

The Body's Grace: Theology and Sexuality. The Church and same sex relationships

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This morning is the last in our series The Body's Grace: Theology and Sexuality, and today we turn our attention to the church and same sex relationships.

I said at the beginning of this series that there is a few things I wanted to repeat each week.

The history of the Church's dealing with sexuality is poor and frequently abusive.

My hope is that in this series we have in some ways confessed and lamented the brokenness and also celebrated the beauty of human sexuality.

I've also wanted to acknowledge that I don't have sexuality all sorted, and this series has set out to raise more questions for you than provide answers.

We've also wanted to acknowledge that conversations about sexuality are difficult for some because of past or even present experience,

and so our hope has been that we have walked with care through this series.

Please speak to Andrew, or Bronwyn, or myself if there are things this series has raised for you.

My thoughts on sexuality throughout this series have been offered, I hope,

gently and tentatively- and the request is that they are received in that light and that any conversations we have with each other are conducted similarly.

I also need to say that the Deacons here at Central know what I'm going to say today and have encouraged me in that.

And I want to express my gratitude to them.
The Deacons are not all in the same place on sexuality,
particularly when it comes to same sex relationships-
and yet we eat pizza together,
laugh together,
pray together,
love the Central community together and that is
something I value highly.

In recent decades the church,
at least in the western world,
has raised sexuality to the level of dogma and I think
that has been unhelpful.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the area of
same –sex relationships.

For some reason this has become the issue that has
been the litmus test of whether you can be evangelical
Christian or not.

I use the word issue because that is how it has been
framed- again unhelpfully so.

In the church we talk in terms of the same-sex issue,
and I find that an incredibly alienating framework.

By speaking as an issue,
it allows us to separate ourselves,
to use sexuality as a marker of identity in negative
and exclusive ways-
and yet whether we are straight or gay our sexuality
is part of who we are-

in the first week of this series I said how we
experience our sexuality as a place of joy,

wonder,
shame,
anxiety,
yearning,
woundedness,
curiosity, and

fulfilment and that is the reality for most regardless of our
orientation or identity.

I realise that in this message I will inevitably talk about
same sex relationships as an issue,

simply because that is how it is framed in society and in the church at present, and I apologise for that.

If you identify yourself as Lesbian Gay Bisexual or Transgender (I'll refer to that as LGBT) you are welcome here- your sexuality is not an "issue".

It maybe a Christian ethic would ask questions of your expression of sexuality but in ways equal to the questions a Christian sexual ethic would present to heterosexual people.

In this message I walk into another challenge- using straight or gay as binary categories is also unhelpful – our sexuality cannot be seen in simple binary terms, and there is much that can and should be said about that.

In this series and specifically in this message we don't have the space to address that in any depth

and I realise that a risk of this message

is that in looking at the church and same sex relationships I am likely to often make it appear like straight or gay are the only two experiences of sexuality and I apologise for that.

I have come to a place in my own journey where I believe that same sex relationships are something that can be embraced,
welcomed
and celebrated in faith communities.

This has been a journey for me of about 8 or 9 years duration and I am still being formed.

The journey has included conversations, and study and reading,

reflecting,

listening and prayer.

And so this morning I want to offer you a little of that journey and seeing that this is a series on theology and sexuality I want to consider same sex relationships in that light.

There's a couple of things I want to say in preamble-

I lament how same sex relationships are such a flashpoint in church communities and I am saddened by how we hurt people because of that.

I'm also not too naïve to realise why it is such a flashpoint when it is framed in the way it is- and we'll cover that in a bit.

I said in the first message in this series that I am likely to irritate everybody at some point,

I said that is something that I don't do lightly, but that I wanted irritation in its most positive sense in that it may encourage us to engage our thinking, to reflect and dialogue with each other.

With this message I'm particularly aware that strong feelings are held by people on same sex relationships.

One of my highest values is harmony-

it drives much of what I do, both in healthy and unhealthy expressions.

My observation about conversations in Church settings about same-sex relationships is that harmony is not a common end point!

So please appreciate the burden I carry in even raising the conversation.

But I think we have to be able to have conversations. One of the main motivations for this series on theology and sexuality is that the Church broadly speaking has done dialogue on sexuality very poorly and something needs to change and this series has been an attempt to speak into that.

In April last year Central hosted A Different Conversation- a weekend seminar focussing on a journey of compassion in sexuality and spirituality-

There were remarkable stories told there that pushed and prodded me.

One story has kept coming back to me- a young man in his mid to late twenties who was a guest speaker at the seminar-

his love for God was very evident in how he spoke, he is a musician and found being involved in leading the community in worship was something that gave him life, he loved being a part of Christian community, it felt like home.

There was one aspect of his life that could not find a home there and that was his sexuality- he was gay, and there was no room in the church for that.

He had spent many hours in heartfelt and desperate prayer asking God to take away his homosexuality,

and hoping that his prayers had been answered he initiated a relationship with a woman, but his integrity meant that he could not continue the relationship.

Eventually he stepped down from leading worship-

simply because he knew that if his orientation was known in the community he would be asked to.

