
GOD, SEX AND JUSTICE

Dr. George F. Regas

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"God, Sex, and Justice" is the title of this sermon. God and justice—we certainly know they belong together. But God and sex—and in church? It may be a puzzle to some because we have been the lifelong recipients of double messages. "Sex is good and beautiful, but let's not talk about it in church." Or, "Sex is dirty. Save it for someone you love!" I never have understood how that works!

Years ago the psychologist Carl Jung observed that religion and sexuality were closely intertwined. When people brought to him religious questions, they turned out to be sexual issues. And when they came with sexual questions, they turned out to be religious ones.

At conscious and unconscious levels our spirituality and our sexuality are very much intertwined.

By spirituality, I mean all of the external, ritualistic forms that help to connect us to God, the creator. I mean also the informal ways we forge a union between our own spirit and the divine spirit, and live in God, the lover. It is a journey into God who is the ultimate power and meaning in our lives. It is the recognition that it is God in whom we live and move and have our existence. In part, that is what spirituality means.

By sexuality I do mean erotic arousal and genital expressions of love. But I mean much more. Sexuality is a basic dimension of human existence. It affects all of our thoughts and feelings and actions. Sexuality is our way of being in the world as female and male persons, and living as bodied persons with the capacity of sensuousness and touch and communion. It is our way of being in the world with certain sexual and affectional orientations. In short, sexuality is our way of being in the world by God's design and creation—created in such a marvelous way that we can be drawn into intimacy and touch and communion. Our sexuality is all of that.

During the 1960s we experienced a sexual revolution. During the last quarter of a century we have witnessed great changes in the cultural and religious understanding of sex roles, sexual behavior outside of marriage, single parent families, homosexuality, and the explicit ways in which sexual matters are discussed. There was enormous resistance to these changes, but it happened.

In 1984 Time magazine did a cover story announcing that the sexual revolution was over. Veterans of the revolution, Time said, were bored and wounded. The one night stand had lost its sheen. Helped along by herpes and AIDS, commitment and intimacy were "in" again, and celibacy was once more a respectable option. There was some evidence that the "me generation" was giving way to the "we generation."

There is no question that much of that is true. However, in a deeper sense, the sexual revolution is far from over. Many scholars are saying that never before in the history of the Church has there been so much ferment as there is now on human sexuality. The outpouring of resolutions by national church bodies, the pronouncements by national religious figures trying to reaffirm the traditional values on sexual practice, has been unprecedented.

It is a tremendous privilege to be the rector of a church that is willing to live with conflict in its life. One of the things I treasure most about All Saints Church is the fact that we have not shied away from trying to deal with the tough, controversial questions of the contemporary world. It has been hard work, but we've tried to face these issues openly, gracefully and honestly. I love that about you.

This morning I want to engage you on a difficult issue. Among many ethicists whom I respect there is the growing conviction that human sexuality is the test case for communities of faith in our time. These complex issues of sexuality are placed forcefully on the Church's agenda: full equality and justice for women, abortion rights, sexual love outside of marriage, and the most controversial of them all, homosexuality. William S. Coffin, formerly the senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City and a leading prophetic voice in American churches, says the issue of homosexuality is probably the most divisive issue since slavery split the Church.

The mandate of Amos and the prophets, and the imperative of Jesus and the Church to seek social justice will not allow us to forget the fact that discrimination and oppression continue against millions of gay and lesbian people in the structures of society, as well as within the Church. We must address that injustice.

My case has four dimensions to it. I. We of the Jewish Christian heritage are a people of the Book. So what does the Bible say about homosexuality?

Many of the people who condemn and reject gay men and lesbians and want to deal with them punitively read the Bible with a selective literalism. I just read a recent article by the Chaplain of the United States Senate where he called homosexual practice an aberration and abomination—and quoted scripture to show how sinful and perverse such behavior is.

