

"Sex, Lies and The Bible"
delivered by Rev. Margie King Saphier
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OK. What about sex, homosexuality and the Bible? I won't be telling you anything new when I say, "Yes, it is all there."

But how is sex, women and homosexuality represented in the Bible? How do these representations reflect today's understanding of relationships between same sex couples and heterosexual couples? **The answers to these two questions are absolutely critical because they influence how many in the U.S. think about these relationships today.** A prime example occurs everyday in the United States military with the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Homosexuals may serve in the military if they "don't tell anyone" about their sexual orientation. If the soldier is faithful to the "don't tell" policy, the military won't ask. This is a policy based on shame - shaming homosexual men and women who serve in the military. I also believe it is a policy based on fear - fear that heterosexual men may experience sexual harassment, or worse rape by gay men. After all it would be no different from how women are treated in the military. Ever since women have played more significant roles in the military, we read in the newspapers that these women have been subject to sexual harassment and even rape. Instead of promoting relationships that affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals, no matter their sexual orientation, the military condones a policy that debases homosexuals and women, while elevating heterosexual men. This policy has even resulted in death of some soldiers because of their sexual orientation.

This past Tuesday night at the Board of Governors' meeting, the Board voted eight to four to display a donated banner stating "Civil marriage is a civil right" from the pillars of the church. No date was set when this will happen, but I imagine it will be soon since groups are gathering signatures for a referendum

to amend the constitution of the Commonwealth to prohibit same sex marriage. Those on the Board who opposed displaying the banner did so not because of the spirit of the message but because UFPC might be seen as a single-issue church resulting in alienating some members and potential members. Their concerns are valid, and we need to listen to them. One of the inherent tensions religious liberals confront is how to stand for something without offending people. But as John Nichols said in this morning's opening words said, "If you believe in something that is important - you are likely to be attacked by those whom you threaten." We will be. In this morning's reading, I chose Gandhi's words on politics and religion to address this inherent tension.

My personal belief is that many of us experience a degree or two of ambivalence about opening marriage to same-sex couples because our society and the world recognize heterosexual couples as the norm. This morning I will explore how the Bible has shaped our understanding of heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Before I begin my analysis of Biblical passages, I need to say it is not my intent to bash the Bible, Judaism or Christianity. But I will be lifting up passages that have been traditionally interpreted through a patriarchal lens that has compromised women and homosexuals. **It is these interpretations that have corrupted human relationships and continue to do so.** Professor and theologian, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza states "The Bible was not only used against women's liberation but also had no clear option for women's liberation." She could just as easily said the same for homosexuals.

I will also briefly explore how the understanding of human relationships from 3000 CE to 500 BCE influenced the writers' of the Bible. The Bible, among other things, is an accounting of a patriarchal society shifting from polytheistic religion to a monotheistic one, in which this sole god is creator of all. God begins as a warrior god for his chosen ones. He is quite violent, wiping out many tribes viewed hostile to the Hebrews (ethnic cleansing?). But eventually the writers (the prophets) come to understand this god as compassionate and

the god of all people. Compassionate justice becomes its primary message, calling people to be in right relationship with each other and God. Tragically this evolving message of the Bible is lost when the Bible is understood as the final word. No longer can the message grow with people's evolving understanding of their relationships to one another.

In Genesis, God commands his people to be fruitful and multiply at least 9 times. Based on these commandments, the Roman Catholic Church as well as other churches in the Christian tradition states marriage is for the procreation of life and therefore same sex marriage is wrong. It is wrong, they profess, because "it is a crime against nature." According to this logic a childless marriage is a perversion. In the Roman Catholic Church a childless marriage is grounds for an annulment. It is not the love between the two adults that is valued, it is the product (the child) of the love act that is valued, resulting in the debasement of love act unless it is solely for procreation.

Why is God so concerned about the Israelites being fruitful and multiplying? Throughout the Old Testament there are stories of infertility, because in actuality, infertility was a problem. According to anthropologist Carol Myers, human fertility was critical, but it was hampered by many factors. Because of drought, famine war and pestilence, the population of the people was often on the verge of decreasing. The average life span for a woman was 30 years and for the man 40 years. Fertility was an issue for women because food was scarce and her caloric needs were high, therefore she did not ovulate. In ancient Israel, the physical aspects of motherhood – pregnancy, breastfeeding, caring for the young – were compounded by women's highly labor-intensive existence. Women were expected to work in the fields. They did as much as 40 percent of the physical labor. The work for men and women were endless.¹ Hence God tells the early Israelites to be fruitful and multiply. This

¹ Carol Myers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 1988), pp. 166-171.

commandment is so important that when God isn't commanding them, he is promising them that he will make them fruitful so that they will multiply. This commandment was appropriate for its time. It is no longer so.

Considering how important women were, it is amazing that women were de-valued. Because the woman was considered a possession, she could bring shame to a man – her father or her husband. If she was infertile or only bore daughters, she was not as worthy as the woman who bore sons. Rape was the primary vehicle of shame – often used in war. Although it was the woman who was the victim of the act, it was her husband or father who was seen as the victim from the woman's fall from grace. His possession was now tarnished. This mentality persists today. We read in the newspapers how rape in wars is still used as a weapon of shame and disgrace.

This patriarchal understanding of women was not unique to the Hebrews, but was prevalent throughout the Greek and Roman empires, of which Israel was a part.² Historians have learned from writings of the first century CE., that women were seen as substantially inferior to men. Some early Jewish teachers wrote that women were inherently evil [cf. Sir.42:12-14]; which fueled early Christian writers to demonize women, especially Eve.

