

When Landmarks Move: The Challenge of Diverse Sexualities

Luke 7:36-50

Over the past three weeks, we have looked at three different times in our history when the settled orthodoxy of the Christian faith was challenged by new ideas in changing times. First we talked about the rise of modern science and its ideas about the age and structure of the universe, and the origin of species. Then we talked about the movement to abolish slavery. Finally, last week we talked about the drive for equal respect, opportunity, and rights for women. All these challenges to what the church believed played out according to a similar pattern. At first, the church resisted the new ideas vehemently. After that initial rejection, though, as the new ideas began to take root, there came a gradual acceptance, along with a re-thinking of the old orthodoxy. Mind you, there were always a few holdouts, people who refused to consider the new ideas.

In all three of these examples, those who eventually accepted and made way for the new ideas had to deal with the same obstacle: the Bible. In the case of science, biblical narratives do not play nicely with the cosmology of modern science or the theory of evolution. In the case of the abolition of slavery, the problem was that the Bible nowhere explicitly condemns slavery but rather takes it for granted. And when it came to the equality of women, there are passages of scripture that not only assume the inferiority of women but mandate their submission to men. Here's how I dealt with all three: I suggested that the Bible is a multi-layered book. A surface layer reflects the time, context, cultural presuppositions, and even personality quirks of the human authors of the books. These cultural and personal peculiarities obviously vary from author to author and should not necessarily be taken as messages from God. At a deeper level, though, there are constant themes that run through scripture from start to finish – themes about the nature of God, and humanity's purpose on earth. These themes are found throughout the Bible, but are best expressed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. He is the light by which we should examine new ideas – and re-examine olds.

Now, I said last week that the struggle for the equality of women is not over. It is still being waged around us. But at the same time, that cultural issue has now been overwhelmed by the next one: all the issues relating to homosexuality, transgenderism, and all the rest of the alphabet. It's not exactly *new* of course. Homosexuality has been around as long as humans have. But it might *feel* new to some of us. Many of us are old enough to remember when homosexuality was swept under the rug, or crammed in a closet. Nobody *we* knew was gay, we thought. Within our lifetime, homosexuality was officially classified as a psychological disorder, which could be cured by behavioral science. So, those who *were* gay or lesbian learned to hide their true selves from the world. Many tried to change their orientation, and when that failed, settled for lives of pretending. All that's in living memory.

Since then, a lot has changed, hasn't it? I don't mean to suggest that things have finished changing – in fact, I guarantee they haven't – but it's worth noting how much change actually has taken place in just forty years or so. Once the closets started opening, they began opening everywhere. Unless you are extraordinarily insulated, everyone who's hearing this knows someone who is gay or lesbian. And if you don't, your children do. Same-sex marriage is legal, and public figures are openly gay without fear for their lives or careers. Yes, stigma is still around, but most of it is a residual crust on a few people from Baby Boomer or older generations.

Younger generations don't even care. It's not that the issue has been resolved for them; it's that it's not an issue. But now, just in the past decade or so, even the question of homosexuality has been overwhelmed by the next wave: transgenderism, people transitioning from one sex to another. Again, this is nothing new, but it *feels* new to us from older generations, because it used to be invisible, having been rigorously suppressed. So, even people who had begun to grudgingly get used to the idea of homosexuality being a real thing got whiplash as this new wave crashed over us. So I have some sympathy for those who are floundering right now as they try to take it all in. It's a lot to process. But I can't help them. This is how social change happens. Dams don't burst a little bit at a time. The question for us now is how to respond as the Church of Jesus Christ.

What does the Bible say? Well, as with some of the earlier issues we've looked at, the little bit that the Bible actually says about homosexuality is negative. The Levitical laws of the Torah call homosexuality an abomination, and in two or three New Testament epistles, it is condemned as a sinful choice that some people make. In Romans 1, Paul includes homosexuality in a list of sins – a list that includes greed and gossip – as an example of how depraved humanity had become. So what do we do with that?

