

## *Sermon: Injustice Regarding Gender / Sexual Orientation*

The Rev. Mike Wernick

December 6, 2017

Year A  
Galatians 3:23-28

Pastors David... and Marcy... thank you for inviting me to speak this evening... in some ways... it's interesting to be the person speaking... and be one of the people whose lives are being spoken about... it's interesting... speaking not only about injustice regarding one's sexual orientation and gender identity... but also about my own journey as a gay man... and wanting my words... to be God's words... which speak healing... to the collective heart that beats here...

An Episcopal priest I know... recently said... *Look around at creation... and if you can... show me evidence that God favors uniformity...*

You see... I grew up in a Jewish family... a Reform Jewish home... we went to services on the High Holy Days... Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur... we went most Friday evenings to Shabbat services... and I had a Bar Mitzvah... I think I grew up with a healthy sense of physical intimacy... but like many gay... lesbian... bisexual... and transgender people... I grew up... aware of being different... of not quite fitting in the way most of my peers fit in... and so what pushed me into the closet until I was forty-five... wasn't any threat from the rabbi's pulpit... what pushed me into the closet... was a lack of healthy role models... social intolerance for those who were different... eyes that rolled... and denigrating jokes... and there was no how-to book called... Coming Out for Dummies... and so what's unfortunate... is that most LGBT feel alone... isolated... and forced to blaze our own trails... instead of following the well-trodden trails that others have cleared... and which they would have been happy to share...

When I was growing up... I used to believe that my same-gender attraction arose out of some thinking that was in error somehow... or in an attitude that I needed to adjust somehow... but after years and years of trying... and praying... nothing worked... then I began to think that when I grew up and got married... it would just go away...

And I did marry... I met my former wife through our mutual interest in self-development and meditation... we had a daughter... who's now 29... but my struggle continued... I felt strongly about honoring the commitment I'd made to my wife and daughter... and so I attended Exodus International meetings... you know... pray the gay away... and attended these meetings for almost a year... but I had already studied Family Systems Theory... my former wife's father was an alcoholic... she was the adult child of an alcoholic... and we were as determined as we could be... not to pass on to our daughter the multi-generational dysfunction we had inherited... but I realized that this group's goal was unrealistic... because rather than seek wholeness and integration... goals that are important to me... their aim was to create fragmentation and disintegration... by ignoring how one was... and pretending to be someone different... but this fragmentation wouldn't work for me... and I began to sense that the problem wasn't located in my being... in my sexuality... but in society and religion's attitude towards it...

It was now about 1998... our church in Greenville, OH got a new priest... and his wife was a spiritual director... spiritual direction seeks to discern what God alone is saying about a particular issue... so you take what you think and feel about a thing... and name and honor it... but set to the side... and you take what your family thinks and feels about a thing... and name and honor it... but set it to the side... and you take what society and culture think and feel about a thing... and name and honor it... but set it to the side... maybe you even take what your religion or denomination thinks and feels about a thing... and name and honor it... but set it to the side... and what you're left with... the only thing that's left... is what God thinks and feels about that thing... and in that silence... what God said to me was that there was no thinking I had that was in error... and there was no attitude I had that needed to be adjusted... all I needed to do was let the life I had suppressed on the inside... be lived on the outside... my wife and I separated... and through an Episcopal organization that's like ReconcilingWorks... I met my partner... who's now my husband... we've been together for 18 years... and married for four...

But LGBT people continue to endure vandalism... discrimination... threats... and even violence and murder... and I offer three reasons why...

There's an incredible degree of biblical illiteracy in this country... in a 2007 movie interview... The Rev. Dr. Laurence Keene said: "There's nothing wrong with a fifth-grade understanding of God – as long as you're in the fifth grade." Yet according to a composite of Barna Research Group polls... fewer than half of all adults can name the four gospels... many Christians cannot identify more than two or three of the disciples... 60% of Americans can't name five of the Ten Commandments... 82% of Americans believe that "God helps those who help themselves" is a Bible verse... 12% of adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife... a considerable number of respondents to one poll indicated that the Sermon on the Mount was preached by Billy Graham... and over 50% of graduating high school seniors thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife...

Many focus on Lev. 18:22 as the sole justification against homosexuality... though the meaning of that word... as it exists today... didn't exist 100 years ago... but yet we ignore almost every other prohibition cited in scripture... and don't do those things we might... for example... Exodus 21:7 says it's OK to sell our daughters into slavery... but we don't do that... I mean... what would be a fair price... Lev. 25:44 states that we may indeed possess slaves... both male and female... provided they are purchased from neighboring nations... does this apply to the nations to our north and our south... Lev. 11:10 says that eating shellfish is an abomination... Lev. 21:20 says that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight... so in today's world... must I have 20/20 vision to receive communion... and Lev. 11:6-8 says that touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean... so should NFL players wear gloves?

