

The Sin of Homophobia

What the bible really says

Milwaukee, 2006

I am very happy to be able to be with you, and to be invited to speak to you about issues regarding same sex love. This is my third time in a year to be in Milwaukee and I am glad to be back. I am especially glad to be invited to be a part of the remarkable witness of Kairos Commotion and the Reconciling Ministries network.

I also want to say a special word of welcome to those who come here neither to celebrate and affirm the gift to the church of same sex love among those who love the church nor to inquire about these matters but to oppose and perhaps even caricature what we do here. I am actually grateful to the representatives of the religious right since whenever they write about me or my books I notice that a few more copies of the books get sold. Of course this doesn't benefit me personally since all royalties go to fund a scholarship at The Chicago Theological Seminary where I teach. But it does mean that there are people within the religious right who are gay or have loved ones who are and who seek out resources like those books to help them to better understand themselves and the bible that forms so important a part of their and our heritage. When the religious right attacks what I say or write they let closeted gay people in their constituency know where they can go to get help and I am glad of that.

I just wish they would pay attention to the other themes and issues that I continually work on. A couple of years ago I was giving some lectures in Virginia and a well-known member of the IRD showed up. However it turned out I was speaking about the bishop's initiative on children and poverty and the importance of the church's reformation in relation to the vulnerable, the impoverished, and the violated. The IRD rep was, it seems, interested only in sex and so went sadly away.

I am of course interested in many things besides sex. I have written on prayer and liturgy, on Wesley and the Apostles creed, on the questions of poverty and of racism, on contemporary European philosophy and on the problems of living in a new age of Empire. And am at work on a book on atonement and the theology of the cross. For in all that I do I am concerned with the question of enabling the church to be more faithful to the liberating Gospel attested in the biblical texts and in our Wesleyan heritage..

But if these matters are of great importance for me why then spend so much time also on questions about what for the moment we will call homosexuality. [I say for the moment, because tomorrow I will talk about the limits of this word and about the horizons opened up by alternative ways of naming the lives and experiences of people to whom this word has been applied

But the first reason for spending time and energy on this theme is because it is here that the church is in great pain today. Perhaps no issue since slavery and racism has so divided us And because it is here that the church continues to inflict enormous pain and suffering upon many of its most vulnerable members. Many have already left the church rather than continue in a relationship that has become one of psychological battery and abuse.

Because of the way in which questions of the sin of homophobia and those of the urgent reform of the church in the light of biblical or Wesley witness to the God who is among the least of these get separated from one another I want to begin with talking about their connection. But for those who are here only to see if I say something they can quote on the subject of sex let me assure you that I will say some few things about sexuality before I am done tonight..

What I want to do is to point to some connection between the work I did for many years as consultant to the council of bishops on the theme of their initiative on children and poverty and the work I have also been doing for many years in addressing the church's sin of homophobia.

So let me begin with the question of the work of reforming the Church in relation to the one who is amongst the least of these. Although I began this work long ago it has been enriched by my experience over many years with the Council of Bishops.

The invitation to work with them in this process grew out of my own work on Wesley's commitment to the poor. This work in turn was initiated in the mid 80's when I was teaching at the Seminario Metodista de Mexico. It was there that I first had to teach a course on the sermons of Wesley...in Spanish. And it was there that I began reading the complete works of Wesley. When I was later asked to give a paper at the 8th Oxford Institute (1987) on Wesley's economics I began to realize that there was far more in Wesley concerning the commitment to the poor than had been widely recognized. The resultant study was eventually published by Abingdon Press as *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (1989). This in turn served as the theme of the

Ninth Oxford Institute (in 1992) where I was privileged to give the keynote plenary address that articulated the agenda for the work of that Institute.

As a result of a report made on that conference by Bishop Ken Carder the UMC Council of Bishops began to consider the possibility of making a study of poverty the theme of their third episcopal initiative. Characteristically Bishop Carder had already made the question of a “Partnership with the Poor” the theme of work in his own Tennessee Annual Conference and it was my good fortune to be asked by him to work with that conference in the development of that work as well as with the exploratory committee of bishops that considered the question of poverty as theme for the bishops initiative.

In 1996 the Bishops appointed a task force to work on a new Initiative on Children and Poverty and I was honored to work with them for two quadrennia as their theological and biblical consultant. The bishops committed themselves to engage in a process that had in view nothing less than the reshaping of the church in the light of God’s presence among and commitment to “the least of these.” This may, for some of them, have been a rhetorical rather than a real commitment but for those with whom it has been my privilege to work it has been a serious if often daunting goal. That more than the issuance of study papers and the holding of hearings and appointing of task forces is necessary to the reform of the church was quickly recognized. That is why the bishops extended the Initiative into a second quadrennium as they sought to make a more profound impact on the church and through the church on the devastating consequences of impoverishment on people everywhere but especially among the most vulnerable. The

second study document “Community with Children and the Poor” which the Bishops sent to the church in 2001 set out the basis for that renewed emphasis.

