

## McCabe United Methodist Church

When Christians Get it Wrong: In Dealing with Homosexuality (Part 4)

Acts 10:9-16 \* Luke 23:34

May 5 & 6, 2012: Pastor Rick Fossum

Today, we continue our series “*When Christians Get Wrong*” based on a book by the same name. Through this series, we’re trying to figure out why a large percentage of young adults are staying away from the church or leaving the church.

I can’t think of a more controversial subject than our topic today especially in the church. It’s called ‘*In Dealing with Homosexuality*’. I don’t have to tell you that there’s people on both sides of this issue. We have people on the right and people on the left with perhaps a majority of people somewhere in the middle of this debate. Both sides are full of good, God-fearing men and women.

I am not trying to change your thinking on this issue. I don’t have that kind of power nor do I want that kind of power. My goal today is simply to get us to hear what other people are saying about this issue of homosexuality especially what our young people are saying.

During the 2004 Presidential campaign, two prominent United Methodist lay people were on the opposite ends of the homosexual debate. President George W. Bush was on one side and Vice President Dick Cheney was on the other. If you remember, President Bush had two daughters and both were heterosexual. He took a position that was popular with his voters that year. He supported a ‘*marriage amendment*’ to the U.S. Constitution that would define marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

Vice President Cheney, another United Methodist layperson, had a daughter who was a lesbian. In a rare display of disunity, Vice President Cheney publicly disagreed with the president and said he would not support a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

The debate continues. In a 2007 Barna study, it found that 91% of young adults, ages 16 to 29, saw Christians as ‘*anti-homosexual*’. This perception, according to the study, is one reason young adults are turning away from the church in record numbers.

Adam Hamilton, pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas, interviewed a young man by the name of John. This is what John had to say:

**“I myself am not gay, but at the same time, I fully support those who choose it as their lifestyle. For people in our generation, homosexuality is not something that we talk about in hushed tones or in back alleys. For many people in this day and age, my age or younger, we’ve seen it in the media, in our schools, in our communities, and it has become something that is accepted. For a vast majority of people in my generation, people might not be homosexual, they might not even like the thought of homosexuality, but I know that almost all of the guys I’ve talked to have said, ‘yeah, I don’t see anything that’s wrong with it’.**

A 2010 Pew Forum study verified what we’ve known for some time: young adults see homosexuality far differently than their parents and grandparents. For young people, this issue is about including and accepting people they know and care about.

For those on the other side of this issue, it’s not only a question of right and wrong, but it’s also a question about the authority of the Bible. How can those six passages of Scripture that deals with homosexuality be set aside without setting aside the entire Bible? It goes against our grain to say that some things in the Bible no longer apply.

When I was growing up in Hillsboro, my view of the Bible was fairly simplistic. Scripture was the word of God and it was flawless. I was taught the slogan **“The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.”**

As I’ve continued to read and study the Bible over the years, I don’t think the Bible is quite so simple anymore. There are passages in the Bible that I wrestle with. I put an insert in today’s bulletin that describe some of these passages and my struggle with them. For example,

- Most Christians eat pork, crab, shrimp and if we can afford it lobster. Yet, according to Leviticus 11:2-12 they’re all forbidden food. Yet, we eat them.
- In I Corinthians 14:34 Paul said, **“Women should be silent in the churches.”** However, we all know that in many denominations today, including many fundamentalist churches, women are both teaching and preaching.
- Peter, in I Peter 3:3, said to women, **“Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing.”**
- And Paul said in I Timothy 2:9, **“Women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes.”** And yet, despite these clear instructions, not many Christians take these passages literally . . . do we?
- According to Deuteronomy 22:11, the Bible tells us not to wear clothes that mix two kinds of fabrics. Yet, how many of us are wearing clothes today made of more than one kind of fabric?

- In Matthew 5:30, Jesus tells us to cut off our hands if they cause us to sin. Yet, we don't take this passage literally . . . do we???
- In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus tells us not to store up treasures on earth, yet most of us have retirement accounts, pension plans and 401ks. Again, we ignore this passage.
- In Deuteronomy 21:18-21, the Bible commands communities to stone to death sons who are disrespectful to their parents. Personally, I'm glad we set aside this passage.
- In Exodus 31:12-15, those who work on the Sabbath (mowing, cooking, shopping) are to be put to death according to Scripture. Again, I'm glad we set aside this passage.
- And finally, in I Samuel 15:3, God commands Saul to lead the army of Israel against the Amalekites saying, "*Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.*" Why would God order such a terrible thing? Because 375 years earlier, the Amalekites had treated Israel with disrespect! Disrespect!

