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“It’s Not That Simple: The Bible and the Church in Support of Same-Gender Marriage.”

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I was here a couple of years ago, and I’m grateful for the invitation to come back. In the past 2 years, some things changed more than I would ever have guessed. The Supreme Court decision was not one that I had expected from this set of judges; I certainly never expected that marriage would be a legal right for everyone, even in South Carolina, so quickly. That change has meant that a number of congregations are discussing the possibility of weddings for same-sex couples as part of their ministry with more openness than before.

Of course, some things haven’t changed. Other congregations view the legal change as yet another cultural attack on Christianity, and so they dig their trenches a bit deeper. That was pretty publically on display recently in Kentucky, with the clerk’s refusal to follow the legal requirements and issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The rhetoric from that spectacle, from the rallies on her behalf and from the efforts to make her into a saint and martyr as she sat in jail, of course assumed and asserted that there is one clear and unified “Christian” position on gay marriage. She kept saying, “I’m a Christian, and so I can’t issue the licenses.” Well, at best that’s a pretty narrow definition of Christian. It equates “Christian” with only one very particular way of applying a few biblical statements to current social questions. Or there was the man at the South Carolina Pride parade last weekend who was interviewed for a story in the State newspaper. He was there in opposition, and the reason he gave was “I stand on the word of God.” That simplistic equation needs to be challenged; there’s more to God’s word, I suspect, than he realizes. What really worries me is that the rest of the world sees the church as this kind of self-righteous, self-congratulating stance of refusing other people their rights. It sees people who insist that they know God’s will, and who equate that with biblical regulations, and who then assume that they can transfer those regulations over 3000 years of cultural change without distorting the meaning. Other parts of the church, I think, need to challenge those assumptions, and to offer something better.

Within the church and within our society, much of recent discussion about same-sex marriage appeals to what the Bible says. I would not want it any other way (after all, I teach the Bible here at the seminary); I think that is where the conversation needs to take place, at least for the church. But what the Bible says and how it works in our lives is seldom as simple as some of the rhetoric would imply. *The Columbia Declaration* is a statement of support for the 2009 ELCA decisions to open up possibilities for recognizing and blessing same-sex unions and for opening up ordained ministry to qualified candidates in such relationships. That statement and some resources on the website were written by several of the faculty members here at Southern Seminary. That website (<http://columbiadeclaration.wordpress.com>) has 2 pieces I wrote, and those pieces explain why the usual biblical texts that are often lifted up as prohibitions and condemnations of all same-gender sexual relationships, those verses that tend to end up at signs at rallies opposed to gay marriage, really do not mean for us today what a lot of the opposition rhetoric assumes. I'm not going to talk about those texts tonight; you can go online and read those comments when and if you want.

Instead, I want to spend some time talking generally about how three leaders in the church's long relationship with Scripture have suggested we ought to read the Bible. If much of our conversation about sexuality centers on what the Bible says, then this question becomes crucial: How can you tell that you are interpreting the Bible correctly? I think that a general failure to even think about that issue has had some very destructive consequences for how the Bible gets used in conversations about sexuality. And then I want to talk about a couple of biblical texts which offer some helpful ways to think about sexuality and the possibility of same-sex marriage within a biblical context.

Part 1: HOW, AND WHY, TO READ SCRIPTURE

In Luke 10:25, a man comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. In the NRSV, it sounds like Jesus responds with the same question twice: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" But, in fact, Jesus asks two different questions, and this verse is translated much better by the NIV: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" Those are two different questions. We say that Scripture is the standard for our life and faith. But interpreting Scripture is never simply a matter of reading the words off the page. There is always

the question of HOW one understands the words, and how one faithfully lives out that word here and now.

And so, even though Exodus 35 says to do so, we don't execute those who work on Saturday; and despite 1 Corinthians 11 we don't require women to cover their heads in worship; and most of us, despite 1 Timothy 5, don't think that drinking a little wine for the sake of our digestive health is a divine command which we are bound to obey. Our understanding of these texts and how they do (or do not) apply is shaped by some very important things that the long tradition of the church has taught us about reading the Bible, and I'm afraid that these things are often left out of the church's recent discussions about sexuality.