At the end of the second quadrennium of this emphasis the bishops sent out another study document again calling the church to faithfulness in the living out of what Dr. King had called the beloved community. Alas I cannot say that the church has been reformed. But many seeds have been sowed that in God’s good time will continue to bear fruit in the US and in other parts of the world.

One of the lessons of Latin American Liberation Theology is that the work of theology is not and cannot be done in a vacuum. It does not sit enthroned on air above the world of location, commitment, and resistance. Nor can theology simply spell out what ought to be done and await the work of implementation to be done elsewhere. Rather there is a far more complex relationship between intellectual labor and concrete engagement in transformational activity. The work of engagement in a process of transformation provokes questions and insights not available to “pure thought”. And these questions and insights in turn provoke new experiments in the movement of change. And so on.

Of course for Wesleyans there is as well another related model: that provided by Wesley. For Wesley did not seek to develop a theological system but rather to transform society, church and personal life. It was in the course of this “practical labor” of reform and renewal and transformation that his theological ideas are forged, tested, sometimes discarded and newly articulated.

Although I remain in most respects a systematic theologian I have in the course of the work with this initiative learned anew that theological systems seldom change things

but that the work of change is itself not only messy and often frustrating but also necessary to the work of theology that is or seeks to be a theology for the church, a theology that hopes to be of some real service to the church of which it is also necessarily critical. For theology as a task and a vocation derives from the lived commitments of faith and from the embodiment of those commitments in living communities and in movements of transformation.

In the course of this work I have grown increasingly convicted that the church, perhaps especially the UMC, can only be or become a serviceable instrument of God's work in the world if it resolutely turns to a commitment to the vulnerable and the violated, to the impoverished and marginalized. To the extent to which it is preoccupied "elsewhere" it becomes only the religious expression of a world constituted by division and hostility. Yet who can doubt that the church, especially the mainline Protestant church in North America, perhaps even especially the UMC, has become captive to forces and pressures of worldly success that make it seem too often only a religious form of worldliness?

Of course it is the case that there have always been those within a largely middle class institution who have engaged in partnership with and commitment to the impoverished. They have not waited for there to be a Bishops' Initiative to turn away from the enticements of middle class conformity and institutional success to make this commitment a life choice. Everywhere I have gone in the church I have found already long at work those whose lives and ministries are what Wesley would call "monuments of mercy"; and I am constantly astonished and humbled by the clarity and power of their witness. If it were not for them and their witness I do not know how it would be possible

to suppose that the church can really be faithful, that the gospel is not just a good idea but a dynamic power. It is they who sow the seed of renewal in the church, if it is to be renewed.

Yet their life, their ministry, their witness is often marginal to the life and work of the church: something done in a corner, on the side, while the real work is done in churches and institutions that have no relation with, or interest in, the devastating impoverishment that takes so many lives and disfigures the image of God.

Only when there is something like this Initiative do conferences or agencies or congregations point to these barely tolerated ministries as evidence that the church also does some good there. But what seems most difficult for the church to understand is that this commitment to and partnership with the vulnerable and impoverished is not simply a good work to be added to the many worthy and important programs that consume the life of congregations and clergy but that it is the heart, the center, of what the church is and must become if it is to be in any way the church of Jesus Christ.

In the work of persuading the church that it must take seriously the state of the impoverished if it is to effectively witness to the mission and ministry of Jesus the “people called Methodists” have a significant resource in the work of Wesley. All too often however the domain of Wesley studies has been co-opted into either irrelevance by an historicizing approach that seeks to keep the study of Wesley from addressing the life of the church or by ideological attempts to make Wesley studies the privileged domain of so-called evangelical and church growth movements. Since I have for some years been engaged in the study of Wesley I want to say something about the “use” of the study of Wesley.

In a world riven by a yawning divide between the impoverished and the prosperous - a chasm armed by fear and arrogance on the one side and by resentment and bitterness on the other - the Wesleyan heritage is urgently needed today; and not just by Methodists.

For the prosperous desperately need to hear that their salvation depends not only upon their relationship to God but also upon their relationship to the poor; that all they have is entrusted to them by God for distribution to the destitute; that intimate acquaintance with the impoverished is a regular means of grace as indispensable as the Eucharist for growth in grace and holiness.

The churches urgently need to hear that the message of the gospel drives us out of the safety of all sanctuaries and into the streets and alleys where fear and hopelessness stalk the vulnerable; away from institutional self-preoccupation into a risk filled movement of transforming power.

