

January 17, 2016  
Affirming Sermon Series - 3  
Romans 1:24-32

This morning we are gathered around a very significant text as we continue our conversation on becoming an Affirming Congregation. This is our second sermon on a biblical text. If you missed the first, and you want to read it, it is available from the bulletin board in the back, or on our website.

When my sister and I were small, the odd time my parents would want to go out for an evening without us. I can't imagine why. As they were getting ready to head out the door, and giving their final instructions, my father would turn to us and say, "and don't walk on the ceiling." Don't walk on the ceiling.

What he meant was, 'along with all the other things you know you shouldn't get up to, don't dream up new things that you shouldn't get up to while I'm gone.' Don't walk on the ceiling.

I've been remembering my Dad's caution to us kids as I've been mulling over our text from Paul this week. Paul never did tell the Romans not to walk on the ceiling - at least, not in any letters that have come down to us. But he did have lots of other rules for his churches, we know that.

In I Corinthians, he tells women that they should cover their heads and keep their hair long. He says men should keep their hair short, as a sign of respect. He also says women should keep silent in church!

Christians in all eras since the time of Paul have had to sort what he said into two piles: *absolute rules* over here, and *personal opinion* or *social norms* over here. Things that apply to all people at all times in this pile. Things that applied to his culture at his time in this pile. Truths in this pile, "don't walk on the ceiling" in this pile.

We are all pretty content with saying that his opinion on the length of your hair or who could speak in church are in this pile, personal opinion or social norms. We understand that Paul was a man of his time. And times have changed.

And I think we are all pretty content in saying that his opinions on righteousness go in the other pile- that ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD; WE ARE NOW JUSTIFIED BY GOD'S GRACE AS A GIFT, THROUGH THE REDEMPTION THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS (3:23). That's an absolute truth for all people at all times. No problem.

But then we get to Romans 1 and things get a little murky. There he says GOD GAVE THEM UP TO DEGRADING PASSIONS. THEIR WOMEN EXCHANGED NATURAL INTERCOURSE FOR UNNATURAL, AND IN THE SAME WAY ALSO THE MEN, GIVING UP NATURAL INTERCOURSE WITH WOMEN, WERE CONSUMED WITH PASSION FOR ONE ANOTHER. (26-27)

When he talks about *degradation* and *unnatural acts* do we interpret these powerful words - degradation, unnatural - as absolutes? Are they true statements about sexual orientation? Or do they fall into the category of “don’t walk on the ceiling”: opinions that made sense at a certain point in time?

It seems to me that this is the key question concerning this text. Is it an absolute truth? Or is it a personal opinion or social norm? And I am not going to answer this question in this sermon. Sorry. I think everyone has to make their own mind up about this one. And I will never tell you what to think.

But I will give you a bit of information which you might find useful as we ponder this question. Most of us have a pretty clear sense of what the traditional interpretation of these words has been, since it’s been around for so long. In fact, many of us were born and raised with the traditional interpretation, and heard it preached from pulpits just like this one - maybe even this one.

It would go something like this: Paul’s opinion in Romans 1 is an *absolute* condemnation of same sex attraction and same gender sexual practice. In this matter, he is expressing an opinion close to Jesus’ opinion, and it is sanctioned by God. People attracted to others of the same gender, or those who transition between genders, or those attracted to both genders, what we call bisexual, may be wonderful people, who have every bit as much right as anyone else to be part of the church, as long as they are celibate. Love the sinner, hate the sin.

Perhaps this is your opinion. If so, you are in good company. Many Christian denominations teach some form of this interpretation.

But there is another possible way to unpack this text in Romans 1. And since it is newer, and less well known than the traditional version I just paraphrased, I’m going to go into it in a little more detail, to give us a reasonable and intelligent alternative to the traditional view. Let’s call this one, the Emerging View.

In the Emerging View the reader’s lens is focused a little wider in the first chapter of Romans than just these two verses. If you widen up your lens, and take in more of the text, the context, if you will, you see that Paul’s words about same gender sexual acts come smack in the middle of his longer condemnation of *idolaters*. That is, people who turned away from God and worshiped idols. As Paul says, **SO THEY ARE WITHOUT EXCUSE; FOR THOUGH THEY KNEW GOD, THEY DID NOT HONOUR GOD AS GOD OR GIVE THANKS TO GOD, BUT THEY BECAME FUTILE IN THEIR THINKING AND THEIR SENSELESS MINDS WERE DARKENED (20b-21).**

*Futile thinking* and *senseless, darkened minds* - guess what Paul thinks of these idol worshipers! He hates them! They turned away from Christ, and back to paganism, to idol worship, and back to its drunken feasts, its drug-induced frenzies and its sexually promiscuous acts of worship. Orgies, parties, wild Friday nights - Paul is livid at what he sees.

