

Good News to Bad: Sexuality

Romans 1:18 - 2:11; John 13:33-35

Ellen Fowler Skidmore

Forest Lake Presbyterian Church, Columbia South Carolina;
Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, Virginia

There is an ancient tale told of a pagan tribe of warriors who were converted as a group to Christianity. As I heard the story, the Franks, like other tribes who were converted to the Christian faith, waded into a river to be baptized en masse. The warriors knew, at some level, that this baptism would make them followers of a new king, Jesus. They also understood that this Jesus was a Prince of Peace, an ironic statement of faith given the warring ways of the Franks. But the story has it that when the Frankish warriors came to be baptized in the waters of the Rhine River, they were careful to hold their swords above their heads and out of the waters of baptism, not to save them from rust but to keep them from Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

One of the greatest challenges to becoming a Disciple of Jesus is our desire to hold things above the waters of baptism. The truth is that there is nothing that may be kept free of the lordship of Jesus Christ: not money, not power, not our wills, and not our sexuality. And it is to this daunting topic that we turn our attention today as we focus on how Christians are to be good news people in a world full of Bad News.

As I have worked through this sermon series, I have realized myself, how very easy it is to identify Bad News. In my own lists and notes, the list of Bad News often outnumbers the Good News two to one or more. As regards sexuality, there is no shortage of bad news. And, just like last week, when we dealt with the wealthy and the poor, there are many places where Christians of good conscience do not agree. And before I begin, I want to tell you my hopes for this sermon. First, my goal is to encourage us all to think about the issue of sexuality within the framework of Bad News/Good News and under the guidance of Scripture. I am not going to attempt to lay down all of the rules and tell you what you must believe. In the first place, that wouldn't work, and in the second place, I don't have all the answers. So, I am not going to rail against the sexual mores of our culture at large. I am more interested today in how those of us who call ourselves Disciples of Jesus try to hold our sexuality above the waters of baptism, and I want to challenge us all to think about what it means to submit our sexuality to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Having said that, I think there is a lot of Bad News on which we can agree:

* I assume that we can agree that it is bad news that the sitcoms that show up on TV and most of the music on the popular radio stations depict sexual promiscuity as normal and acceptable. I think that as people of faith, we can agree that sexual promiscuity is bad news and hurts us all. Adultery, forbidden by the 10 Commandments, falls into the category of Bad News, a form of promiscuity that destroys people and families.

* I assume that we can agree that sexual addictions and pornography are bad news.

* I assume that as people of faith, we can agree that the sex trade, alive and well in this state and country, is bad news. And that any time sexuality is used to dominate,

sell, destroy, or display power is bad news.

- The belief that sexuality is somehow bad, dirty, or sinful is also something that people of faith have to call bad news. Scripture teaches us that God created us as sexual beings, and everything that God created is good. Sexuality is a good gift from God, and attempts to make it bad news is bad news.

Now, beyond that there is a lot of disagreement in the church over what is bad news. And most of the disagreement comes when we begin to talk about the issue of homosexuality – which appears to be one of the major topics of conversation in our culture. For some Christians, the bad news is that there are people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender—GLBT. For others, the bad news is that GLBT people are not fully included and affirmed in the life of the church. I trust that we would all agree that the horribly high levels of suicide among LGBT teenagers is Bad News. But agreement on the bad news and the good news when it comes to homosexuality is much more elusive.

I will tell you this, as I listen to you, I have observed that there is not widespread agreement in this congregation about what is good news and what is bad news as regards this topic. Members of this congregation hold a wide variety of opinions on this topic. And let me remind you that the issue of good news and bad news as regards sexuality and homosexuality is not a faceless issue that does not affect us. When we talk about the good news and bad news on the issue of sexuality and homosexuality, we are talking about our children, our Grandchildren, our parents, our brothers and sisters, and our friends. And if you disagree with or are angry with me for something I say today, I want you to come and talk to me. I promise to listen. But before you come to talk to me, talk to your family and friends, because I promise you that Good News and Bad News as regards sexuality is not a simple or monolithic position. Do not presume that your Christian family and friends will agree with you. But do make an effort to ask, listen, and understand the different opinions within your own circles.

I am not troubled by a variety of opinions on this topic. God can handle a variety of opinions, and as in other matters of faith, it is not required that we all believe the same thing. What is required is that we cling to Christ more tightly than we cling to our opinions and that we seek to submit every part of our lives to Christ. When we do that, I am confident that over time God will bring us to the unanimity that grows from truth. And while Christ is dragging us to where God wants us to be, our job is to follow the command of Christ to love one another. Christ commanded us to live in such love that the world will see our love before they see our disagreement.

Having said that, Christians of good conscience may have to agree to disagree on issues of sexuality and especially homosexuality until God makes truth clear. And while we are in the process of discernment, there are some behaviors and beliefs that are off the table or out of bounds for those of us who have submitted our whole selves to the waters of baptism if we want to be Good News people.