The world and its various nations must be confronted with the truth that:

No law can justify oppression,

No government can legitimate rapacious exploitation,

No economy or economic necessity can excuse cruel impoverishment or callous indifference to the cry of the vulnerable and the violated.

The impoverished and violated majority of the earth's population needs to hear and to see dramatically enacted the love of God directed especially to them; to the dawning of a truly human community of justice and generosity in which the Spirit of God

is at work to lift them from the shadow of despair and death and empower them to be transformed and transforming agents of the divine love.

And the world, buffeted by manic depressive bouts of false optimism and panicked pessimism must know that God intends the healing of all wounds, the restoration of the whole of creation; and that it is perilous indeed to defy the call and claim, the decision and promise of God.

These are only some of the things that one can learn today from the study of Wesley, and from the attempt to implement truly Wesleyan values rather than those that are commonly and erroneously attributed to Wesley by those who would have us close our eyes to the arrogance and avarice of economic and political systems.

As the challenge of reforming the church in its relation to the impoverished has slowly come to the fore in some circles of the church, mainline denominations (including the UMC) have been increasingly divided by another seemingly unrelated issue; the question of the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons into the life of the church. It is in fact this struggle that has grabbed all the headlines while the question of overcoming class divisions has largely slipped “below the radar” of public consciousness.

Heretofore much of my work in the UMC and indeed in international Methodism has focussed upon the attempt to call the church away from its preferential option for the middle class and toward a more Wesleyan and scriptural preferential option for the poor. But in other contexts I have also been engaged in the development of a gay and lesbian affirmative project which also has implications for the life of the church, and I believe for

the possibility of faithfulness in the church. To that end I began developing a gay studies program at CTS 15 years ago and teach most years in the area of gay and lesbian studies at my seminary, something so far not possible in United Methodist related seminaries in the United States. [And now at CTS we not only have courses that enable Masters and Doctoral level students to concentrate their studies on addressing these issues, we also now have the LGBTQ Cneter for developing research that aims at the transformation of church and society in compliance with our long standing institutional commitment to combat homophobia along with racism, sexism and anti-semitism. This center is now also developing resources to address homophobia not only in the US but in many other countries of the world.

How does homophobia affect the church? I do not believe that this is a side issue. I believe that what is at stake here is the very heart of the church's identity. For I believe that it is increasingly apparent that what is at stake here is the authenticity of the church's witness, the truthfulness of its proclamation, indeed, the identity of its Lord. For in the conflicted times in which we live I do not believe that it is an exaggeration to say that here it has come to a question of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Here it is decided whether we follow Jesus of Nazareth as our only Lord or have instead placed upon his altar the icons of mammon and Bael, of Moloch and Beelzebub. That is to say, I do not believe that what is at stake here is simply good mannered civility or liberal tolerance of different lifestyles. What is at stake is the truth of the Gospel and the Lordship of Christ. The effect of homophobia in the church is to render the church apostate.

Let me indicate to you some of the ways in which the church's homophobia is destructive of the church itself.

1. One of the courses I taught at CTS is on homosexuality and the church. In a review of the study documents and position papers put forward by dozens of denominations it becomes clear that what alarms the churches about homosexuality is the middle syllable. We are terrified of speaking the truth about sex. The only advice the churches have been able or willing to offer people concerned about the inevitable dilemmas concerning sexuality is “just say no”. And if this advice seems irrelevant to untold millions then the church has nothing more whatever to say: nothing about values to be realized in sexual relationships, nothing about dangers in sexual intimacy. Nothing at all beyond the rote, routine and totally irrelevant mantra: no sex outside of marriage. One of the many reasons why young people leave the church is that the church has nothing to say to them that is either true or challenging in this area.

Now as far as I can see there are two reasons for this paralysis. The first is that the churches, since the time of Constantine, have been reluctant to speak a biblical word about sin. For in the Bible sin has to do with oppression and injustice; with greed and indifference to the poor. But we are terrified of offending our patrons in society with a meaningful or biblical doctrine of sin. So we deflect all talk of sin into the sphere of intimacy. And make sexuality the scapegoat for human moral failure. By this means for over a millennium the church has succeeded in making people feel guilty and in need of forgiveness for things that are minor, (just recall the late nineteenth century panic about masturbation) while at the same time dispensing absolution for unconfessed sins of injustice and greed. If ever we were to speak the truth, the biblical truth, about sin we would be forced to expose this whole shell game by which the church has inserted itself

into people's bedrooms to cover its own complicity with the principalities and powers that destroy the wretched of the earth and indeed the earth itself. This distortion of the doctrine of sin shows that we worship the mammon of worldly success rather than the God of the prophets or the Abba of Jesus.

