

THOSE WE ARE NOT TO JUDGE
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 24, 2019
based on Romans 1:18–32

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 what is going on right now in our United Methodist denomination. In St. Louis, this weekend, delegates are meeting in a special General Conference, to seek to find a way forward out of a longstanding impasse in our church concerning our stance on human sexuality. There are twelve delegates at the Conference from East Ohio—six clergy and six laypersons (obviously I am not one of them). We do not know what the Conference will decide, as it continues until Tuesday. There will be one more sermon in the series next Sunday.

As we have noted previously in this series, the current stance in our Discipline, our church rule book, for at least the next two days, declares that “the United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” That stance has been based on how people in years past have interpreted the Bible. In this series, we have been looking at everything in the Bible that has anything to do with same-sex relationships, in the light of the best modern scholarship, to see whether that “traditional” interpretation is correct, with our aim being to fulfill the admonition of II Timothy 2:15—“to rightly comprehend the Word of Truth.”

We have found that there is actually very little in the Bible on the subject, and what little there is relates to specific ancient circumstances. There is a reference to homosexual activity in the book of Genesis in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah; but that was a case of attempted homosexual rape of visitors to the town. There are two verses in Leviticus that speak in a negative way about homosexual activity; but those verses are specifically concerned about male temple prostitutes, who were emblematic of the pagan religions into which the people of Israel were tending to stray at the time. There are two verses in the New Testament, in I Corinthians and in I Timothy, that refer in a negative fashion to some sort of homosexual activity, but those verses refer to the man-boy sex trade that was widespread in the Greco-Roman world. Notice that all these verses refer only to male activity—we have found nothing so far that mentions female same-sex activity. But most importantly, all these verses refer to specific aberrant behavior—rape, child abuse, temple prostitutes—that we also would condemn! None of the passages have addressed what we are talking about today when we think of loving adults in a committed same-sex relationship.

This leaves us with one remaining Biblical passage to consider that specifically addresses same-sex relationships—the passage that was read from Romans. This is the one passage in the Bible that mentions lesbian as well as gay activity, and it is the one passage that speaks of same-sex relationships in a broad, generalized fashion. For this

reason, this is the Biblical passage people most often quote with reference to same-sex activity. It is to this passage, which we heard a moment ago, that we turn. {prayer}

The passage from Romans seems to be clearly negative toward sexual practices among lesbians and gays. But before we assume we know how to take this, it is crucial to consider the larger context of these verses; because in the letters of Paul there are a number of statements which seem to be saying one thing, but which actually mean something quite different when the total context of Paul's writings is kept in view.

For example, in another place, in the first letter to Timothy, Paul says, "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." (I Timothy 2:11-12) That seems quite clear, and it is on the basis of this that a number of churches, such as Catholic, Orthodox, and conservative Protestant churches, do not allow woman pastors, and restrict women's roles in the church generally. If you take this verse at face value, it appears that Paul believed that women should be excluded from leadership in the church.

But in fact, Paul did not believe that, which is quite plain from the larger context of Paul's ministry. One of the most important leaders in the early church was Priscilla, who along with her husband, Aquila, provided pastoral leadership in churches, where she was strongly advanced as a leader by Paul. At one point, Priscilla provided instruction for a young man named Apollos as he started in ministry. (Acts 18:16) She clearly taught and had spiritual authority over men in the church. So what is meant by the statement in I Timothy?

This was an instruction for a particular cultural setting. Timothy was serving in Ephesus, where the primary pagan religion revolved around the cult of the goddess Artemis, whose great temple, one of the so-called wonders of the ancient world, was in Ephesus. In the cult of Artemis, women played a prominent role, serving as priestesses; and it appears, during the time of Timothy, that some women who had been involved in the cult of Artemis had come into the Ephesian church, and were bringing false some teaching, tainted by the ideas and attitudes of the cult of Artemis. The elder Paul saw a need to put a damper on their presumed leadership in the congregation. This explains why Paul would urge the women to be silent in Timothy's congregation in Ephesus but not elsewhere. Paul's words were not meant to be a rule for all time; they were part of Paul's general principle that the presentation of the gospel needs to be adapted to each cultural setting. Today, when the problem in the church is not a history of idol-worshipping priestesses but a history of male-dominated priesthoods, the church should want women in leadership, in order to make the most effective witness to our own age. This is why we have a woman bishop.

