

May 1, 2016
Affirming Sermon #5
I Corinthians 6:9-20

Our last biblical text in this sermon series on The Clobber Texts is the one that Sharon Kyle just read for us from I Corinthians 6, specifically these words: 9 DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT WRONGDOERS WILL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD? DO NOT BE DECEIVED! FORNICATORS, IDOLATERS, ADULTERERS, MALE PROSTITUTES, SODOMITES,¹⁰ THIEVES, THE GREEDY, DRUNKARDS, REVILERS, ROBBERS—NONE OF THESE WILL INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

It seems pretty clear. It is talking about wicked people, including homosexuals among a long list of others, and says that they are beyond God's love and redemption. These sins are worse than almost any others. Unforgivable.

But is it clear? I guess that you know me well enough by now to know the answer to that question is: maybe not. I can sympathize with you if you are feeling that nothing is clear any more. There once was a day when men were men and women were women. Now some men are women, and some women are men, and there are new things called gender identities, and sexual orientations, and transitions between them, and asexuals, bisexuals, inter-sexuals.... What once felt like a checkerboard – of black and white – has turned into a rainbow – with gradations of colours. What is certain any more? What is certain any more? That's where we are going to do our digging into scripture today.

Many of us know Paul's wonderful words in Galatians 5:1 where he says IT IS FOR FREEDOM THAT CHRIST HAS SET US FREE. These are powerful words of liberation from a man who, as a Pharisee, was once enslaved in his attempt to follow the laws of God.

Paul travelled around a lot. He established Christian communities where he went, supported them until they could survive on their own, and then he would go on his way to start the whole process again in a new location. But sometimes, after he had left, his message was misunderstood, or reinterpreted. That's why he sent so many letters – he was still trying to guide his fragile communities, even after he had moved on down the road.

If you take a quick gander through this first letter to the Corinthians when you get home later today, you'll be amazed by the amount of bickering and arguing and fighting and debauchery and immorality that seems to have been going on in that tiny community of brand new Christians. Right in chapter 1 Paul writes: SOME FROM CHLOE'S HOUSEHOLD HAVE INFORMED ME THAT THERE ARE QUARRELS AMONG YOU. WHAT I MEAN IS THIS: ONE OF YOU SAYS, "I FOLLOW PAUL": ANOTHER, "I FOLLOW APOLLOS", AND ANOTHER "I FOLLOW CEPHAS." They're going at it hammer and tongs, arguing over who is the boss!

And in chapter 3 he talks about JEALOUSY AND QUARRELING, in chapter 4 ARROGANCE, and in chapter 5, just before our reading, he addresses incest: A MAN HAS HAD HIS FATHER'S WIFE. AND YOU ARE PROUD!

They sound like a pretty cantankerous bunch! What seems to have happened is that some people took Paul's idea of FREEDOM a little too far. They have decided that if IT IS FOR FREEDOM THAT CHRIST HAS SET US FREE then freedom is what they're going to have - and lots of it. What does it matter what you get up to, since Jesus died to save us, since we are justified by faith not works, since we are already adopted as sons and daughters of God through Christ - then what does it matter what we get up to in this life? Whoopee! Let the good times roll! A bit like Grand Bend on a long weekend!

The letters show that Paul is just as horrified by this as we are - and most of this letter we are reading from today is his parental lecture back to his fledgling church as he tries to rein them in and get them back on the right track again. Think of Paul as a parent, writing to his son or daughter who have spent the first year at university living the wild life.

The first part of Chapter 6 concerns lawsuits between believers. They are fighting so much with each other that they are suing each other in the public courts - it makes me think of family in-fighting - and making the Christian community a laughing stock. So he charges them to stop airing their dirty laundry in public.

While writing to them about that, he gets all tangled up in the idea of WRONGDOING in general, and this causes him to start a little lecture on that: **9 DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT WRONGDOERS WILL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD?** No soup for you! If you act immorally, then you will not be saved. Clearly he is linking ethics - our behavior - and faith - our beliefs. So far, are we with him? Yes.

But then he goes on to a list of immoral behaviours - examples of what he means - and says, **NONE OF THESE WILL INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD.** Big stuff here. No soup for them.

