

Making Peace With Our LGBT Neighbors

Last week we talked about being ambassadors of peace to a troubled world and how to make sure our vertical love and our horizontal love is balanced. Jesus taught us to love God with all of our heart and we to love our neighbor as our self. This balancing act is a kind of spiritual acrobatics, asking us to walk a tight rope of equal concern for the holiness of God and the preciousness of people. Or, in the words of Paul, learning how to speak the truth in love. Today I want to apply what we've been studying to a particularly troubling issue in our society, the controversy over questions of sexuality. Christ commands us to love our neighbors and more and more our neighbors are members of the LGBT community, people who refer to themselves as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgender. How can we make peace with these neighbors in a way that honors both the holiness of God's truth and the preciousness of people? Not an easy tightrope to walk.

Until recently we lived in a culture that generally agreed having a same sex attraction was not healthy and acting out on that attraction was not right. Things have changed. Today anyone who suggests that same sex attraction is not healthy comes under intense scorn and is labeled intolerant and bigoted. If we express a belief that homosexuality is contrary to God's will, even if we have no desire to impose our views upon anyone, many still accuse us of hatred and of inciting an environment of violence.

Adding to the problem is that many on both sides of this debate are motivated by mutual animosity. Some militant gays provocatively march in

gay pride parades, showing utter contempt for traditional morality. Some angry Christians picket those parades carrying signs that say in various hateful ways that God hates gays. I believe most on both sides would rather have a compassionate, civil conversation but the times we live in are neither compassionate nor civil. The conversation is mostly in the media and not generally led by voices inspiring compassion. The result is an uncertain and confused world and confusion does not lead to peace. Part of the confusion is the different theories why people experience same sex attraction.

The truth is we aren't certain. For some genetics or at least a genetic pre-disposition to this seems a reasonable theory. But even if genetic factors play a role that would not mean this orientation is healthy. Some are genetically pre-disposed to alcoholism, obesity even anger; we do not encourage people in these. Others say a same sex orientation is a result of particular family dynamics. Those who experience it are at least partially victims of the actions of others as much as their own. Some say humans simply mirror the animal kingdom. Some species engage in homosexual behavior for reasons that apparently address nature's larger purposes. So, if it's natural in some animals why not in some humans? Animals are also promiscuous; some eat their young. The presence of a behavior in animals does not argue for its acceptance in humans. The truth is surely a complex combination of these and several other variables we have yet to discover.

The lack of scientific clarity is troubling enough; more troubling is the lack of moral clarity. Even Christian voices differ as to what we should

think and how we should respond to those who experience same sex attraction. Some argue that grace demands we accept our LGBT neighbors and their lifestyle as they are. Not to do so is to be judgmental, ungracious. There is at least one gay Christian denomination, the Metropolitan Community Church. On the other end of the spectrum are Christians who believe anyone who has any of these differing sexual orientations is that way largely, if not solely due to his or her own personal choice. They deny it is possible that one can have a same sex orientation without their consciously choosing it. It is often implied if not directly stated that this condition is the result of a descending series of increasingly wicked and perverted choices. If anyone really wanted to change God would change him.

Many Christians fall between these two positions, including myself. They believe for the vast majority who experience this orientation it is not a choice they decided to make but a condition they discovered they had for reasons they cannot explain. They face a terrifying dilemma. On the one hand they hear their world say it is normal and they should come out of the closet and accept who they are. On the other hand they hear Christian friends making harsh, even hateful comments or cracking ugly, disparaging jokes about gays and they fear if they do come out of the closet, even if they do not want to act out on their orientation, they fear they will be shunned and mistreated by their Christian friends and maybe even their family. They are put in the dilemma of choosing between the warm embrace of a world that offers a love without concern for the truth, or the cold isolation of a

truth that is presented without love. For me personally it's been a long journey from being oblivious and naïve about these issues to having close friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, respected church leaders who have shared with me that they have struggled with same sex attraction from an early age. I have visited with outstanding Christian college students who were struggling with this. I have sat with parents who have come to me in anguish after discovering this struggle in their child. Such experiences have a way of turning contempt to confusion; disgust to despair and anger into anguish. So, exactly how do we respond to all this? How do we become spiritual acrobats, learning to walk the tightrope of loving the holiness of God and the preciousness of people. Lets begin with Paul's counsel to the Ephesians to not be tossed to fro by every wind of teaching, but instead to speak the truth in love.

People today are eager to show love, but are uncomfortable with truth. Truth means some things are right, some things are wrong. Our world is uncomfortable making such judgments. Instead we're told to be tolerant and accepting of everyone. "What's right for me may not be right for you." But as Christians we believe that love without truth is not truly love. God's truth teaches us what love is and how love acts. Without truth, in the name of love people have defended having sex outside of marriage, committing adultery with another's spouse or even divorcing a spouse so they can be with someone they love more, all behaviors that God clearly tells us are not just wrong, but destructive and hurtful. Without truth, our love is like a ship

with no rudder, tossed to and fro by the winds of culture. Right and wrong is determined by the will of the majority or the ruling elite as we saw by the Supreme Court's ruling last summer. Their decision on what constitutes marriage was not made on the basis of any absolute truth, but on the arbitrary opinions of a slim majority of a ruling elite. As Christians we believe love must be anchored by truth. Yes, we may not always agree on what is true, but it is one thing to say no one perfectly understands the truth; it is another to say there is no perfect truth or standard by which all behavior, all peoples, all cultures are ultimately judged. So as Christians we gently insist that true love includes a love of truth.

