

THE BIBLE & HOMOSEXUALITY
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“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your mind... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
- Jesus of Nazareth

Just outside Laramie, Wyoming, shortly after midnight on October 7, 1998, two men at a local bar pretended to be gay and offered a University of Wyoming student and gay man, named Matthew Shepard a ride. The two men then robbed and tortured Shepard, tied him to a remote fence in a rural area and left him to die. His death brought national attention to hate crimes against gays and lesbians, and the need for specific legislation to prevent it. But his death also brought national attention to a man named Fred Phelps.

Fred Phelps is the pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, a congregation of approximately 100 members, nearly all the family of Phelps. Phelps founded the church on the belief that nearly every tragedy in the world stems from homosexuality and society's increasing acceptance of the “homosexual agenda.” Phelps and his family first gained notoriety when they attended Matthew Shepard’s funeral, protesting with signs that read, “God Hates Fags” and “Matt in Hell.”

If Phelps and his tiny congregation were the bulk of such hatred, we would have little to be concerned with. But unfortunately, the religious influence of hate towards gays, lesbians and bisexuals is far more widespread. While researching her novel, *The Drowning of Stephen Jones*, based on the true story of a young gay man who was tossed from a bridge to his death, author Bette Green interviewed hundreds of young men in prison for various crimes against gays and lesbians. She reported that few of the men expressed any regrets about their crimes and a good number of them claimed that their

actions were justified by their religious faith. One young man she interviewed told her specifically that his pastor said that homosexuals represented Satan.

Today, we explore the Bible and its effect on people who love someone of the same gender. The connection between the Bible and homosexuality seems to have special importance in our society because of the continued, widespread religious acceptance of discrimination against gays, lesbians and bisexuals. It is this very public prejudice that makes this topic seem so important to address.

In addressing the Bible, Unitarian Universalists value the practice of bringing our hearts *and* minds to the text. We recognize as with all sacred scriptures that the Bible was written by people, most likely men, and blends both great spiritual and ethical wisdom along with cultural holdovers of the time. We consider it a religious act to bring our consciences to bear on what we accept as true and what we reject as false, even to that which some consider sacrosanct, such as the Bible.

Also, as Unitarian Universalists, we have a long history of standing for the respect and equality of gays, lesbians and bisexuals. In 1958, a minister in our religious tradition performed the very first ceremony of union in the United States. In 1969, the first openly gay minister “came out” while serving one of our congregations. In 1970, our denomination publicly called for an end to the widespread discrimination of gay, lesbian and bisexual people. In 1984, we actively encouraged our clergy to perform ceremonies of union for same-gender couples. In 1996, we called for the legalization of same-sex marriage. In 2004, seven of the fourteen plaintiffs in the Massachusetts case that declared discrimination against same-gender couples a violation of the state constitution were Unitarian Universalists. And we continue to remain active in the fight for equality. While some would have us believe that there is only one religious position

on homosexuality, we, along with several other religious faiths, have represented to our nation that there is another. John Buehrens, former President of our denomination, expressed our values well when he said, “We believe that homophobia is the sin, not homosexuality.”

I’d like to explore ways the Bible has been used to harm and also ways the Bible can be used to help gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Perhaps surprisingly, there are only a few passages in the Bible that actually address this issue, or have been claimed to address this issue, at all – the Creation story, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Holiness Code of Leviticus, and three quotes from Paul in 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Romans.

In the creation stories of the Bible, there actually being two if you read the text closely, God creates male and female, Adam and Eve. Perhaps you’ve heard the argument, “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” People use the creation of man and woman to declare that homosexuality was not in God’s plan. But, of course, this is an argument without merit. Nowhere does the Bible’s creation story say anything against homosexuality, only that man and woman were created. And that’s all you need to say to counter this argument.

