

21 January 2018

The Problem(s) with God: Does God Really Hate My Gay Friends?

Luke 7:36-50

This season I am preaching through some of the hard questions that people ask about God, the ones that often turn people away from faith, and I have noted already that sometimes the problems people have with God are really problems that they have with the church. That is especially true in today's topic, as I look at the questions surrounding homosexuality and the church. There are few issues today that drive more people away from church than our perceived stand on homosexuality, and when you look specifically at young adults, that becomes the number one issue. In 2007, David Kinnaman, the president of the Barna Research group, reported on a multi-year study of young adults' attitudes toward the church, and he found that 91% of young adults agreed with the statement: "The Church is Anti-homosexual." And for most of those, the term "anti-homosexual" equates with "judgmental" and "hypocritical," which were also among the top 5 words that people apply to the Church of Jesus Christ. Kinnaman's results can be found in his book *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*.

So, yeah. The issue of homosexuality has been a problem for a lot of people. How did we get here? Let's start with a broad historical look. There have always been gay and lesbian people, in every time and culture. Occasionally, cultures have acknowledged them and valued their distinctiveness. Some Native American peoples had positions of respect for those who demonstrated both male and female characteristics, and in ancient Mesopotamia there was a city called Mari that apparently had an entire division of the priesthood reserved for gay men. (You hate to feed stereotypes, but one of the roles of those gay priests was liturgical dance. Show tunes, maybe.) But these accepting cultures have been rare. Most societies shun or oppress minority groups that they don't understand, and this has been especially true of the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As a result, gay and lesbian people have either carefully hidden that aspect of themselves from their society, or they have paid the price.

In the late 20th century, this millennia-old status quo began to change. Social and religious pressures against homosexuality remained strong, but in the comparative freedom of western democracy, some gay and lesbian people began not only admitting publically that they existed, but demanding that others acknowledge their existence, too. But that was nothing. In the 21st century, we have seen one of the most remarkable cultural shifts in recorded history, as attitudes took an unprecedented U-turn. As one example: just fifteen years ago, only a third of Americans approved of gay marriage, and today that's almost two thirds. Among millennials – the people who will be running our country in ten years – it's 75%.

This change is taking place amid a much larger cultural shift. Our culture is changing almost as fast in its racial and religious makeup, but the shift in attitudes toward the LGBTQI population has outpaced every other. Such rapid change is going to frighten some people, and there has been a tremendous backlash against homosexuality, especially among evangelical Christians. Probably everyone here has heard of the Westboro Baptist Church, a pseudo-church consisting of the family of one very angry man named Fred Phelps, for whom opposing homosexuality was the sum total of Christianity. But even churches that don't go to the Phelps family's extremes have been a part of this backlash. Evangelicals have sponsored so-called "conversion therapy" centers, designed to cure gay and lesbian people of their homosexuality.

(Remember when “conversion” used to refer to accepting God’s grace and following Christ?) These centers don’t do what they claim but instead cause great damage to their victims, but even after the founder of the largest of those centers closed it down and apologized for the damage he had done, they’re still out there, being promoted by Focus on the Family. Meanwhile, there’s a backlash to the backlash, and other Christians have become crusaders for gay and lesbian rights, with the result that middle-of-the-road churches, like United Methodists, have been paralyzed by the issue. We may be headed toward schism over this, because there is no will to compromise on either side of the current battle lines. That’s where we are.

Each side in our Civil War has its biblical arguments, of course. Those opposed to gay and lesbian acceptance point out – correctly – that although the Bible doesn’t say *much* about homosexuality, everything that it does say assumes that it is a sin. Leviticus 18 calls gay sexual relations “detestable” and in Romans 1 Paul uses homosexuality as an example of human degeneracy, as bad as envy, gossip, and slander, which he mentions in the same passage. Those on the side of acceptance point out, as I did last week, that the central revelation of scripture is the example and teaching of Christ, and that Jesus himself says nothing about homosexuality. Instead we find stories like this one, from the Gospel of Luke. We read chapter 7, verses 36 through 50:

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.’ ⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ ‘Teacher,’ he replied, ‘speak.’ ⁴¹‘A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?’ ⁴³Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’ ⁴⁴Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ ⁴⁸Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