First, Christians, finding ourselves in an increasingly secular culture, may not allow all of the sexuality education our children receive to come only from school or culture. While schools do the best they can and walk a fine line trying to give our children basic scientific information, we as a church and we as Disciples of Christ have a responsibility to talk with our children about sexuality and to teach the morals and values that grow from our faith. It is good news that our congregation has begun

to offer faith based sexuality education for our children. Disciples make sure that their children know that sexuality is a good gift from God. If you need help doing that, do not ignore the resources offered in our congregation. They are good news.

Second, in order to be good news people, Christians may not engage in hate speech in the name of Jesus when it comes to the GLBT community. If you think that homosexuality is bad news, then you are bound by the example of Christ to love the members of that community. If your faith leads you to believe that homosexuality is sin, remember that Christ didn't make the sinners mad. They were moved by his compassion. Christ made the religious authorities, who liked to draw lines and make lists of who was included and excluded, furious. And if, on the other hand, you think that homosexual persons who live lives of faith and grace and service are good news, then we need you to actively express the love of Christ to them, so that we can offer an antidote to the hate speech that spews from so many corners of the Christian family. Love them – that is good news.

I think that one thing that will help us in this pursuit to love as Christ commands is to avoid broad stereotypical language. Just as last week I cautioned you against unhelpful stereotypical statements about the wealthy and the poor, so this week also I want to rule out of bounds statements like “The homosexual lifestyle is destroying the fabric our community.” In the first place, there is no such thing as one homosexual lifestyle. Of course there are homosexuals who live a life outside the bounds of submission to Christ. But there have also always been faithful, Christ-confessing homosexual persons who have served faithfully within the church. I don't want anyone making statements about the “Heterosexual lifestyle” and using Hugh Hefner as the example! Again, Good News is always contextual, and Jesus often addressed good news to individual needs. We are to follow Christ's example if we want to be a good news people.

Finally, I think it is critical that we as faithful Christians take a long, hard look again at Scripture for guidance on issues of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. As I have done before during this sermon series, I have included a long list of scriptures that I think help us think faithfully about the issues of sexuality. There are seven mentions of homosexuality in Scripture. Jesus says nothing about it. And, there are good Christian scholars who disagree about what these seven passages mean and how to apply them to our current lives of faith.

One of those scripture is the passage from Romans 1 and 2 that I read today. In Romans, Paul is writing to a Christian community who lives in the midst of a culture that offers them no support and many distractions. And in Chapter 1, he begins to teach the Roman Christians about the dangers of idolatry. Those who follow Christ are to hold to truth and to worship God alone. Idolaters refuse to honor God or to give thanks to God, but instead, “they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles” (1:21-23). It is easy for us to dismiss this warning because we don't worship statues of reptiles. But be careful—we do give honor and thanks to human beings (especially those who are wealthy, sports icons, or movie stars), and we do give honor and glory to beautiful, big houses and fancy cars. We do worship our own pleasure and desires. Idolatry is giving honor, thanks, and glory to something or someone other than God. Putting something other than God at the center of our lives is Idolatry no matter what the object of worship looks like.

And then, Paul lays out a long description of what people who practice idolatry look like. And the list is unsettling. It seems that when we worship other gods and worship our own pleasure, we pursue sexual pleasure no matter the cost, we are filled with wickedness, evil, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander, insolence, pride, rebelliousness towards our parents, foolishness, faithlessness, ruthlessness, and we encourage such evil in others. Paul paints a fearful picture of what happens over time to those who worship either themselves or other things instead of the true God. Paul is talking about the Roman culture of promiscuity and idolatry that existed side by side with the early Christian community. I can almost hear the early Christians chanting, “Yeah! That’s right! Those Roman idolaters are going to burn in hell.” And then Paul pulls a switch on the early Christians and on us. He turns the spotlight on Christians themselves. Paul writes, “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things” (2:1). Just when the early church was about to reach a fever pitch of condemnation for those outside their faith community, Paul pulls the cover off of the truth and reminds us all that idolatry is not something that is reserved for those who do not believe. In fact, all of us struggle with the desire to pursue our own pleasure before all else. All of us struggle to free ourselves of envy, malice, gossip, and rebelliousness.

The issue here that Paul is addressing is not homosexuality, per se. There are expressions of sexuality (both heterosexual and homosexual) that are idolatrous. He is using those as examples of what grows from idolatry. But, Paul is addressing idolatry, worshipping something other than God and the truth we have come to know in Christ. And he leaves us no room for condemning the culture at large and those outside the bounds of the sanctuary, because he reminds us that God knows our hearts and knows our thoughts. We all struggle with wanting to hold parts of ourselves and parts of our lives above the water of baptism. The only antidote to idolatry is submission to Christ as Lord and Savior. Out of that submission grows humility, grace, and the ability to love. As Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).