

## Known -- and Included

Jeremiah 1:5a; Psalm 139:13-16 8/26/12

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I'd like to begin this sermon by describing an experience I had in the third grade. My father was a career army man, and as a result our family moved a lot. Some places that we moved to were great, like Rome, Italy; some not so great, like Enterprise, a small town in southern Alabama. I was in the third grade when we moved to Alabama from Brooklyn, New York. One of the first things I did was to check out the local Woolworth's 5 & 10 cent store. It had a unique feature that had not been present in the Woolworth's in Brooklyn: two water fountains, one marked "white," and one marked "colored." I remember excitedly running up to the fountain marked "colored," expecting colored water, maybe even Kool-Aid, to come gushing out. Instead of meeting colored water at the fountain, I found myself being yanked away by a large man wearing a large badge that said "Manager." "What's the matter with you?" he yelled at me: "Don't you know that "colored" is for blacks (but that's not the word he used -- he used the "n-i-g-g-e-r" word), and "white" is for whites?" I explained that I was waiting for colored water to come out of the fountain. He looked at me like I was from another planet. And then, honestly not knowing, I asked him what the word "n-i-g-g-e-r" meant, at which point I was ushered out of the store, and told not to come back until I had learned some manners.

I share this story as a metaphor for the position that many persons of same-sex orientation find themselves in today. They -- and let me say right off the bat that I absolutely hate using the word "they." For persons who are followers of Jesus, for us, as for him, the word "they" simply does not exist as a negative label. Back to my metaphor: persons of same-sex orientation find themselves in an analogous position to blacks in the South during the era of segregation. The mantra in the south during the 50's and 60's was "separate but equal." but everyone knew that this was a lie. When my father went back to Alabama to retire from the army and begin a second career as a teacher of American history, he was assigned to an all-black high school. Unlike the all-white high schools in the city of Montgomery, the all-black high schools had dirt floors. "Separate but equal?" That slogan, I believe, is parallel to those who propose acknowledging same-sex unions, but refuse to dignify them with the name "marriage." While better than nothing, it still maintains the caste system of some -- namely heterosexuals -- being able to claim the name "marriage," while others -- namely homosexuals -- have to be content with the second-class status of "civil unions." Civil unions carry none of the more than one thousand federal benefits that real marriage brings with it, and are not transferable from state to state. Separate but equal? Hardly. But the issue of gay marriage needs its own sermon.

What I ask you to consider today is that we have an unacknowledged caste system right here in the United States of America, and that in the vast majority of places in this great country of ours, to be a person with same-sex orientation automatically places one very low on the totem pole. I first became aware of homosexuality being a

major challenge to the Christian church in 1999, when I read a book edited by Walter Wink entitled *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*. In this book is a chapter by John Cobb, who had been one of my teachers at Claremont Graduate University. In this chapter Cobb describes how his consciousness was raised by Ignacio Castuera, a Mexican-American liberation theologian, who made, for Cobb, the startling claim that gays were the most oppressed persons in our society. Cobb goes on to say in his essay: "some may question whether gays and lesbians are the most oppressed group in our society. There is serious competition for that spot." Then he makes the startling statement: "but it is clear that whereas in most other oppressions the church has given at least some support to the oppressed, in this case the church has been the leader in the oppression."

Let me run that by you one more time: ..."whereas in most other oppressions the church has given at least some support to the oppressed, in this case the church has been the leader in the oppression."

So the one place which is called to be a safe, welcoming, and affirming place for all people -- namely, the church -- has allowed itself -- with a few exceptions -- to become one of the most hate-filled and rejecting institutions toward those with minority sexual orientations on the planet. Most of this hate and rejection is based on six verses in the Bible which seem to condemn homosexual behavior. Never mind that these verses were written thousands of years ago, before the findings of modern science that there is a strong genetic component to sexual orientation, and that about 5% of the population is simply born this way. Never mind that the Bible also assumes, along with other writings of its time, that the earth is flat, a fact that persons of Christian persuasion did not have too much trouble giving up. Never mind that Jesus himself overrode all the "purity" regulations including, therefore, those against gays and emphasized compassion over religious rules which he systematically broke every chance that he got. Never mind, that God would rather die so to speak -- as God died in the person of Jesus -- than to be connected in any way with violence.