After marrying, the Roman male, like the Greek male before him, was free to entertain himself sexually – not just with his official wife but with his slaves, male and female, adult and child. The Jews, on the other hand, wanted to mark themselves off from every non-Hebrew community by marking every daily act as sacred and uniquely Jewish through special codes, disciplines, and requirements. Hence there is the Decalogue (or Ten Commandments), the Holiness Code that includes the purity laws in Leviticus. In Chapter 18 of Leviticus, every possible heterosexual liaison is forbidden, except between husband and wife. It is in this litany of sexual prohibitions that homosexual sex is forbidden in Leviticus 18:22.

² Antoinette Clark Wire. *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction of Paul's Rhetoric*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) p. 65.

This litany of infidelities is repeated again in Leviticus 20, with verse 13 adding that the men should be put to death. Because these prohibitions are part of the Purity Laws that distinguish Jews from the Gentiles, the Christian community has traditionally ignored Leviticus 18 and 20; but this is changing, Fundamentalists often cite these laws. These laws limiting one's sexual contacts were laws that established the importance of being in right relationship with one another. If one is in right relationship with another, s/he is in right relationship with God. I will discuss the Israelites' understanding of homosexuality when I discuss the epistles of the Apostle Paul. Although Paul was a Christian, he was really a Christian Jew and well versed in the teachings of Torah.

Homosexuality appears two other times in the Old Testament: once in Genesis 19 and in a similar story in Judges. In Genesis 19:8, Lot is visited by three men, who are angels of the Lord in disguise. The townsmen arrive demanding that the three men come out so that they may "know" them. To appease the angry mob, Lot offers his daughters saying, "Look I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under my roof for protection." Until feminist theologians of the latter half of the twentieth century raised up the profound injustice to Lot's daughters, commentaries of this passage stressed that Lot's response was in terms of the hospitality codes of the times! The only sexual matter relating to Lot, which male theologians chose to comment on, was the incestuous behavior of Lot's daughters. For those of you who don't know, Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt because she looked back. The daughters, realizing that they didn't have a future because their fiancées had perished in Sodom, get their father drunk on two consecutive nights so that each can seduce him and become pregnant. This corruption of the father-daughter relationship, first by the father and then by the daughters, is a symptom of the perversity of the patriarchal system of the time. What is so tragic is that this

perversity was normalized or explained away by theologians until women enter ministry in significant numbers in the latter half of the 1900's.

The parallel story to Lot is in the Book of Judges. Again the abusive rape by men on a man is not tolerated, but the gang rape of woman is supported. (Before I go on with story I want you to move to the present: Think about our military and the policy toward homosexuals [they are not tolerated because heterosexual men fear the overtures of homosexual men] but the persistence sexual harassment and rape of women in the military is tolerated by cover-ups). There is a parallel here. Now back to the Book of Judges: A Levite, traveling with one of his wives, asks a family if he and his wife can stay overnight. The man of the house welcomes them into his home. Soon after their arrival, a horde of townsmen arrive wanting "to know" the Levite. Like Lot, the man of the house says no but offers his virgin daughter and the Levite's wife in same fashion as Lot. But the townsmen will not be appeased, so the Levite takes his wife and shoves her out the door leaving her to be gang-raped all night. At dawn he puts the lifeless body on his mule and takes her home. He cuts her in twelve pieces and sends each piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel calling the tribes to warfare to restore HIS honor. The silence of theological commentaries about what happened to his wife is deafening! I find that silence remains to this very day. This story is explained away by saying the story is really about the hospitality code being violated.

Homosexuality is not mentioned again until The Epistles from the Apostle Paul, and then it is mentioned three times. Two words in 1Corinthians 6:9 and one word in 1Timothy1:10 imply that "homosexuals" will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven. The authorship of Timothy is often felt not to be Paul; and the meaning of the Greek words in Corinthians have other interpretations, such as "licentious," "loose" or "wanting in self-control;" so it is not conclusive, these verses are prohibitions against homosexuality.

This brings us to Romans 1:26-27. In this passage Paul is very clear he is talking about homosexual acts. But he defines these acts as being performed by

heterosexual men or heterosexual women. Most historians agree that there was no understanding at the time that there were men and women whose genuine sexual orientation was toward the same sex. Instead homosexual acts were seen in the context of the Gentiles (Romans) who had few codes of behavior; leaving slaves, women and children at risk. In this passage Paul states that God will send his wrath to all those who have chosen to live “ungodly lives.” God therefore sends these people behaviors that prevent them from being in right relationship with God or each other or themselves. To our way of thinking this may seem self-defeating on God’s part, but this was at a time when people believed everything came from God. The point of the passage is not that God sends homosexuality to you if you have sinned; instead the point of the passage is that when you are not true to your inner self (remember these were heterosexuals performing homosexual acts), you are no longer in right relationship with God, with your community and most of all your self. You are off your spiritual path and in the wilderness.

The Chinese say “May you live in interesting times.” Well, we do live in interesting times. When the Bible was being written, they also lived in interesting times. They made the seismic transition from polytheism to monotheism, with the elimination of the feminine in the image of God. We, of the 20th and 21st centuries in the Western world, are peeling away the last vestiges of patriarchy so that we can be in right relationship. There are strong forces trying to restore patriarchy of old. I believe it is a big part of our culture wars.

The Board of Governors in their vote on Tuesday night honored the right of two people who love each other to marry. They also acted to elevate all men and women to be on the same playing field. That is being in right relationship!

When we are in right relationship, Everything is Possible. So as Fred small and we sang this morning, “the only measure of your words and deeds will be the love you leave behind when you are done.