He said that there were some churches who would accept him but he found their teaching too liberal,

he held what would be described as conservative Christian views.

There were other churches he could go to where he would be accepted as long as he didn't initiate a same sex relationship –

and yet he longed for the intimacy of a committed relationship.

And he was stuck, drifting away from church feeling that the door on Christian community was being closed.

I suspect that among us there is a range of reactions to that story-

there are some who would lament that the church has acted this way,

and that the person is experiencing alienation.

There are others who hear the story and feel compassion for the person

but believe we have to draw a moral line somewhere.

For many people in the church the fact that Churches are even engaging with people in same sex relationships is a marker of the moral decline that has been happening in society for some decades.

David Gushee is a Baptist minister and ethicist in the States who has recently changed his views on same sex relationships.

He describes, in a helpful way, this narrative of the church slipping into moral decline.

Imagine, he suggests,

that you are at an altitude of 30,000 feet-

from this altitude the narrative can be framed as the story of secularisation of the western world and the collapse of Christian cultural dominance,

at 15,000 feet it can be framed as a story of Christian capitulation to theological and ethical liberalism and the consequent erosion of the vitality of the churches.

At 5,000 feet the narrative can be framed as a story of the collapse of historic western/ Christian sexual ethics seen traditionally as heterosexual, marital, faithful permanent-

and the role of the faithful church was to stand against the encroachment of cultural decline in the church itself.

In this perspective of the narrative the LGBT Issue as he describes it is

“perhaps the most egregious example of this cultural, ecclesial and moral decline.” (David P Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, 2014, kindle location 1721).

in fact Gushee says he’s used language like that in his own earlier publications-

and he stands by much of the picture he has drawn in that image-

except he says “the part about gay people seeking covenanted relationships”. (ibid, location 1721)

Gushee then suggests what if we reframe the narrative as one of marginalization, resistance and equality.

With this perspective at 30,000 feet this is a story of the sad but constant human tendency to pick out “the other” for contempt, rejection and mistreatment.

At 15,000 feet this is a story about the ways Christians have so often participated in the damaging mistreatment of those viewed as sinful,

marginal or less than- whether women, Jews, slaves, African-Americans, muslims, immigrants or others.

And at 5,000 feet, this is a story about how LGBT people and their allies have gained success in resisting further marginalization encouraging both church and society to change their attitudes and practices.(ibid, location 1729)

Gushee says “From within this narrative, the role of the faithful Christian church is compassionate participation in the struggles of LGBT people for inclusion, acceptance and equality.” (ibid, location 1737.)

The difficulty for many people when it comes to inclusion, acceptance and equality is what is understood about the perspective of Scripture on same sex relationships and activity.

And at its core the debate in evangelical churches over same sex relationships is about how will we read Scripture.

We don't have the space to consider the seven texts that mention homosexuality in the Bible,

and I have to say that I have read and re-read both the scriptures and the endless exegesis of the passages from both affirming and traditional viewpoints-

and when same sex relationships are discussed in the church the same passages are rehearsed and re-examined and exegetical grenades are thrown in either direction.

There is one passage that I'd like us to look at together though, and that is in Romans 1

Paul starts his letter by celebrating the gospel that saves both Jew and Gentile.

He then moves into a polemic against the idolatry evident in the pagan Gentile population:

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created

things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. ³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:24-32, NIV)

The first hearers of this letter, the largely Jewish Christian community in Rome, are being led into what Eugene Rogers describes as a 'rhetorical sting operation':

as they hear this list of vices being read they are beginning to mark themselves out against the Gentiles- Oh yes, they say- these people are so bad, they are apostate, look how far they have fallen.

And as they plump themselves up Paul leads them into his sting

Romans 2:1 (NIV)

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.

And this is Paul's primary purpose in this part of the letter to Romans,

that it is by grace that all of us are children of God.

There is no justification at all for the church to exclude people on the basis of sexual orientation or identity.

I found it immensely sad reading this week about the Christian couple in Australia who have said they will divorce if marriage is extended to same sex couples.

I find that to cheapen marriage and see their protest as distorted and desperate.

We will have nothing meaningful to say to the LGBT community until we are a place of welcome that does not judge –

we comfortably sing Just as I am without one plea-

but maybe,

if we're honest,

we should change the next line to “but that applies to me and not to thee.”

Eugene Rogers makes some interesting observations of Paul's use of “against nature” when describing the sex acts in Romans 1-

that phrase “against nature” occurs just one other time in Romans, it's in Romans 11 where Paul speaks to the Gentile Christians describing them as being grafted in like branches into the people of God:

²⁴ After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and *contrary to nature* were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

(Romans 11:24, NIV, emphasis added)

And Rogers suggests that

“Just as God saved flesh by taking it on and defeated death by dying,

here God saves those who act in excess of nature by an act in excess of nature.

Gentile Christians owe their very salvation to God's unnatural act. That is how much grace it is.” (Eugene Rogers *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, p65).

