

No One Is Excluded

Romans 2:1; Luke 18:9

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
October 15, 1995

Transcription of the spoken sermon

I'm very proud of this congregation, and I'm very proud to be your pastor. In the 1970s we sought to find out what God was calling us to be, and we lived into that statement of identity. We did it again in the 1980s, and we lived into that identity. As the 1990s came around, we began once again to say, "What is the context of this ministry and what does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ and the people of God in our day, in this place?"

We defined ourselves according to some very familiar themes— the wonder of worship, the mystery and awe of God, and the grace of God that embraces all people. Then we became concrete and specific in order to indicate to all of those who might be interested that this was a safe place, that was inclusive, that did not exclude anyone. We added the words "sexual orientation" to indicate that inclusiveness, knowing this issue to be a volatile one in the Church and one that is dividing our society at large. We as a congregation took the position that one's human sexuality is not something that one chooses, but is something that is given. It is a complex subject and research continues, but the weight of evidence would indicate that human sexuality is at the very core of our being, intrinsic to our humanity, something that comes along with the very constitution that we inherit and with which we are born.

We made our statement to indicate to all in this community and beyond that for us sexual orientation was a given and was not a matter of morality. I'm proud to be a pastor of a congregation that dares to print that. And I'm proud to be a pastor of a congregation whose Consistory, when the time came to act on that statement, without demure, said to the Metropolitan Community Church, "Of course, you can come in and worship in this facility." And I'm proud that when we have been called into question by our local judicatory in the Reformed Church of America, as has happened in the past four weeks and will continue following this service today, this congregation listened to stories, reflected together about the basis of our moral judgments and spoke together about this very critical issue in the life of our society and the culture of our time. I'm proud of you.

As your pastor and teacher, I suspect that I ought to tell you my story. I was listening to National Public Radio this week from the University of Michigan, and I learned that Wednesday on the Christian calendar is National Coming Out Day. Well, maybe it wasn't the Christian calendar. So I'm going to "come out" just to tell you how I got where I am.

It was back in the 1970s. I had a colleague in ministry who had a married person on his staff who had come out of the closet—divorcing his spouse and declaring himself to be of homosexual orientation. That was a tough one for that congregation. And my friend began furiously to study and to read. The congregation studied the issue, and they were somewhat divided as to how to respond. When my friend studied, I studied, too. I suppose that I was, at that time, where most of us are at one time, knowing very little about this shadowy thing called homosexuality and thinking that, at best, it must be an aberration of nature and, at worst, a perversion.

But as I began to read and to encounter the reality, I began to get new insight into that human condition. At that time I read a statement that was approved by the synod of the Christian Reformed Church and printed in their synod minutes by one of their most respected pastors and theologians. I was amazed at the compassion in that statement. I had lunch with that gentleman and I said, "Where did you get that insight?" He just said, "Pastoral experience."

It was about that same time that I came to understand what he meant, because a young man who was worshipping with us sent me a letter. The handwriting was so poor that I had to believe it was because of the great degree of pain written out in that scrawled hand. He told me that in his hometown in another state, there had been a time when he was in the hospital and quite vulnerable and had confessed to his minister that he was homosexual. The minister's response was condemning, and he charged the young man to change his life.

After I read his letter, I called the young man in and I looked at him and I loved him. I felt his pain and I sensed his love of God and his desire to worship and to be valued as a child of God. I loved him and when I came to know the man with whom he was living in covenant relationship, I liked him, too. And when through a job change they moved out of the state, Nancy and I visited and stayed with them in their home on more than one occasion. To my great disappointment, I found they were quite normal.

In 1978 and 1979 the Reformed Church in American recognized that homosexuality was an issue that needed to be addressed. And so a statement was written by the Theological Commission, given to the General Synod, and passed along to the churches for guidelines and instruction. I was pleased with that statement. It had a very positive feel, a pastoral concern, a recognition that one's sexuality is not a matter of choice, but a given orientation. The statement did say,

however, that one with such orientation must abstain from the expression of their sexual nature.

I had breakfast last week with the man who wrote that statement. When I reminded him, he smiled. He said it was a good statement in 1978, but it is, of course, untenable today in light of what we know. But it did at least move the church ahead.

I continued to reflect and to experience and to hear human stories. And then it was a warm, sunny day on my deck in September, 1985. My houseguest was my old Dutch professor, Hendrikus Berkhof.

I said, "Henk, I think that sexual orientation is a given."

He said, "Ja."

I said, "If it's a given, then it's part of Creation."

He said, "Ja."

I said, "If it is part of Creation, then it's not a moral issue."

He said, "Ja, you're right."

I said, "Thank you." And that is where I've been for the last ten years. For me, it is not an issue.

But you say to me, "What about the Bible?"

And of course, I need to address that question. First of all, let me say that what I'm talking about and what this congregation is engaged in is not addressed in the Bible. We are talking about homosexual orientation and relationship in faithful, covenant love. And that isn't even in the purview of the Scripture. It never came up for discussion. The whole matter of orientation was not understood until relatively recently with the research of the behavioral sciences. And so if you want to know about two people of the same gender living in loving relationship and faithful covenant, the Bible doesn't speak to it. It does address the whole matter of human sexuality generally, and it has a whole lot to say there.

Now we can't talk about human sexuality in church. The Church has never been able to handle it. We get awkward and uncomfortable. We are human beings and our sexuality is at the core of our being. But we can't talk about it in church. That is something that we simply have to recognize and acknowledge.

But sometimes we have to talk about it. We are sexual beings. And when I say that, I don't mean simply genital sexuality. I mean in the very relating of

ourselves, one to another, man to woman, woman to woman, woman to man, man to man—in all of our human relationships there is the manifestation of that precious gift of creation with which we are endowed, the gift of human sexuality.

