

“The freedom of love”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
June 23, 2019

Galatians 3:23-29 and 5:13-25

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Let’s begin with a story. You know how I like stories. This story, though, is a tough one, and comes with a trigger warning. If hearing about depression or death triggers you, it’s OK to step out.

This story is about a boy named Ryan. It’s a true story. Ryan grew up in a Christian family. He loved God, loved church, and when he was 12 years old, he realized he also loved boys. He told his parents that he was gay. They hugged him and told him how much they loved him, would always love him. But then they said, “Ryan, you know what the Bible says. Embracing your sexuality is not an option.”

For six years, Ryan tried really hard. He read books, joined the church youth group, prayed every day. But try as he might, he couldn’t stop liking boys. What did change was that this sweet, happy kid became severely depressed, suicidal, God feeling more distant than ever. He turned to drugs as an escape. And at the age of 20, Ryan overdosed and died. The boy who loved God, the boy who loved boys.

His parents had spent so long praying, hoping, not to have a gay son. And now they didn’t.¹

I share this story not because it’s exceptional, but precisely the opposite—because it’s so normal. There are kids like Ryan in Auburn, in Skaneateles, in Weedsport, in Syracuse. Kids who are attempting suicide, depressed and hopeless. Kids who feel abandoned by God and are leaving the church. Kids who are dying—in body and in soul.

Jesus said, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them... Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matt. 7:15-20).

If non-affirming Christians like Ryan’s parents were right, then the fruit of their teaching would be a closer walk with God, righteous and joyous. Love would abound. But that’s not what’s happening. Instead, there is despair and loss of faith and hatred. Instead of life there is death. On the other hand, LGBTQ Christians who embrace their sexuality and gender identity are among the most faithful and joyous disciples you’ll ever meet.

It was seeing this incongruity that led Mark Achtemeier to revisit Scripture, as we are about to do. Mark’s a big leader in the Presbyterian church, a pastor and seminary professor. In the 90s, Mark was one of the most vocal opponents of the ordination of LGBTQ people; he was convinced that the Bible condemned homosexuality. But as he began to witness the destructive

¹ This story comes from Matthew Vines’ book *God and the Gay Christian* (2015).

consequences of that teaching, Mark made an incredible shift. Fourteen years later, he was “working to repeal the ban on gay ordination [he] had once helped put in place.” He preached at the ordination service of the first openly gay Presbyterian under the new rules. And it was all because he went back to the Bible, set aside his assumptions, and read it clearly.²

So what does Paul—the biggest source of contention—actually say about sexuality and gender identity? Very little, it turns out. In fact, there are only three brief passages.

There’s an old joke about how we sometimes export our modern ideas into Scripture: “Question: What was the favorite automotive brand of the early church leaders? Answer: They preferred Hondas.” Didn’t know that? Oh, you haven’t been reading your Scripture, because in Acts 15:25, it says, “It seemed good unto us, being with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul.”³ See! By this we know that only the Honda Accord is blessed by God; burn in hell, Toyota!

Of course, we all know that cars didn’t exist in the 1st century. The problem is that we may not be aware of some of the other things that didn’t exist. For instance, neither Paul nor any of his contemporaries had any experience of a loving, committed same-sex relationship. What he had seen were men using sex to dominate others—women, other men, boys. It was a common practice in slavery, military conquest, and the tutelage of young boys. Paul had never seen two men of the same age walking hand in hand, wearing wedding rings, smiling and laughing. He could no more condemn or imagine such a scene than he could us driving a car.

In the Greek, Paul uses very specific words to condemn what any of us would condemn: rape and exploitation. Paul is making an argument that, when we serve other desires than God, not love but lust, not service but self-gratification, our lives get out of control and cause pain.

He says nothing against the God-centered love exchanged between two people of the same sex. He says nothing, for that matter, against the person who dutifully obeys their inner spirit and embraces a gender identity different from the one they were assigned at birth.

So if he doesn’t condemn, the question is whether he would bless.

Paul began as a man who most certainly would not have. He was utterly devoted to the traditional interpretations of biblical Law. But then something changed his life forever. Christ appeared to Paul. Suddenly Paul realized that this devotion had blinded him and others to the new thing God was doing in Christ, to the promises that were right there in Scripture all along but he could never see: not a law, but grace.

All one had to do, Paul said, was believe—answer God’s love with love.

In Galatians, Paul’s writing to a people who don’t understand that yet and think that the Gentiles should have to become like Jewish Christians and follow the old law. Paul says this is wrong.

² *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage* (2015), Mark Achtemeier

³ Achtemeier

Christ came, Christ died, Christ resurrected for the Gentiles as Gentiles. They are free to remain themselves, even if that means violating the traditional understanding of biblical Law.

Paul, however, is quick to say that freedom isn't license to do whatever they want. The person who bows to every need and desire, who steals or lies or hurts whenever it suits them, isn't free; they're a slave to every whim, a slave to sin. No, freedom means being free to live as the image of God. It means the freedom to know that you were created in that image, loved and saved in that image, and now empowered to live in that image.

That image, Paul says, is love. If you live in that image, your actions will be loving. You'll love God through worship and faith. You'll love your neighbors by being kind and gentle, patient and generous. You'll love yourself by being joyful and exercising self-control.

And in this love, all the old barriers wash away. Jew or Greek. Slave or free. Male and female. Could we add, Gay or straight? Cisgender or transgender? Paul writes, "From now on, therefore, we regard *no one* from a human point of view... If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:16-17).

Everything that Paul has described thus far is completely compatible with committed, loving same-sex relationships and transgender identities. He has made no mention of procreation (which by the way would rule out my family), no mention of body parts staying the same (after all, eunuchs are now affirmed), no mention of body parts fitting together (that old plumbing theory), no mention of complementary gender theory—nothing that would rule out LGBTQ people.

Whether heterosexual or queer, whether cisgender or transgender, we all are capable of falling short, and we all are capable of a life with Christ, a covenantal life that is mutual and self-giving—one that no more requires us to give up our identities than it required the Gentiles to give up theirs.

Historical Paul may have had no clue about what we now understand as sexuality and gender identity. But he did set a vision for a freedom of love that breaks down social barriers, defies old laws and interpretations, and reclaims the image of God. That sounds like a blessing to me.

I know that's a lot to ask. But we've been here before. Committed, faithful Christians used to think that the Bible said that the Earth was the unmoving center of the universe, or that it endorsed slavery or the oppression of women. But when they began to awaken to the bad fruit of those teachings, they returned to Scripture and looked again.

But I also know that reasoning only gets you so far. I imagine that plenty of folks had tried to argue with Paul when he was persecuting the church. It wasn't enough. There was only one word, one *logos*, that was able to change his heart: Christ himself.

Historian and gay Christian John Boswell writes, "Christ was God's unanswerable 'argument.' His people had hardened their hearts against his spoken reasons, the arguments propounded—in *words*—for centuries by the prophets and sages. So he sent an argument in the form of a human being, a life, a person. The argument became flesh and blood: so real that no one could refute or

ignore it... Gay Christians are *logoi* in this sense, arguments incarnated in persons... [who make] their commitment, their lives, their beings an unanswerable, living statement of faithfulness and love.”⁴

In the end, the only thing capable of changing our hearts is the One who waits for us still on that road to Damascus, where he encountered Paul all those years ago. The One we’ve wounded, the One who loves us anyway. Waiting with him is Ryan, the boy who loved God, the boy who loved boys. Waiting with him is every LGBTQ child of God, free in love, ready to show us God. **Amen.**

⁴ Vines