

UU Fellowship of the Peninsula  
June 15, 2008  
Sara Mackey©

## The Bible Tells Me So...Or Does It?

A couple of years ago, I was proctoring for exams at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, where I work part time. There were two other proctors there as well, both PhD students. Not surprisingly, all three of us were working on Bible-related material as we sat at our post. I was preparing an earlier version this very sermon, in fact. One of the PhD students, a Bible scholar who is the son of a Bible scholar, asked what I was doing, and then began to tell me about his studies related to the same topic: homosexuality in the Bible. This man is Hispanic...I don't know what country he's from, but he told me that in his culture, it is taught that homosexuality is wrong. He said, "I wanted to know why it was wrong, so I looked in the Bible." Naturally. He's a Bible scholar raised by a Bible scholar. When he wants to know things, he seeks answers in the Bible. He said, "I read the texts, I researched, I examined the language, but I could find nothing in the Bible to support that homosexuality is wrong. So..."

What a refreshing perspective! We had a good time that morning, and our conversation was very helpful to me as I developed this service. Serious Bible scholars with an understanding of Biblical language and the history around the creation of the texts will not claim today that the Bible condemns gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people. So who *is* claiming that, and why? And more specifically, why do we Unitarian Universalists

need to care? We're not calling anybody sinners; we're not telling anybody that they're going to Hell. The Bible isn't our sacred text; most of us don't use it to inform our thinking or guide our lives. What difference does it make to us what the Bible says about anything? Why is it any of our business?

We care, we *need* to care because of our second principle: we affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Justice. This is *our* concern because no matter how inaccurate it is to do so, using the Bible to hurt people, to batter people, is an injustice. It's an injustice to the people, and it's an injustice to the Bible. And injustice *is* our business.

Let's look for a moment at what the Bible *does* say about homosexuality. If you ask me that question, I'll answer... nothing. The Bible says nothing about homosexuality. The word did not exist until the nineteenth century, and certainly did not exist in either Biblical Hebrew or Biblical Greek. It is not present in the Christian sacred text. Also, the concept as we understand it now, the idea that people are born with the predisposition to love whom they love, is very modern. It was not a part of the thinking of that ancient culture. When we speak of homosexuality today, we are talking about genuine, mutual, loving, caring relationships that exist between people of the same gender. It is only in the early twentieth century that we have reached the understanding and general awareness that such relationships are real and possible, and they involve far more than what some might define as simply "unnatural" sexual behavior.

Someone asked me, and I in turn asked a professor at the seminary, are there very many love stories of any kind in the Bible? Anyone who grew up in a Christian church can name some, but the professor pointed out that the idea of romantic love didn't exist at the time that the Bible was written, and certainly was not a factor of the history recorded there. In the Old Testament, there is little recognition of the individual, as we understand it today. This is the story of a tribal people, and beyond that, a tribal people in a land not their own. The important thing was to survive as a tribe, and identity was defined through the connection to the tribe.

It would be useful and instructive to look at each of the Biblical texts that is cited as condemning homosexuality. There are eight places...only eight...in the entire Bible that are claimed to be references to homosexuality. If we had about eight weeks, we could look carefully at each of those, but since we have about twenty minutes, I'd like to approach this another way. Let's think instead about the historical and cultural context in which the Bible was written, and take more of an overview of the specific texts.

One that is most frequently used is in the book of Leviticus; we can let that serve as a good example. Leviticus chapter 20, verse 13 says "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (NRSV). There are so many reasons that this text has

nothing to do with loving relationships in the twenty-first century; let's look at a few of them.

First of all, this book is full of prohibitions that mean nothing to us today. There are extensive instructions about the correct way to offer live sacrifices in the temple, and we don't believe in offering live sacrifices any more. There are dietary prohibitions that we routinely ignore, as well as prohibitions against wearing different kinds of cloth at the same time. We certainly don't condemn anybody for not following those rules today. How can we decide that most of the Levitical codes are no longer pertinent, but one or two things still have meaning? On what basis does one make that choice? When members of the religious right make modern references to Biblical imperative, they can be very selective; yet no one is entitled to say, when the Bible condemns things I want to do (eat shellfish or cut my hair, for example) that doesn't count. But when the Bible condemns things I don't like (homosexuality, for example), then that does count.

Another factor that deserves our attention is the context in which these codes were developed. Indeed, whenever we discuss anything from the Bible, we need to name and understand the context. It was a very different world then, a different way of thinking. Key to understanding the Levitical codes is the realization that the people of Israel were a small group trying to survive and populate the region, against formidable odds. They knew and understood themselves not as individuals, but as a people. They had a tribal identity, not an individual identity. They were the Holy People...God's

people...and their survival as a nation depended on everybody else recognizing them that way also. They had to be distinct from others. One way of assuring that distinction was by following these codes, which served two functions: they separated the Israelites from the Canaanites, whose land they were in, and they kept the Israelites pure. The Holy People had to be pure; that's one of the things that made them the Holy People. The function of so many of the rules in Leviticus is to maintain that purity, as was befitting the people of God. A man lying with a male as with a woman was prohibited for many reasons. For one thing, there were Canaanite fertility rituals involving temple prostitutes who were male as well as female, so a man couldn't lie with another man because it might make them look like Canaanites, and they had to be different to survive as the Holy People. For another thing, the survival of this small nation depended on procreation, and if a man lay with a man, seed that could be for procreation got wasted. Again, a threat to the well-being of the nation. Also, the point has been made that the phrase *as a woman* is significant in this passage. In the context of Leviticus, a woman was an inferior being, so the abomination was that a man would be behaving as an inferior by lying with another man *as a woman*.

