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# “Homophobia and the Boundaries of God’s Love”

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June 25, 2023

## New Testament Readings on God's Love for All

*I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (John 12:32)*

*I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world. (John 12:47)*

*Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. (Romans 5:18)*

*For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that God may be merciful to all. (Romans 11:32)*

*For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:22)*

*For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all. (1 Timothy 2:5-6)*

*For to this end, we toil and suffer reproach, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:10)*

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. (Titus 2:11)*

*God is not slow about God's promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)*

*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)*

In 2008, I was the Senior Minister at a Baptist church in Texas that decided to have a church directory. Do you

remember church directories—photos of families, addresses, phone numbers? The companies that produced church directories must be out of business.

We began the process thinking: “What’s more fun than a church directory? What’s not delightful about eight-year-old boys being forced to wear ties for photographs that make them look less like themselves than anyone else? What could go wrong?”

If you had been at that church, you would not have been surprised when two male couples, that had been together for years, had their pictures made together. The church had gay members for decades. The church directory committee had no clue there was an issue, until one member alerted her friends that it was time to go to war.

We were a progressive congregation, but it was fifteen years ago, and we were Baptists in Texas. This was an opportunity for the old guard to take back their church after what they saw as a 30-year slide to the left. They argued that same-sex couples could not be pictured together in their church directory, because it would not depict the “biblical view of the family.”

The church staff naively thought this was an opportunity for growth and understanding. We invited two New Testament professors from extremely different seminaries to debate the issue. They ended up not liking one another at all.

Most who were against including gay people in the church avoided talking to gay people in the church. They preferred to talk about the peculiar verses in the Bible that were never the point. Gay Christians call these the “clobber verses,” meaning that religious people use these verses to

try to clobber them.

Genesis 19 has the story of a gang rape in Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus says the sin was a lack of hospitality and not sex (Luke 10:11-12). Two verses in Leviticus that are often cited to defend bigotry (18:22 and 20:13) are actually about using sex for power. The laws in Leviticus, by the way, include prohibitions against eating shrimp, growing two crops in the same field, wearing polyester, picking up sticks on the Sabbath, and naming your genitals. These laws do not concern most religious people.

Romans has a verse (1:27) about pedophilia and sex in the temple. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Paul avoids first century words for gay couples having sex, instead creating a word to describe religious sex rituals and prostitution. Neither Paul nor the writers of the Hebrew scriptures use the words that describe committed same-sex relationships. Using the words for pedophilia and homosexual promiscuity against committed gay couples is not fair, and certainly not Christian.

Those who were against gay people used a few strange verses as a way of protecting a tired, old prejudice. Those who wanted to include everyone had the story of Jesus and the central message of the Gospel, but as long as there is heterosexual privilege, there will be homophobia.

When leaders of our national, state, and local Baptist conventions found out that we were talking about what the Bible actually says, they let us know that if we pictured gay couples in our church directory we would be kicked out—which we eventually were.

Angry people made a point of sharing their angry views with me. Sinful people wanted to explain their definition

of a sinful lifestyle. The angriest church members offered me \$50,000 to resign and threatened to fire me. Our church bylaws had a provision that if 100 members signed a petition the church had to vote on any issue, so they started a petition to fire me.

One angry church member said: "I've fired two ministers. I can fire this one."

After seven different pieces of bulk mail were mailed by the people who wanted to fire me to every member—that is how people communicated in 2008, and front-page stories appeared in The Dallas Morning News and Fort Worth Star-Telegram—people read newspapers in 2008—the church voted to keep their Senior Minister 499-237. The fact that I still know those numbers does not mean I have not moved on emotionally.

Many of the angriest people left the church, because they had seen this as their last stand. The dean at a seminary in Atlanta read the news and invited me to join his faculty. I told myself I took a new job because I could not be a good minister for those who wanted me to leave, but I was also tired of an old argument.

15 years later, I have decided that this is what I should have said from the start: "The argument over the inclusion of gay Christians is just another version of a tired, old, mean-spirited, wrong-headed debate."

Before we had the great directory debate, the church had the same tired argument about the inclusion of poor people. The Missions Committee wanted the church to participate in a program in which homeless people spend the coldest nights of the year in the church building. Almost without exception, the people who did not want

gay people in the building did not want poor people in the building either. We had eight churchwide meetings before 66% of the church voted not to let God's children freeze to death on the sidewalk. The arguments over welcoming poor people and welcoming gay people were painfully similar.

We keep repeating this centuries old argument. We have different churches for the rich, the poor, Democrats, Republicans, white people, black people, gay people, heterosexual people, churches with screens, and churches with stained glass. We have created practices, policies, and peculiar justifications to keep people out of the church. We have repeated the same tired argument.

When I was in junior high, my father was the pastor of a church in Mississippi. Melanie, a seventh grader, invited her best friend Carlene, an African American, to our church gym for our youth revival. Melanie and Carlene made their way to folding chairs near midcourt. The ushers gathered to decide how to deal with this thirteen-year-old threat to their Christianity. Wayne, a Little League baseball coach, asked Carlene to leave. Melanie went with her. The next night, two church leaders and members of the Klan were stationed at the door to make sure no African Americans tried to worship God.

