

Arming Ourselves With Knowledge:
Reclaiming Scripture on Same-Sex Relationship
Rev. Lilli Nye
November 7, 2004

Carolyn McDade is the songwriter who gave our contemporary tradition the hymn “Spirit of Life.” In one line from another of her hymns she writes: “What is truth, if not witness to the whole.”

If we, as religious liberals, are to have any relationship with this complex, daunting tome of writings called the Bible, it will be by witnessing to the whole of it—by seeing it holistically. That means that when we look at the details and strive to understand them, we do so by interpreting them within their larger context. We hold its particulars within a larger arc of meaning.

Many UU’s have simply walked away from the Bible, dismissing it as a basis for spiritual, religious and moral authority. When I was in seminary, I had colleagues who protested the Masters of Divinity requirement of taking courses in biblical interpretation, or fulfilled them only grudgingly, insisting that this scripture was no longer relevant to our religious practice.

There is, indeed, so much in it that seems not only absurd and archaic to us, but also so much that can be, and has been, used throughout history to justify violence and oppression. “Good riddance!” has been the general attitude of many contemporary Unitarian Universalists towards the Bible.

There are a couple of problems with this view. One is that Unitarianism and Universalism, as sister traditions, grew right out of the soil of biblical interpretation like two great trees. Their intertwined roots and trunks are solidly planted in the ground of Judeo-Christian scripture. To really understand who we are today, one needs to understand these origins.

Our social justice orientation, in particular, is fundamentally biblical. It is based in the teachings, preachings, and ministries of the great biblical prophets, including Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and Jesus, all of whom challenged the social and religious status quo of their day and called the people toward mercy, humility, justice, and concern for those who were suffering or marginalized.

Another problem with a casual dismissal of the Bible is that our ignorance of the Bible cuts us off from the culture of our nation and society, and makes it impossible for us to have any dialogue whatsoever with anyone whose faith and values are biblically grounded. As the exit polls of this election reveal so dismayingly, liberal thought and language seem to have missed the boat. We have failed to articulate our vision in moral terms. We know our concerns are indeed moral ones, but we have not successfully communicated them as such.

So a strong argument for reengaging the Bible is that in fighting for social justice as we understand it, we need to be willing to use this shared language. We can't abdicate it to the conservative voice. We have to reclaim it.

One of the most pressing reasons to reclaim this language is the issue of same-sex relationship. Among the Bible's million or so verses, there are a handful of texts that are seen to be clear condemnations of homosexuality. These few texts, many of them not more than a passing phrase, have been used as powerful, destructive ammunition against gay people, against any expression of same-sex love or sexual contact, and, most recently, against gay marriage.

In preparing for this talk today, I have drawn from a small, accessible book called *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* by Daniel Helminiak. He wrote his slim volume for lay audiences, and he does a good job of condensing a huge amount of scholarship into a few short chapters. But he makes the point that to understand what the Bible really says about homosexuality you cannot read scripture at face value. You do have to make the effort to delve into it using an approach called the historical-critical method.

He's condensed that method into 107 pages. I'm going to condense it further into a few paragraphs, which obviously cannot do it justice. So, if you want to develop facility with this subject in order to dialogue with others or confront others on the subject of homosexuality in the Bible, you will probably have to do some homework on your own, and Helminiak's book is a great resource to start with.

To get a sense of the historical-critical method, here's a little metaphor that he offers:

We have an expression in our culture today: "to be out in left field." To understand what this means, you have to know something about baseball—you have to know that most batters swing from right to left, and will periodically hit the ball deep into left field, looking from the batter's perspective. So the left fielder covering that area has to be positioned far out into the field to be ready to catch those balls. In many ways that left fielder will seem isolated, disconnected from all the infield activity. The player might seem to be in his own world and out of touch. And so the term has over time come to mean disconnected from reality, or "spaced out." It's even come to mean unconventional or loony. You won't really understand this description of character—"She's out in left field" or "that comment came from left field"—without understanding the whole cultural picture.

Imagine that several thousand years have passed. It's now sometime in the 6th millennium AD, and all the lore and culture and rules of baseball have long ago fallen from common knowledge and have been lost and forgotten (what a horrible thought!). But someone stumbles upon a piece of writing from the late 20th century that describes a character in a story as being "out in left field."

It would be natural for that future archeologist to interpret this phrase literally, as describing the physical location of that person. By interpreting the phrase literally, the nuanced cultural meaning is entirely lost and the description may not make much sense.

This metaphor describes the situation of any person who comes to read the Bible without any knowledge of biblical history, without any understanding of the cultural context of a passage, without any understanding of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek languages in which the Bible was originally written.

This is how the vast majority of us read the Bible. We come only with our own modern cultural references, and try misguidedly to glean what the writer meant. So, let's "unpack" a couple of passages using the historical-critical method, trying to reconstruct their original cultural meanings.

Our term "sodomy" comes from a story in the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible.

In this story a man named Lot, who has settled in the land of Sodom, takes two travelers into his home and shows them hospitality. While they are staying with him, all the men of the town gather around the house and demand that he throw the visitors out to them, so that "we may know them," they say. Lot tries to pacify them by offering his two virgin daughters instead. Instead of accepting the daughters, the men of Sodom become angrier and more violent. Lucky for Lot, his visitors are actually angels, and they use their supernatural powers to blind the men so that they become confused and cannot find the door. The angelic visitors tell Lot that this town is about to be smitten by God for its wickedness. Later, indeed, the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah are reduced to smoke and ash.

The sin of Sodom has long been assumed to be its residents' simple lust for male-to-male sexual contact. But when seen from the historical-critical perspective, that argument becomes unconvincing.

