

Mayflower Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 14, 2022 10:00am
Rev. Howard Bell
Beloved Child of God

When Sarah asked me to preach this summer on the theme of “Bad Theology and Good”, my initial reaction was not one of enthusiasm since I consider myself a rather reluctant theologian. I agreed to preach simply because I generally like to say yes to any request from Sarah...I then picked from Sarah’s list the topic I knew would challenge me: “The Bible and Sexuality”.

As we are all well aware, from a Biblical literalist interpretation, the Bible has been interpreted as condemning homosexuality and used as justification for the exclusion from many faith communities of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer+ (LGBTQ+) persons and of persons questioning their gender identity, resulting in their experiencing deep shame about their God-given sexual orientation and gender identity.

As may be obvious to all of us here at Mayflower a literal interpretation of scripture is simply indefensible. However, the revelation that I have come to personally, as I prepared for this sermon, is that understanding that these scriptures have been interpreted erroneously, does not necessarily reach into the depths of my soul and the soul of so many others to limit or erase the harm imposed on so many by the Biblical literalists.

I know that today when I speak of sex education “I am preaching to the choir”. Mayflower began teaching sex education and embracing healthy attitudes toward human sexuality at least as early as 1973. Mayflower member, Pat Letson, shared with me her memories of that time. Her husband, Bob, was a pediatric ophthalmologist on the staff of the University of Minnesota Medical School. She and Bob were asked to preview the sexuality curriculum developed at the U. of M. Medical School which has been a national model for medical school education. Pat and Bob also learned of efforts underway to adapt the curriculum to the church setting at the Universalist Church on 50th and Girard in South Minneapolis. With the assistance of others as well as the support of Mayflower’s Christian Education Committee, the first “About Your Sexuality” 14-session classes were held for Mayflower High School and Junior High students between 1973 and 1976. I assume this three-year effort is a pre-cursor to our current Our Whole Lives (OWL) curriculum. Four of the scripture texts for today were drawn directly from the OWL curriculum. I am so grateful for this pioneering work that can help to assure that Mayflower children and youth, as well as others in the community, have a much better chance of living into their adult lives with healthy attitudes toward their sexuality, their sexual orientation, their gender identity and in their ability to appropriately discover and give expression to their God-given nature as sexual beings.

Soon after picking this topic for today’s sermon, I saw a promotional email for a book by Colby Martin titled UNCLOBBER, Rethinking our misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality. In his introduction, Martin says, the word “*UnClobber*” is my attempt to say in one word, that I do not believe God stands opposed to those who are attracted to the same sex or that God withholds

divine blessing from same-sex relationships ... (Martin continues) There are approximately six verses (out of 31,000) in Scripture that appear to reference same-sex sex acts, and our gay brothers, sisters, and siblings have long felt the brunt of these six verses...¹

What I found most intriguing is that Colby Martin, prior to writing this book was ordained in, and, as he says, “deeply entrenched in”, the conservative evangelical movement. In his book Martin provides a non-literalist, scholarly understanding of how these six “clobber passages” can be interpreted more accurately. Martin and other modern Biblical scholars have re-interpreted these “clobber passages” given both the issue of “cultural context” when written vs today’s context; and given the diverse ways Hebrew and Greek words in these scriptures have been and can be interpreted in ways that are not filled with absolute condemnation of same-sex sex acts.

In the book, Martin also provides his personal story of being a cisgender heterosexual who, while remaining a heterosexual, transitioned theologically from judgmentalism and condemnation of gay people to becoming an advocate and ally; even though he suffered the consequences of being asked to leave his ministry setting. May the miracle of his theological transition be an inspiration to others who today still cling to using the Bible, to judge, condemn, and exclude so many of God’s beloved.

While preparing this sermon, I came to realize that when I refer to myself as “an out gay male who first came out of the closet at the age of 39” that the very existence of the gay closet derives from the cultural influence of this bad theology.

To illustrate the depths of my closet: when I was sixteen years old, I had my first same-gender-loving sexual experience with another sixteen-year-old boy. It was certainly unplanned and unexpected and occurred in the context of a church-related activity. That sexual experience revealed in me, the truth of my gay sexual orientation. However, since this was 1963, even before Stonewall, I kept this transformative experience a secret; and psychologically repressed it from my memory for the next 23 years while I remained in the closet - even closeted to myself.

I ask you to imagine with me the horrific pain, harm, and injustice – too often even leading to suicide - that is a result of God’s beloved children feeling a need to be closeted – caused by justified fear of family rejection, fear of discrimination, fear of denial of equal rights, fear of bullying, fear of being attacked, beaten, or killed. The walls of the closet are buttressed by this bad theology.

