

Wrestling with the Bible

by Rev. Irene Monroe

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Note: The following sermon was delivered at The Cathedral Church of St. Paul on June 10 in honor of Boston Pride 2006.

I come this afternoon to talk about the texts of terror in the Bible.

Why?

Because the Bible has played a salient role in discrimination against all people at different times in this country. Both religious intolerance and fundamentalism foster a climate of spiritual abuse that leaves many people in spiritual exile for the rest of their lives. At present, its excommunicated population is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people.

Used too often as a controlling device and not enough as a spiritual compass, the Bible becomes a tool to promulgate moral and political agendas. In 1998, for example, right-wing Christian groups - the Family Research Council, the Christian Coalition, and Americans for Truth About Homosexuality - ordered all its members to cease using the King James Version of the Bible because historians had proven that King James I of England, who was also known as James VI of Scotland, was indisputably gay.

Should the King James Version of the Bible, which has been around since 1611 and used worldwide, be discarded solely on the basis of King James' sexual orientation?

Speaking at a press conference about this controversy, Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council said, "I feel uncomfortable that good Christians all over America, and indeed the world, are using a document commissioned by a homosexual. Anything that has been commissioned by a homosexual has obviously been tainted in some way."

The justification for queer bashing stems from the belief of doing God's will as purported in the Bible, and many Christians, both blacks as well as whites, believe only heterosexuals are elected to do so.

For example, gospel singers Angie and Debbie Winans released a single in 1998 titled "Not Natural," in which they self-righteously denounced lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as children of God. When queried by newscaster Travis Smiley on the cable show "Black Entertainment Tonight" about what compelled them to come forth and record this song, Debbie Winans stated, "We don't come as Angie and Debbie. We come as messengers of God doing His will."

"Doing God's will" is a prodigious task and unmistakably a human enterprise. As a human enterprise, "doing God's will" is invariably subject to error because it is fraught

with both humble intent and righteous indignation. Its anchor and its impetus are found in the human act of interpreting the Word of God.

Interpreting scripture as the Word of God is always subjective and suspect in intent, whether it is being done in the ivy towers of seminaries or within the holy walls of sanctuaries. Interpreting scripture with menacing messages - and with litanies of dos and don'ts - is not about embracing and empowering all people, but about authority and power over certain groups of people. The authority of scripture does not lie in what God said. It lies in the hands of those in power who determine what God ought to say.

The Bible is replete with contradictory and damning messages to all people. Determining which of these texts of terror are discarded and which are upheld is not a battle about biblical inerrancy or God's will. It is an unmitigated battle of human will. For example, there are two creationist myths in the Bible (Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:22). The first myth says that God made woman and man simultaneously. The second creation myth is our "rib story" in which Eve is born from a rib of Adam.

Undoubtedly this story has ribbed and poked at Christian women throughout the centuries, since it is the authoritative text for substantiating gender inequity in society. The Curse of Ham (Genesis 9:18-27) and Apostle Paul's edict to slaves (Ephesians 6:5-8) served as the scientific and Christian legitimization for the enslavement of people of African ancestry. The Sodom and Gomorrah narrative (Genesis 19:1-29) is one of the most quoted scriptures to argue for compulsory heterosexuality and queer bashing.

The invention of sodomy is rooted in Christian theology. The anti-sodomitic theological tradition derives from a homophobic and misogynist reading of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative in Genesis 19. As one of the most quoted scriptures to argue for compulsory heterosexuality, the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative has become authoritatively damaging not only to LGBTQ people, but to women as well, because women are the real victims we read about in the text, and LGBTQ people are the scapegoats who are read into the text.

Functioning in this culture as one of the paradigmatic biblical texts of terror, the narrative is used to police the sexual behaviors of LGBTQ people and women, but the text is not used to police the sexual behaviors and sexual violence of men. The preferential treatment given to men in this text ironically carries over into our real lives today; thus, setting up unequal gender and sexual dynamics that set the stage for unequal power dynamics in our bedrooms that is not only unsettling for women and LGBTQ people, but also unsafe for them. How often have we heard of women being raped not by strangers on the street, but instead by male members of their own families? And how often have we heard of "The Gay Panic Defense," an anti-gay strategy employed by attorneys to win an acquittal for a homophobic client who claims that an LGBT person came on to him - providing his "justification" for killing the person.

Present-day feminist and queer biblical scholars who are in opposition to anti-sodomitic theological tradition contest that the narrative has nothing to do with homosexual sex, but

instead the text is about inhospitality to male strangers and sexual violence toward women.