There is another reason that we are afraid to speak honestly about sex. It is not only that our dishonesty about sex is the way we avoid the biblical truth about sin, it is also because we have made a fateful and fatal alliance in the church between the gospel and what are today called "marriage and family values". I am astonished at the way in which the specter of homosexuality so regularly and predictably causes church people to invoke the sanctity of marriage and family. What is particularly astonishing about this is that Jesus is remembered in every gospel as opening an assault upon the institution of the family. When his own family comes to him he disowns them and says that his only family, his only mother and brother and sister are the ones who do the will of God, who are committed to the values of the reign of God. And when he speaks of the requirements of discipleship he even says: any one who does not hate mother and brother and sister and spouse and child is not worthy of me and the reign of God. In passage after passage of the gospels Jesus makes clear that the gospel is in irreconcilable conflict with so-called family values. Yet we have decided in our churchly wisdom that these values are somehow absolute. This is the way that we have tried to persuade society that we play the indispensable function of insuring the stability of its most basic institution. Thus we honor the Bael of social stability rather than the one who comes to make all things new.

And the human price for this is ghastly. For it has meant that the church has muzzled itself. We are unable to expose the family as a scene of violence and violation.

Domestic violence, abuse and incest continue unabated, unexposed, unacknowledged in our churches because we have decided that we must at all costs support the institution of the family even if this means we must ignore the teaching of Jesus and the cries of the victims.

Now what I have been describing is an impossible situation. On the one hand the church has determined to reduce talk of sin to talk of sex. Yet where sex really does involve sin in the abuse of the weak and the defenseless, the church is silent. What is going on here? An important, indeed essential part of this devil's bargain made by the church is homophobia. By scapegoating gay and lesbian and bisexual people the church perpetuates the myth that sex is sin while making sure that it does not have to question family values. Homophobia has become the alibi for our confusion about sexuality and our complicity in the injustices perpetuated by the institution of the family.

2. I have already suggested something of the human cost for this complicity. But there is another dimension of this human cost that ought to be mentioned. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is one of the most important contributors today to an understanding of homophobia. In a collection of essays called *Tendencies*, she begins by indicating why she and others have undertaken the work of antihomophobic intellectual labor. The reason she cites is chillingly simple. It is the incidence of adolescent suicide. For a disproportionate number of teenage suicides in our society are the product of internalized homophobia; gay and lesbian and bi-sexual teens get the message that they are freaks with no place in the world. Adolescent sexuality is scary enough in a world in which there is constant sexual stimulation on the one hand and an empty "just say no" slogan

from church and parents on the other. It is a wilderness in which there is no moral compass. But for the gay or lesbian adolescent it is far worse. They are actively prevented from knowing that there are other people like themselves who can be companions on the perilous journey to adulthood. They are actively prevented from even suspecting that there are people who have found, against all odds, ways of making sense of life and love under the hegemony of homophobia in society and the church. They are constantly told that the only ways to human self respect are the ways that are closed to them by the desires that they did not invent, that the ways they seek to find friendship and consolation and intimacy are unthinkable, unspeakable. That they are forever cut off from God and from community by the shape of their needs and desires. In millions of families (Church families) they receive the unmistakable impression that it would be better to be dead than to be gay. And multitudes of gay and lesbian teens acquiesce in this horrifying message in which the church is complicit: and they take their lives.

Who ever told them that sexuality is God's way of helping us find one another, need one another, rely upon one another? Who told them that their desire for intimacy with a person of their own sex was a precious gift to be celebrated and understood and shaped toward relationships of respect and trust and loyalty? Have they heard this in their society, their community, their home? They have for sure not heard it in church.

Who can calculate the cost of the church's homophobia? Everytime someone or some commission in the church suggests that we speak truthfully and redemptively about sexuality and especially about homosexuality legions arise within the church to cry that we are abandoning the gospel. They seek to silence any voice of compassion and reason,

of gospel truth. And if the price of this silence is the gruesome sacrifice of our children on the all consuming altar of Moloch, then so be it.

Bible

You are, I hope, all aware of the way in which a homophobic reading of Scripture does violence to God's Holy Word. Aware of the way in which the same exegetical tricks that were previously employed to justify slavery and then segregation and even still are used to deny to women full equality in Church and society - that these same tactics are used today to license homophobia. The homophobic reading of scripture makes the Bible into the rule book of a petty tyrant, transforms the wine of the gospel into the poisonous wastewater of legalistic and vindictive condemnation.