It is true that there is a passage in the book of Leviticus in the Jewish Bible that does call a man lying down with another man an abomination. But I want to point out that the Leviticus law also used the word abomination in reference to other behaviors as well: eating pork, misuse of incense, sexual intercourse during the menstrual period, and wearing clothing of mixed fabric. Selective literalism always gets us in trouble!

The television evangelists are always talking about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, and how homosexuality destroyed the city. I can't imagine any respectable Biblical scholar attributing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to homosexuality. Yet the words sodomy and sodomite have come to mean the perversity of homosexuality.

I heard a great story about Sodom and Gomorrah. A political scientist, who was also a good lay theologian, opened a speech he was giving in Washington, D.C. in this manner: "Washington is full of sodomites. The Congress of the United States is half full of sodomites. And the President of this country is probably a sodomite." Then he said, "Let me tell you what sodomy means. I will read from the Book of Ezekiel, the sixteenth chapter, the forty-ninth verse: 'This was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had the pride that goes with food in plenty, comfort, and ease, and yet she never helped the poor in their need.'"

He said, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was the sin of inhospitality, the sin of hardness of heart in the presence of human need, the sin of injustice, the sin of neglecting the poor. That is the abomination to God. Those are the sodomites. I'm sure he got their attention!

The world in which the Bible was written did not know about the loyal, faithful, tender, non-exploitive loving acts of same-sex couples for whom mutual attraction is part of their given natures.

When the Bible condemns homosexuality, it is speaking about rape, incest, prostitution and cruelty which is also sinful for the heterosexual. And there is not a single word from the lips of Jesus about homosexuality.

The really serious problem for the people of the Book is not how to square homosexuality with certain Biblical passages that appear to condemn it, but rather how to reconcile rejection, prejudice, hostility, and punishment of homosexuality with the unconditional love of Christ.

II.

Homosexuality in the vast majority of cases is a condition that is given and not chosen. From my own reading and personal experience with gay and lesbian persons, I am convinced that at least ninety per cent of homosexuals do not have anything remotely close to a choice in their sexual orientation.

I recognize that a few say they do. Some believe they have freely chosen to be homosexuals and live out that sexual orientation. I respect that position—and honor those people.

What do we know about the causes of homosexuality? The exact causes are unknown—but it is increasingly clear that the more we know about heterosexuality the more we will understand homosexuality. It is a continuum. I don't believe a person is absolutely straight or absolutely gay.

I have been guided very substantially in my understanding of homosexuality by the many books of James B. Nelson.¹ He is a brilliant theologian who teaches at the United Theological Seminary in Minneapolis. He is recognized as the country's leading ethicist on human sexuality.

According to Dr. Nelson, we cannot say with any precision what causes homosexuality. It is likely to be an interaction of several factors, including genetic, hormonal and environmental. But psychological and social influences alone probably cannot cause homosexuality. He writes that the genetic, hormonal, neurological predisposition toward homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual orientation is present at birth for all people. But it takes the blending of various factors—and no

one seems to be quite sure how—in the earliest years of a child's life to produce a lasting sexual orientation in that person. Once that is relatively fixed—and the research now says this is between two and five years of age—this sexual research now says this is between two and five years of age—this sexual orientation cannot be changed permanently by therapy. Many gay and lesbian people tell us horror stories of how parents, upon hearing that their child was homosexual, sent them off to a psychiatrist "to be fixed." The dehumanization of that process is overwhelming.

To deny or repress or hide one's sexuality is bad theology and bad psychology. The only healthy thing to do is accept oneself and affirm one's sexuality.

Without self acceptance one cannot possibly live responsibly. But for gay and lesbian people that is a gigantic struggle. They have frequently been told by their families that they don't belong to them, by the Church that they are perverse and desperate sinners because of their sexual orientation, by the medical profession that they are sick and abnormal, and by the Supreme Court of the land that they are criminals.

How have gay and lesbian people withstood such an onslaught? I am amazed to see such health and stability in the homosexual community.

