

RIGHTLY EXPLAINING THE WORD OF TRUTH

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 13, 2019
Based on Galatians 5:16–23a; I Cor. 6:9–10; I Timothy 1:8–11; II Timothy 2:15***

The sermon this morning is the beginning of a sermon series entitled, “The Way Forward: What God Says to the Church on Human Sexuality.” The title relates to a decision that our denomination will soon be making about our church’s official stance on human sexuality. It is pretty safe to say that most United Methodist pastors would rather not be preaching about this, and some right now are choosing to simply stay silent. The subject is divisive, as it divides people according to opinions, and it divides people according to sexual orientation. My own basic perspective is to see each person as a child of God. Can we not leave it at that? Unfortunately we cannot leave it at that, because of our current church position and the ferment around it. Currently there are major disagreements in the United Methodist Church about what our church stand should be; and our bishops are seeking to lead the church to find a way forward—hence the sermon series title. Our aim in this series will be to thoroughly study everything in the Bible that has anything to do with same-sex relationships; we will find in the process that the relevant passages actually speak to everyone. There is also a concurrent University of Life class looking at the same Scriptures each week, being led by Rev. Doug Denton, meeting each Sunday morning from 9:30 to 10:15 in room 200, which provides further opportunity for discussion and reflection. Our guiding principle in all this will be II Timothy 2:15—“Study to show yourself approved unto God, that you may rightly explain the word of truth.” {prayer}

The United Methodist Church has an official position on a great variety of issues. That position is spelled out in a book that is called the Discipline. It normally does not make for exciting reading. It is the set of United Methodist Church rules. Unlike the Bible, the Discipline makes no claim to divine inspiration or infallibility; so as a United Methodist, you are free to disagree with anything that the Discipline says. Nevertheless, we are constrained as church to follow the basic rules in the Discipline.

The Discipline has a section on human sexuality, in a part called the Social Principles; and in that section there is the following sentence: “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” (Discipline, paragraph 161F) A great many United Methodists disagree with that statement and wish to see it changed. There are other related statements that depend upon this main one. There is a rule against same-sex weddings being performed in a United Methodist Church or by a United Methodist pastor. There is a rule against the ordination or appointment of what the Discipline calls “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” There are, at the same time, admonitions such as the following: “We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image

of God. 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.” (Discipline, paragraph 161F) Obviously, there is some tension among these various statements and positions.

So who decides on all this? The United Methodist Church has a structure that goes back to the very beginning of the church. In the book of Acts, we are told about a dispute among early church leaders about how the church should relate to Gentiles—that is, non-Jews—who wanted to become Christian. The basic question was, “Do Gentiles need to become Jews in order to follow Jesus?” We will return to that story later in this sermon series; but the way the church decided that question was by holding a council—a meeting of church leaders in Jerusalem, that collectively sought God’s guidance. This established the pattern that the early church subsequently followed. There would be a long sequence of church councils—in Nicea, in Chalcedon, in Ephesus—that would decide basic questions about church belief and practice. This was essentially a democratic process, with delegates gathering together from all parts of the church to make a decision together, hopefully under God’s guidance. Later on, in the western church, the bishop of Rome, called the pope, began to claim that he had absolute authority, and this led to a split between east and west. The Catholic Church in the west adopted a monarchical model, in which the pope functioned very much like a medieval king. But in the Protestant reformation, in the sixteenth century, Protestant churches reclaimed the ancient tradition of church councils, and Protestant denominations today almost all use this model, with delegates gathering on some regular basis to make decisions for the whole church. The Presbyterians call that gathering the General Assembly; the Reformed church calls it a Synod; United Methodists call it the General Conference.

Our General Conference meets every four years, and every time it meets, there is a major effort to change the statements relating to same-sex relationships. As best as we can tell, if it were up to American United Methodists only, the statement that ‘the United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching’ would actually have been eliminated some years ago, and the church would have moved to a position allowing for same-sex marriage and the ordination of anyone who demonstrated the gifts for ministry, regardless of sexual orientation. But the United Methodist Church is a global denomination. Of the more than twelve million United Methodists worldwide, only 56% are Americans. Less than 1% are European, mostly German, about 2% are in the Philippines or other parts of Asia, and more than 40% are African, where our church is growing rapidly. There are also affiliated Methodist churches in other countries, such as the church in Brazil.