The issue of context is very important in another place, where Paul says, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ,

doing the will of God from the heart.” (Ephesians 6:5–6) This verse seems to accept the institution of slavery and urges slaves to simply and obediently fulfill their assigned role. In centuries past, some churches used this verse to justify the practice of slavery. If you take this verse at face value, it appears that Paul thought that slavery is God-ordained and appropriate. But in fact Paul did not think that, which is quite clear when you look more broadly and look at his letter to Philemon, in which Paul, while accepting that slavery was a legal institution in the Roman Empire, urged Philemon to set a slave free on the basis of Christian values. Paul’s admonition to slaves to submit to their masters was thus not a general affirmation of the practice of slavery; it was an encouragement to live in the most Christlike way possible no matter where we find ourselves.

In our passage in Romans, there are two verses where Paul seems to say that when women engage in relations with women or men with men, it is contrary to nature and an expression of our fallen human condition. Taking these verses at face value leads to our present denominational position. But once again it is crucially important to look at the larger context of those two verses.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, he was in the late part of his life, and this letter would be his most comprehensive statement about salvation. He was writing to both Jews and non-Jews, or Gentiles, but this presented a challenge, because Jews felt that they were in a very different position with regard to salvation than Gentiles. In the typical Jewish understanding, Jews had the inside track with God, and Gentiles were hopeless sinners. Paul addressed this thinking right off the bat.

In chapter one, he begins to describe the Gentile position, as he says, “What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking . . . Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.” (Romans 1:19–23)

Paul thus establishes that even though Gentiles did not have the history of Biblical revelation, they were still accountable to God. The reality of God was plain for them to see, since God’s power and glory are evident everywhere, and everyone has a basic God-implanted sense of right and wrong. Therefore Gentiles have “no excuse” when they turn from away from God and refuse to do what is right, and engage in all sorts of idolatry.

This whole line of argument is not unique to Paul. It was standard rabbinical argumentation—the sort of thing Paul would have heard over and over when he stood with the conservative Jewish leadership and was named Saul. The argument that Paul lays out can be found, for example, in the Wisdom of Solomon (not actually written by Solomon), a Jewish tract from the second century B.C. which is now a part of the collection

we call the Apocrypha, which was never accepted by the Jews as Scripture, but which reflected Jewish thinking at the time. Paul's arguments in Romans 1 closely echo a number of specific points made in the Wisdom of Solomon. In other words, Paul is not exactly speaking here in his own voice; in fact he uses a lot of vocabulary in this section that does not ordinarily use, which indicates that he is drawing phrases from other sources. Paul is portraying standard ideas that Jewish people in his day had about Gentiles. Paul would affirm some of those ideas—especially in this early section, which he follows with an “Amen”—but his argument will finally move in a very interesting way.

The Jewish book, the Wisdom of Solomon, after noting that Gentiles had fallen into the foolishness of idolatry, then makes the point that this resulted in all kinds of immoral behavior. Paul follows this line of argument exactly, as he continues and says, “Therefore God gave the Gentiles up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves. (Romans 1:24) To say that “God gave them up” is a way of saying that God allowed people the freedom to go ahead and made bad moral choices. In this verse, Paul uses very broad terms—“impurity,” and “the degrading of their bodies”—to denote the full scope of the negative and self-damaging things that people do.

But then the Wisdom of Solomon continues further by listing a number of specific behaviors considered by the Jews to be sins that were widespread in the ancient world. Among those specified in the Wisdom of Solomon was one called “exchanging of nature” (Wisdom of Solomon 14:26), which was a reference to lesbian or gay sexual activity. Paul continues with exactly this idea, when he says, “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (Romans 1:26–27).

It is these two verses that form a primary basis for traditionalist views about sexuality and the current United Methodist church stance. Same-sex relations are described here as “unnatural.” People often point to this to argue that only heterosexuality is natural and that any same-sex relations are contrary to God's design. But that is not actually what Paul is saying. In verse 26, the original Greek phrase translated as “unnatural” is the phrase *παρὰ φύσιν* *para physin*. This was an oft-used phrase in the Greco-Roman world, where its standard meaning was not so much “unnatural” but more “atypical” or “unconventional.” It did not indicate something immoral, although it could at times have a negative connotation. Something was *para physin* when it was something that struck you as strange, or even yucky, or just not right. Putting mustard on your French fries would be *para physin*. It is not immoral, but it's just not right.