I was deeply involved in the care of persons with HIV/AIDS in the 1980’s. I witnessed and attempted to help alleviate the harm many of these persons experienced from the bad theology we are exploring today. Many of the men I knew were closeted at the time of

¹ UNCLOBBER Rethinking our misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality by Colby Martin, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY ©2016; © 2022

diagnosis and being forced out of the closet by their diagnosis often resulted in rejection by family. Contrary to the way the “gay lifestyle” is often portrayed, it was the gay community who stepped forward to care for members of their own community. I know it is also true that many unnecessary AIDS related deaths occurred due to this bad theology. President Ronald Reagan withheld research dollars and could not even say the word “AIDS” during his presidency.

I am beseeching all of us today, to fully comprehend the devastation this bad theology caused at that time and continues today despite progress that has been made. Since the horrific US Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe vs Wade, it is certainly conceivable that the progress that has been made for gay rights could also be significantly diminished by those who cling to this bad theology. In whatever ways, necessary, I pray that Mayflower’s commitment to justice ministries will be brought to bear to reassert gay rights as needed in the future.

As for good theology...after I finished reading Martin’s book, I found myself on an interesting journey of trying to discover scriptures that could be easily interpreted as specifically affirming same-gender-loving relationships. I came to the realization that, to a certain extent, I was playing by the rules of the Biblical literalists which were bound to be unfruitful.

However, the six short scriptures read today are all offered as scriptures that are good theology and are affirming of human sexuality. The first two are from the Song of Solomon. This book is an “erotic poem” that celebrates sexual love. Even though the eroticism in these passages describe heterosexual love, I read these passages as affirming God’s blessing on the sexuality of each one of us as God’s beloved children.

The next two scriptures are remarkable Old Testament Biblical stories of same-gender-loving relationships – between Ruth and Naomi as pictured on the cover of our bulletin. Ruth 1: 16 has Ruth covenanting with Naomi saying, *“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God”* - and between Jonathan and David from 2 Samuel 1:26b: *“Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.”* I remember studying these scriptures in the past without truly hearing these profound same-gender-loving words. During my interim ministries in recent years, I was called to preach on these passages and was amazed at how clearly this truth was revealed to me.

The last two scripture passages are from writings of Paul that powerfully affirm the good theology, the truth, that *“nothing can separate any one of us from the love of God”* and that each of us *“are all beloved children of God.”* God’s love is unconditional. God’s love is universal. No one is excluded. Beloved children of God, please hear these affirming scriptures anew and know that no matter your sexual orientation or gender identity or that of your friends and family members, that God loves each of us unconditionally.

I share now these wise and oh-so-applicable words written by Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin: *“Clearly it is not scripture that creates hostility to homosexuality, but rather hostility to*

homosexuals that prompts some Christians to recite a few sentences from Paul and retain passages from an otherwise discarded Old Testament law code.”²

When I chose to share with my family that I was gay in 1986. The words what I said was, “In the future, should I choose to be partnered, it will more likely be with a man rather than a woman.” My son responded, “You mean you’re gay?” I was rejected by both of my two brothers. One of whom used the Leviticus text and called me an abomination. I have also been estranged from one of my sons. He not only cannot come to accept his father as an open and affirming gay male married to a loving husband, but he also has “refused to sit at table with an unrepentant sinner”. We tried to reconcile for many years but have not been successful. He did not permit his four children – my grandchildren – from their birth to be in relationship with me. However, I can share and celebrate that a reconciliation has occurred in the last two years, sadly, only after my son was divorced, that my grandchildren and my daughter-in-law and I have connected and have formed a deep and loving emotional bond.

As I conclude my sermon, I turn to the quote that you see printed on the top of the left inside page of today’s bulletin. This quote comes from a brochure provided by Soulforce.³ From their website, Soulforce’s purpose is: “...to end the religious and political oppression of LGBTQI people...” Soulforce was co-founded by Mel White who also was an evangelical pastor. White came out as a gay man in 1994 and transitioned from bad to good theology on homosexuality.

We, in the United Church of Christ celebrate continuing revelation in our slogan: “God is Still Speaking,”. Hear these words affirming good theology from the perspective of God’s continuing revelation:

“Revelation and truth can also be found in us, as creations of the Divine. In our lived experiences we have access to revelation when we engage our deepest truths and live into our most authentic selves as Queer people, as Trans people, as People of Color, etc.”⁴

May each one of us, beloved children of God, learn to fully engage our deepest truths and live fully into our most authentic selves; and may we at Mayflower grow in our understanding of our covenant to be “Open and Affirming” by deepening the affirming part of this covenant so that all God’s beloved children may someday learn to engage their deepest truths and live into their most authentic selves. May it be so. Amen.

² <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/14282/a-passion-for-the-possible>

³ <https://soulforce.org/>

⁴ Reverend Alba Onofrio, *WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE* Published by Soulforce, Inc. Copyright © 2017 All Rights Reserved