One of the most blatant examples of this exegetical perversion has to do with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. For centuries this story has been turned on its head in order to be made synonymous in Western secular and religious discourse with deeds of intimacy between persons of the same sex. Yet the story tells of the injustice of Sodom that descends to the level of seeking to commit mass gang rape upon vulnerable strangers thereby violating the bedrock of biblical ethics: the just and generous treatment of the alien. For the alien or sojourner or immigrant worker (all are proper translations of the biblical category) is the most vulnerable member of society - being without the protection of clan and tribal ties. Hence Israel was regularly warned to treat the immigrant with special care for Israel too was an alien in the land of Egypt.

But from the time of the Roman emperor Justinian this text has been willfully distorted into a pretext for the violation of vulnerable members of society. And from the

Middle Ages through the Nazi terror it has been used to license crimes against (gay) humanity.

This arbitrary perversion of the biblical text has severe consequences not only for gay people but also for the church's ability to hear and heed the Word of God. Some years ago the citizens of California voted to commit State sponsored Sodomy by depriving even the children of (undocumented) immigrants of the most basic human services (Proposition 187). But how were they to suspect the gravity of their crime against humanity and God? For the Church through its perversion of the biblical text has deprived itself of the possibility of uttering a clear biblical word of judgment. By identifying sodomy with homosexual acts the church has made itself a collaborator in the biblical crime of sodomy: the unjust treatment of vulnerable immigrants.

Beyond this, a further part of the terrible price paid for this homophobic distortion of scripture is that people of goodwill learn to expect from God's Holy Word not the liberating word of the Gospel but only the mean spirited moralizing that hates life and despises love.

This is surely a part of the price of homophobia, that the gospel is silenced in our churches.

The Distortion of the Bible:

In addition to the question of the story of Sodom there are a few other texts that are used by folk to oppose the affirmation of same sex love. The ads said I would say something about these texts, so I will. But I should protest against spending much time worrying about them. As I have indicated in my books there is so much more in the

Bible that is relevant for thinking about same sex love that these arguments never even touch on. Instead we seem to go round and round circling these same worn scraps of tattered verses as if this were all the Bible had to say. And these discussions seldom prove very fruitful. Moreover these arguments regularly turn out to be arguments about accepting gay people into the church. This is, I believe an inherently degrading discussion.

It is not a question of the more or less grudging acceptance or toleration of gay people: it is a question of the repentance of the church for the damage it has done to so many people, and for the damage it does to the word of God.

It is not a question of toleration; it is a question of astonished gratitude that despite so much abusive treatment there are multitudes of gay and lesbian people and their friends who by God's grace are still willing to give the church a chance. It is only a miracle of divine grace that there are still those in our midst who in spite of everything still trust God, still commit themselves to follow Jesus; despite all the church has done and continues to do to turn them away.

Many, for the sake of their own health find that they must leave an abusive relation to the church that continues to batter them and to dash their hopes of a community of justice and mercy. But by a miracle there are still those who are granted the grace to remain. May their courage be the seed of faith that transforms the church from an agent of hostility into a community of grateful celebration.

A few words then, about a very few words in the Bible.

Leviticus.18:22; 20:13

It is astonishing that there are actually people who like to, if not quote then at least, refer to Leviticus. Of course there is the regular problem that people quote without reading and so rip the bible to shreds in their quest for proof texts.

Leviticus is a strange and wonderful book. I once did a series of bible studies for reconciling movement called Leviticus for lovers. The book is dedicated to matters of cult and ritual, hence its name derived from the levitical priesthood. Much of the book is concerned with temple decoration and with the vestments worn by the priests. Now, how bad can a book be that is preoccupied with swank interior decoration and fabulous outfits.

There is another part of Leviticus that is concerned with economic ethics: for example the cancellation of all debts in the year of jubilee, and the return of all farmland to its original owners. The friends of banks and industrial agribusiness somehow seem never to quote any of these texts; perhaps they never read them. Nor do they seem interested in the claim of Leviticus that undocumented immigrants are to be welcomed rather than harassed or imprisoned, nor the claim that all belongs to God and is to be placed in service of the poor.

Now within this context we get a couple of pages that seem to deal with sexual kinds of things. Of course this is all anyone seems to be interested in.

I have dealt with these texts in my book on Jacob's wound so I won't go over all that here. I will only remark that of the several legal codes in the literature of ancient Israel, the OT, only one such code makes any reference to the question of some sort of sex between males. If it weren't for this code you would have to suppose that same sex sex was not prohibited in Israel. Moreover this is, as any scholar knows, the latest or most recent law code of Israel, the one that was written well after the Babylonian exile.

So perhaps for most of its history Israel did not have any negative reference to same sex relations at all. And this will help us to understand how older narrative material in the OT can deal unblushingly with same sex eroticism.

The second of these Levitical texts calls for the death penalty for the sort of behavior its referring to. Oddly Jews have never in all their recorded history taken this literally. Only Christians have. Of course it took a long time for this to happen. Only after about 1500 years could Christians really think that this code might be literally applied by Christians to other Christians.