Contrast this last passage in I Samuel 15 with Luke 23:34. Jesus is hanging on the cross and he looked at the Romans and Pharisees who crucified him and prayed, "**Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.**"

Do you see the difference between I Samuel and Luke? What is your God like? The God of revenge in I Samuel or the God of forgiveness, love and grace in Luke?

And then there's the Apostle Peter. He was called a Jewish Christian because he both followed Jesus and he also tried to keep Jewish laws and rules. The Old Testament was his only bible. He would have agreed with my slogan I was taught to say as a youngster, "**The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.**"

One day, Peter was in Joppa which was on the southern edge of what is today Tel Aviv. He was hungry. While his meal was being prepared, he prayed and while he prayed, he had a vision. In the vision, a large sheet was let down in front of him by its four corners and inside this sheet were all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds that God clearly commanded people not to eat (Leviticus 11). In fact, according to this passage, people weren't even allowed to touch these things.

But, something profound happened in Acts 10:11-15, "*Peter saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."*

-Acts 10:11-15 (NRSV)

In Peter's vision, he heard God telling him to do something that was clearly forbidden by Scripture. Peter was told to set aside this passage of Scripture, **"Don't call what I've made clean, profane,"** God said. And Peter was told to eat what used to be unclean.

Peter's world changed before his eyes. He heard God's voice and he followed that voice rather than Scripture. He moved beyond the old slogan that says, **"The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it."** Instead, his new slogan was, **"The Bible says it, but I think God is up to something new, so I will listen God."**

This does not give us permission to set aside those six passages in the Bible that talk about homosexuality, but it does challenge us to wrestle with those six passages and to wrestle with the voice of God.

You might not agree with what I've said today. That's OK, but consider this. For over 1,800 years people used certain passages in the Bible as a basis for allowing and maintaining slavery. We know the Bible passages. However, today, we know that slavery is inconsistent with the message of Christ. We set aside those passages.

For over 1,900 years people, mostly men, used certain passages in the Bible as a way of controlling women both in the church and outside. Again, we know the Bible passages. However, today, we know this is inconsistent with the message of Christ. We know that God has given women the same gifts and talents to be preachers and teachers that men have been given. And so, we set aside those passages.

I could also mention those Bible passages where polygamy is accepted which allows the man to have more than one wife or concubines where men were allowed to keep other women around just for fun, but I think you get the idea.

We have changed over the 3,200 years since parts of the Bible were first written and recorded. God is speaking to us in new ways and in a new day.

I remember a lady by the name of Carol. She lives in North Dakota. When I first met Carol at Annual Conference, she was anti-homosexual and she wasn't afraid to say it. She could be pretty mean and cruel. And then, a couple of years later, Carol asked me, again at another Annual Conference, if I had time to visit. She was in tears as she told me about her grandson. **"He's gay"** she said. **"I found out last Christmas."** She went on, **"My heart changed toward gay people. It's one thing to be mean and intolerant to gays when you don't know anyone who is gay, but when you know someone, it's another story."**

I'm going to ask you to do something right now. I hope it doesn't offend anyone, but if you have a family member, a friend or someone you know and care about who is gay would you please raise your hand? Look around.

It makes a difference, doesn't it? If we can put a name behind the face, it somehow makes this issue personal. I think this is what young people are trying to tell the rest of us. For them, it's a matter of including and accepting people they know.

There are a lot of questions about homosexuality that are yet to be answered. Is being gay genetic? Is it in their DNA? Or, is it a choice? I don't have those answers, but I do know this, I would much rather lead a church that welcomes and accepts people like Carol's grandson than one that turns them away.

I think Christians get it wrong when we speak and act in ways that hurt any of God's children . . . straight or gay. I think we get it right when, even in our uncertainty, we express the love of Jesus for all of God's children.

Let's pray . . .