

“When Christians Get it Wrong—When Addressing Homosexuality”

Today we’re continuing in the message series, *When Christians Get it Wrong*. We’re trying to understand why 40% of young adults age 16 to 29 are opting out of Christianity. And it’s not just that they’re dropping out for a few years and plan on reconnecting down the road. In the 1980’s one in ten young adults called themselves agnostics or atheists, today it’s twice that many. Many people of all ages are saying, “I respect Jesus, but I’m repelled by Christianity and Christians.” We’re taking a hard look at why.

I want to be clear that this is not about talking to young adults who’ve opted out of Christianity and doing what they want us to do and being what they want us to be and maybe they’ll reconnect to church. No. The goal is to ask, “Do they have something important to teach us about where we might really be getting it wrong? Are they pointing to places where we are not being faithful to what Jesus calls us to be?”

My hope is also that for those who have opted out of Christianity, that when they hear what it’s really supposed to be about, they would say, “You know, I might be interested in following this Jesus you’re talking about.”

Today we’re turning to the topic that causes the most concern for young adults—the issue of homosexuality. Honestly, I’d rather not talk about it because it can be so divisive and that’s not what I want. I’m tempted to just ignore it. But listen, when young people who have opted out of church are asked to describe Christianity, the number one answer given is anti-homosexual. 91% of those asked gave that as their number one response. How do we do this series on when Christians get it wrong and not talk about that?

I want you to hear from David Kinnaman, the president of The Barna Research group. He’s the one who led in the research on this and wrote the book *UnChristian* that’s been at the heart of this series. Young adults are saying, “Jesus hung around prostitutes, tax collectors, people labeled as sinners. We think he would have done the same with homosexuals. But we don’t see you Christians acting much like Jesus. In fact you seem to have a special contempt for homosexuals.”

Part of what’s going on today is that young people see homosexuals different than I did at their age. When I was kid at Southeast Elementary School in Warrensburg through 6th grade, I didn’t know a single gay kid—at least not at the time. Because back then you didn’t dare tell anybody you were different or having the thoughts or feelings young gay kids might be having. If you did, you were diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder.

In Jr. High, the worst thing you could call another boy, if you really wanted to put them down, you called them a queer or a fag. That was one of the most insulting things you could do. But I didn’t know any gay kids.

In high school in the early 1980’s there were no gay kids, at least not that anybody knew about. Nobody was gay, but there was plenty of gay-bashing talk.

I don’t ever remember it being talked about in church, or Sunday School, or youth group. Although somewhere along the way somebody taught me about what Leviticus in the Old Testament said about homosexuality. That it’s detestable. Some versions say it’s an abomination. I didn’t have any problems with that, because I didn’t know any gay people and it wasn’t my problem. My problem was praying every single day, “Help me keep my hands off the girls. God please help me!” It was not my problem, it wasn’t in my world. I never really had to think about it or wrestle with it.

Today’s young people are in a different place. They all know somebody who is gay. They have friends who are gay. They hear their stories and for them it’s hard to hear that their friend is detestable, or an abomination. And when they hear Christians berate their friends, they are protective of their friends and they are repelled by that form of Christianity. And it’s not just young adults. You have neighbors, and co-workers, and family members and friends who are gay.

Here’s what I’m getting at: It’s one thing when this issue is hypothetical, it’s another thing when we’re talking about people you care about. That changes things and that’s where younger generations are. They see this issue differently than I did at their age. Again, I’m not suggesting we take a poll of what young adults think morality and values ought to look like and we adopt those values. That’s not what I’m talking about. But it is important that we listen to young adults to see if there is something they have to say to us, to challenge us about, that would help us be more authentically Christian. It’s important that Christians wrestle with this issue. And it’s important for Saint Paul’s because we’re reflective of our society in general, then about 5% of the people who call this their church home have a homosexual orientation. We have to wrestle with this because some of these people, are your kids, or your grandkids, or your nieces and nephews.

I've also got to recognize that this is a very divisive issue. Our country is divided on this, mainline churches are divided on this, in the next 10 years evangelical churches will be divided on this. Here at Saint Paul's there are people who are more on the right on this issue and there are people more on the left of this issue. And my goal is not to get anybody to change their position on this issue. My goal is to stretch us and give us some tools to think about this and ultimately bring us together, whatever our viewpoint, to act like Jesus would act toward all people, gay or straight. What I know for a fact is that there are deeply committed Christians on both sides of this issue but ultimately we cannot allow this one issued to keep us from our mission of leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ.

There is tension over this issue and I think the official stance of the United Methodist Church captures that tension. This comes from our *Book of Discipline*. It sums up our official view saying: "We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God...[Although] The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons." (UMC *Book of Discipline*, 2008).

I've also got to be honest and say that while my views about homosexuality have changed over time, I don't have this all figured out. But there two key things that are the sources of my understanding this issue: my study of scripture, and getting to know gay and lesbian people, some of them your kids.

