

February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006  
Transfiguration Sunday  
Mark 9:2-11  
2 Corinthians 4:1-6

### **Lead Us Not Into “Tent-tation”**

There is a story in the middle of Jesus’ ministry in which he takes three of his disciples with him up onto a mountaintop. There Jesus does the blinding light from heaven thing, has a little reunion party with two Old Testament heroes, Moses and Elijah. Peter pops up with the odd notion that he and the other disciples should build three “booths”—tents—one for each of the men. I’m sure it seemed like a good thing to say at the time...

Later, I think Peter and the other apostles came to see in Peter’s suggestion a deeper instinct: the instinct of what would become the church to try to put God into a box—into a tent where the message can be controlled, contained, and that the Church would be the agency to control access to God and God’s access to the world. The story of the Transfiguration is a reminder to the church to not contain Jesus, but to let Jesus be seen through the Church. The Church puts Jesus on a lampstand, not under a bushel, eh?

### **Here I Stand**

At the height of its abuse of power, when the church had forgotten its humility and had tried to put Jesus in a tent, Martin Luther and the other reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century exposed the Church as having overstepped its bounds. We do not proclaim ourselves...we have this ministry of reconciliation by the grace of God. To be a Christian is not to follow the tenets of a Church or church leader. To be a Christian is to live by the three solas: GRATIA, FIDE, and SCRIPTURA.

The church is always tempted to confine and control Jesus and the good news about God...

### **Can a Christian be gay?**

This question was scribbled on a Welcome Card from a Wednesday night service last month, presumably from a young teen. Obviously there is a lot of public discourse about this question. Some Christian groups saying that homosexuality is sin and therefore ought to be banned and battled. Some Christian groups arguing that homosexuality is a gift from God to be celebrated. Some Christian groups identifying homosexuals as a people subject to discrimination and deserving social justice. Some Christian groups claiming that the homosexual agenda is out to undo traditional American values. So what IS a “Christian” response to the question? Can a person be “gay” and be “a Christian?”

Today I want to honor this young person’s question with a response. Still, I want to give this young person, and each of you, the tools you need to wrestle with this issue in your conscience, at your dinner table, in your chat room, and at the water cooler. I know that many of you have already “pitched your tent” in one camp or another with regard to this issue. Regardless of what your opinion is at this time, what your experience is, or what I or anyone has taught you, I want you to consider the three solas—gratia, fide, and scriptura—and use these as a guide for your context and your conscience, so help me God.

### **Sola Gratia “Grace Alone”**

Grace is God’s undeserved kindness, God’s loving faithfulness. It is the God who created you before the beginning of time for this moment—delights in you as you are. It is God’s completed and complete work on our behalf, “reconciling all things to himself through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:18) Grace is that God gives the Holy Spirit which works in God’s people to free us from our sins and to transform us more and more into God’s image and likeness. (2Cor 3:18) And then God gives us a purpose, meaning for life: we are his ambassadors, we carry around in us the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our bodies.

Grace also means that we don’t deserve it. Really. You and I deserve hell, death, and punishment for our actions and inactions. For our sins of omission and commission. We are “in bondage to sin...” God’s love is unconditional, complete, perfect because of who God is, not because of our loveliness. Apart from the grace of God, each one of us would be damned to hell for all eternity.

God loves me, not because of what I believe or what I do, but because of who God is. If God really is shaping me into his image and likeness, then part of that shaping is the challenge to love others just as they are, not according to what they do.

Sola gratia, then, is to live in gratitude and humility, to be ruthlessly honest about my own sinful nature and motives, while at the same time **being as gracious and patient with others** as I can. It is to offer an umbrella of grace to individuals, congregations, and church bodies who wrestle with issues like homosexuality.

To the person who is gay or lesbian, the Gospel is that God loves you as you are, that you are a sinner for whom Christ died, that God has a purpose and plan for your life, that God continues to create you in God’s image and likeness. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more, there is nothing you can do to make God love you less.

### **Sola Fide (A Christian lives by faith alone...)**

Romans 10:9 If you declare with your mouth that “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:13 Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (see Joel 2:32)

Trust Jesus. Faith is trusting God, following Jesus as if His will for your life is better than anything you can come up with. If he is Lord of your life, what implications this fact has for your life. And if Jesus is not Lord of your life, what implications are there in your life. Faith requires that I conform my life as best I can to the will and purpose of God, to be as much like Jesus as I can be.

The person who is gay or lesbian has to ask the same question that the rest of us must ask and wrestle with everyday: Am I living as though Jesus is my Lord, or is something else more important to me? Does my life reflect Jesus to others? Am I becoming more and more like Jesus—more loving, closer to the Father, more humble, etc.

Galatians 5:6 says that the only thing that matters is faith expressing itself in love...

Love is not easy, especially in community, especially when a brother or sister is walking in a way that appears to be contrary to faith. Faith in community also sometimes requires that I tell a brother or sister a hard truth. I am my brother’s keeper—an intervention—because we trust Jesus to work all things for good. That my love for my brother is stronger than my desire to be liked by my brother...