Here, Jesus is humbly honored by a woman who is “a sinner.” Now the text doesn’t tell us what her sin was. American Protestant preachers generally assume it had something to do with sex because . . . because that’s how American Protestant preachers roll, but we don’t know. What we do know is that Simon the Pharisee thought it was a horrible, disqualifying sin, that if Jesus knew what she had done he would never have let her touch his feet but would have kicked her out as unclean. We also know this: Jesus didn’t care. He indicates zero interest in what she might have done in the past and exclusive interest in the fact that she was humbling herself before him, in very much the same way that Simon the Pharisee had not. Her sins are forgiven because of that

humility before the Lord and because “she has shown great love.” Jesus adds, “The one to whom little is forgiven is the one who loves little.”

I hesitated to use this passage today as I talk about homosexuality, because Luke clearly states that this woman is a sinner, and of course that’s one of the arguments that is raging around homosexuality: is it a sin? Some say yes, the Bible says so: it is a sinful choice. Others say no, it’s just the way some people are born, and what kind of God would condemn people for the way they’re born? My own feelings tend toward the latter view – my own gay friends did not choose their orientation but instead eventually accepted it as what is. But at the same time I’m wondering if the sin question even matters. Look, if homosexuality is a sin, that doesn’t make a gay or lesbian person any more of a sinner or more in need of God’s grace than I am. And if it is not a sin, that doesn’t change the fact that that gay or lesbian person is every bit as much a sinner and every bit as much in need of God’s grace as I am. In terms of the depths of our sin and the forgiveness offered us by God, there is no significant difference between human beings. Maybe the reason Jesus seemed unfazed by this woman’s sinfulness was because *every time he sat down to dinner with anyone, including his own disciples and Simon the Pharisee, he was sitting down with sinners. And he loved them.* Why would she be any different? In fact, the only sin that Jesus ever treated as worse than others was the sin of being a self-important, priggish hypocrite who condemns others and justifies yourself. And that’s all I’m going to say about that.

I’m oversimplifying, but that’s how the biblical argument breaks down. Some look at very precise and clear condemnations of homosexuality in the Old Testament and Paul, and others look to the broader example of Christ, who counted all people the same and welcomed all outsiders to his grace. But it’s not even really about the Bible, you know. A question we should ask is how did this issue – mentioned only five or six times in scripture and not at all by Christ – become the lightning rod for every church battle? It makes no sense. Why is this issue the last fortress that must not fall or the last bridge that must be taken? And this is why I started with that long summary of our social background. I don’t think it’s really about homosexuality at all, or about the Bible or about Christianity or about God; it’s the culture war. For whatever reason homosexuality has come to represent all the social change that is sweeping our time, and those who are troubled by that change have drawn this line in the sand, while those who eagerly embrace change have accepted the challenge. We’re not arguing about the Bible; we’re each using the Bible to fight the larger culture war, and that makes me angry, because I am a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I am not called to fight someone else’s culture war on the battlefield of their choosing. I get it all the time. United Methodist colleagues on both sides of the battle lines, trying to enlist me on their side. But I don’t want to be a gay rights advocate and I don’t want to be anti-gay. I want to be like Jesus. To me, that means honoring and loving each person as another human being loved by God exactly as I am. So, to the title question of this sermon – Does God hate my gay friends? – I have an answer. No.

We have a team in our church that has been working on this question for a while, and the first stage of their work is the “inclusion statement” on the front of your bulletin. I inherited this group. They were already at work before I got here last summer, and at first I was cautious, for the reasons I’ve just given. I didn’t really want the church to take its identity from which side of a hot button issue we were on in the culture wars. But then I read the statement:

We embrace all of God’s children as persons of sacred worth regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, national origin, culture, tradition, physical or

mental ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other difference real or perceived, and welcome all people into the life of this congregation.

This isn't a pro-gay statement. This is a pro-human-being statement. This is a no-one-is-outside God's grace statement and a challenge to us to live up to Christ's own example, and I'll stand with it. I can name lots of people I love who will think I'm wrong. But if I'm going to make a mistake, I want it to be on the side of loving much. I don't want it to be the mistake that Simon the Pharisee made, excluding someone else from God's presence whom God waits eagerly to receive.