

**Sexual Orientation**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Linda Yates - September 17, 2006**  
**St. John's United Church, Halifax, Nova Scotia**

**Scripture Passages:**

**Proverbs 1:20-33**

**Matthew 15:10-20**

**Matthew 15: 21-28**

This week Global News came to interview me. When they called and asked if they could do an interview with the minister of a church that did same sex marriages, I said "Well, you know we have a representative kind of democracy in the United Church. I have to check with some people to see if that is okay." So I called the Clerk of Session, Sharon Nicolle and she called the Session Executive. Then I made some calls to the Affirming Committee because I thought they should be there too. All who had been called gave their approval. So we did an interview. They wanted to know how we felt about Stephen Harper's plan to reopen the debate around this issue of equality. In particular they wanted to know how I felt about Archbishop Pendergrast's pastoral letter urging Roman Catholic parishioner to write the Federal Government urging the repeal of the legislation that made that particular piece of human rights possible. So I gave them, what I felt was a pretty good interview, outlining all the issues and said "You should come on Sunday. I had planned three months ago to speak on these very issues because the scripture readings lend themselves to it that day." But the press is not here they didn't show the clip. I think I wasn't radical enough, or hateful enough or strident enough. To be truthful I am a little relieved.

The topic of same sex civil unions is one that our Federal government is forcing upon us again. So, the Holy Spirit must have been moving me three months ago, because today has become a critical day to speak about it. As your minister I have a responsibility to reflect upon such subjects by taking into

consideration scripture, church tradition, current scientific thought and societal beliefs. I can not of course separate my own personal experience of having many gay and lesbian friends whom I care about deeply. All of this will inform our discourse today.

We can not talk about sexual orientation until we have a basic look at the very broad and complex topic of human sexuality. The question I always ask when doing marriage courses, is “Sex, what is it and what is it good for?” From the of the dawning of humankind, God clearly intended sexuality to be an important part of a committed couple’s relationship. Sexuality within such a relationship has three purposes. Sex can be 1) procreative, 2) unitive and/or 3) transformative.<sup>1</sup> Procreation refers to the baby making aspect of sexual activity. Unitive sexual activities are those intimate physical actions that serve to enhance the spiritual, emotional and psychological union of a couple. The transformative aspect of sexuality refers to the fact that something mystical happens during sex - something that makes it a union of the divine and the physical world that we imperfectly know as earthly existence.

Ted Peters says:

The sexual impulse is by no means reducible to human concupiscence or even the forces of genetic self-preservation; rather, it is an icon, a doorway that opens up pathway between the particular and the universal, between the part and the whole, between time and eternity, and between the profane and the holy. No more grand or sublime justification for the value of such love could be offered that to ground the passionate embrace of two people in the divinely appointed unity that bids all things in heaven and earth into eternal blessedness<sup>2</sup>.

So then, if we really consider the three purposes of sexual relationship between two lifelong partners, what becomes immediately obvious is that the procreative aspect of sexuality is the *least central*. For example, no one in this church actually believes that Carl and I only had sex twice because we only have

two children. The sexual activity in our marriage then is centred around the unitive and transformational properties of sex which are essential to our continuing relationship as life-long partners. (Boy, I am really glad my sons are not here today to hear this sermon; I think they would faint with embarrassment). Thus, for most, if not all couples in Canada, the unitive aspect of sexuality is key. For people united in a religious ceremony the transformational aspect of sexuality is something that they are seeking blessing for. Most Canadians opposed to homosexual marriage often cite the fact that permitting it will undermine "family." When I hear this, I think that what underpins such an argument is the basic understanding that doing sex is about producing children. The Roman Catholic church for example, believes that all sexual intercourse of any kind should only take place if the possibility of procreation is left open - hence no condom use even if it will prevent HIV spread. As you can see, the action of procreation is only really a very small part of the purpose of sexual activity. It should therefore not be used as an argument against homosexual union.