In the 2nd century, there was a great leader and theologian of the church named Irenaeus, who spent much of his life opposing a heresy which taught that the creator was in fact not the Father of Jesus, but was a lower, evil being. Irenaeus said that those who taught this used a few Bible passages in the Old Testament about God's wrath and they contrasted them with a few from the New Testament about God's love, but they didn't place those verses within the whole story correctly, and so got it all wrong. Irenaeus said they were like people who got the materials to make a mosaic of the king; they got all the little pebbles, and they got the pattern that told them where all the pieces belonged. But they ignored the pattern, and so instead of making the mosaic look like a king, they made it look like a dog – that is, they were using the same biblical pieces, but they ended up with the wrong picture. Just because you can quote a few Bible verses does not mean that you are right, or that you have understood what those pieces mean or where they belong within the whole biblical picture. Irenaeus said that the pattern for reading Scripture correctly was what he called “the rule of faith” – by which he meant the basic story, the sort of summary that we find in the creed about God the good creator of all, and the Son Jesus whose death and resurrection brings salvation, and the Spirit of God given to the church. What Irenaeus suggested is that there is a **central** story being told in Scripture that teaches us how to read the whole thing. It is that central story that teaches us to recognize that THIS piece belongs at the center, and THAT piece belongs out near the very edge of the biblical story. So those catechism classes that we teach, and the creeds that we keep saying together in worship, teach us what to look for when we read the Bible; they remind us of the central story so we don't get lost in our reading.

Other teachers in the church found other ways to say basically the same thing. Augustine, the great theologian of the 4th and 5th centuries, said that one can tell right from wrong interpretation of the Bible because the right interpretation is always the one that leads to increased love for God and for neighbor (remember, in Luke 10 Jesus affirmed the man's answer that the central command in Scripture is "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself"). That's not a bad thing to remember when you're asking whether or not you're faithfully interpreting any biblical text: does that interpretation lead to greater love for God, and for your neighbor. That's the point of the Bible as a whole, according to Augustine. Of course, sometimes we have confused ideas about what "love" really is, and what it means to really love God and our neighbor. At that point, it seems to me that we rely on the Holy Spirit, and prayer, and actually serving our neighbors to teach us what love means. We need actual discipleship, actual practice in loving our neighbors and serving them, so that we can know what love means, so that, according to Augustine, we can learn the true way to read the Bible. We learn to be faithful readers of the Bible by loving our neighbors, not by screaming at them.

Martin Luther also realized that proper reading of Scripture meant focusing in the right way. One of his best and most ignored writings is titled "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels." There, Luther says people need to be "taught what one is to look for in this book, so that one may not seek laws and commandments where one ought to be seeking the gospel and promises of God." For Luther, the very center of scripture is what proclaims the good news of Christ. I think the Bible itself shows this same sense that its story has a clear center in God's grace. There's an interesting pattern in the Old Testament, and I think it says a lot about what is central in this story, and about how we ought to read it. Exodus 34:6-7, the encounter of Moses with God on Mt. Sinai, contains a self-identification by God as "The Lord, the Lord, a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation." That basic declaration of God's identity reverberates through other passages of scripture, but something interesting and I think important happens to it. It is repeated in Numbers 14:18, where Moses appeals to God for forgiveness instead of destruction for Israel. Moses quotes the whole statement from Exodus, but it is the mercy that is central, and the mercy that Moses appeals for with God. Then, Nehemiah 9:17, on a day of national repentance, recalls that text and says "You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them." Psalm 86:15 says "You, O Lord, are

a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Joel 2:13, a text we often use in worship during Lent, calls to the people, "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." In Jonah 4:2, the prophet angrily accuses God, "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." Did you notice what happened? That foundational scene in Exodus may carefully balance mercy and the threat of punishment, but all of these later uses focus on the mercy; most of them leave the last part of that Exodus quote off completely. There is a trajectory here, focusing on the essential, central revelation of God as a lover and forgiver, rather than as a destroyer. That doesn't deny the reality of God's wrath or the seriousness of sin; but in the Bible's story, it isn't even close to an even balance between these two. The wrath must be understood within the larger story of God's saving mercy. The Old Testament tradition points to that core of the revelation; the New Testament claims that this mercy and grace of God comes to fullness in Christ. Luther says that the Bible is the manger in which we find the Christ; that's the point of the Bible. If we go to Scripture looking for anything else, we won't hear what God wants us to hear. If we come asking other questions, misguided questions like how to get rich or questions about whom we are allowed to exclude and hate, then we simply cannot read the Bible at all.