The racists had selected Bible verses, church tradition, and walls that had been standing for centuries. They had a tired, old argument, but as long as there is white privilege, there will be racism.

In 2019, the shooter in the synagogue in Poway, California, was a member of a Presbyterian Church. Rabbi

Lippe invited me to go on a radio show with him to talk about Christianity and anti-Semitic violence. I started looking more carefully at our history. Martin Luther, who may be the most important figure in the last 500 years of Christian history, was anti-Semitic. In *The Jews and Their Lies*, Luther writes, “We are at fault in not slaying them.”

Historians like to say that Luther was great except for his anti-Semitism—which is embarrassing, for the historians. You cannot be great and anti-Semitic. The anti-Semites have selected Bible verses, church tradition, and walls that have been standing for centuries. They have the same, tired argument, but as long as Christians want to put down Judaism to make Christians feel superior, there will be anti-Semitism.

We should stop having these foolish arguments and let everyone in. The arguments are old, but the promise of God’s love is too. The Bible is filled with support for the idea that God includes everyone. Did you hear it in the readings? All flesh will see the salvation of God. Christ will draw all people. Jesus said, “I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.” Christ leads to justification and life for all. God is merciful to all. All will be made alive in Christ. One ransom for all. The Savior of all people. The grace of God bringing salvation to all. The Lord wants all to come to repentance. God is for the whole world. Are those passages just a fluke, or did they really mean what they wrote?

Henry Ward Beecher came to the conclusion that the church needs to reflect God’s love for all people. Henry’s father, Lyman, was a famous Calvinist. He preached that God preordained human fate, some to heaven and some to

hell. But living in Brooklyn tends to make us more open-minded, and that is what happened to Henry. He began to preach a gospel of God's love for all people.

Debby Applegate writes: "What Beecher brought to American culture in an era of bewildering change and fratricidal war was unconditional love so deep and so wide that the entire country could feel his warmth, like it or not."

Doesn't that sound like our situation, an "era of bewildering change and fratricidal war that calls for God's unconditional love"?

I used to tell this story at ordination services: Years ago, a little Roman Catholic village in Eastern Europe needs a midwife, but they do not have much money. The only woman willing to take the position for the meager salary they can offer is Jewish. After some debate, they give her the job.

She spends the rest of her life becoming part of the community. She is with them in fear, sorrow, and joy. When she dies, she leaves those whom she has loved in a quandary. They want to bury her in the church cemetery, but she is not Roman Catholic.

The priest agrees to call the bishop and ask for an exception to be made. The bishop's initial response is unequivocal: "The Jewish woman can't be buried in the Roman Catholic cemetery."

The priest pleads: "She's family. She brought our children into the world. She loved our congregation."

The bishop offers a compromise: "She can't be buried in the cemetery, but you can bury her just outside the fence."



That is what they do. After the graveside service, several members of the congregation go to the pub and begin to tell stories about the woman: “She came in the middle of a terrible snowstorm to deliver our son. It was snowing again when she delivered our granddaughter.” “She was there when my sister had a miscarriage. She cried right along with the rest of us.”

They talk about how she helped them welcome life and how she grieved with them in the shadow of death. They are slowly overwhelmed by embarrassment at what they have done. They have buried a family member on the wrong side of the fence.

They go to their homes and get their tools. They gather again at the cemetery and begin the hard work of moving the fence. The next morning the grave has not moved, but now it is inside the fence.

When I told the story, I used to close by saying, “The church needs people who will enlarge the fence.”

Now I think that is wrong. We should not encourage anyone to be part of the tired arguments over where the fence should be. We have applauded the people who move the fence, but we can do better. We can get rid of the fence.

We should not argue that the LGBTQ+ community is inside the walls of the church. We need to tear down the walls. We need a fence-destroying spirituality, because God destroys the walls that separate us by race, culture, or orientation. Instead of figuring out which people qualify as God’s people, let’s accept everyone.

God's church is for those who know they belong, those who are not sure, those who think they are winners, those who feel defeated, those dealing with the pain of prejudice and those dealing with their own prejudice. God's church is for the mentally disabled, the physically challenged, nursing home residents, prisoners, neighbors who do not fit in, and relatives who embarrass us. God's church welcomes all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or family configuration.

Here is what we should do. Stop waiting for others to take the first step and step across the lines ourselves. Speak with kindness and courage when it would be easier to say nothing. Do more than vote right. Work for justice and equality.

Work for our congregation to become more accepting. Do more than tolerate our differences, celebrate them. Give up complacency for the way of passionate concern. Be impatient with inequality, impatient with anything less than God's love.

If anyone is still printing church directories, someone should tell them that the division of the church into family units is, theologically, a mistake. The most church-like photograph is one wide angle, great big, loving, wonderful picture of everyone.

*sermon © Brett Younger*