We have seen that most Christians would rather follow a few obsolete biblical texts than follow the radically new way of Jesus, a way which emphasizes inclusion rather than exclusion and affirms the inherent goodness of God's creation and of every person as part of God's good creation. Literally hundreds of books have been written debating the validity of these six verses from the Bible. It's a tug-of-war between those who want to uphold these verses and those who want to deconstruct them in the name of Jesus. Right now, most churches and denominations are stuck, unable to move to a more affirming stance on gay identity and gay marriage. The debate surrounding these verses has resulted in a stalemate. What I'd like to do this morning is to offer a theological vision which I believe achieves an end-run around these six oppressive verses, and allows us to make a valid claim that gay identity is a God-given gift. Christian theology is ultimately based on scripture. The question, then, is: are there deeper and bigger biblical insights into the nature of human identity than the six texts traditionally used to put down homosexuals and

homosexual activity? My answer to that question would be a very big "YES!" You've already heard a few of these deeper and bigger texts today.

Using the principle that what the Bible says about one person applies to us all, let us consider the prophet Jeremiah's evocative statement "before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." remember that the prophet Jeremiah is speaking for God. We don't have time to go into the fascinating implications of the word "before" as used in this text, but at the very least the use of this word implies that God knew us -- and affirmed who we were to become -- even before our parents conceived us! Now that's a pretty heavy-duty affirmation! It tells us nothing less than that in God's eternal present God gave us the gift of our identity. Not many would argue with the fact that the gift of our identity includes the gift of our sexual identity. This becomes more explicit in our reading from Psalm 139 where God is described as creating our "inmost being," as "knitting us together" in our mother's womb. In reality, today's scripture readings from Jeremiah 1 and Psalm 139 are just a few of many biblical texts celebrating the gift of ourselves and the gift of our identities as part of God's good creation. Job has the boldness to say to God: "your hands shaped me and made me. Will you now turn and destroy me?" (Job 10:8) The prophet Isaiah reminds himself and God: "still, God, you are our father. We're the clay, and you're our potter: all of us are what you made us." (Isaiah 64:8)

There are many more creation texts in the Hebrew scriptures affirming the goodness of God's creation and the goodness of ourselves including, by implication, the goodness of our sexual identities. For Christians the most radical statement of all occurs at the very beginning of the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the one who is called the Word. The Word was with God and was truly God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. And with this Word, God created all things. Nothing was made without the Word. Everything that was created received its life from him, and his life gave light to everyone." (John 1:1-4)

For me as a biblical scholar and theologian these transcendent creation texts coming to us from God's eternal present have vastly more authority than culturally determined pronouncements, such as we find in the famous text in the book of Leviticus: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they should be put to death. (Leviticus 20:13)

In western Pennsylvania, when I gave presentations affirming gay identity and gay marriage in various gatherings of the Penn West Conference of the United Church of Christ after considering these creation texts, I would always be challenged by those in opposition: "But what about the fall? Doesn't the reality of the fall settle this question once-and-for-all? Isn't homosexual orientation and activity simply part of the avalanche of human sinfulness that was unleashed with the fall?"

Good question!

Personally, I think that the creation texts that we've been considering this morning achieve an end-run around the fall originating as they do in God's eternal present, which precedes the fall and takes precedence over it. My wife, Elizabeth, however,

recently challenged me to look at what some major contemporary Christian thinkers have to say about the fall. I was surprised that I didn't really know and even more surprised when I took the trouble to find out. John Zizioulas is considered to be the major contemporary theologian of the branch of Christianity known as the orthodox tradition. I was stunned when I turned to my well-worn copy of *Communion and Otherness* and found this quote on the very first page: "There is no doubt that [the rejection of otherness] is a direct result of what in theological language we call the 'fall of man.' There is a pathology built into the very roots of our existence... and that is the *fear of the other*."

Come again?

Here was one of the finest minds in all of contemporary Christendom describing the fall not in terms of the traditional language of pride, disobedience, or even sexuality run amuck, but in terms of "fear of the other." I checked out Karl Rahner, considered to be the major Roman Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, and Jürgen Moltmann, considered to be the major living protestant theologian, and found that their understandings of the fall all converged in considering the main dynamic of the fall to be the rejection of the otherness of the other. Can you begin to see the importance of this kind of thinking for a liberated Christian understanding of our fellow human beings who happen to be gay or lesbian? Rene Girard, who is a professor at Stanford and at the Sorbonne in Paris and who works in tandem with anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists, teaches that all violence attributed to God in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is nothing more than the projection of human violence onto God. Girard locates the fall and original sin in humankind's original violence in the mechanism of scapegoating. Few groups throughout history have been subjected to more violence or the violent vehicle of scapegoating than those with same-sex orientations. In direct opposition to shallow understandings of the fall and original sin which traditionally have been used against sexual minorities -- in effect turning these doctrines into vehicles of violent scapegoating themselves -- the best contemporary approaches to the fall and original sin turn the tables, so to speak, and can be seen as attempts to affirm and to protect the otherness of the other. They challenge those who reject, mock, abuse, torture, and kill those of same-sex orientation to face up to their own violence and repent.

