



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Same-Sex Marriage

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*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:12-13).*

Most people want someone to love and be loved by. The deepest commitment two people can make to one another is the promise to be faithful to each other for as long as they both shall live. A man and a woman have been encouraged to make that commitment in marriage for a very long time. The question now is whether two men or two women should be able to make the same commitment before God and have it blessed and supported by the church.

That question conjures up deep feelings because marriage is so important to all of us, and whenever we have strong feelings about something it can be hard even to think about it clearly. If we ask, “Why shouldn’t two men or two women be allowed to marry?” some people just beg the question and say, “Because marriage is only between a man and a woman.” But of course that’s not a reason; it’s only a reflection of how that person feels.

Our Presbyterian church takes the question seriously because some of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters want to be faithful to God in Christ, and they also want their devotion to their partner to be blessed and supported by the church. That is, they want the same things the rest of us want.

The church has struggled with this issue for a long time. It’s not something that has suddenly come up; the question has been around for 40 years, or about two

generations. And it's not a matter of the church just going along with the culture either. There are all sorts of things about our culture that the church stands against, but this question comes from some of our fellow Christians because it cuts to the heart of who they are. They want their church to treat them the same way we treat everybody else—welcoming, loving, and supporting them, and supporting their commitment to the people they love most in this world.

So we take the question of same-sex marriage seriously in the same way we consider any other important question: by seeking to know God's will. And the starting place for Christians on any question of faith or practice is the Bible. The Bible is the uniquely authoritative witness to God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ, and because we take the Bible so seriously we want to read it with all the intelligence and wisdom God gives us, relying on the Holy Spirit to guide our understanding.

One of the things we learn in Bible study is that we can't simply read the book and do whatever it says in any particular verse without considering the context and the basic message of the Bible as a whole. There are passages in the Bible that say people should be put to death for cursing or striking their parents, for being a rebellious and drunken son, for breaking the Sabbath or committing adultery. We may agree that those are all bad things, but does anyone seriously think we should put people to death for doing them?

The Bible also has passages that say women should keep silent in church, that they are not permitted to teach or have authority over a man, and if they have any questions they should ask their husband at home. Do we believe that? Haven't we all benefited from the preaching and teaching

and leadership of women in the church? And there are many texts in the Bible that seem to condone slavery—so many, in fact, that slaveholders claimed anyone who opposed slavery was obviously not a Bible-believing Christian. Six hundred thousand lives were lost in the Civil War over that issue, and millions of lives suffered terribly from an institution defended with passages from the Bible.

The point is obvious enough, isn't it? We need principles for interpreting the Bible that are more sophisticated than just "Read the book and do what it says" in any given verse, or the kind of prooftexting that looks for particular passages to support some position without considering the context or the message of the Bible as a whole.

Having said all that, we should note that to the extent the Bible has anything explicit to say about same-sex intercourse it has nothing positive to say, and all the passages about marriage in the Bible are about heterosexual marriage. That's certainly true, and taken at face value it would seem to support a biblical case against same-sex marriage—which is why the church has opposed it until recently and why many thoughtful Christians still do. Why, then, is there any question for people who take the Bible seriously? In fact there are several reasons.

First, it's not altogether clear what exactly the writers had in mind in the eight passages or so where same-sex physical relations are mentioned. The details are too complicated for a single sermon, which is one reason we've provided opportunities for the congregation to talk about this over the last few months. There are scholarly opinions on all sides, debating what the texts really meant in their cultural context, and it's not at all clear that writers two or three

thousand years ago understood sexual orientation in anything like the way we're beginning to understand it today. In short, the meaning of some texts may be less obvious than many people think.

Second, virtually no one believes that same-sex intercourse should be a capital crime, even though Leviticus 20:13 calls for the death penalty. It's fair to ask people who cite Leviticus as one of their sources why the first part of the sentence opposing homosexual acts is the eternally binding word of God, but the second half of the same sentence calling for the death penalty can be set aside. Some Christians reply that no one has to pay the penalty now because Jesus died for our sins and paid the penalty for us. But that confuses two different things. If a murderer claimed he shouldn't have to go to jail because Jesus died for his sins, any judge would see that argument for the evasion it is. Leviticus clearly intends its punishments to be carried out by society, just as we punish murder, robbery, and other crimes today. We can't escape the text's intention by shifting the subject to ultimate salvation and eternal life.

