...I am so deeply sorry for the pain and rejection any of you have experienced in church and society because of your gender identity or sexual orientation. I am sorry for the ways your family members have treated you when you have come out or been outed by others. I am sorry that you have been hurt. In my love for you, and on behalf of all of us – Welcome home. Amen.

Please stand and join with me in reading our Open and Affirming Statement – which we have had in every Sunday bulletin for almost 22 years. Let us read these words together:

We, the members of First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, welcome and affirm all. We believe we are all created in God's image and called to love our neighbors as Jesus loves us. We believe we are many members, but one body in Christ, called to unite all people in God's love. We are a community seeking God's presence and love in our lives. We seek to unite persons of all ages, races, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, sexes, gender identities and expressions, family structures, mental, intellectual and physical conditions, economic circumstances, political, theological and faith backgrounds. Together in our diversity, and being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, we will "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8)

—Adopted September 8, 2002 by the congregation; revisions adopted January 27, 2019 by the congregation.