This may sound overdone and overblown until we remind ourselves that the suicide rate for homosexual teens is fourteen times that of heterosexual teens. Or until we run into books like *Staying the Course*, which happens to be Methodist. But such books are to be found in all major Christian denominations with the single exception of the United Church of Christ. In this book, which is endorsed by a Methodist bishop and the president of a Methodist seminary, we find the following, written by a husband-and-wife team serving in Kenya: "It [homosexuality] is always associated with cursed people. Many cultures consider it taboo for any person to deviate from normal and natural human behavior. Among the Meru of Kenya, for example, such a person would be called *uturutu*, a name also given to a goat that behaves unlike other goats, sometimes sitting down like a dog, and so on. An animal that gets itself into this behavior is labeled *uturutu* and killed to protect other animals against imitating *uturutu*. Homosexuality is therefore understood to be a deviation from

what is normal and, therefore, *uturutu*, an abomination, whether practiced by a Christian or a nonbeliever. How one acquires the behavior -- innate or learned -- is immaterial. What matters is that it is deviation... Within the family, a deviant would be considered a black sheep to be disowned and possibly stoned to death for dishonoring the family." (*Staying the Course*, 161-62)

Wow! Talk about scapegoating! Talk about violence! And this in a book written, among other things, for Christian pastors on how to deal with the problem of homosexuality in pastoral counseling situations! No wonder John Cobb (also a Methodist, by the way) writes: "It is clear that whereas in most other oppressions the church has given at least some support to the oppressed, in this case the church has been the leader in the oppression."

Years ago I remember reading a chapter in a book, unfortunately now forgotten, which stopped me in my tracks. The chapter was about the immorality of the gay population of San Francisco. I was expecting to read yet another diatribe about the depravity of gay sex. But the chapter wasn't about this at all. It totally affirmed the validity and the beauty of same-sex orientation and expression and scathingly critiqued the manipulation, the use of another as object, the promiscuity, the immaturity, and the lack of emotional and physical commitment which is so often a part of gay sex -- just as it is so often a part of heterosexual sex. In other words, it is not gayness at the level of ontology, at the foundational level of one's being that is ethically reprehensible. And it is not the act of making love between two persons of the same sex that is reproachable. What *is* indefensible is the dishonesty, objectification of the other, childishness, and selfishness which are so often a part of *any* sexual relationship, gay or hetero, or for that matter, which are so often a part of any relationship, period.

So, when Jacob sang, as the chorus of this morning's anthem, "I was put on this earth as I am; I was born with my own special blessings; I'll let them shine and not give a damn; I was put on this earth as I am!" he was and is merely mirroring the longing for acceptance and affirmation on the part of millions of persons who happen to have been born with a sexual orientation toward persons of their own sex. At the beginning of our service, when Mandy and Jacob sang the powerful words to the song "The Prayer," they echoed the yearning of millions of homosexual persons to find a safe place, to find a world without violence, and to be allowed by parents, friends, church, and country to find another soul to love. I'd say that as a church we have our work cut out for us: we're deeply into hospitality with the homeless; we're deeply into the heifer project, with its emphasis on helping those in third world countries learn to help themselves with gifts of seeds and animals. Many of us dream that we will become known as a church that is deeply into justice issues, including restorative justice for those who happen to be of minority sexual orientation.

I'd like to close this sermon by sharing with you part of the prayer-poem "I Am" by Liz Styan:

Creator God, Lord of all life,  
The great 'I Am',

You know that  
I am what I am.  
By whatever quirk of nature,  
Or product of nurture,  
I am what I am...and I am loved by you.

I did not choose to be gay/lesbian  
In some rebellious fit of rage.  
It is not some willful façade,  
Or superficial covering.  
It cannot be removed by  
Repeated scrubbing or endless repentance,  
Nor erased by persistent denial.  
No Lord,  
You know that  
I am what I am...and I am loved by you.

Amen.

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