Well, one thing is to remember that we do not go to the Bible for our science. We've talked about this. And while the science of sexuality is still in flux, some things are clear. First, it is not just a choice that some people make for some reason. Homosexual orientation is a normal variant of sexuality, and not just among humans. Moreover, that idea that homosexuality can be "cured" with behavioral science has been resoundingly rejected by psychologists and physicians. "Conversion Therapy" doesn't work, unless your goal is to seriously damage a human being. But if homosexuality is not a choice but simply a part of who some people are, how is it a sin?

Second, we remember that some parts of the Bible reflect culture. And here the particular culture that I want to focus on is one element of Old Testament Levitical purity laws – a context that is common to all the biblical writers who address homosexuality. The world view of the Levitical purity laws was that God made all things separate and distinct – each according to its kind. Thus those laws demanded that everything be kept in its own, separate category; thus Leviticus forbids mixing different grains in a single loaf of bread and using more than one kind of fiber in a single cloth. Wool or cotton or linen, but never woven together. That's an abomination, too. Second, having established those clear categories, Leviticus says that anything that doesn't fit within those lines is "unclean." In the laws about clean and unclean foods, we see that the fish that are "unclean" if they don't have scales or fins. They don't fit the standard, so they are abominations. Same with birds that don't fly. That's just wrong; birds are supposed to fly. So, ostriches are unclean. (I'd love to see a Levitical priest's response to a platypus – a duck-billed, hairy creature that lays eggs.) But you see how, within that context, homosexuality would be seen as an abomination. It doesn't fit within the expected gender lines. It doesn't stay in its lane, so it must be unclean. But this isn't our worldview today. One of the things evolution has taught us is that lines are blurry, and the process is messy and often apparently random. Simply put, nature does *not* stay in its lane. In fact, sometimes nature drives the wrong way on the interstate. In this worldview, the idea that there might be more than two variants of sexuality is not surprising. It would be surprising if there weren't.

So once again we see that the biblical witness on homosexuality reflects a scientific and cultural worldview that we no longer accept. Is there a deeper message in scripture that applies here? Let's look. We read Luke chapter 7, verses 36-50.

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' ⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' ⁴¹'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' ⁴³Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' ⁴⁴Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' ⁴⁸Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Notice how Simon looks on this woman. He calls her a sinner, but he treats her as one who is unclean. *Sinful* and *unclean* are not the same: sinful refers to having committed sins, and we are all sinners. But something who is unclean is to be avoided simply because of what it is. Simon says: "If Jesus knew what *kind of woman* this is. . . ugh!" To him, she is clearly the wrong kind of people, and that Jesus shouldn't be letting her touch his feet. But Jesus doesn't seem to know, or care, that she's untouchable. He does, mind you, recognize that she's a sinner, but he's unconcerned about that, too. His response to her sins, as to ours, is simply to forgive them. This he did willingly, because when he looked at her, he didn't see a category of unclean people, and he didn't even see a collection of specific sins: he saw a person expressing love. And that was the only thing he cared about.

So, here's where I am. I treat the biblical passages condemning homosexuality the same way I treat the ones accepting slavery and mandating a subordinate position for females. I think they are an indication of the scientific limitations and cultural assumptions of the human writers and therefore should not be taken as the eternal mandate of God. Now some will say, "But wait, once you start doing that, where does it end? Now can't anyone just take any passage of scripture that they don't like and say, 'Oh, that's just cultural bias. Ignore it'?" And that's a fair question. If we're going to avoid a free-for-all where anyone can pick out what they like from scripture and ignore the rest, we're going to have to have some standard to use beyond just what we like or what is the latest thing or what is popular right now. And again, Jesus gives us the answer: the standard is love. The Bible seems to be fine with slavery, but slavery cannot be reconciled with loving our neighbor, so slavery has to go. Some scriptures assume that women are to be kept in subjugation to men, but that is not how Christ expressed his equal love and respect for all. We stand with Christ. And the Bible condemns homosexuality as an abomination, but Christ's love extended beyond every cultural boundary of his day and made it clear that no one is unclean because of who they are. Love is our standard. Here I stand.