Part 2: SURPRISING TEXTS

When the Lutheran discussion regarding homosexuality was being carried on a bit more vigorously a few years ago, and when some of us objected that certain biblical texts were being misused and misapplied to condemn people and relationships that the texts really didn't fit (the points discussed on the website I mentioned earlier), some people on "the other side" of the debate argued that in other contentious issues the church has faced in the past, like whether slavery should be ended or whether it is ok to ordain women, there were at least some biblical texts that pointed in the new direction. And they raised the question, "Where is there any positive comment, any support for gay marriage in the Bible?" Well, I think that question deserves an answer, but it depends on what you're looking for in terms of "support". If you mean whether or not there are biblical rules that explicitly allow it, then the answer is clearly "no"; but, given the first part of what I've said tonight, you might decide that the rules and laws may not be the place

to go to find the heart of what God is up to anyway. Further, the truth is that if you're looking for a biblical "rule" about gay marriage, then the Bible doesn't say anything one way or the other. The issue of gay marriage is OUR question, and what the church is called to do in its reading of Scripture is not to pretend that our questions are the same as the questions addressed by the biblical authors; rather, our responsibility is to find, for our current questions, answers that are consistent with the Bible's central claims and its central story.

To take up for a moment the suggested parallel with the ending of slavery, we ought to recognize that change was not based on biblical rules or instructions in the Bible about freeing slaves. Rather, the church's eventual realization that it must oppose and end slavery was more a matter of the Bible's deeper claims about where God is bringing the world. That is, there is no clear biblical command to end slavery, but the Bible's constant insistence that God desires justice, mercy, and freedom from oppression leaves no other possible conclusion. In a similar way, I want to suggest that while there are no biblical texts that explicitly support gay marriage (and, as I've already said, we should not be surprised by this), there are theological claims made within Scripture which I think point in that direction.

Tonight, I want to talk about two texts, both from Paul's letters, which I find to be useful and promising places to think about how the Bible does in fact have room for the church to bless and nurture same-gender relationships and marriage.

Galatians 3 – Here Paul is arguing that what identifies the church is not its adherence to the laws of the Bible, but rather it is faith – by which I think he means first the faithfulness of Jesus himself, and then our trusting in that faithfulness in response. Paul points to baptism, and reminds the Galatians that they already know that it is "in Christ" that they are children of God, because in baptism they were clothed in Christ. Then, in verse 28, in what is probably a little piece of very early baptism liturgy, Paul writes, "for in Christ there is no more Jew or Greek, there is no more slave or free" – the social divisions and distinctions have been removed in Christ. Then, in the last phrase, Paul goes on to say, "there is no more 'male and female'." This may be one of the most frequently misquoted verses in the Bible. Some of you may know the hymn "One Bread, One Body." One verse of that hymn says "Gentile or Jew, servant or free, woman or man no more." That's not what Paul says, and I think it badly obscures Paul's point. That hymn makes it sound as though Paul is advocating a kind of de-gendered Christian life, as

though being in Jesus somehow makes us a-sexual beings (which seems to be precisely what some expect from LGBT Christians, though they would not want that life for themselves).

But Paul doesn't say "no more male or female". He says "male and female." Now, you've probably heard that before. Paul is quoting Genesis 1:27, "God made them male and female." And Paul says, in Christ there is no more of that. Why would Paul say "no more" Genesis 1:27? Certainly not because Paul is denying that God created sexuality and gender. But in Paul's 1st-century context, people understood the creation story to mean that God created males to rule and that a woman's honor was determined by belonging to some man – to her father, brother, husband, son. Paul says "no more" to the dominant interpretation of the creation story that required a woman to belong to a man. Paul, who was single, was also saying "no more" to an expectation that the only way for both men and women to fully serve God was to get married and make babies, to "be fruitful and multiply." Paul says that, in Christ, that's no longer the case. We are justified because of Christ, not by marriage or singleness, and in our context, we also need to say that we are justified because of Christ, and not by sexual orientation.

Here, I want to take a bit of a detour out of Paul's letters. Jesus, when he was asked about when divorce is allowed (Matthew 19), moves beyond the regulations in Deuteronomy (I find it interesting that those Old Testament divorce rules were not the final word on this topic for Jesus), and he points to Genesis 1:27, the same text about which Paul says "no more," and Jesus talks about the intent of the Creator for marriage there. But that intent needs to be understood correctly. For much of the church's history, the creation story was understood to mean that the only valid use of sexual intercourse was to "be fruitful and multiply," and that if any married couple engaged in sex for enjoyment rather than for procreation, that was sinful. I think we've gotten past that. I don't hear anyone saying that Genesis 1 means the church cannot bless any marriage between people older than about 50 or 60 or 70, or couples of any age that cannot have children; and I don't hear any people suggest that Genesis 1 condemns anyone who decides to live a single life. Thus, in these situations, the church has read the Genesis account about God's creation and blessing of marriage with children as a primary mode of human family, without that meaning condemnation for everyone else. I think Paul's treatment of Genesis 1 points in a similar direction.

