



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

On keeping our hearts open

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

June 24, 2012

One of the most central statements in Christian scripture was in last week's reading from 2 Corinthians. "From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view." And today that is followed up with "open wide your hearts." Paul has asked his congregation and us to do something that is contrary to human nature - to overcome what the world teaches us. In Paul's time, social and class divisions were strong. Men were at the top of the social pyramid, free Greek and Roman men leading the way. As a slave holding culture, there were clear hierarchies. The Greeks thought they were better than the Jews. The Romans thought they were better than the Greeks. And here comes Paul, proclaiming an end to all of those distinctions. Once someone gets the Christ understanding, all categories are passé. The uniting power of Christ renders human distinctions null and void. But, he might as well have said, from now, stop acting human.

It takes tremendous awareness, willingness and commitment to remake our attitudes about others. At one point, I naively assumed that the Civil Right era addressed and ended racism in the US. But it is clear that legislation does not change what is in people's hearts. Latent racism in America has been forced out into the open as we have witness the shockingly boorish behavior directed at our first black President. Too many people still look at him and see only the human distinction of pigment and the attending stereotypes. The Christian is called to let go of such distinctions and to see all human people as our brothers and sisters. The attitudes that we all hold that separate us from others are the work we have to do.

Sandy Baldwin, who many of you know has served in numerous leadership capacities here, shared a story from her experience as a chalice bearer in the late 1980s. As one of the first women here to do that, she often had people refuse to take the cup from her or they would intentionally go to the side where there was a man offering the chalice. And yet, less than twenty five years, later, you called a woman to be your rector. God bless the women who served here as associate clergy who through their competence and style and loving presence, helped to deconstruct old assumptions and attitudes. Denise, Angela and Lucy and a couple of others helped to open hearts and erase the distinction of gender. I am grateful.

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You may guess where I'm going with this. Most cultures in the world are currently addressing, in some way, the status of people who are not heterosexual. Some are moving toward acceptance, others are criminalizing the existence of homosexuality. It is likely to be an issue of division for quite a while. Following in the progression of civil rights and racial equality and the women's movement, those cultures moving toward acceptance and the call for full recognition of the humanity and rights of gay and lesbian people are challenging ancient assumptions. It is good to understand how those assumptions came to be in the first place.

For Christians, the Bible is regularly cited as clearly condemning homosexuality. However, once armed with good scholarship, the texts in question, and there are not many of them, do not provide as much surety as you might think. There are a couple of reasons for this. First being the complex nature of human sexuality which is barely understood today. Try as we might to learn the dynamics of preference, it is elusive. No one can say for sure whether it is nature or nurture or both or something else all together. These questions were not even contemplated in the ancient Near East. Issues of identity were more closely related to one's clan, class or social status, personal identity was barely considered. The culture was rigidly stratified and those on the top had the right to use all others at will. Sexual relations were less about intimacy and more about dominance than we can comprehend today. There were two roles, an active one and a passive one. Women were the passive ones, the ones acted upon, whether it lovingly or violently was of little consequence. For that to happen to a man, well....

The first text that we encounter in the Bible is the story of city of Sodom. Many people assume that the sin of Sodom was homosexuality but it was not. The prophet Ezekiel says that Sodom's sin was being rich but selfish (Ez 16:49). According to Rabbi Steven Greenberg in his book *Wrestling with God and Men* the early rabbinic commentators identified Sodom's sin as cruelty, arrogance and disdain for the poor." Others said it was pride, envy, cruelty to orphans, theft, murder and perversion of justice." The selfish inhospitality of Sodom is the story in Genesis. Abraham's nephew Lot has houseguests, two angels disguised as men, whom he has invited into his home. They have come to town on a mission from God to determine whether or not Sodom will be destroyed or not. The townsmen of Sodom, were so protective and jealous of their wealth, that no outsider was to be tolerated in their gated community. Their strategy for keeping their town to themselves was to humiliate and brutalize the strangers. It is a story of a mob determined to rape. This was common practice in the ancient world. Captives, POWs, political prisoners, anyone who could be humiliated was treated to such a fate. It was the violent abuse of another person and I am personally pleased that the Bible says that that is wrong. However, the Bible does not condemn Lot for offering his daughters to the mob if only they will respect his guests and his role as host. You see it was all right to treat a woman that way.

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And so when we come to the passages in Leviticus, the act called an abomination becomes understood as the usurping of a man's rightful role as the active one. Most translations of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 use the words "you shall not lie with." What is lost in the translation is that the word translated as "lie" is the Hebrew verb *shakab*. It is used 52 times to describe a sexual encounter using deceit or force – a non-mutual event. At best it means "to have your way with." For that to happen to a man, is to upset the way things are meant to be. Likewise in Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul, as a good and learned Jew, brought this context and understanding to the Christian communities he planted. He was right in calling out the prevalent misuse of another human being for position and power. But Paul had nothing negative to say about Jonathan who fell in love at first sight with David. He had nothing negative to say about Ruth who pledged her life to Naomi.

What the Bible says is only part of the cultural attitudes toward those who are not heterosexual. It's not a happy history. Gays were sent to the gas chambers along with the Jews. Matthew Shepard had his arms stretched wide and tied to a fence in Wyoming where he died. Too many young people kill themselves rather than live with the hatred they are shown. They have not been embraced as fellow spiritual beings because of one facet of their human experience.

Now please hear me, I am not telling you what you are to think or feel. You do not have to be in the same place that I am about this. What I am asking you to do is to remember that we have all made the same promises, to seek Christ in all people and to respect the dignity of every human being. Having made those promises, we must examine anything that keeps us from being able to do that.

When people first try to make such a change it can feel frightening, as though there is nothing stable to hold onto anymore, as though the waves are swamping your boat. If you are being called to try to accept something new to you, just remember who is in the boat with you and know that if you keep your heart open and trust him, he will bring you to calmer waters and a safe harbor – a harbor that is safe for everyone.

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