That Christians take this text literally is odd because this book is the one that has the most important place for the education of young Jewish males. It's the text you memorize before bar mitzvah. Yet today reform Jews and conservative Jews suppose that whatever the texts may mean they should not be taken to apply to contemporary gay and lesbian people. They have historical interest but are by no means to be applied as legally binding today. That is to say that about the only people who think these texts can be applied to contemporary gay and lesbian people are Christians: those who say they are into gospel rather than law.

There is a bitter irony here. One of my students, a woman who came from a conservative Christian denomination found that Christians were hostile to her. But that Jews were not. She converted to Judaism to discover a religion of grace and away from Christianity that had become a religion of blind and unthinking law. Perhaps we should learn from our Jewish neighbors what it means to follow the Jew from Nazareth.

I have spoken of OT texts. What of the NT. Now even the most ardent homophobes have been hard pressed to find anything in the Gospels to justify their antipathy to lesbian and gay people. There is the legend of the book published that was titled what Jesus says about homosexuality. You open the book and the pages are blank. I'll suggest a different way of reading in a moment. But the "clobber passages in the NT are all attributed to Paul.

In the NT we have very little to go on: a word or two in 1 Corinthians, a word in 1 Timothy and a couple of verses in Paul's letter to the Romans.

What about them. Let's take the words first: One is *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians 6:9. It is a term that elsewhere in the NT (Matthew 11:8) means luxurious and refers to the clothes worn by the rich and powerful, in contrast to the simple attire worn by John and probably Jesus and his disciples. And that is precisely how the word was commonly understood in the early centuries of Christianity. A critique of the luxury of the rich and powerful somehow gets transformed into a word that is used to attack the vulnerable young males who do not conform to the macho ways of masculine arrogance.

The other word, used by Paul (1 Corinthians 6:9) and by the writer of 1 Timothy (1:9-10), is *arsenokoitai*. The word looks like a combination of the word for bed or bedding and the word for male. It is used very rarely and so is very hard to be sure what it means when it appears in a list. But in fact it is used again in a second century text not in a list but in a narrative type discussion of the crimes of the gods. And what is the crime: kidnapping and rape. Since in the Greco-Roman world male type sex was regularly understood precisely on the model of forcible rape which was the paradigm of

macho sex it seems likely this is what the word meant for Paul. In the case of 1 Timothy this is quite clear since the list in which it appears is a list of violent crime: not just murder but murder of parents, not just theft but stealing human beings for the slave trade and so on.

Thus for Paul to suppose that the luxury and violence of the powerful should exclude them from the reign of God seems to be absolutely clear and persuasive. It also has the advantage of helping us to see clear continuity between the teaching of Paul and that of Jesus. Of course if we want to make friends of the rich and powerful then we will want to tone down the bible and deflect attention away from their sins, even if the price we pay is to make vulnerable members of the community suffer in their place.

That then leaves Romans 1 which is an indictment of Roman imperial civilization; a society that as Paul says unjustly imprisons the truth, a society of injustice to which he contrasts the justice of God. Of course you would never guess that Paul is concerned with true justice in opposition to the injustice of the powerful since imperial translators have been careful to translate the simple words for justice and injustice in Greek into words like righteousness, unrighteousness and wickedness to help you to think of ordinary sinners rather than the criminal behavior of the rich and powerful. Whose interest does such a mistranslation serve I wonder?

Good to remind ourselves of Paul's indictment: "They were filled with every kind of injustice, evil covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips (maligners slanderers, God-haters, insolent arrogant inventors

of evil rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless ruthless. They know the divine decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, yet they not only do them but applaud others who do them. “

Now who is Paul referring to here and what does it mean that they are under sentence of death?

If you were to bother to read the descriptions of Roman high society written by Roman historians like Tacitus or Dio Cassius or Suetonius you would find almost a word for word description of the dictatorship of emperors like Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and so on.

In these descriptions women also play a part for the imperial women are described as acting against nature as the assassins of husbands and fathers, and even sons, descriptions of them usurping the so-called natural place of men as the ones who rule emperors like Nero and Tiberius or Claudius, using sex to play power games even in public. So when Paul says they women are given to acting against nature any person in the empire would know exactly who he was talking about. And when he speaks of the men and their presumed sexual practices those who know of Julius Caesar described as every woman's husbands and every man's wife, or Caligula who lived out rape fantasies with extreme gusto or Nero who publicly married a beefy slave as well as one who looked as much as possible like the wife he had murdered...well the list goes on. Neither Paul nor the pagans who denounced the extreme sexual cruelty of the emperors are concerned with sexual relations between ordinary people of consent and mutuality. They denounce those who use their power as a cover for rape; they are the ones who also bear on their bodies the punishment for their crimes: think of Caligula who was stabbed with a

sword thrust through the genitals by a young soldier whom he had raped, after raping his wife.