In a strange kind of way another argument against homosexual union concerns children. This argument accuses homosexuals of being pedophiles. A pedophile is someone who "has a preference for repetitive sexual activity with prepubertal children."<sup>3</sup> This is to say a pedophile is someone who is attracted primarily to children under the age of 16. You know when you talk to your doctor and they scratch their chin, then say they have to check something and will come back in a minute? Well, they are looking up your mysterious symptoms in the Merck Medical Manual. I learned this when I trained medical students in an Infectious Disease Research Lab in the McKenzie Bldg some years ago. The Merck Medical Manual is the "bible" for the physician who is a general practitioner. I bought one. (It never ceases to amaze me how useful it has been in my work as minister). The Merck manual says that pedophiles prefer opposite-sex to same-sex children 2:1.<sup>4</sup> In other words most pedophiles are

*heterosexual*. I have never heard anyone saying that we should ban heterosexuality because *some* heterosexuals are pedophiles. As with heterosexuals, the VAST majority of homosexuals are NOT pedophiles. This argument is a non-starter because it is based solely on myth.

At this point in our discourse we will turn to the bible. For all the hand wringing and shouting about homosexuality being “banned” by writings in the bible there really is very little to be found about the topic. If you open the bible you will not find the word “homosexuality” in it. Try it when you get home. We need to remember that when we try to interpret the bible and when we consider the process of the actual writing of it, we need to come to terms with the fact that we are dealing with writings arising from a *pre-scientific* culture. The bible is a book of theological truths, spiritual wisdom and mystical guideposts. I read it everyday for these reasons. But if you are looking for science in the bible, you will be in trouble. This book comes out of a pre-scientific time. Thus, we are also dealing with writings that speak of the sun circling the earth, that speaks of the earth being flat and having four corners. Remember poor old Galileo was imprisoned in his house by the church fathers for daring to go “against” the bible by saying that the earth revolved around the sun. In a similar fashion the pre-scientific cultures in which the various parts of the bible were generated from would have understood that all people were born heterosexual and chose to “act” homosexual. We know now that this is just not true. In fact, the more we learn about sexual orientation, the more we understand that it is as individual as eye colour. It exists as a spectrum. If heterosexual orientation were to be envisioned as the colour black and homosexual orientation were white, the truth would be that most of us are shades of grey.<sup>5</sup> Some of us would be dark- grey, some of us grey-white and the rest of us would be all the shades in between. It seems to be very much biologically based and perhaps even fixed within the womb. So we do not choose our orientation. It is part of who we are. Thus, homosexuality as we

know it is not directly addressed by scripture.

The little that is addressed in scripture about homosexual acts can be found in six tiny verses. Three verses can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 23. In Genesis 19 we encounter the famous story of Sodom and Gomorrah. It has been used to vilify homosexuality but a careful reading will show you that the “sin” of the people was not that of homosexuality. It is not really focused on in the passage at all. To God, the terrible and grievous sin of the people was inhospitality taken to the extreme of rape and sexual violence. All major biblical scholars agree on this. Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 23 encompass the old “cleanliness” codes of the ancient east. If you read the rest of the codes before, after and all around the tiny verses concerning homosexual activity, you will also find it is sinful to touch a woman on her period, to wear clothes of different fabrics and plant seeds of different kinds in a field, to name just a few rules that we now find bizarre. Why do we lift out the homosexual activity verses to codify in stone and ignore the hundreds of other rules surrounding it that we have decided no longer fit our culture and reality? All three of these Hebrew Scripture citations are found in the Torah, (the first five books of the bible), which deliver a very complicated and demanding set of rules formulated to help the Jews distinguish themselves from the prevailing practices of the Canaanites, (whose lands they had invaded and colonized).<sup>6</sup> The rules that we find formative for our lives as Christians are contained within the ten commandments, none of which say anything about homosexuality.

The three passages in the New Testament can be found in the letters of Paul (Roman 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:10). There is much debate about the language used in these passages. Some scholars debated whether these were later insertions to the letters after Paul had died. Other scholars believe that Paul (in Romans and 1Corinthians) was, in fact

referring to “pederasty” which is sexual activity between an older man and a young boy. We would know it today as pedophilia. Surrounded by a culture in which such activity was considered okay, (as was much other sexual violence), Paul was taking an unusual stand. Robert Tshannen-Moran states that “What was unnatural was not the homosexuality, but the twisted and tortured expressions of homosexuality as Paul encountered them in Corinth and Rome. And he rightly condemned them.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Paul seemed to be most concerned with people treating one another with respect and kindness and in particular he wished to see the obsession with ancient codes and laws ended. In his letter to the Galatians he says “Who has bewitched you? How can you be so foolish? Did you experience so much grace—for nothing? How can you go back to keeping special laws and observing special days and creating special distinctions? There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female—for you are all one in Christ Jesus. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (paraphrased from Galatians 3)