Our African churches are traditionally conservative in the whole area of same-sex relations, as African countries are generally, and the African vote has repeatedly tipped the scales in favor of maintaining the current position. The vote has often been about

55%–45% in favor of keeping the current church stance. Obviously, our church is very divided. The divisions are worldwide. While the African church is conservative, the European church wants change; and the divisions are also very much evident in the United States, where the southern churches tend to be conservative, the northeastern and western churches tend to be liberal, and the Midwestern churches are just all mixed up. Many Ohio churches have broadly differing perspectives within the same congregation.

At the last General Conference, held in Portland, Oregon, it looked as if it was going to be the usual course of wrangling over the issue leading nowhere, but the decision finally was made to hold a special General Conference that would deal solely with the church's stands on human sexuality. A commission was established to develop a plan to move the church forward in a new way; I will talk more about that in the future. The General Conference is going to take place in few weeks, in late February, in St. Louis. This sermon series will take us up to and just beyond that special General Conference. We really do not know what the final decision will be.

As our bishops have looked at the broad divergence of opinion in the church, one of the main observations they have made is that people on all sides of this issue are seeking to be faithful to God and to take God's Word in the Bible seriously. Those who have a conservative stance have that stance because they feel that they are following what the Bible teaches; while those advocating for change feel that they are acting according to what the Bible teaches. In that scenario, the bishops are urging everyone to respect one another and recognize that all of us in the church are sincerely seeking to follow God's will.

But if everyone is looking to the Bible, why are we not drawing the same conclusions? A major reason is because when it comes to same-sex relationships, the Bible says almost nothing. This in itself is an issue to which we will return, namely, why is it exactly that the Bible says almost nothing? But just consider: I have seven sermons planned in this series, and I will be covering every single passage in the entire Bible that has anything remotely to do with same-sex relationships. Moreover, within those few passages, there are some real challenges for us to rightly understand what is being said, because of major differences between the Bible's cultural setting and our own. A very good example of that is the passages that were read this morning.

In the ancient world, ethical writings would often contain lists of good behaviors and bad behaviors. Paul followed this literary pattern in several of his letters to audiences who were very familiar with this pattern in Greek discourse. We saw it in the three readings that we heard, which were all lists of sinful behaviors. One such list is in Galatians 5.

In that passage, Paul contrasts the desires of the flesh with the desires of the Spirit. [*Live by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. Galatians 5:16*] By desires of the flesh, he does not simply mean bodily desires. We desire food all the time, and there is

nothing wrong with that, unless you are working on a diet. But the phrase “desires of the flesh” is a specific phrase Paul uses to denote sinful desires, as opposed to spiritually healthy desires. To illustrate what he is talking about, he then moves into a list of prime sinful behaviors. As he said, “The works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.” (Galatians 5:19–21) There are two items in this list relating to sexual behavior—fornication and licentiousness. These terms refer to general sexual looseness and promiscuity. These terms of course apply to everyone, and are very relevant to today, as our society has a good deal of trouble with sexual promiscuity. There is no specific mention of same-sex relationships. This naturally raises the question: if same-sex relations were considered to be a problem in the church, a significant sin, why is there no reference in this list, especially when the list includes fifteen items, two of them relating to sexual practices? This is one of many examples in the Bible of a place where human sinfulness is being extensively discussed, and same-sex relationships are not mentioned, raising the question as to whether there ought to be an issue here in the first place. We will return to that question as this series continues.

There is, however, another passage where Paul has a list of sinful behaviors, and he does include a reference to some sort of same-sex behavior. This is in first Corinthians chapter six, one of the most oft-cited passages in the present debate. He begins by saying, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?” (1 Corinthians 6:9). He then continues with another list of sinful behaviors—“fornicators, idolators, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers” (1 Cor. 6:9–10). Here we have two words that refer specifically to some kind of homosexual behavior, which have been translated into English in all sorts of ways. In the New Revised Standard Version, the terms are translated as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites.” It is important to remember that the New Testament was written in Greek, and while it is generally rather easy and straightforward to translate the Greek into English, sometimes there are particular Greek words that have a nuance or a specific meaning that just has no good English equivalent. That is the case here; the two Greek words being translated are terms referring to a very specific kind of practice in the Greco-Roman world.