Let's start with the Bible. This is where the divisions among Christians begin. It's very important that we understand that there are 6 references to homosexuality in the Bible. That's very small number. Compare that to over 500 references to prayer, 1,000 references to money and possessions, over a thousand references the Kingdom of God. I think it's important to keep that in perspective. It's also important to understand the contexts of these passages. The two most important passages in the Old Testament come from the book of law called Leviticus. They are 18:22 and 20:13. They are a part of the Jewish holiness code, the purity laws, the kosher laws. These are the verses that call homosexuality detestable, and say that those found engaging in it should be put to death. But be careful because if you want to embrace those passages as weapons against homosexuals, you can't ignore that those same chapters say the exact same thing about adultery—that it's detestable and those caught in the act are to be put to death. Keep these in context.

By the way, those same laws, that holiness code, the kosher laws, they are the ones that say not to eat shellfish, or pork or touch the skin of a dead pig. So much for shrimp, bacon and playing football. This is the code that talked about what you could and couldn't wear, eat, etc.

Then in the New Testament we see three passages in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians we see that homosexuality is said to be contrary to Christian practice. In 1 Timothy we find a reference to a pagan practice of castrating boys so they could be sexually exploited.

Romans 1:26 and following addresses homosexuality as an exchange of natural desire for unnatural.

The witness of scripture is clear that homosexuality is not consistent with God's plan. But it is also clear that homosexuality received almost no attention in the greater witness of scripture. It was not a prevalent issue in the minds of the writers of the Old Testament, or the New Testament. In the Bible, Jesus never addressed homosexuality. We need to keep all that in perspective.

Some say that what the scriptures said about women and slavery we have looked at and interpreted for modern times, and that we need to do the same regarding homosexuality and accepting it. Others say if we do that then we start sliding down the slippery slope of just picking and choosing which parts of the Bible are convenient to follow and it won't take long before we completely lose our identity and our understanding of God's call for us to be holy. That is the tension we live within and there is no easy resolution in that. The scriptures are complex and to oversimplify them is a dangerous way to make them a weapon to hurt people.

Now, it's important for us to know that scientists disagree on the cause of homosexuality. Some say that it's genetic, some say hormonal, some say it has do with the early environment of the child. There's not widespread agreement. I've had parents tell me that their kid was different from the start and they knew early-on.

There's also not agreement on the percentage of people who are homosexual. Estimates run from 1% to 10%. The most common finding is that about 5% of the population has a homosexual orientation but only about 1% engage in homosexual behavior.

There is a lot of disagree about the causes of homosexuality and in the percentage of the populations that's gay, but in my research I found consensus that no one chooses to be homosexual--that the orientation happens

early in life without a conscious decision. And most sociologists say that homosexuality is a spectrum. There are some who are more homosexual than others. That those who are on the side of the spectrum closer to heterosexuality can and often do live fulfilling lives as straight people, those on the other end of the spectrum simply cannot. But either way, the orientation is not a conscious choice.

That's important because I've heard preachers lambast gays and lesbians saying that if they just wanted to, if they just prayed more, those homosexual tendencies would just go away. There are cases where that's happened, but it almost never does. And when straight Christians start talking that way, all they end up doing is laying guilt and shame and pushing homosexuals away from Christ.

Let's talk about fear. "**We must address our fears.**" It seems to me that fear is what has made this such a divisive issue. Fear on both sides. It is what has led to gay-bashing and hate language from straight people. And when 95% of the population is one way, and 5% is another, that five percent is looked at with fear and suspicion. For gays, fear has led to massive pushes for legislation by homosexuals—fearing that they will lose basic human rights.

I tried this week to figure out what some of those fears might be for straight people. There is the fear that homosexuals are somehow undermining marriage and family. There is the fear that homosexuals will recruit our children to be gay. There is a fear that homosexuality is equated with perversions of all kinds that need to be suppressed.

Let's talk about these. It's become more clear to me that homosexuality is not a threat to marriage and family. I've read the arguments about that and I don't find them valid. Simply because marriages and families have broken down just fine on their own. The real threats to marriages and families are infidelity, selfishness, materialism, idolatry, and personally turning your back on God. These are the real threats in regard to our marriages and families. Fear makes us put the blame where it doesn't belong.

And from what I've researched, I don't think we have to worry about the gay community recruiting our children. Sexual orientation is not a choice that a person can be persuaded to take if they are not already oriented that way. What we do have to worry about recruiting our children is a boat load of other things. My kids live in a very godly home and they are surrounded by the teachings of Jesus and a life of faith, but there are some very loud voices that call out to them all the time recruiting them. I'm talking about the voices of materialism. The voices of image over substance. The voices of self-addiction. The voices of pleasure over compassion. That's what is recruiting our children. That's the threat we need to address.

Then this fear of homosexuality leading to all kinds of perversion. A big source of this fear was a video circulated starting in 1992 called *The Gay Agenda* by the Family Research Council—a Christian organization. Hundreds of thousands of copies were sold primarily through churches. It was a video that depicted lewd acts in public by homosexuals at certain events and parades. It was meant to give the impression that that is what all homosexuals were doing. But let's think that through. That would be like a film crew going to New Orleans on Mardi Gras and filming all the lewd acts of the heterosexuals there and saying that's what all straight people are doing—that that's what I am doing. I would be so offended and outraged, even more so if that came from a Christian organization. To blame homosexuals for perversion in our culture is to pretend that it's not coming from everywhere else. We need to name our fears regarding homosexuality and address those fears as Christians. John wrote in the New Testament that, "...**perfect love drives out fear**" (1 John 4:18).