One more point to note is that in English, the translation says "if a man lies with a male as with a woman". Two different words are used there in English, man and male, indicating that two different Hebrew words are used in the original (or in as close as we've got to the original). A Bible scholar would instantly recognize that as a signal to do an extensive word study, research what each of the

words means, what the root of each word is, what's going on there with the language. I haven't sought out the research about those two different words, but I know it's out there, and that's the point. You see two different words for the same thing used in the same sentence and a light bulb goes on: you say," Bingo! There's a story behind *that!*"

There is nothing in this text that says there is anything wrong with two people of the same gender being together in a loving, mutually nurturing, supportive relationship. The case just can not be made. Again, if we had time, we could examine other Old Testament texts that are used against BGLT people, with similar results. In the New Testament, Paul, writing after Jesus's death, makes references in three of his letters (Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9, I Timothy 1:10) that are cited now as condemnation of homosexuality. Paul, though, is not talking about what we're talking about, and again, the word homosexual does not exist in Biblical Greek. Even without looking at the texts specifically, we can still point out that context is crucial. Paul is speaking of sexual acts that often involved men and male slaves, who were in many cases boys. These acts, by definition, were exploitive according our values in the twenty-first century... not mutual, not necessarily voluntary on the slave's part, and not loving. Paul's letters do not refer to what we mean when we talk about BGLT relationships today.

It is crucial to note that New Testament references that are cited as anti-gay are in Paul's letters. Jesus himself did not say anything that can be translated as a reference to homosexuality. In

fact, if you want an example of somebody who made it a point to create community with people who were normally rejected and cast away and scorned and vilified, you won't have to look any farther than Jesus. His message was about loving your neighbor, and not just the neighbor that you knew and liked. Jesus, the one person whom you could count on to speak for Christians, said never mind about the old rules (the Levitical codes, for example.) There are only two rules: love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor.

We haven't even touched this morning on the story of Jonathan and David in the book of I Samuel, or the story of Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth. Now, let me reiterate what I said earlier: the word homosexual does not appear in the Christian sacred text, and the concept as we know it today, with homosexuality as identity rather than behavior, did not exist at the time that the text was written. (Not as far as we know, anyway. We weren't there.) These stories can not legitimately be called stories about homosexuality any more than the Levitical codes can be said to condemn homosexuality, as we mean that word today. Still, it is fascinating to note that in a body of work about a tribal people with a tribal identity, two powerful stories about strong interpersonal relationships are about a man who loves a man, and a woman who loves a woman.

Again, if we had two weeks, we could study these two stories carefully. A very brief glimpse is all we can do today, though. In I Samuel 18:1, the text says..."the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." (NRSV) In

the story, Jonathan strips off his robe, his armor, his sword and bow, and gives them to David; at another point they kiss; and he and David make a covenant together more than once in the story. Covenant language is particularly noteworthy; when a covenant is made, a sacred trust is brought into being. *God* made covenants with *people* in the Old Testament. These acts have political implications that we can't ignore, and yet Jonathan loved David. It says so right in the text.

The story of Ruth and Naomi may be familiar to you through this beautiful wedding song based on the Biblical text from the book of Ruth (ch.1, beginning with verse 16)

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;

Where you lodge, I will lodge;

Your people shall be my people,

And your God my God.

(NRSV)

Although this is a popular wedding song, I wonder how many brides and grooms realize that Ruth is not singing it to a man; this song of devotion is for Naomi, her mother-in-law. When Ruth's husband and Naomi's husband both died, Ruth was supposed to return to her own family, since she was no longer connected to Naomi by the relationship with a man. But Ruth didn't want to go. She wanted Naomi's people to be her people, and Naomi's God to be her God. She wanted to die where Naomi died. She wanted to be with Naomi.

Jonathan loved David as he loved his own soul, and I know that because the Bible tells me so. Ruth begged Naomi not to send her away, to let their devotion to each other sustain them together. Ruth loved Naomi, and I know that because the Bible tells me so.

I come here today as a friend of the Bible. I also come as an advocate for the rights of BGLT people, and as a lover of justice. When we hear people say that homosexuals are sinners because it says so in the Bible, we need to know how to answer that inaccurate and unjust statement. At least we need to know that competent scholars can answer that misguided claim with integrity. I have included in your order of service today an insert with some quotes that indicate what the Bible says about love, and I chose these entirely at random and stopped when I had enough to fill half a page. I could have had pages of quotes. If somebody tells me that the Bible says it's a sin to be gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender, I can respond with any or all of these quotes, plus plenty more that aren't on that insert. I can also respond by saying, "I don't agree with you. But I'll bet you can agree with me that this is what the Bible *does* say, among many other things:

It says God is love.

It says love your neighbor."

And so may it be.