The first word is *μαλακοὶ malakoi*, translated “male prostitutes,” but it actually has a more specific meaning than that. This word has caused some confusion for translators over the centuries, because it had a standard meaning in Greek, but by the first century it had also come to have a slang meaning. The term literally means “softies,” but in the first century, it had come to be a common slang word for “boy prostitutes.” This term is referring to the man-boy sex trade that was very much a part of Greco-Roman culture. Some boys willingly engaged in this; many others were forced, most of them being “catamites” or sex slaves. Paul is condemning the whole business. We certainly would as

well. The second word is the one translated “sodomites.” That English word is quite problematic in itself; we will be talking next week about the whole story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Greek word behind it is ἀρσενικοῖται *arsenokoitai*, which is a very obscure term, but the clearest understanding is that it refers to the adult males who were the customers of those boys. Our most precise English word for that is pederast—a man who abuses boys. This is something that we continue to see today—it has been serious problem, of course, in the Catholic church—and it is something that we all thoroughly condemn. But in the Greco-Roman world, this kind of man-boy sexual practice was widespread. It would have been especially prevalent in the city of Corinth, a Greek port city full of traders and sailors, a place known for its revelry and debauchery. We can understand, therefore, why Paul would specifically mention this in his letter to the church at Corinth. He is clearly condemning the practice. But of course, this has little relevance to what we are thinking about today whenever we think about same-sex adults in a loving, long-term relationship. First Corinthians chapter 6 is thus a prime example of a Biblical passage where there is a reference to a homosexual practice, but it is to a very specific ancient sort of practice that we readily join in condemning. This passage is relevant if we are talking about child abuse, but it has little to say for our present discussion about church rules with regard to adult relationships among LGBT people.

The third list of sinful behaviors that we heard this morning came from I Timothy, where Paul wrote, “The law [of God] is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God.” (I Timothy 1:9–11) Again the word being translated as “sodomites” is the word *arsenokoitai*, or pederasts. This Greek word has actually been translated with that precise meaning for centuries. When Martin Luther did his translation of the Bible into German in the sixteenth century, he translated *arsenokoitai* as *Knabenschänder*—a German word that means specifically men who abuse boys, or pederasts. The same terminology is used in modern German translations. A corresponding word appears in Dutch translations (*knapenschenders*) and also in French translations (*les pédérastes*) of both I Timothy and I Corinthians 6. But ever since the King James Version translated *arsenokoitai* into English as “them that defile themselves with mankind,” English translations have tended to render this term very broadly. The New International Version, for example, which is especially popular in nondenominational or evangelical churches, translates *arsenokoitai* in I Timothy as “those practicing homosexuality.”

This points to one of the major issues that we have when we are trying to rightly understand the Bible on this subject. There are a number of cases where translators in the past have taken a Hebrew or Greek term that had a very specific meaning in ancient culture and translated it as though it referred in a blanket way to all LGBT people, or at

least in this case to all male homosexuals. This has happened not only in English but in a number of other languages; and this has led to major misunderstandings of what the Bible is actually saying. If we are to fulfill the admonition of II Timothy and rightly explain the Scriptures, we need to investigate what God's Word truly and precisely is. This is what we will be seeking to do throughout this sermon series.

So it is that the references to homosexuality in I Corinthians and I Timothy have little to say to the present day unless we are talking about pederasty. But there is at least one very important lesson for the present situation of our church that is embedded in our Scriptures for today—in that passage from Galatians. Among the 15 condemnable behaviors that Paul listed in those verses, six of them are the following: enmities, strife, anger, quarrels, dissensions, and factions. What seemed to bother Paul more than anything was division and heated arguing in the church. This is why the United Methodist Church is approaching the coming General Conference by encouraging all United Methodists to be in respectful, loving conversation with one another. If we have differing understandings of the Bible, it is only because we are all struggling to understand difficult passages faithfully. Paul urges us, within all of that, to strive for spiritual unity and genuine respect and care for one another. We are aiming for that as a church, as we continue to search God's Word, and we seek to grow together in God's truth and grace.