## **Sola Scriptura**

The 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers grabbed onto to what Peter and Paul knew and warned: Don't make a tent—listen to Jesus. Don't preach or teach what YOU think. Teach the word of God: The Bible, read through the lens of Jesus. We don't worship the Bible, but the Bible is living and active, says Hebrews 4, and when we read it, God speaks to us a word that either convicts or comforts us, Law or Gospel. The Law tells us what we ought to do and convicts us that we do not do it. The Gospel then reminds us of what God has done on our behalf out of his grace and mercy, particularly through Jesus, thus demonstrating God's faithfulness and why we can put our trust in him and his forgiveness. This grace also frees us to serve God and God's purposes, not in order to impress God but in order to give Him glory.

### **So the question maybe isn't "What does the Bible say about homosexuality?" but rather: "What does the Bible say to a person who is gay?"**

The answer, in general terms, is that it will speak both Law and Gospel. Parts of Scripture will condemn and parts will console. Engaging the word of God will bring about a crisis of faith. The only responses to God's grace are either to reject it or confess Jesus as Lord.

As for the person's sexual identity, the passages in the Bible which a gay or lesbian person might read regarding their sexuality will probably convict them. Scripture does not speak favorably of sexual relations between people of the same gender, as opposed to heterosexual relationships, which it does affirm, such as in Genesis 1 and the Song of Solomon. A homosexual person reading passages in the Bible, especially Romans 1 or Leviticus will likely be "convicted" by this word with regard to their sexuality—either the choice or the inclination.

It may be that this is an area in which God is shaping your character—to deny yourself, to make Jesus your Lord, to learn compassion for others who wrestle with sexual sins. It's okay for the Bible to make you feel bad! 2 Corinthians 7:9 ...your sorrow led to repentance... (Conscience is a good thing...) Your orientation is not punishment, it is not a curse of a cruel deity, It is not the "unforgivable sin." It may be a thorn in your flesh (to keep you from being too elated). It may be the arena of a particular spiritual battle, either yours or for somebody around you.

### **And what does the Bible say to a person who is not gay or lesbian?**

Plenty! Paul warns the Corinthians about impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery (any and all of which one can commit regardless of their orientation), but not before he warns them about the ungodliness of quarreling, jealousy, anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder! (2Cor 12:20-21). Paul's biggest beef in 2 Corinthians, in fact, has to do with a lack of generosity, tithes, and offerings. (chs. 8-9). "We have plenty of sins in common!" Truth telling in Christian community ought to begin in areas we have in common.

For others of us, the issue might be love of neighbor. When I despise, fear, or hate my brother or sister for any reason, I sin against them and I sin against God. It is murder. I commit sin for which I deserve death. Is my faith expressing itself in love? Am I reflecting the life of Jesus, growing more like him?

### **Don't build a licentious tent!**

The answer, however, is not to explain away scripture or take away the offense just because it makes somebody feel bad. Don't try to take someone off the hook and call it love of neighbor. Christ didn't tell people that what they did doesn't matter, that the Law and conscience doesn't matter. Jesus loved sinners, ate with them, died for them, and calls us to follow him to hell and back. Will I love my neighbor as he is, or is my love (hospitality, acceptance, delight) based on the person conforming to my belief set or on making good choices or acting like I want them to act?

### **What does this mean?**

By the command and example of Jesus Christ, who is Lord of this church, the people of Trinity Lutheran Church welcome all people, regardless of gender, race, socio-economic, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. If you have a problem with that, then you have a problem to take up with Jesus.

The **current policy** and practice of the ELCA does not allow for the blessing of a marriage between people of the same gender, and I honor that policy and would act accordingly, if I were to be asked to perform such a ceremony.

ELCA policy also prohibits the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian candidates, not because they are “too sinful” but because leaders in the church—heterosexual and homosexual—are held to a higher standard of sexual conduct.

As a civil rights issue, Christians should be advocates of any group that is being denied basic civil rights—housing, health care, employee benefits.

As a church polity issue, the church ought never allow itself to be either intimidated or manipulated into adopting unbiblical theological or social positions.

Humility. We could be wrong! In fifty years the church may look back on homosexuality the way we now look at slavery or women in leadership in the church. Individual congregations in the ELCA who wish to call and ordain non-celibate gay or lesbian pastors ought to be given some leeway—and added scrutiny, to evaluate how the decision affects that congregation’s heart and ministry.

### **Umbrellas, not tents**

Grace—Am I living life as though everything is gift from God? Am I being gracious toward others?

Faith—Is Jesus Lord of my life, and am I following him, trusting him, growing more like him?

Word—Am I listening for God in his word? If God were trying to tell me something, would I hear him? What would he say?

Umbrellas, not tents.

So, can a person be gay and Christian at the same time?

Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura.

All glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.