On the other hand, just as love without truth distorts love, truth without love distorts truth. Truth without love is not really truth at all. Christian truth is not just the right answer to a question or the correct interpretation of a scripture. For Christians truth is a person. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." And at the heart of Jesus is love. To speak truth without love perverts truth. Truth without love leads to cruel jokes that ridicule and demean homosexuals. Truth without love tolerates hateful speech. Truth without love promotes anger and fear. So, however strongly we believe the truth that homosexuality is not God's design for people, we make a huge mistake if we fail to speak that truth in love.

We can hardly do better than follow the lead of our Lord, the greatest spiritual acrobat of all. As we noted last week, there was no question Jesus loved God and was committed to the truth of God. He said the truth would

set us free. He taught truth and called people to follow him and accept his truth. “If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching... If he doesn’t love me he will not.” At the same time it was equally evident Jesus loved sinners. He did not approve of their sin. He did not participate in their sin. He did not encourage their sin. Yet it was clear to every sinner, Jesus loved them. In the Bible “sinners” refer to people who disobeyed the law of God: prostitutes, drunkards, tax collectors, anyone who exploited the poor. I am not saying every homosexual is deliberately disobeying God’s law; but I am saying that even if they were, Jesus would love them no less.

Jesus did more than love sinners; he hung out with them. *While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many sinners were eating with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners, they asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with sinners?” Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Mark 2:13-17). Jesus befriended a Samaritan woman who had been married and divorced several times and was currently living with a man she was not married to. Jesus publically defended rather than condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery. Rather than stoning her, as Leviticus commanded, he said to her, “Neither do I condemn thee.” He also told her, “Go and sin no more.” Jesus associated enough with sinners that he himself was accused of being a sinner too. Jesus didn’t wait for people to change before he would be their friend and associate with them. This was the nature of Jesus’ love. There is no question in my mind if Jesus were in

the world today he would not hesitate to make friends and even hang out with folks from the LGBT community. And they would have no doubt that Jesus loved them. Of course Jesus is in the world today. He is us. One very good example of doing just that is told by Rosaria Butterfield in her book, “The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert.” She begins here book, “When I was 28 years old I boldly declared myself lesbian. I was a PhD in English Literature and Cultural Studies. I was a teaching associate in one of the first and strongest women’s studies departments in the nation...recruited by universities to take on...roles in advancing leftist ideologies.” She goes on to tell the story of a Christian pastor and his wife who befriended her, who invited her repeatedly into their home for dinner and social and who went to her home and spent time eating and socializing with her friends, most of whom were also gay. During this relationship they spoke the truth in love to Rosaria and in time she became a most unlikely convert. Not because this pastor and his wife strategically befriended her in order to convert her to Christ, but because they committed to be her friend, whether or not she ever chose to follow Christ.

There was no question in Rosaria or her friend’s minds that this pastor did not approve of their lifestyle. But for two years this pastor developed a friendship that was unconditional and thus opened the door for them to study the Bible together, especially Paul’s teaching about homosexuality in Romans chapter 1. We haven’t time this morning to work through it verse by verse. Let me just briefly summarize Paul’s argument.

In Romans Paul argues why man cannot save himself, but must instead rely on the grace of God for his salvation. He begins his argument in chapter 1 by saying the unbelieving world is without excuse because nature itself should lead all men to worship and reverence God. However, instead of worshipping God, mankind chose to worship idols. They worshiped the creation rather than the creator. One of the many devastating consequences of man's choice is that by rejecting the God of nature, they rejected what is natural and turned instead to the unnatural. Listed among those unnatural things is the act of homosexuality. But Paul's is not concerned primarily about homosexuality or even Gentile unbelievers, rather he is concerned about what sin has done to the whole world. Sin has made all of us unnatural, no longer the kind of people God intended when he created us.

Here is the important point, the point that this pastor understood so well. This unnaturalness is true not only of the pagan Gentile world. In the next chapter Paul says the Jews, God's people, are just as unnatural. After condemning the sins so prevalent in the Gentile world, with the Jews shouting amen over and over, he then turned to the Jews and said, *You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.* Paul is not saying that Jews were committing exactly the same sins as the Gentiles but that as far as being sinners in need of God's grace, they were exactly the same as the Gentiles. Here is Paul's final conclusion about the matter, concerning both

Jew and Gentile: There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one...for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Rosaria learned from this pastor and his wife that from the biblical point of view yes, the homosexual lifestyle is a sin and a believer should not pursue it. But it is not just that sin that falls short of the glory of God, all our sin does. And our sin is no less perverted in the eyes of God. This pastor avoided a mistake I believe we in the Church too often make. We have come to understand our sin as normal sin. But Paul's argument in Romans should teach us that all of us have perverted what it means to be human in the eyes of God. There is nothing "normal" about sin in God's eyes. When we are tempted with desire to lust after another man's wife, that is not a "normal sin" it is a perversion of God's ideal. We were not created for that! When we live oblivious to the needs of the poor and the suffering all around us and instead indulge ourselves with every luxury we can afford (and many we cannot!), this is not the "normal sin" of greed but a perversion of the perfect humanity God created for his own glory.