Unfortunately, one Greek word of love, *eros*, is translated into English *erotic*. Therefore, the Church has always been nervous about acknowledging the presence of *eros* in human love. But *eros* is one of three Greek words for love, all of which are in God, and all of which are in us. And it is the *eros* in our nature that moves us toward one another, that enables us to relate to another, that brings us into intimate connection with another, that is the glue of human community and human relationship. As human beings we are sexual beings, and thereby we are beings able to relate one to another and move toward community. It is also that *eros* within us that moves our soul, causes our soul to yearn toward God. It is one of God's precious gifts. And the Bible says, use it wisely.

The Bible has a great deal to say about human sexuality. But being the great gift that it is, sexuality also presents great potential for disaster. And that's the reference in Romans 1. I chose that passage because it's probably the one last holdout for people who claim the Bible condemns homosexual practice. There are only a half dozen or so references in the whole of the Bible. In the Hebrew scriptures they belong to the holiness code which has all kinds of regulations and rules that were part of the culture of that day and that have been transcended in the grace of the Gospel. But Paul was speaking or writing to the Roman church because he anticipated coming there to proclaim the Gospel. Now this series is about the Gospel, the Good News. And Paul was as passionate a human being as ever has lived on this earth when he thought about the Gospel and the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And so he says, "I'm eager to preach at Rome. I'm not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God for human transformation."

Human transformation? Is there a problem?

Paul says, "Can we talk?"

And then he goes on with that catalogue of sins, one paragraph of which has to do with messed up human sexuality, unnatural relationships. Now there are all sorts of interpretations of exactly that to which Paul pointed, but the Greco-Roman culture of Paul's day would make a "lady of the night" blush! And there were all kinds of decadence which Paul could point out and then call the Christian community to withdraw itself and claim a new identity.

As Paul makes those references, he is not being exhaustive in a catalogue of sins, nor is he condemning homosexuality per se. Because the root of his argument in that whole context is not that people are messed up sexually, but that people are messed up sexually because of idolatry. And idolatry is the putting of something else in the place of God in one's life. Read those verses again when you get home, if you can stand it. He says the problem is that we have exchanged the creature

for the Creator, God blest forever. Everything that's wrong with humankind stems, according to Paul in this passage, from the fact that God is not put on the altar of life. And Paul says, when God is not the center of one's being, all kinds of things unravel. There are unnatural sexual relationships. But we can't talk about that in church.

We can talk about some of the other things he said. We don't have much trouble talking about gossiping and slandering and hardheartedness and arrogance and maligning and that whole catalogue of sins. I finally just quit the reading and quoted Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." That's all. He's speaking to a Gentile group and a Jewish group. They were living in tenuous relationship in that community. And during the first verses he probably was referring more to Gentile depravity and in the second chapter to Jewish depravity. About the time the Jewish people were nodding their heads in approval of his condemnation of Gentile depravity, he said, "And you do the same thing!" And finally it's as though he's using a sledge hammer to beat everybody down so that he can announce the grace of God, which he eventually does. But his conclusion is, "You Gentiles and you Jews, universally, no one excluded, all sin and come short of the glory of God."

Now he is ready to announce the grand good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ to change the situation. And as I said, in Romans 5, he says where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. And in Romans 11 where he's trying to figure out why his brothers and sisters according to the faith of Israel didn't see what he saw in Jesus, he said, "God has included all in disobedience that God might have mercy on all," because Paul didn't believe for a minute that the Creator of heaven and earth would ever be defeated in terms of any individual. It didn't matter what their history, what their record, what their pattern, what their orientation—God would finally win. Grace would overcome. Mercy would prevail.

And so I take Romans 1, put it in context so that when somebody throws it up to you saying the Bible condemns human homosexual activity, you say to them, "No. The Bible condemns abusive practices and self-destructive behavior in human sexuality, period." The only thing the Bible calls us to is faithful covenant love, to mutual respect and responsibility. And that cuts across the board. That isn't for a special group of people. No one is excluded in that call to responsible, faithful, covenant love, and everyone has this precious gift which is always potentially explosive, ready to send us into all kinds of trouble.

Now that's what the Bible says. Be faithful. Live in covenant love. And give each person dignity. That's what the Bible speaks to clearly. And it also is very clear that one of the worst offenses for any child of God is to act in moral superiority to any other. Jesus said in the little story he told of the Publican and the Pharisee, "It is not the parading of my virtues. It is the acknowledgment of my fallenness and the pleas for mercy that justifies and brings me again into sync with God."

As I said, dear friends, homosexuality for me is not an issue. It just isn't an issue, until I hear the story of one of my brothers or sisters who is hurt, who is excluded, who is shamed. To me it is not an issue until I read of a young boy whose mother continued to paste Bible verses on his door and on his mirror until he finally jumped from a viaduct into the path of a semi, taking his life. To me it isn't an issue until a fine young gentleman leaves choir practice one Thursday evening and is found on Sunday morning, having taken his life because he despaired of God's grace. Then I feel like I felt walking the Jewish ghetto in Prague—as I always feel when I encounter the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust. Then my heart churns within me as I realize what we are capable of as human persons hurting other human persons. And then, frankly, when I hear those stories and come to that realization, my eyes fill with tears because, dear friends, I don't want any person to be hurt. I want them to be embraced and valued. And with all my heart, I want this community to be a place that any of God's children can come, knowing that the good news is that no one is excluded and all are valued and all are invited to follow Jesus and to live in awe before the mystery of God, embraced by God's grace. With all my heart, that's what I want us to be, and I believe you do, too. And I am so very proud of you.