Yet by some strange magic Paul's indictment of Roman elites, the very ones in whose name the messiah of God had been executed as a criminal subversive of Roman order, this indictment has been magically transformed into a way to stigmatize those ordinary and vulnerable people who seek and find love in the arms of those who happen to be of the same gender.

Perhaps now you begin to see how I can suppose that the church's preoccupation with homosexuality has served as a way of deflecting attention away from what Jesus in Matthew calls the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy; that the condemnation of homosexuality is something that serves the interests of those who curry favor with the rich and powerful, that it prevents us from noticing that it is avarice and arrogance and violence that the Bible condemns as sin. That love is not a crime but the only possible means of fulfilling what is essential about law, the only means of enacting justice pleasing to God, that justice without which none shall see God.

What the Bible really says

But are these poor scraps, so long chewed over in our debates really all the Bible says about same sex love? Not at all. If the Bible is read without the blinders of homophobia we find not a couple of verses but literally dozens of narratives and

teachings that presuppose a positive appreciation of the astonishing variety of human loves including same sex love.

One of my most recent books deals with what is traditionally called the OT but which I refer to as the literature of ancient Israel. This literature, as any schoolboy (and perhaps school girl), knows is characterized by an astonishing frankness about human sexuality. That is one reason it has been the subject of Hollywood blockbuster movies: Samson and Delilah David and Bathsheba and so on. And a number of stories too lurid even for Hollywood: Lot and his daughters or the Levites concubine and so on.

It should not really come as a surprise to discover that a literature this open to sexual life also has remarkable stories of same sex love.

There are some that it has been very hard for people to avoid: David and Jonathan for example or Ruth and Naomi. Even these are seldom actually read as narratives of same sex eroticism however. We seldom notice the gripping love triangle between David and Saul and Jonathan: the way Saul and Jonathan compete for the love of David whose beauty is remarked upon over and again in the story; of Saul's jealous rage when he supposes that Jonathan has supplanted Saul as the lover of this lovely boy-toy; and David's refusal to take the life of the man who first loved him even when that man tries over and again to assassinate him.

Or the story of Ruth and Naomi, the first lesbian romance in Western literature, Indeed the words of love between Ruth and Naomi often appear in liturgies to celebrate the marriage of persons of the opposite sex: entreat me not to leave you, your people shall be my people...". It is the story of two women whose love for one another leads them to take great risks in a patriarchal world and to seduce old Boaz. The village women know

what is going on for when a son is born they say not: Ruth has given a son to Boaz, but Ruth has given a son to Naomi. Perhaps they should remind us of the women who today conspire together to have and raise children in spite of the rules of homophobia and heterosexism.

There is really too much in this great body of texts to even touch upon here. In the imagination of the prophets even God gets into the act: dressing up a male Israel as a female and marrying him. Finding him to be faithless because he is attracted to the more beautiful males of the Syrian or Babylonian empire: dashing cavalry officers and wealthy merchants instead of the rustic desert god of Israel but then after attacking Israel in jealous rage God relents and invites this transvestite lover to return to a now gentler and kinder lover. But, we can hardly fail to notice, one of the 'same gender'.

Of course I am not saying that God is literally a husband to Israel whether jealous or not. Anymore than I am saying that Israel is literally a male in drag whether faithful to his old (male) lover or not. I am simply noticing that the prophets of Israel are so little bothered by same sex love or by transgendered people that they can quite easily and naturally use this as a way of describing God's love for his people. They seem not to think that male lovers should be stoned but that they ought to be faithful to and forgiving of one another. Like YHWH and Israel ought to be.

With this sort of background it is not surprising that the Gospels seem to have no difficulty representing Jesus as also accepting of same sex love; In Matthew Jesus is indeed descended from prostitutes and adulteresses, not therefore one to be greatly

troubled by sexual irregularity. He even says to the religious leaders that prostitutes are going onto heavens domain ahead of them.

It should not be too astonishing then that Matthew can depict Jesus acceptance of a centurion who comes to a Jesus that he seems to imagine is a powerful Jewish wizard in league with what we might call the darkside of the force, comes to this Jesus because of the centurions reckless love for a lad, whom he names with the standard word in Greek for boyfriend. Jesus doesn't say: wait a minute: your love for your boyfriend is irregular. Instead Jesus says I've never seen such faith. Or maybe we should say; such faithfulness. And, in keeping with the way faith is used in Mark and Matthew we should even speak of the boldness or courage of one who desires wholeness for his beloved more than he cares for his reputation.

