

**WHAT GOD CREATES IS GOOD**  
***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 17, 2019***  
***Base on Genesis 1:26-27,31; Genesis 2:15-24***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Way Forward: What God Says to the Church on Human Sexuality.” The title relates to the momentous decision approaching the United Methodist Church, as a special General Conference is being held to decide whether and how to change the church’s current official position on human sexuality. The present rules do not allow for same-sex weddings in the church, nor do they allow for the ordination of what our rules call “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” The church position, stated in the Discipline, our church rule book, does insist that churches should welcome everyone, and should treat everyone with compassion, but at present our denomination does not approve the practice of any sexuality that is not heterosexuality. As the Discipline puts it, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” (Discipline, paragraph 161F) This morning we will continue our consideration of what the Bible says about all this.

{prayer}

The current statement in our Discipline declares, in essence, that the practice of homosexuality is a sin; the central question being debated in many Christian circles is whether that assessment is in fact Biblical. In order for something to be sinful, it cannot be something that is a natural part of who you are. If God made you short, it cannot be sinful to be short, since God made you short, or at least created the mechanisms of genetics that resulted in your height; and what God makes, according to the Bible, is good. For something to be sinful, it has to involve a personal choice, whereby you are in some way choosing against God. The quintessential image of sin is the picture of Eve choosing to eat the forbidden fruit that God told her not to eat.

For many years, it was commonly thought that homosexual orientation involved a personal choice—that people were in some sense choosing to go whatever route they were going in their sexual orientation and that they could choose to go otherwise. Thus there were a number of Christian organizations whose stated mission was to move people to choose a straight orientation and who claimed that they could enable LGBT people to convert to heterosexuality, or at least to completely tamp down their homosexuality. The leading entity in that realm was Exodus International, which was a kind of umbrella organization that promoted a so-called conversion therapy for LGBT people.

Exodus International began in 1976; it disbanded in 2013. The leader of the organization, Alan Chambers, admitted, upon the dissolution of Exodus International, that the methods used by the organization had not worked, that in fact they had caused much more harm than good; and he apologized for all the pain and suffering caused.

Today there is broad agreement, grounded in many scientific studies, that sexual orientation is a trait that is a given, much like skin color or mental capacity or the color of your beard. This is why the United Methodist church, like many Christian churches, believes that it would be completely unchristian to hate or despise or not welcome people who have a same-gender orientation. We should love and welcome everyone that God has made. As our Discipline states, “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.” It is not same-sex orientation that is condemned; it is the *practice* of homosexuality that is condemned in our Discipline, and it is self-avowed *practicing* homosexuals who cannot serve as ministers. But if people with a same-sex orientation cannot practice their sexuality, this would mean that God gave to LGBT people a sexuality that somehow was not worthy—that there was something inherently wrong with it—and that contradicts the Genesis principle that what God creates is good.

When churches say that LGBT people should not practice their sexuality, this means of course that they must be perpetually celibate; and this in fact is the basic position in many conservative churches today—that LGBT people are morally right with God as long as they commit to life-long celibacy. Does the Bible have anything to say about that?

Jesus never said anything about homosexuality, a significant fact we have already noted in this series. He did have something to say about celibacy, when he said to his disciples, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” (Matthew 19:11-12)

We talked in the last installment of this sermon series about eunuchs, and the very interesting story about a eunuch in the book Acts. A eunuch was a man, serving in an ancient king’s court, who was surgically altered so as to be unable to molest the women in the king’s harem. That’s the middle group to which Jesus refers—those who have been “made eunuchs by others.” There are others who have some kind of congenital, biological hindrance to sexual activity; that would be the first group. Then there would be those, Jesus said, “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” This does not suggest that people are performing surgery on themselves; it refers to people who choose life-long celibacy as a part of serving God. This would include Catholic priests today. So there are three kinds of celibacy—biologically given, imposed by others, or chosen—and the whole thing is framed by the statements, “Not everyone can accept this teaching” and “let anyone accept this who can.” The clear implication is that life-long celibacy is not something that is to be expected of people. It is a given for some; it is chosen by others. But when Jesus said, “Not everyone can accept this,” he was plainly saying that life-long celibacy cannot be considered a moral requirement. This means that

the Shakers, who required their members to commit to life-long celibacy, missed the mark. (That's why they are no longer around!)

We do believe that celibacy is the right stance for periods of life. We encourage young people to abstain from sexual activity until marriage; because according to the Bible, sexual activity is intended for the covenant of marriage. Jesus' whole statement about eunuchs comes right after a discussion about marriage. Some people, of course, choose to be single; others end up single after divorce or being widowed, and we know that it is possible to find real fulfillment in the single life. The apostle Paul said that if you are single and celibate, it is actually best to remain that way; because you save yourself a whole lot of trouble, and you can devote yourself more fully to God. On other hand, he said, if you just have to, if you are burning with passion, go ahead and get married! For a single person, who is heterosexual, the option of marriage is always there.