What almost all of us experience... growing up in our family of origin... we consider to be normal... and right... children who hear their parents making homophobic comments... are quite likely to adopt the same attitudes and behave the same way...

but many of us also take what we know as normal... and make it normative... determinative for everyone else... one of the examples I use when doing pre-marital counseling... is when do you open Christmas presents... if one of the two grew up always and only opening them on Christmas Eve... and the other grew up always and only opening them on Christmas morning... then one may well think they're right and the other one is wrong... they have taken what they grew up with... and absolutized it... The third idea... and I'll say it twice... because it sounds so radical... is that the rejection of homosexuality... is rooted... in the hatred of women... [repeat]... and here's why... from biblical times through today... far too many women have been treated as little more than sexual objects... just look at all the women who have posted #MeToo on their FaceBook pages... and look at all the men who have lost their jobs recently because of sexual harassment or abuse...

In Biblical times... men had power... women did not... women had no voice... could not own property... they were little more than the mothers of their husbands' children... they could not divorce their husband though he could divorce her... so overtly patriarchal men could not comprehend why any man in his right mind would want to "debase himself" and behave like a woman... and I think we also have to at least ask... if there's nothing to this... then why do we say with a chuckle... *Boys will be boys*... why don't women receive equal pay for equal work... and why are there still glass ceilings for women... but not for men...

And while the Sin of Sodom is widely believed to be homosexuality... nothing is said about how the crowd intended to abuse and rape Lot's guests... no one questions Lot when he says: *Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man... let me bring them out to you... and do to them as you please*... but Ezekiel says... in Ch. 16:49... that the sin of Sodom was really the city's lack of hospitality... their unwillingness... due to their pride and haughtiness... to share their excess food and prosperous ease with those who were poor and marginalized...

At Two Churches... we have an outdoor sign... and one of the messages on it says... Overcoming Denominational Tribalism... it's a way of saying that we uphold the Called to Common Mission Covenant... a way of saying... you like our theology... we like your theology... let's play in the same sandbox... it's a way of addressing the fact that others... consciously... and sometimes even unconsciously... believe that their denomination is right... and others are wrong...

And so what happens when we say that our religion is right... and yours is wrong... what happens when we say that our race is right... and yours is wrong... what happens when we say that our culture is right... and yours is wrong... what happens when we say our sexual orientation is right... and yours is wrong... the sad truth... is that this country is drowning in far too many kinds of tribalism... too many are vying for the top shelf... and it is literally killing us...

In our baptismal covenant... we vow to strive for justice and peace for ALL people... and to respect the dignity of every human being... when LGBT people are marginalized... when they can now marry their partner on Sunday... but get fired on Monday for being gay... when they experience discrimination in housing... or medical care... we are not being respected...

The theme of our Advent lessons this year... is to seek Wisdom... stay awake... seek Wisdom... stay awake... and keep our eyes on the Cross... but we can hardly grasp the new promise we find there... in the flow of Advent... we can barely imagine a God who accepts crucifixion... but who says... *Not even this... can keep me from loving them...* in the flow of Advent... we can scarcely fathom... the depth of love... that forgives Deicide... the killing of God...

But our wounds connect us to others in the world who are wounded too... our wounds connect us to the wounds of Christ... the taunting I received when I was growing up... is the taunting Jesus received... the rejection I endured for being who I am... is the

rejection Jesus endured for being who he is... when my world fell apart because I was called to a new life... Jesus' world fell apart too when he was called to a new life... but as Romans 6 reminds all of us... *If we have been united with him in a death like his... we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his...* and part of how we stop this insane tribalism... is by keeping our eyes on the Cross...

There's an African greeting... *Sawu bona*... I see you... but it also means more... it means... I see your personality... I see your humanity... I see your dignity and respect... and in small African villages... where everyone knows each other... it's a way of connecting... and the response is... *Sikhona*... I am here... when you see me... you bring me into existence... and until you see me... I do not exist...

The end of tonight's passage from Galatians... does not claim that distinctions no longer exist... of course they do... but that they no longer give us license to see ourselves as superior... or others as inferior... in Christ... the playing field has been leveled... we are all One... and this is precisely why... each of us needs to be able to say... *Sawu bona*... and needs to answer... *Sikhona*...

Mike+