At the core of the Christian faith is the simple and profound assertion: God loves you just as you are. In the Gospel the first and last word is grace. Grace means you don't have to become something before you are loved by God. It is offered free. You can't buy it or earn it or deserve it. All you can do is receive it. That unconditional love and generous acceptance are not marginal to our religion. They are central to our belief.

This radical acceptance is of the total person—body, mind and spirit. James Nelson says that once we allow this radical grace to penetrate and we accept the body as loved by God—we begin to reclaim the lost sexual dimensions of ourselves.

Grace is total acceptance. Our body's feelings, our body's erogenous dimensions, our fantasies, our masculinity and femininity, our heterosexuality, our homosexuality, our sexual irresponsibilities as well as our yearnings for sexual integrity—all of this is graciously accepted by divine love.

That is the wonder and glory of the Christian faith. When we know God loves us just as we are and we put our arms around ourselves in acceptance and self love, there is released in us enormous spiritual power —power to grow into wholeness, into that beautiful person God has created us to be.

III.

I want to move on and share with you my belief that genital expressions of homosexual love can be holy and good.

The National Episcopal Church, along with other mainline denominations, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, have said that gay and lesbian persons are welcome. Their presence and service in the Church are valued. But they must remain celibate.

The Episcopal bishops recently by a very narrow vote disassociated themselves from an ordination to the priesthood of a man who is a practicing homosexual. By a vote of 78 to 74, Bishop John Spong of Newark was censured by his colleagues for this ordination. And a couple of years ago the Episcopal House of Bishops reiterated the Church's belief in the traditional values that say genital expressions of love are permitted only for heterosexual couples within the bonds of marriage.

I strongly reject these positions of my Church.

Yes, celibacy is an option to be honored when voluntarily chosen for positive reasons. Often celibacy is chosen not because genital love is intrinsically wrong but rather because celibacy is for this person the best way to express a vocational commitment or the best path into sexual integrity. I know many people who have chosen celibacy in whom this commitment is a beautiful quality. It should be supported.

But celibacy is not the only valid homosexual lifestyle for Christians. Every human being has a God-given right to sexual love and intimacy—a right to be lived out in a way that is compatible with the spirit of Christ.

John J. McNeill was a Jesuit for nearly forty years before being expelled from the Society of Jesus in 1987 for his views on gay and lesbian sexuality. His books have helped illumine my journey.

Father McNeill writes that only a sadistic God would create millions of human beings who are homosexuals and then deny them the right to sexual intimacy. He says before he believed in such a sadistic God he would choose to believe the Roman Catholic Church is wrong about homosexual activity. And they kicked him out!

After much study, reflection and struggle, I have come to believe that the ethical standards for sexual practice are the same for homosexuals as for heterosexuals. The core issue for sexual ethics is not the assessment of certain types of physical acts as right or wrong, normal or abnormal. The core issue is not whether genital love is within or outside of heterosexual marriage. The pivotal issue is the integrity of the relationship. This is true for us all.

Gay men and lesbians desire and need deep, lasting relationships just as much as I do. And they should not be denied genital expressions of that loving communion.

We must boldly proclaim that it is not the legality of marriage that determines the morality of sexual love. Is sex in marriage right and good? It all depends. We know there is lots of sexual abuse in marriage, so much bargaining within the bedroom scene, lots of impersonal sex, much deception and deep sexual alienation that produces violence. You can't tell the goodness of a sexual act just by looking at the external appearance. You must know the inner meaning and deep quality that act is expressing.

So the ethic is authentic love for all of us. What is a good sexual act? It is honest and real--clearly conveying what the relationship really means, what its deepest meaning is. It is other-enriching, respecting the other person, never exploiting. It is faithful-- "tonight's pleasures are not tomorrow's pain." It reveals a commitment, a trust, a tenderness for the other person. It is willing to take responsibility for sexual love's consequences—personal and social. Good sex connects us to the building of a good society. It is liberating, life-giving, joyous, fun, easy, ecstatic, fantastic. And it resists all cruelty, all exploitation, all impersonalization. This kind of ethic for sexual behavior is appropriate, I believe, for both gay and straight Christians.