And who does he leave outside of heaven's gate, knocking on the door, begging to get in? Listen: **FORNICATORS**, (that is sex outside of marriage) **IDOLATERS** (that is putting someone or something ahead of God), **ADULTERERS** (back to sex outside of marriage again), *malakoi*, and *aresenokoitai*, (yes, for now I am leaving those words in Greek. We'll come back to them in a moment),¹⁰ **THIEVES, THE GREEDY, DRUNKARDS, REVILERS, and ROBBERS.**

Stop for a moment and think about that list. Do any of our children or grandchildren live with someone without being married? No soup for them. Have any of our family members left the church, left faith and belief behind? No soup for them. Have any of us had an affair? No soup for us. Have any of us "borrowed" supplies from work, or wanted something that our neighbours have, or gotten good and drunk at a party....? No soup.

Paul is coming down pretty hard on the folks in Corinth. Harder than we would, I think. Harder than I would, to be sure. Morality has changed, hasn't it? Morality. Is. Contextual. Who we sleep with seems less important these days - and maybe not so easily equated with Right Behaviour.

Right Behaviour means not hurting someone else with our actions. It means not lying to our beloved. It means not violating boundaries. It means respecting others. That is where we agree with Paul about morality - maybe not so much in his examples.

That is important. But there is more. Just about here some folks will be thinking "What about verse 9 where Paul talks about MALE PROSTITUTES and HOMOSEXUAL OFFENDERS? You've conveniently left it out!"

Let's not leave it out - let's draw it out now. We're down to two words now - four in English, but two in Greek: *malakoi*, which in my bible has been translated MALE PROSTITUTES and *arsenokoitai*, which in this translation is HOMOSEXUAL OFFENDERS. What do we know about those words?

You will not likely be surprised to find out that it is not entirely clear what those words mean, and scholars are uncertain - although they do know it probably has to do with male/male sexual encounters. *Malakoi* literally means 'soft ones' and *arsenokoitai* is a word Paul himself probably made up to translate a Hebrew word meaning 'one who lies with a man as with a woman.'

In neither case does it mean what we assume our English word 'homosexual' to mean, namely, a naturally occurring variant of human sexuality, a sexual orientation. For Paul it referred to a kind of sexual self-indulgence well known in Greek society in which it was common for straight men to have sex with other men and even boys to spice things up. We're back to that whole idea of freedom again - some members of the Corinthian community were abusing their Christian freedom by sleeping around: with men, with women, with children, who cares? Because of their so-called new FREEDOM.

Paul is saying: No! No to sleeping around. No to adultery - cheating on your spouse. No to idolatry - cheating on God. No to thieves, to greed, to drunkenness, slander, swindling - No. You are better than that now. In his words: v. 11 YOU WERE WASHED. YOU WERE SANCTIFIED. YOU WERE JUSTIFIED IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. Start acting like it.

He continues: DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT YOUR BODIES ARE MEMBERS OF CHRIST? ... YOUR BODY IS A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WITHIN YOU, WHICH YOU HAVE FROM GOD, AND THAT YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN?²⁰ FOR YOU WERE BOUGHT WITH A PRICE; THEREFORE GLORIFY GOD IN YOUR BODY.

He is reminding this hard-drinking, hard-partying group of brand new Christians that they should be practicing Right Behaviour, ethical living, moral rectitude.

It's not really *who* you sleep with, so much as *how* you sleep with them. And we are all called to the same morality by virtue of our baptism. Behaviour *is* linked to belief. Ethics *is* linked to faith. But sexual orientation, I think, is irrelevant.

It seems to me - and here we are entering the realm of my opinion not fact (feel free to disagree) - it seems to me that it is very possible that Paul would say to us: why are you shaming your LGBTQ brothers and sisters by singling them out like this? Why are you treating these, among the most vulnerable members of your society, this way? Why are you judging them? God will judge us all by the same standard: kindness to one another, faithfulness to one another, and love for one another.

I want to close with the words of one of our former Moderators of the United Church of Canada, the Very Reverend Dr. Peter Short. He says, "I suspect that the Scripture is not so interested in fixing the mind as it is in widening the heart."¹

Widening the heart. What if the checkerboard of certainty is also a rainbow of inclusivity? What if what we saw in others was their talent? Their passion? Their ability? Their love?

YOU WERE WASHED. YOU WERE SANCTIFIED. YOU WERE JUSTIFIED IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST....YOUR BODY IS A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WITHIN YOU, WHICH YOU HAVE FROM GOD, AND THAT YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN?²⁰FOR YOU WERE BOUGHT WITH A PRICE; THEREFORE GLORIFY GOD IN YOUR BODY.

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¹ Peter Short, "Love and Marriage. in *Outside Eden: Essays of Encouragement*. (Toronto: Observer Publications, 2006), " p. 28.