In reference to the two uninvited male strangers/angels who come to the city of Sodom to inform Lot of the city's impending destruction, for example, Lot says to the crowd of riotous men outside of his door (verses 7-8), "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof."

Therefore, one would argue that the sin of Sodom is not about the sexual acts between consenting LGBTQ people, but instead that the sin of Sodom is about the cultural acceptance of sexual violence toward women.

A gay male minister and activist asked me how can the text be read as a judgment against the mistreatment of women since he saw Lot as the perpetrator of that sin and yet Lot is saved from destruction. "Am I missing something," he asked me? Yes, Lot does indeed help to perpetrate the sin and many renderings of this text talk about how Lot has sinned and how God punishes Lot's wife for that sin. However, many of the hermeneutical renderings of the text do not look at how two minority groups are pitted in the text-- woman who are in the text and LGBTQ who are read into the text.

In trying to break the dominate and normative reading of this text, it is important to highlight that the text was never about homosexuality but inhospitality and indifference toward women in its acts of inhospitality with Lot's wife and daughters. In Lot's days women were the property of their fathers and husbands. When the explicit misogynist treatment of women in the text is not discussed while a dominant reading of LGBTQ people into the text is privileged, we miss the sexual violence perpetrated on both minority groups in this country.

Religion has become a peculiar institution in the theater of human life. Although its Latin root "religio" means "to bind," it has served as a legitimate power in binding people's shared hatred.

Until the fourth century C.E., when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, Christians were despised as much in those days as LGBT people are today. As a matter of fact, to be called a Christian was considered a religious epithet, and it subjected Christians to ridicule, hate crimes and Christian-bashing in much the same way as we queers are today.

Just as LGBT people transformed the pejorative term "queer" into a positive word of self-reference, Christians transformed the word "Christian" into one of self-reverence.

Having known this history, I found calling myself a queer Christian neither blasphemous nor an oxymoron. Both are tied to the unending struggle of human acceptance, just at different times along the human timeline.

I come out of a black religious tradition born of struggle for human acceptance. When slave masters gave my ancestors the Bible, their intent was not to make us better Christians, but instead better slaves. The Bible, at least according to slave owners, was the legitimate sanction for American slavery.

But my ancestors took this authoritative text that was meant to aid them in acclimating to their life of servitude and turned it into an incendiary text that not only fomented slave revolts and abolitionists movements, but also the nation's civil rights movement. The Bible told African Americans how to do what must be done. And in so doing, Nat Turner revolted against slavery, and Harriet Tubman conducted a railroad out of it.

My ancestors expanded not only the understanding of what it meant to be human, but also the parameters of what it meant to be a Christian.

Having known this history, I found calling myself a queer African-American Christian to my community neither less black nor less Christian. For all are tied, as my community ought to know, to the unending struggle of human acceptance, but at different times along the human timeline.

My favorite scripture that embodies a present-day social gospel is Matthew 25: 30-41.

Why?

Because it asks us to look for "those who are Christ among us."

Perhaps this sounds funny.

But the scripture reminds us that we look for Christ everywhere but among ourselves, and because we don't look for Christ among us everyday people.

We are not looking at reality from an involved, committed stance in light of a faith that does justice.

And when we are not looking at reality from an involved, committed stance in light of a faith that does justice, we cannot connect what we believe as people of faith with what we do as followers of Christ.

I particularly like the verse in this Matthew scripture reading that asks the question, "When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes?"

And the King says, "I tell you whatever you did this for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me!"

The scripture asks us to see the faces and hear the voices of the damned, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and the disrespected.

In this instance along the human timeline, it is the poor, illegal immigrants, the homeless and certainly LGBTQ people.

I want to leave you with my advice about how we might begin to combat these texts of terror that clobber us over the head.

As lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, many of us allow the power of God's will to be interpreted and executed by heterosexuals by not knowing the Bible ourselves. Our ignorance about the Bible, whether we are practicing atheists or recovering Christians, perpetuates our oppression and makes us participants in this climate of homophobia. As more and more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people unabashedly take back the Bible, new theological and ethical questions must be raised.

As our society crawls toward diversity and inclusiveness, the moral imperative calls for the prophetic voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the same manner that the civil rights movement in this country called for the prophetic voices of African Americans.

Is it the will of God to devalue and to dehumanize the lives of women, people of African ancestry, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people? On the question of race and gender, most Americans, both Christians and non-Christians, clearly see the answer as no. But on the question of sexual orientation, many of our heterosexual brothers and sisters are biblically challenged.

I think we should take back this Bible. •