But according to our church's present stance, for LGBT people, the option of marriage is not there. This creates a church position in which the pieces, Biblically speaking, do not add up. We recognize that sexual orientation is a trait, which means that God creates some people such that they have a same-sex orientation. We believe that sexuality is meant to be expressed in the covenant of marriage. We believe that lifelong celibacy can be chosen but cannot be imposed. Yet the church insists that those who are LGBT must commit to lifelong celibacy and are never to express their sexuality in a covenant of marriage. The incoherence in that is exactly why many United Methodists believe we need to change the stance of the church to allow for marriage in the church for all people. But would that fit with the overall Biblical vision for sexuality and marriage? We can gain real insight by looking again at the Scripture that was read earlier—the account of God's creation of humanity.

In presentations on the traditional view of marriage, there has been a long-standing quip that, in the beginning, God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. The argument is that the man-woman relationship is the one and only normative relationship being presented in the Bible as God's plan for humanity. But this view overlooks central aspects of the Genesis story.

The book of Genesis does not in fact say that God created a man named Adam, since Adam in ancient Hebrew is not a name. In Hebrew, Adam (or ah-dahm) is a word that means "human being." Genesis 1:27 says that "God created *ha-adam* אָדָם—the *human being*, or as the New Revised Standard Version puts it, "God created humankind." The word *adam* does not specify any gender or orientation, which is why after saying that God created "*the adam*," the passage goes on to say that God created people "male and female."

When the story of creation is continued in chapter two, it says that "God put *ha-adam*—the *human being* in the Garden of Eden." (Genesis 2:15) English translations are typically misleading at this point, as they commonly say that God put a "man" in the garden, and they go on to describe the man doing one thing or another, which leads people

to imagine a male figure in the garden. But the actual Hebrew uses the word *adam* consistently at this point; the figure God puts in the garden is the *adam*—*human being*, gender unspecified.

The garden is paradise. It is beautiful and bountiful. But God says, “It is not good that the *adam* should be alone; I will make a suitable helper.” (Genesis 2:18) There follows the story of God creating all sorts of animals and bringing them to the *adam*, who names each one. But, the story reports. “for the *adam* there was not found a partner.” (Genesis 2:20) So God causes a deep sleep to fall upon the human being, and creates another person from the rib; and it is then that two new Hebrew words are introduced in the story—*ish*, meaning man, and *ishah*, meaning woman. She is called *ishah* because she was taken out of *ish*. [*This one shall be called ishah (woman), having been taken out of ish (man)* Genesis 2:23]

These Genesis passages lay out foundational truths about who we are. The first point is that we are created by God, and Genesis repeatedly declares that what God creates is good. This means that however people are made, whether they have black skin or white, whether they are tall or short, whether they are super high functioning or differently abled, they are a good creation of God. So what about sexual orientation? On the basis of Genesis, we are moved to recognize that all people are created in a way that is good and worthwhile in God’s sight.

The second major point is that “it is not good for a person to be alone.” We are created to be in relationship with others. If this is the case, then how can we say that God created a certain group of people, namely LGBT people, with the intention that they *should* be alone? It is true that single people can find very meaningful fellowship in friendships and in extended family and in communities. But why would God create some people with a certain sexual orientation with the intention that they would never be allowed to find a partner in the same way that heterosexual people do, and they would never be allowed to enter a covenant of marriage, which is a fundamental institution affirmed by God at the end of the Genesis story?

One of the challenges we have when thinking of the Genesis story is that we tend to have in mind a certain traditional way of envisioning the story, backed up by traditional paintings of the story. We picture a man and a woman in a garden. But the actual picture in the whole Genesis story is more complex—it is of an androgynous human being who is literally pulled into pieces to finally make a man and a woman. The actual picture says that our humanity is much deeper than the sexual aspects of us; and therefore the principles laid out in Genesis transcend sexuality. Genesis declares that everyone is a child of God, and everyone is meant for community—with God and with one another.

In that picture, the church is called finally to be the ideal community—a fellowship where everyone has a place, where there are no barriers, and where all can develop their

God-given nature. But can the United Methodist Church be that kind of community with its present policies?

So where is all this heading? The special session of General Conference, to consider and possibly change the policies of our church, begins this Saturday, Feb. 23, and continues through the following Tuesday, Feb. 26. Whatever it decides, or does not decide, will be of great significance for all United Methodists; and that is why I have been doing this sermon series, so that we have a Biblical background for all that is being considered. The series will continue for the next two weeks, during the General Conference, and just beyond it. There is information in the bulletin about how you can connect online with the General Conference proceedings. Please be in prayer for our whole church in the coming days, so that we come finally to a position where God can say of the church, "It is good."