So, does that mean Galatians 3 and its "no more male and female" opens up the possibility for other pairings? If the necessity of "male and female" is 'no more,' does that allow

“male and male,” or “female and female”? I do find it striking that the Genesis 1 text that often forms the bedrock of an argument that there is no room in God’s creation for such things, and that God intends only “male and female,” is a text that Paul picks up and says “wait a minute; that’s not how it works anymore.” I think that opens up a biblical path to recognize that there may be faithful ways for LGBT people not "to be alone," which Genesis 1 says is God’s intent for loving, committed sexual relationships.

The other text I want to look at more briefly is **1 Corinthians 7**. It’s a discussion about marriage. Some in Corinth apparently thought that becoming part of the church meant leaving sex behind, and they’ve asked Paul about this. Paul wishes everyone could be single like he is, but he knows that isn’t the case. Here Paul repeatedly tells the Corinthians what his general advice is, but then goes on to indicate that there are exceptions to the rule. For example, in the opening verses of chapter 7, Paul talks about affirming the sexual relationship of marriage; but in verses 5-6 he is willing to make an exception, abstinence for a short time, by mutual consent, for the sake of prayer. Verse 8 gives advice on another topic: stay single; but verse 9 goes on with an exception: those who cannot practice such self-control may marry. The same pattern is followed in verse 10, where those married are told not to separate, but then an exception is made in verse 15, if the unbelieving partner is not willing to stay married. Paul is amazingly flexible, and sees that different people have different ways of living out their sexuality in faithful ways.

The key point for us is that in verse 7, Paul says that in this matter of marriage and singleness, each person has a particular “gift” from God, i.e. a sexual gift, and that those gifts differ from one to another. In verse 17, Paul talks about God’s “calling” in these matters. So, Paul refuses to lay down a rule for everyone to follow. The crucial question for Paul is whether each individual can serve better in singleness or in marriage (remember Augustine’s standard for reading the Bible: love for God and your neighbor). That’s what needs to be discerned, and then to be lived out, in marriage or singleness. Paul’s claim about a sexual calling opens up interesting and helpful possibilities not only for marriage and singleness, but also for thinking about sexual orientation and gender identity as different callings, in all of which we are called to faithfulness and service. Paul says there are different sexual callings for different people— probably more different than he ever imagined, but the direction of Paul’s claims here is surprising in his culture and still surprising in ours, but I think full of profound possibilities.

If we approach the Bible as Irenaeus & Augustine & Luther taught us, and if we listen to Paul here in 1 Corinthians 7, then the question about gay marriage is not a matter of trying to find rules in the Bible for a possibility that the biblical authors never envisioned, but the question of whether life-long, committed, faithful same-gender relationships can reflect the love of God and can support people in their love for the neighbor. It seems to me that the evidence for that being the case is overwhelming, and increasingly is a visible part of life both in our society and in our congregations. Well before the Supreme Court decision, this is what has changed the church's conversation in recent decades, so that even churches like 1st Baptist in Greenville have come to realize that gay marriage is not unchristian. I think that the church's experience with actual people probably got ahead of being able to figure out how to read the Bible. Remember, we learn how to read the Bible by loving our neighbor. It's not the first time that's happened. Remember Peter and his encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10. Peter was sure he knew God's will from the Bible, until he met Cornelius and witnessed what God was already doing in Cornelius' life. It is that encounter that gave Peter new insight into Scripture, and into how God is calling people into the Kingdom. I think something similar has been happening in many congregations in recent years, as LGBT people live out their faith and become open and loved members of those communities. And because of that, many people are learning to read the Bible in new and better ways.

Now the texts that I've discussed here aren't the kind of proof that will convince everyone; some will refuse to be convinced, because arguments can't get through their assumptions. This isn't a discussion that will be decided by proof texts. However, I do think these texts provide a couple of places where we can, in a positive way, think and talk about sexuality and the life of the church in biblical ways that can include LGBT persons and relationships and same-sex marriage. And I think that is the better way forward that we can offer to one another, and to the church, and to our society. Not everyone is going to agree; but some will be changed, and we've seen remarkable changes lately, and I hope and believe that that progress isn't finished yet.