Whatever our view of homosexuality is, it's deeply affected when we know homosexual people. What has affected my view of homosexuality more than anything is getting to know homosexual people. People who call this their church home, some of them literally your kids. Some of them I baptized as babies, and we made a promise to these kids.

I had a conversation with a young woman a couple of years ago who had been a part of this church since she was little. She told me how she'd really been struggling, fighting off feelings that she'd had her whole life. She knew she was homosexual and told me how she'd just been bombarded with the message (not here, but other places) that she was bad, evil, that God didn't love her, that she should just pray harder and she would change. She, prayed, and prayed and prayed and prayed and it didn't go away. She didn't change, she believed that she couldn't. She wanted to know if she could still be a Christian, still be a part of this church.

I've had many conversations like that. One young man talked about his struggle in the same way. Constantly hearing messages from TV preachers about how he was an abomination. He wondered if God really did hate him.

There's the gay man who's been in a committed monogamous relationship for most of his adult life. He's a dedicated Christian, he runs his own business, he's always looking for ways to help people who are poor, needy, broken. He's a friend of mine. He struggles with the messages he hears. He worries about his safety.

He knows I'm not at a place where I approve of homosexual behavior. How can I, it's so foreign to me that I simply cannot comprehend it. But he knows that I will stand up for him, sacrifice for him, even die for him, just like I would for my straight friends.

I wrestle with what scripture says about this, but what I do know is that these are real people. They're my friends, they're your kids and grandkids, and when they're you're kids this issue takes on a whole different perspective.

So that takes me to Jesus. Jesus had this way of putting people before rules. He always did it. I love what unfolds in John chapter 4. This is so defining for Jesus. In this passage of scripture he's gone into an area of the Holy Land called Samaria. Remember that the Jews don't associate with the Samaritans. Jesus goes into Samaria with his disciples. They arrive in a town and Jesus sends his disciples to get something to eat. He's tired so he stops at a well to rest.

A woman shows up and says, "Could you get me a drink." She's surprised because Jews don't drink after Samaritans. She says, "You're a Jew, I'm a Samaritan, how can you ask me for a drink?" Jesus says, "If you knew who it is that's asking you for a drink, you'd ask for living water, and I'd give it to you and you'd never be thirsty again." She says, "I want some of that water." And he said, "Go and get your husband." Back before you had wedding rings, that was a way to ask if you're married. She says, "I don't have a husband." He says, "You've told me the truth. You've been married and divorced 5 times and the man you're living with now, you're not married to." And then he reveals to her that he is the Messiah and she goes and finds everybody in town that she knows and she brings them to Jesus and they come to believe in him.

Notice that nowhere in there does he lecture her on the sins of divorce or living with a man before they're married. It's not that's it's unimportant. He just doesn't mention it. Notice that nowhere does Jesus say, "Before you go and tell anybody about me, go straighten up your life and get out of your sin." He doesn't do that. He simply loves her and offers her living water and she becomes the first missionary and evangelist to her own people and the world is changed.

That's what Jesus was like and that's part of what I love about him. I want to invite us to be those kind of Christians, the Jesus kind of Christians. We won't all agree about homosexuality—I know we won't. And we're all being stretched in trying to figure things out. But here's what we can agree on: that Jesus loved people. He loved people that other people wouldn't love and he reached out to them. And if we call ourselves followers of his, we ruthlessly eliminate derogatory comments, bashing, and trashing. And we take it a step further and we stand up when we hear it and we say, "That is not right." Whether you approve of homosexuality or not, that is the call for people who love like Jesus loved.

A number of years ago I was vice president for Joplin Ministerial Alliance and I and the president of the Ministerial Alliance were invited to meet with a group of gay Christians who were starting a church in Joplin. We met for lunch at a restaurant and there were probably 2 gay men, 2 gay women and one man who was the parent of gay daughter.

We ate lunch, we chatted, and then they hesitantly brought up what they wanted to talk about. They told us they were starting a church, and they just wanted to know if they would be safe. They wanted to know if we would call our churches to violence against them—to hurt them, or their pastor, or burn down their building. If we had those kind of intentions, they just wanted to be forewarned. They didn't put it in these words, but they wanted to know if their quest to know Jesus, was going to be met with violence from his followers. That had to be one of the most heartbreaking questions, I've ever been asked, because it spoke so much. I could only speak for myself, but of course we would never do that.

Listen, I am not at a place where I approve of homosexual behavior—I just don't get it. But I am at a place where I disapprove of a Christianity that has forgotten how love people that Jesus will never stop loving. Jesus knew the rules, and sometimes he broke the rules in order to show truly unconditional, protective love. Sometimes we must also break the rules to show that same unconditional, protective love. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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