In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, some claim that the cities were destroyed because of sexual perversions and homosexual behavior. But when you read the story, the reason for the destruction of the city is not made clear, other than God has heard an outcry. God condemns the city due to this outcry but sends two angels disguised as strangers to go into Sodom to seek out any just people. Lot, a resident of Sodom, meets these angels, inviting them into his home and caring for them. However, the men of the town all gather and surround Lot’s home, calling on Lot to bring out the two strangers,

so that they may “know” them. This verb, “to know” in Hebrew appears 943 times in the Old Testament, and only ten times is it used with sexual meaning and not once in a homosexual context. Even if the intended meaning is sexual, this sin seems more like rape than homosexuality. Not to mention, God has already condemned the town for other reasons. In the book of Ezekiel, it says that Sodom was destroyed because the people were cruel to the needy and the poor. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus seems to suggest that they were inhospitable to strangers, a grave sin in a desert culture. Regardless of the sin or sins, nowhere does this text or any text spell out homosexuality as the reason for this town’s destruction.

With the Holiness Codes of Leviticus, the condemnation of homosexuality gets a little more direct. In Leviticus, chapter 18, it says, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” Leviticus, chapter 20 reads, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.”

The ancient Jewish people were very concerned with ritual purity, in ways that have little relevance to our contemporary lives. Much of the laws of Leviticus detail not what they considered right and wrong but what was clean and unclean. The word abomination was consistently used not to describe evil acts, but ritually impure ones. Abomination is used 6 times in the book of Leviticus and 4 of those refer to issues with food, including not eating vultures, ravens, and bats.

Of course, the more obvious argument against the Holiness Code is that there is so little if anything that we follow today, why should we follow the laws about homosexuality? Perhaps you’ve read the famous letter, circulating on the internet and supposedly written to Dr. Laura Schlesinger of radio fame.

The letter begins by thanking Dr. Laura for her clear Biblical stance against homosexuality. It then proceeds to ask advice about other statements in the Bible, like how to deal with neighbors who don't like the smell of bull sacrifices, how much to charge for selling one's daughter into slavery, and how to tell when a woman is menstruating so as not to touch her at the wrong time, as generally women take offense when you ask them.

It ends saying, "Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging. Your devoted disciple and adoring fan."

Even if we were to take these laws of Leviticus seriously, you may notice that they only speak about the problems of a man with another man. They don't mention a thing about women, so ladies, you're in the clear!!

The last series of statements often used to attack homosexuality is perhaps the most difficult to challenge from a Biblical perspective. In Romans, chapter 1, Paul says, "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

The way to address this text is to look at the larger text in which it's placed. Paul is describing what happened to the Gentiles for choosing to ignore God. Paul describes the people he is speaking of as "full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil..." and on and on. Paul is not describing a loving, consensual relationship between two people of the same gender. He is describing a people that have gone wild, committing all kinds of

cruelty, having turned away from God. And I think it's important to note that Paul likely had no experience or even awareness of a caring and consensual homosexual relationship. The primary model at the time of same gender sexuality was male prostitution, in particular, pederasty, where adult men effectively raped young boys for pleasure and money.

The last two statements by Paul that have been used to attack homosexuals are in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. There Paul offers a list of all kinds of sinners who are not worthy of the kingdom of God, including sodomites. For these two quotes, we can simply use the same responses for Sodom and Gomorrah – that the Bible claims a lack of caring for the poor, the needy and the stranger as the sin of those towns. But it is likely that Paul meant this child rape that we just spoke about when he used the term sodomite, again a very different understanding of same gender relationships than we know today, and a behavior that all of us would condemn.

As I wrap up this sermon, I want to leave you with a few more words from the Bible, words that I believe express the revolutionary character of the book. While the Bible can be difficult and challenging at times, it also contains some of the greatest spiritual and moral wisdom ever put to paper.

In the book of Leviticus, it says, “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself.”

From the book of Micah, it says, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?”

From the Gospel of Matthew it says, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged... Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own?”

And from Paul in the Letter to the Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation shall separate us from the love of God.”

And perhaps most important for our theme today, Jesus nowhere in all his teachings says anything about homosexuality. If it was so important, I imagine he would have mentioned it. However he does say that the sum of all the law and the prophets comes down to this – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It all comes down to love. Each and every day, each and every moment may we continue to breathe truth into that amazing reality.