IV I want to share another conviction I have on homosexuality. I have come to the place in my own thinking that I now believe I should bless the covenant of same-sex couples.

There has been a strong theme in Jewish Christian thought that procreation was the justification for sex. This began to change in the seventeenth century. Some Puritans, Anglicans and Quakers began to teach a different understanding of the Bible. They preached that God's main purpose in creating us as sexual creatures was not to make babies but to make love. Loving intimacy is the primary goal of sex. If children come, it is only an added blessing. They are not the primary reason for marriage. The reason is love and commitment. We all know that such an ethical position has had a difficult struggle in the councils of the Church.

Over the years I have gotten acquainted with some wonderful gay and lesbian people. They have been my friends and have gently led me on my journey. I've seen goodness and holiness and beauty and love in these people. Nothing in me could ever see their lives as sinful and perverse. They have been the instruments of grace for this community of faith.

At least ten per cent of this congregation are gay and lesbian persons. There are more who have children and friends and colleagues who are homosexuals. We have all learned so much by the willingness of these people to share with us.

The holy spirit is speaking to this congregation in and through the experience of gay and lesbian Christians. Our ministry with persons with AIDS has brought me into contact with some extraordinary people. I've seen remarkable love between persons with AIDS and their lovers. I've witnessed such tenderness and fidelity, such affection and care and deep respect to the last breath. I've seen the holy God at work in their relationship.

I know many same-sex couples in this congregation. Some of them I know up close and down deep. I'm convinced, without any question, of the integrity and goodness of their relationship. I believe I should bless those unions if the request is made. Even though the National Episcopal Church says no to the blessing of same-sex covenants, I feel God is calling me and this great parish into a new place. I've come to believe that not to be willing to bless a relationship that is committed to the same standards of love and lasting fidelity as heterosexuals is to say in effect to a same-sex couple that whatever their relationship is, it is not "fit" for public Christian affirmation, support and celebration.

We should not be in such a place in this Christian community. The blessing of a same-sex covenant is the clearest symbol the Church can offer that these precious children of God are fully accepted into the life of the congregation.

Don't ever underestimate the power of healing such an act would bring. When we bless a union of a homosexual couple, I believe this is what we are saying: the church sees goodness in you and your love for each other; we recognize your intention to share that love for a lifetime; the church wants to bless you on your journey and sustain you when the way is difficult; we cheer you on your way and hope for your success; and we shall rejoice in your victories and weep for your failures. That is where I want us to be. Even though I've been too long in coming to this position, we will not jump into a radical policy. I want us to struggle, gay and straight together, to discern the best way to move on this decision. I certainly recognize we are not all at the same place. We need to share how we feel, our fears and our hopes, as we plan this important act of justice for gay and lesbian persons.

But it is for us all. Sexuality is vitally important to the dignity of each one of us. The issue isn't about "them" but about all of us. I'm confident that the more I live in the radical grace of God and trust myself, body and soul, to this loving God the more steadily I will travel on this adventure.

After a long pilgrimage I'm solidly committed to bless same-sex covenants, but I want to listen to you and make our way together as a parish. I look forward to that day when gay men and lesbians will be embraced fully and unconditionally in love with justice. And once more in this church those famous words of the prophet Amos will mark our corporate life:

Let justice flow on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream. [Amos 5:24]

Amen

1 James B. Nelson's books:

Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology. (Augsburg Publishing House, 1978.)
The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality and Masculine Spirituality. (Westminster Press, 1988.)
Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience. (Pilgrim Press, 1983)

2 John J. McNeill's books:

The Church and the Homosexual. (Beacon Press, 1988)
Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers,
Families and Friends. (Beacon Press, 1988)