Paul is not angry with the people he describes in Romans 1. He sees them, as he sees all everyone, people ensnared by sin and needing to hear the gospel that while we were still enemies to him, Christ died for us.

It is true when we see the blatant, blasphemous behavior paraded about by the militant gay community we are incensed. We should be as we

should be by much of the hateful responses some Christians make. But the truth is those behaviors are not typical of most on both sides who struggle with this issue. It is true that there are many who do not struggle with this issue and believe there is nothing wrong with the homosexual lifestyle. And we live in a world that apparently will encourage that view in the foreseeable future. Like this pastor we must learn to speak the truth in love to our neighbors who feel this way. Some will reject us no matter how loving and peaceful we try to be. If our genuine effort to love others is responded to with hate then we can claim Jesus' promise, *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.*

But there are and will always be many like Rosaria who are willing to listen to us and others who already anguish over feelings they do not want to have and have tried in vain to overcome. These need a community of people formed by the grace of God, who understand what it means to be sinners and who stand ready to pray, encourage and embrace any sinner who wishes to come to the Lord. How can someone struggling with a same sex orientation share his burden with a brother or sister who makes jokes and speaks in a derogatory manner about homosexuals. Why would he even want to?

So, I believe God calls us as the church to be a community of people who know we are all sinners, all equally terminal if not for the grace of God. If we truly see ourselves that way, then anyone struggling with any issue might just find the courage to come to us and ask for help. As a community

painfully aware of our own unnatural sin, we can more effectively speak the truth in love to our homosexual neighbor. We speak the truth, “Yes the homosexual lifestyle is wrong.” And in love we quickly add “But I’m a sinner too, and I’ll help you if you’ll help me.” We can speak the truth “Yes the homosexual needs to resist temptation,” only if with equal urgency we are willing to say, “But no more than I need to resist my own temptation.”

This is why people loved Jesus so much. Not because he ignored their sins. Not because their sins did not bother him. They loved Jesus because they knew their sin offended him and yet he still loved them. Remember what that Samaritan woman said to the folks in her village. *Come see a man who told me everything I ever did.* What an extraordinary thing to say. Which of us after meeting a man aware of every sin we’ve ever committed would run and ask all our friends to come and meet him. This woman said more to that village than the Scriptures record, she must have. *Come meet a man who told me everything I ever did and still loves me!*

Here is the balance of love for God and neighbor. Not that we ignore in others what we believe is sinful but that the sins of others do not keep us from loving them because we’re no less aware of our own sin. This is what Jesus’ meant when he said, *Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged.* Not that we don’t make judgments about what is right or wrong, but that as a fellow sinner we dare not sit in judgment over others. So how can we speak the truth in love in a way that leads to greater peace, greater shalom with our LGBT neighbors?

Let me dare to make a few suggestions. First, like Jesus, let our love and friendship not be conditional. Just as Jesus made friends with everyone, let us befriend those associates at work, neighbors, relatives, who have a same sex orientation. I believe Jesus would not hesitate to go to a movie or a ballgame. He did this first of all simply out of love, but also I think because it's easier to talk about hard things with friends. Proverbs says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend"(27:6). Friends can tell each other what they need to hear. If we really want to share with our LGBT neighbors God's truth, we will be more effective speaking to them as a friend. Which implies a third suggestion. We must also be willing to receive wounds from our homosexual friends. My experience is they are often able to see more clearly in us and our churches a harsh or unloving spirit, hurtful comments and actions. One friend told me he finally left a church he attended because he heard so many comments he felt were hurtful, even hateful. He never felt he could safely share his personal struggle with them. What a tragedy. A fourth suggestion I think important is to distinguish between having a same sex orientation and acting out on that orientation. As I said before, for many, I believe most, this orientation is not chosen. People who are unable to change and yet remain committed to live faithful to God's will should not be judged by us or considered any less at all by us but instead supported.

Let me conclude with this. We cannot control the confusion in our world today. We can make arguments. We can vote for candidates. We can peacefully protest. We can pray and pray and pray. What will happen, no

one knows. We may come to better learn what it means to be strangers in our own land, and maybe not. Revival may break out in our land. In either case, whatever the world does, let us not be driven by the winds of culture, but guided instead by the compass of God's truth. We may have to set our sails against the wind, steer our rudder against the current. If the storm is too great we might just throw out anchor and hold on 'til the storm passes. Whatever happens, let us be in this world, for this world, a haven of love and peace, a place where people find not only God's truth about sin, but also his abiding love for sinners. If we can do that, I believe we will become better at finding peace for ourselves and making peace with others in this world.