To those who worry about the way same sex love undermines marriage and family values we have only to notice that Jesus is far more dangerous to the institution of the family than any number of homosexual liaisons. After all in Luke Jesus says if you don't hate mother and father wife and so on you can't be my follower.

And for those who worry about same sex love scrambling gender roles we have only to recall Jesus stripping naked to perform the service that elsewhere in biblical literature is only done by women: washing the feet of his companions. Or his saying in Matthew about despised eunuchs as a model for discipleship.

Now some people say that my book claims that Jesus was himself ‘gay’ I don’t. Terms like homosexual or gay don’t work very well to describe contemporary life and experience which is why the terms themselves keep changing. Still less do they work well to describe cultures so radically different from our own as those of ancient Israel or the Greco-Roman world of the first century.

What I do notice however is that the Gospel of John, which is in many ways the most outrageous of the Gospels, doesn’t hesitate to depict Jesus as the lover of another man: the man Jesus loved. It does not hesitate to depict this relationship as one characterized by physical intimacy: lying in his lap or on his chest: a posture that in all depictions of the Greco-Roman world of men eating and drinking together is always the signal that they are physically intimate; that they are, as we might say, “lovers”.

I am not claiming that I know on this basis whether Jesus and the man he loved had sex, either in reality or in the imagination of the author of the 4th Gospel. I am simply pointing out what the text itself makes clear: that of all those whom Jesus loved with intimate and sacrificial love there was one man who in a special sense marked by physical intimacy was known as the man Jesus loved. I will come back to this in another lecture.

Some imagine that I therefore think Jesus was a sinner. No. But the sinlessness of Jesus isn’t found by counting up any number of laws and rules and seeing if Jesus measured up. Those who did that were the ones who concluded not only that Jesus was a sinner but one who deserved death. In fact they thought or claimed that in was in league with Satan. The sinlessness of Jesus means that his loyalty to God was such that he was

unswervingly committed to God's cause of the reign of God in spite of the verdict of the religious that he was the chief of sinners and of the verdict of defenders of imperial law and order that he was a subversive criminal. God shows him to be innocent as Paul says by his resurrection from the dead.

So no I don't conclude that Jesus was a sinner. But I do conclude that Homophobia is a sin. Far from denying the divinity of Christ, I insist upon it. And like the theologians of the early church I insist that this very divinity – true god of true God, becomes truly human, of the same flesh as we are including the capacity and longing for the comforts of sexual intimacy of love and loyalty. And those who today deny this have an argument not with me but with the ancient creeds of the universal and orthodox church.

Conclude:

I indicated at the beginning my view that these challenges of overcoming homophobia and of overcoming the preferential option for the middle class are deeply related struggles. I want in conclusion to review how this is true.

1. In the first place both movements have in common that they take the side of the despised, the forgotten, the vulnerable and the violated. In this they seek to follow the one who made it his business to reach out to those excluded by the religious and respectable establishment of his day.

2. Second both struggles confront the complacent self-preoccupation of the mainline churches in their alliance with social and cultural respectability.

3. Both seek to expose the hidden violence of social structures of economic exploitation and familist complicity in domestic abuse.

4. In confronting this violence we discover that these structures are deeply related. For the family is the place where children are socialized into heterosexist institutions; family is also the place where they imbibe the values of social and economic upward mobility and learn to despise those who are “outside” or “left behind”. It is perhaps no accident that the Jesus movement which took the side of the outsiders and outcasts also engaged in a radical critique of the institution of the family.

5. Both struggles as well require of us a serious re-engagement with the Bible, one that moves beyond simply quoting a verse or two and actually seeks to read and study and reflect with the goal of encountering there a living word that addresses and confronts our individual and corporate lives and enables our transformative engagement with the world about us.

6. Finally, as we have seen, the focus on marriage and family values has been accompanied by a focussing of the doctrine of sin on questions of sexual transgression thereby rendering us incapable of recovering a biblical emphasis on sin as injustice, and especially on sin as the violation of the lives of the impoverished, and vulnerable and violated.

In one sense these struggles belong to what is sometimes called social ethics. But in both cases what is finally at stake is the identity of Christ, the apostolicity of the church, the biblical themes of human complicity in evil and our hope of universal

transformation. These are the standard themes also of systematic or doctrinal theology. But they take on new life and pertinence when related to the concrete struggle for the reform of the church.

Nor is this struggle for the reform of the church to be permitted to become an inward self-preoccupation. For these struggles aim at a worldly witness to the in breaking of the divine reign that entails confrontation with massive social structures and offers hope to the world's most vulnerable people. In this way the church may witness more convincingly to the vulnerable and the violated the good news of the coming of the divine reign of justice, generosity and joy. (8962)

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