We've said that there's some uncertainty about what a few passages really mean in the Bible, and even people who invoke those passages against homosexuality shy away from the penalty required by one of the texts—which suggests that their principles of interpretation may be less consistent than they imagine. But what about the fact that all the marriages in the Bible are between men and women?

That's true, of course, but when people talk about "the biblical view of marriage" they often imply more consistency than the Bible actually shows. In fact Jacob, Moses, David, and Solomon, among others in the Old Testament, had multiple wives at the same time, and sometimes concubines.

The Bible does not criticize them for that, even in the New Testament, though by New Testament times polygamy was apparently no longer practiced by Jews or Christians. The point is that the Bible seems to accept different marriage arrangements at different times. Still, all those marriages were heterosexual, so it's fair to ask how the Bible could leave room for the possibility of same-sex marriage.

No one in our church wants to propose anything contrary to the overall sense of the scripture. If we believed that same-sex marriage was against God's will, we would be against it, too, full stop. Our whole purpose in the church is to seek to know and do God's will, so the question becomes, are there reasons to believe that same-sex marriage might be permitted by God, not in spite of the Bible but precisely because of what we know about God from the Bible as a whole, and from our own experience?

A large and growing portion of the church is coming to believe that the answer is yes, same-sex marriage may in fact be consistent with God's will, especially as we learn more and more about human nature. There's no scientific consensus today about why some people are drawn to same-sex partners, but three or four percent of the population say it is their natural orientation. If that's true, then St. Paul's argument, for example, that same-sex relations are against God's will because they are unnatural may well have seemed true at the time but turn out not to be true in light of our growing understanding of biology and psychology.

Paul himself says that we see in a mirror dimly; our knowledge is only partial now, though one day we will know more fully. And even to the extent that we know some things, if we have all knowledge but have not love, we are nothing—



just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Faith, hope, and love abide, Paul says, and the greatest of these is love. Here he echoes the words of Jesus, who gives us the Great Commandment to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. And Jesus also lifts up the Golden Rule, to treat others as we ourselves would want to be treated, by way of summarizing the law and the prophets.

All of this points to how the church could support same-sex marriage, not in spite of the Bible but precisely because of its emphasis on love, which Jesus says is the foundation for everything else. We support marriage in part because it's a loving commitment between two people intended for life. Given what we're learning about sexual orientation, isn't it possible that we should support the devotion of two adults of the same sex, because that's what we would want if the question was about us?

There are, of course, other questions that arise, and they deserve more discussion than we can give them in a sermon—which again is why we've been talking about all this for months and will continue to talk about it as long as people want to do that. For the moment, though, here are some brief responses to a number of common concerns.

Some people worry about things that no one in the church is proposing, and in fact most of us are against. Some are afraid that same-sex marriage will open the door to all sorts of other arrangements, such as polygamy. But the idea of polygamy has been around for a long time, at least since biblical times, and all the arguments against it still stand. The only marriages being proposed in the church are between two adults who love each other, and that has nothing to do with polygamy or any other arrangements

people sometimes imagine.

Some people link homosexuality with promiscuity in their minds, and with it the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. No doubt some homosexual people are promiscuous, just as many heterosexual people are today, especially in the culture of the so-called “hook up.” The church has generally been opposed to promiscuity, and I myself certainly am, but of course marriage is exactly the opposite of promiscuity. It’s intended to be a life-long commitment of fidelity between two people. If people were chaste before marriage and faithful in marriage, STDs would all but disappear. Marriage is in fact an antidote to promiscuity and sexually transmitted diseases.