This is exactly how Jewish people in the first century viewed the same-sex practices that were widespread in the Greco-Roman world. Jews saw those same-sex

practices as emblematic of Gentile culture and how the Gentiles, in their view, were just not right; they were, in the Jewish view, morally off. But significantly, Paul chose this particular phrase, *para physin*, which does not actually indicate something that is sinful. This is quite plain as the letter of Romans progresses, because a little later, in chapter 11, Paul says that God acts *para physin*. God does so, Paul said, when God acts to include the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation even though the Jews were the chosen people. That act of bringing the Gentiles into the Jewish tree of life was, Paul, said, like grafting a wild olive branch onto a cultivated olive tree. Such an act was "unnatural" (*para physin*) in the sense that it was unconventional and unexpected. But this creates an extraordinary kind of word play. The very phrase that is used to describe Gentile same-sex activity, which was so condemned by the Jews, is the exact phrase used to describe God when God includes those Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. When you are reading Romans 1, you do not see this coming. It is part of a lot that you don't see coming.

Along with the reference to same-sex activity, the Wisdom of Solomon continues with a listing of numerous sinful behaviors that were considered to be characteristic of the Gentile world. Again, Paul follows the Wisdom of Solomon with a final section in which he says, "They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them." (Romans 1:29–32)

This is a thoroughgoing indictment of the Gentile world. Notice how Paul repeatedly refers to what "they" do. "They" are filled with every kind of wickedness. "They" are gossips, slanderers, and so forth. The same pattern can be seen in this entire section. It started, "They are without excuse, for though they knew God they did not honor God." (Romans 1:20–21) "They became futile in their thinking." (Romans 1:21b) "Therefore God gave them up to impurity." (Romans 1:24) "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural." (Romans 1:26) "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done." (Romans 1:28) "They" appear to be really bad people!

A word meaning "they" or "their" appears 26 times in this section. This is highly unusual for Paul. Paul typically addresses the reader directly. His letters talk about what you should believe and what you should do and how you should deal with your own sin. Paul never spends a lot of time talking about "them" and how bad "they" are. But Romans 1 has the character that it does because Paul in this entire section is echoing standard Jewish rhetoric toward Gentiles, such as is reflected in the Wisdom of Solomon. Paul is actually using here an ancient Greco-Roman rhetorical technique called *προσωποποιία prosopopoeia*. This was a common rhetorical tool used in debate; it involved stating another person's argument—for the purpose of finally refuting it. Paul in Romans

chapter 1 has lined out the whole standard Jewish argument for why the Gentiles are guilty, godless, and immoral, and thus uniquely deserving of condemnation. But if this is prosopopoeia, there will be a turn, a pivot, in which Paul will dramatically reverse course, adopt his own voice, and rebut the entire argument that was just laid out.

Reading through Romans 1, the average Jewish person at the time would have been cheering Paul on. “Yes, Paul,” the person would have been thinking, “you are right about those rotten Gentiles. They are corrupt. They are debased. They are full of immorality. They deserve to be condemned!” Then Paul continues,

“You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” (Romans 2:1) Wham. Paul suddenly reverses from talking about *them* to talking about *you*. And the “you” specifically addressed is anyone who has been caught up in passing judgment on others. Suddenly the person with “no excuse” is the person who judges others and who thereby condemns the self. Paul thus establishes the point that will be foundational for his letter to the Romans. He will state it clearly in Romans 3—“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

Those two verses in Romans 1 that speak in a negative way about same-sex practices are often called the “clobber verses” of Romans, because they are regularly used to clobber LGBT people with a sense that they are being condemned by the Bible. But the actual clobbering occurs in Romans 2, where Paul comes down hard on anyone who would pass judgment on others. Those two negative verses about sexuality in Romans 1 are part of a section expressing a judging attitude, which Paul, in the end, *refutes*. Paul’s basic point is that we all stand as sinners before God, a point that he continues to hammer home all the way through chapters two and three. Therefore we are to pass judgment on no one; it is a teaching that clearly echoes Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” (Matthew 7:1) So we all stand equally in need of God’s grace. It is a grace that we can find as we put our faith in Jesus Christ.

What then will our General Conference choose to do? Our Bishops are calling us to pray right now and have provided a particular prayer for every church to use, which was written by a group called the “Praying Our Way Forward Team.” I invite you now to be in an attitude of openness to God’s Spirit as I share this prayer . . .