The sin of Sodom seems to be more about two other things: 1) a failure to demonstrate hospitality; 2) that failure compounded by sexual violence—by rape—perpetrated by men against other men.

1) In desert country, for a traveler to sleep outside unprotected could be fatal. At the time that this passage was written, the gesture of hospitality was perhaps the principal expression of social propriety. So strict was the rule to offer shelter to the traveler that one was not allowed to do harm to a hated enemy if that person had been taken under another's roof. From Lot's standpoint, he was trying to do the righteous thing given a choice of two evils. It was worse for him to let his guests be abused than to give his daughters over (and that, of course, is a whole other issue, for another day).

2) It was bad enough that the men of Sodom were inhospitable, but it was much worse that they sought to inflict sexual violence against the travelers. In ancient Semitic society

(and still today in Semitic and non-Semitic societies) male-against-male rape was the ultimate humiliation, the ultimate insult, because it forced the victim into a female role in a society where women were considered property.

In the context of the story, how much more of an offense the men of Sodom committed by trying to humiliate the divine messengers of God.

In adjacent texts within the Bible that reference the destruction of Sodom, there is no suggestion that male-to-male sex was actually their sin. The prophet Ezekiel states the case by saying:

“This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surplus of food, and the ease of prosperity, but did not aid the poor and the needy.”

In the book of Wisdom, the sin of Sodom is described as the “bitter hatred of strangers” and “making slaves of guests,” a reference that may have connotations of sexual servitude.

Jesus refers to Sodom when he sends his disciples out to teach the gospel. He tells them that if anyone does not welcome them or listen to them, then they should shake the dust of that place off their sandals and leave quickly. “It will be more tolerable for the towns Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than it will be for that town.”

There is nothing in the story of Sodom that references homosexuality as we understand it today, as mutual love or sexual relationship between consenting adults.

If hateful inhospitality was the sin of Sodom, rather than homosexuality, then there is a terrible irony in this story’s misinterpretation. Homophobia’s most pervasive expression is the lack of hospitality, to put it mildly. Gay people are often made outcasts in their own communities, young people are kicked out of their homes, people are fired from their jobs and cast out of their religious communities because of their sexual orientation. The use of rape to express hatred against gay people is the most horrifying irony of all.

These are difficult subjects to talk about. But this is why we must arm ourselves with knowledge. When we have no way of confronting the misuse of the Bible, we are all the more vulnerable to it. It is not enough to say, “I don’t believe in the Bible.” We need to know what the Bible says, and what it really means, if it is being used against us.

Since the first reading today refers to the book of Leviticus 18:22, I want to touch briefly on that passage. The text translation usually reads, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination.” Leviticus 20:13 reads, “If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death.” Seems straightforward. Ugly, but straightforward.

From the historical-critical perspective, certain nuances become important. There were a number of social offenses that called for the punishment of death, but for different reasons. Understanding those reasons helps to clarify the point of this text.

The laws in the book of Leviticus constitute a holiness code. They were the rules that clarified the social and religious behaviors of this particular people, the Israelites, and set them apart from other peoples.

1) To engage in same-sex relations was a practice common to many Gentile groups at the time, so, the prohibition against it was to some extent one of the ways that Israelite men were to set themselves apart from Gentiles. The Canaanites, for example, engaged in many fertility rights that involved various kinds of sexual liaisons. These cult behaviors were called abominations in the book of Leviticus, because they involved idolatry, the worship of gods and goddesses other than the Hebrew god Yahweh.

The Israelites were a newly formed people, a vulnerable nomadic group. And, according to their own story, they had a weakness for foreign gods. So the rules of Leviticus were intended to keep the people's identity and boundaries clear. The sin of male-to-male sex in Leviticus was the sin of idolatry and behaving like a foreigner. In their brutal world, it constituted a kind of treason that required the elimination of the offenders.

There are other layers to the meaning of Leviticus, which have to do with purity laws, and laws governing procreative behavior. When all of them are put together, we can understand why it was perceived as threatening to these ancient peoples. But there is, again, nothing in this passage that universally condemns same-sex partnership, as we understand it, simply for its own sake.

What did Jesus say about homosexuality? Not a thing. He had something to say about divorce, of which he was quite critical. For some reason the Christian right is not coming out in droves against civil divorce in our society, a pervasive practice which, it could be argued, is more damaging to children, family, and the foundations of society than having two parents of the same gender.

Jesus gave us the great commandments—"Love your neighbor as yourself" and "Love one another as I have loved you." And "Love the one who is in the margins, the one who is scorned by society." These were his teachings.

But there are passages in the letters of the early Christian teachers Paul and Timothy which seem to make negative, if obscure, references to same-sex relations. The larger context for these passages was the confusing cultural world of the very early Christian movement. One set of issues had to do with sorting out whether or not people could be Christians without first converting to Judaism and accepting its idiosyncratic codes morality and purity.

The second set of issues concerned how this young, vulnerable movement could hold together, and how Christians were to distinguish themselves behaviorally from non-

Christians, especially with regard to the decadence of the Greco-Roman world. So, in a sense, these passages echo the same challenges addressed in Leviticus.

Paul's writing have been used to attack and condemn gay people, and yet again, the irony is that some of the most beautiful and lyrical passages in the New Testament about love and inclusion and unity were written by Paul.

It was Paul who taught that the letter of the law kills, but the larger spirit gives life. It was Paul who wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ." This passage, if received in its larger spirit, points to the final inclusion of all people who are sincere disciples.

Martin Luther King Jr. said that the arc of the Universe is long, but with our help, it bends toward Justice. The arc of biblical writing and teaching is long. It begins in ancient times, over 4,000 years ago, and transforms as it passes through the ages. It continues to arc through our time, as we read it and interpret it and bring it to bear on our world today. It is a long arc, but with our help, this scripture bends toward justice.