Some people worry about things that the church is not even proposing, but there are other questions that do pertain to the nature of same-sex marriage. For example, if marriage is fundamentally about conceiving and raising children, biology tells us that only a man and a woman together can do that, so isn’t it obvious that marriage should be limited to a man and a woman? Of course conceiving a child requires both sexes, but we routinely marry people who will not conceive or raise children for all sorts of reasons. On the other hand, some of the strongest and most loving families are those in which parents and children are bound not by biology but by adoption and choice. To claim that marriage must be confined to people of the opposite sex because only they can conceive children sounds like special pleading, since we already marry couples who don’t meet that criterion and we celebrate and support adoptive families.

People ask whether children don’t need parents of the opposite sex to grow up with healthy role models and identity formation. The truth is, same-sex parenting is relatively new

in our culture, and we won't have longitudinal studies to make scientific comparisons for some time. That said, I believe the American academies and associations of family physicians, nursing, pediatrics, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, and social work have all indicated support for same-sex marriage and the impact they expect it to have on raising children. The belief appears to be that what matters most is not *who* does the parenting, but *how* they do it. Sadly, lots of children grow up today without the love and support they need from both parents, so our goal must be to strengthen all families and encourage everyone who has a child to be a loving and responsible parent.

Which brings us to another thing some people say: namely, that support for same-sex marriage reflects a lack of concern for family values. The family is surely the bedrock of society, and we can see how some people imagine that anything other than a traditional family threatens the institution of family per se. But to suggest that anyone who supports same-sex marriage doesn't care about family values is simply false. According to a recent survey of predominantly white mainline churches, 69% of Presbyterians, 68% of Episcopalians and Congregationalists, 67% of Methodists and 64% of Lutherans support same-sex marriage. Family is the most important thing to most of us, next to faith in God, and it's just nonsense to claim that all these fellow Christians don't care about family values.

So much of our culture these days is willing to boil big questions down to simplistic either/or caricatures of good guys vs. bad guys, conservatives vs. liberals, true believers vs. unbelievers. People do that because it's so much easier than sitting down to talk with one another, and listen to one another, and recognize the complexity of some things, and

understand the nuances of other people's thoughts and feelings.

We can see why some people prefer to caricature and stereotype others they won't even listen to, but one of the ways our church leans against the culture is that we don't do that here. We listen to one another. We try to understand the facts, and consider alternatives when the facts are not entirely clear. We study the Bible together, and pray together, and respect the fact that people of sincere Christian faith can see some things differently. We don't condemn our fellow Christians who disagree with us, no matter which side we're on, because we trust that everyone who seriously engages the issues wants to be faithful to God and do what's right.

When our Session voted on the question of same-sex marriage a couple weeks ago, I thought the spirit of the meeting was wonderful. It was the church's leadership modeling what the church should be. In Presbyterian polity, the session is elected by the congregation and charged with the responsibility of seeking to discern God's will for the church. It can be a heavy responsibility. As one member commented wryly, last year's big issue was whether or not to get new hymnals. On the question of permitting same-sex marriage at Westminster, the secret ballots showed twenty-three in favor and three opposed. There were different views around the table, but everyone respects one another, and understands that everybody else is trying to discern God's will, too, and even on important matters people of faith can act in charity and agree to disagree.

In the twenty-four hours or so after my email went out to the congregation about the vote, I received twenty-two emails in reply. Twenty of them were strongly in favor, one

expressed some sadness but agreed to talk, and one mostly misunderstood the process. I don't necessarily take that to be a representative sampling of the congregation, because over the years I've learned that when people like something they tend to tell me and when they don't like something they tend to tell somebody else. Still, no matter which way people feel about the issue, the almost unanimous sense I get here at Westminster is that people respect other people's faithfulness, and recognize that while this is an important thing in the life of the church, it's not the main thing. The main thing is our striving to be faithful to the God we know in Jesus Christ, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As Paul said, we see in a mirror dimly now. Our knowledge is imperfect. Sometimes it's hard to know what exactly the right thing is, when so many Christians see things differently. But our goal is always to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, and to treat other people in the way we ourselves would want to be treated. The Bible tells us that this is what God wants from us most of all, so if ever we're in doubt we will always err on the side of love, and trust that God will judge graciously the intention of our hearts.



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