He is so angry that he throws every name in the book at these people: **THEY WERE FILLED**

WITH EVERY KIND OF WICKEDNESS, EVIL, COVETOUSNESS, MALICE. FULL OF ENVY, MURDER, STRIFE, DECEIT, CRAFTINESS, THEY ARE GOSSIPS, SLANDERERS, GOD-HATERS, INSOLENT, HAUGHTY, BOASTFUL, INVENTORS OF EVIL, REBELLIOUS TOWARD PARENTS, FOOLISH, FAITHLESS, HEARTLESS, RUTHLESS... (29-32)

Wow! *GOSSIPS? REBELLIOUS TOWARDS PARENTS?* He is so upset that he lumps together every single thing he can think of that is godless and throws it at them.

Why? Why does he even care who sleeps with whom when the lights are out?

The key is in his use of the words *DEGRADING* and *UNNATURAL* that we lifted up a few moments ago. *GOD GAVE THEM UP TO DEGRADING PASSIONS. THEIR WOMEN EXCHANGED NATURAL INTERCOURSE FOR UNNATURAL... THE MEN, GIVING UP NATURAL INTERCOURSE WITH WOMEN...*

It seems pretty clear from this that Paul is not speaking of loving, committed, stable, supportive same-sex relationships. He is talking about a form of worship which involved sexual encounters in the temple. He is either talking about straight people who go against their natural inclinations, or he is talking about wild, orgiastic, group sex – both of which were known in the ancient Greek tradition.

He is definitely not talking about what we have come to understand, with our modern, scientific knowledge, as *sexual orientation*, which is defined as referring “to a person’s sexual desire, love interest or affiliation.”<sup>1</sup> This is innate, what you are born with, and therefore natural, part of being human.

Paul lived and thought and wrote in an era when widows were encouraged to marry their brothers-in-law; when rape victims were encouraged to marry their rapist; when slaves were returned to their masters; when polygamy was still practiced. In other words, in an era with a very primitive understanding of what we call human rights. We live in a different era. In your lifetimes you have seen Women’s Liberation, Civil Rights, Gay Rights, Children’s Rights and others all emerge and take a place on the global stage. Paul had no concept of any of these particular rights at all. He was just concerned about idolatry – a perversion of true worship of the One God.

Paul ends his argument here in Romans, in a most intriguing way. Listen: **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 THING (2:1).** What a poignant reminder of Jesus’ teaching on judging others, just when we needed it most.

Paul finishes off by saying, not only are idolators condemned in the eyes of God. Jews are also

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<sup>1</sup> Allyson C. Huntley in conjunction with the Affirming Ministries Program Coordinators, *Open Hearts: Resources for Affirming Ministries in the United Church of Canada*, (Affirm United/S/Affirmer Ensemble, 2011), p. 4.

condemned, since they live under the law. And so are we Christians, condemned since we understand the power of sin. In fact ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD. Got that? All have sinned. Not just people whose sexual practices are different than your own. All have sinned.

SINCE ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD; THEY ARE NOW JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE AS A GIFT, THROUGH THE REDEMPTION THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS.

That's the point about righteousness that I said earlier we probably all agreed was one of those Eternal Truths, in this pile over here, rather than a *don't walk on the ceiling rule*, over here. And it's a good point to end on because I think it brings us to the heart of Paul's theology, to what he was really all about.

To paraphrase what he said in Galatians, in words he might have used if he were alive today; THERE IS NO LONGER JEW OR GREEK, THERE IS NO LONGER SLAVE OR FREE, THERE IS NO LONGER MALE AND FEMALE, there is no longer gay or straight; FOR ALL OF YOU ARE ONE IN CHRIST JESUS.

Each of us is going to have to decide for ourselves what we think about what Paul said in Romans 1. For some that will be very clear. For others it will be a struggle. We're all in this together. But let us never forget that ALL OF US ARE ON IN CHRIST JESUS. Amen.

*(A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at Huron Shores United Church, Grand Bend, Ontario;  
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