Rogers then nudges us as largely Gentile Christians toward a humility that any conversation about sexuality requires:

“For the church to understand sex, it must lose a sense of entitlement and recover a sense of grace. For that reason it is crucially necessary for the Church to acknowledge its overwhelmingly Gentile nature. For only thus will it come to lose its sense of entitlement and appreciate appropriately the grace of the God of Israel”. (ibid, p64)

And again I understand that perhaps some here will say, yes I get that we need to be bearers of grace in sexuality just as we are receivers of grace in sexuality.

And then you lean in and in almost whispered tones say “but what about the sex?”.

And I do want to make a couple of comments about Paul’s description of the sex acts in Romans 1.

I think it is clear that Paul did not condone the same sex activity he had in view,

I think that any other reading of those texts distorts them.

But neither do I believe that in the context of Romans 1 or the other texts that mention homosexual activity,

that the writers were able to conceive of the concept of faithful, committed, monogamous same sex relationships.

Extra-biblical writing of the time, reflected in much recent scholarship, highlights that homosexual sex acts were most common in cultic practices or in drunken parties where the acts were a distortion of power,

seldom mutual,

and in the case of male same sex acts humiliating in that one partner was forced into what was seen as the submissive role of a woman,

an insult in the patriarchal,

possessive structures of the day.

There is a contextual gap between that setting and sexual understandings and our setting and the

understandings we have today about sexual orientation and identity.

William Loader articulates it well

‘The matter is complex. The appearance of sexual genitalia seems at first sight to make matters simple, and is a good guide for the majority of the population, but even at a physical level not everyone is born with unambiguous genitalia and beyond that for some, their lifelong sexual orientation does not match their appearance and for others the orientation may not remain constant’. (William Loader, Same-Sex Relations: Listening to First Century Voices, (<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/SameSex.pdf>), p10-11

Does this mean that Scripture has nothing to say to us today about sexual orientation and sexual activity?

By no means.

The basis of this series on theology and sexuality has been an ethic of good sex.

Based on the work of Christian ethicist David Jensen,

we have explored the idea of the story of Scripture being a narrative of desire Jensen suggests that:

‘[we see the Biblical story as a story] of God’s desire for us, of our desire for communion with God, and of our desire for relationship with others.

Sex is one dimension of the desire for communion and relationship. It is integral to who we are as an expression of longing for connection and intimacy’. (David H Jensen, God, Desire, and A Theology of Human Sexuality, WJK press, 2013,p15).

And in constructing an ethic from this narrative of desire in the Biblical story Jensen suggests that good sex involves

- 1) Consent
- 2) Mutuality
- 3) Covenant/Trust
- 4) Community
- 5) Joy

And I added a 6th element based on the work of Margaret Farley and Marie Fortune good sex does

6) no harm

This ethic enables us to speak constructively, gracefully and hopefully into a sex- obsessed society,

it also speaks well into what good sex aspires to, whether straight or gay.

It is a high ideal,

and to me where the church can speak most helpfully is by pointing people, whether straight or LGBT, to the understanding that

good sex is consensual,

mutual, it is covenantal,

it adds life and vitality to and is celebrated by the community,

it brings joy and does no harm.

But in offering this ethic in those terms we are faced with a fundamental question articulated well by Eugene Rogers:

“Are some bodily forms, like gay and lesbian relationships, irredeemable, or can God sanctify them?” (Rogers, p 238)

At the beginning of this week Tony Campolo, an American pastor, writer and activist who has done much thinking and writing on the ethics of sexuality, particularly same sex relationships, released a statement where for the first time at the age of 80 he calls for the full inclusion of same sex couples into the church.

His wife Peggy over the years had introduced him to many gay and lesbian couples and he says:

‘Our friendships with these couples have helped me understand how important it is for the exclusion and disapproval of their unions by the Christian community to end. We in the Church should actively support such families. Furthermore, we should be doing all we can to reach, comfort and include all those precious children of God who have been wrongly led to believe that they are mistakes or just not good enough for God, simply because they are not straight’.

(Tony Campolo *For the record* <http://tonycampolo.org/for-the-record-tony-campolo-releases-a-new-statement/#.VXj-qs-qqko>, 2015)

Our community and indeed our movement has more thinking, reflecting, praying, and dialogue to do on sexuality,

particularly when it comes to welcoming the LGBT community.

Tim Otto, a Christian writer who for many years has been finding his way as gay and Christian laments the polarised nature of the conversation in faith communities and encourages the church to plot a different course, oriented to faith.

Christian communities find themselves asking who is right? Otto suggests that instead communities could ask

“How is God working for the good?” with regard to the church and same sex relationships

What is God’s gift to us in this? (Tim Otto, *Oriented to Faith: Transforming the Conflict over Gay Relationships*, 2014, p. xviii)

This has described some of the journey I have been on- perhaps it is similar to your own, or maybe very different. What I hope is that even if you find yourself in a different place that we can continue to break bread together.

We know that there are already points of agreement in our community- I hope that people find Central to be a place of welcome regardless of sexual orientation or identity.

The leadership team also recognise that we need more conversation about our church and same sex relationships: the character of that conversation will be our greatest witness.

And in our conversation and prayer may we discern together how God is working for the good.