The interesting thing to me is that these six tiny passages in scripture that are almost always misquoted and misconstrued by the Christian right hold so much weight given the massiveness, (both literal and figurative), of the rest of the bible. All six passages could fit on one page of an eleven hundred page book, or less than one tenth of one percent of the bible.<sup>8</sup> How is it that these verses can cancel out all the other stuff about loving and respecting each other?

The book of Acts, the prophetic books and the wisdom literature of the bible are silent on the subject of homosexuality. Of important note is the fact that Jesus himself said nothing about the subject. It is not as if Jesus did not know about homosexuality. It is also not as if he didn’t speak about sexuality and relationships. This man who condemned (and forgave) adultery, who spoke some words about divorce, who talked about family relationships as being

different than scripted by his “normal” society, who treated women radically different than his society’s norm and who condemned with the strongest words possible those who would mistreat children, had nothing to say about homosexuality. What gives? I’m thinking he might not have been that concerned about it.

Last Sunday we heard about the Syrophenician woman who bested Jesus in an argument. Jesus refuses to help her believing all of his energy, time, attention and healing power was meant for his ministry to the Jewish people. Jesus is a faithful Jew so it makes sense that he would think that. However, the woman in challenging him, in throwing his own words back at him about “even the dogs under the table” deserving care, changes Jesus. In the book of Matthew, he says in this story “Woman, great is your faith!” After this encounter, Jesus includes gentiles and Jews in his ministry from then on - unto the end of his life on earth. Jesus was fully human and therefore Jesus had the capacity to learn. Thank God for it means we too can change, can turn around and can learn. Our society has recognized that we have persecuted homosexuals for far too long. What made that persecution worse was that we used “faithfulness to scripture” to back up that abuse just as we used to do for the upholding of segregation laws. I believe that now when we think that the church, for many years discouraged inter racial marriage we feel embarrassed, ashamed and say to ourselves “What were we thinking?” I think 30 years from now, the same will be said for trying to homosexuals from the right to marry.

In Matthew, 15 immediately preceding this story is that of Jesus challenging the rule bent Pharisees. He tells them that their obsession with obsolete rules at the expense of compassion and good judgement is their undoing. They think it brings them close to God to observe these rules, but Jesus points at that their cruel behavior is, in fact, removing them from God’s presence. The writers of the gospel were making clear to us that in Christ’s

newly birthed church, just as all things can now be eaten, (i.e previously declared unclean food is now permissible to be consumed), all people are now included in God's love - both Jew AND gentile. In Paul's writings to the new Christian communities, he states that slave and free, male and female are declared one in Christ's love - equal in God's care, (Galatians 3:27,28). With our new understandings about sexual orientation we can see today that homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual and transgendered persons are also included. There should therefore be no impediment for homosexual, consenting adults to be joined together in a life long covenanted union with the blessings of both government and church.

What God desires of us is a clean and caring heart. For my part, my heart was swollen this week. I was so proud to be a minister of a congregation that is ahead of so many others - a congregation that has gone through the trouble, the angst, the struggle, the real work of daring to do what is right and just. Thanks be to God for our continuously growing and understanding of God's kingdom of graceful love.

### **Footnotes**

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1. Ted Peters, For the Love of Children, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press,, 1996), pp. 119-154.

2. Ibid. P. 153

3. The Merck Manual, 17<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Whitehouse Station, N.j.: Merck Research Laboratories, 1999), p. 1562.

4. Ibid.

5. See the section entitled "Sexual Orientation: A Test Case For the Church" in James B. Nelson's and Sandra P. Longfellow's, (editors), very fine book: Sexuality and the Sacred, (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1994).

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6. Robert K. Tshannen-Moran, "Homosexuality," [www.pastorbob.net/sermons](http://www.pastorbob.net/sermons)

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

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