

On Sexuality and Scripture

Essays, Bible Studies and Personal Reflections by the Chicago Consultation, the
Ujamaa Centre and their friends

Edited by Masiwa Ragies Gunda and Jim Naughton

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Introduction

Masiwa Ragies Gunda and Jim Naughton

No group of people has been the subject of as much diatribe and scorn in the past few decades as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community the world over. Respected "men and women of the cloth" have thrown moderation out the window as they launched scathing and dehumanizing attacks on the dignity and integrity of brothers and sisters in Christ whose only crime has been to assert that they are created in the image of God. The concerted fight to deny and deprive the LGBTI community of its full humanity and, most importantly, its God-given "Imago Dei" has taken on political, economic, social and religious dimensions. In Africa, anti-LGBTI actors from these different spheres have often been in cahoots, leaving little, if any, room for LGBTI people and their allies to speak and act publicly..

The book you are reading was born out of the realization that, from the beginning, humanity has never fully comprehended God. From biblical times to the present, human beings have sought to live lives pleasing to God, but our attempts have been littered with errors. In 8th century BCE Israel, the prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah condemned the prevalent economic, social and religious practices put in place by elites who believed that they had fully comprehended God. Hundreds of years later, the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ challenged the erroneous belief that communities could please God by rigidly adhering to the law even as they manufactured poverty, exploited widows and orphans, and threw in jail those who could not bribe the judicial officers. In the modern era, the institutions of slavery, colonisation and apartheid have all been sustained or legitimized by a belief that somehow they pleased God. Our history is a history of errors!

Over and over, some men and women have confronted these errors by humbling themselves and honestly returning to the Word of God to try and discern what God was saying on the issues besetting their communities. Like Jacob in Genesis 32, they wrestled with God, demanding that God speak to them about what is right and wrong. By allowing themselves to learn under the Holy Spirit, they established new horizons and perspectives that transformed the world. Thanks to them, slavery was declared to be against the essence of Christian faith and Apartheid was declared a heresy. Colonialism came to be regarded as opposed to the central tenets of Christian faith, which proclaims that no one should be captive or exploited.

The Chicago Consultation, a body within the Anglican Communion, draws its inspiration from this tradition. We have been inspired to go back to God and seek God's guidance on the subject and plight of LGBTI members in the life and ministry of the Anglican Communion. From 2007-2012, while the Chicago Consultation was doing its work in the Episcopal Church in North America, some African Christians had also begun realising that Christian faith and understanding were being sacrificed on the altar of political expediency, even though it was a matter of life and death for some LGBTI brothers and sisters in Christ. Using local resources, some African scholars and leaders began to question the basis for rejecting and even persecuting LGBTI members,, even as those resources were being suppressed or

ignored. These parallel works and developments meant the paths were, sooner or later, going to converge and in 2011, the paths merged!

The Chicago Consultation and the African group met for the first time in Durban in October 2011 in a consultation that transformed many people. Robust presentations, personal narratives and frank but friendly discussions and confessions brought participants from diverse backgrounds closer to each other. Bible studies became platforms for wrestling with God, and each new Bible study drew us closer to each other and to God. The experience was so transformative and good that in July 2013, the groups re-convened in Limuru in Kenya. Among the many resolutions from Kenya, one was that these consultations must never stop, that we must continue to meet and expand the network and circle. Effectively, the paths that merged are now ONE path!

Central to our consultations is our desire to study the word of God together and to listen to personal stories. The days spent in Durban and Limuru have been days when we have sought to get closer to our creator. Our Bible studies have sought to establish and ground our faith in Christ and to unpack what it means to be a follower of Christ. These Bible studies have focused on the widely cited texts against sexual minorities and some that have not been widely used by many Christians, such as Genesis 39, Judges 19, the story of the Baptism of Jesus and the parable of the Good Samaritan. Bible studies have been opportunities to read the Bible and ask the Holy Spirit to help us process complex issues. Most importantly, however, our readings have helped us learn from the Lord how we must relate to our LGBTI sisters and brothers. Our Bible studies have been complemented by the powerful personal narratives of participants, ranging from the warm embrace of friends and relatives who have accepted their brothers and sisters in spite of their difference to the bitterness of being rejected by those whom we have grown to trust and love because of differences in the way we were created by God.

We have organized the contributions in this book into four sections. In the first, two Biblical scholars discuss the importance of the Bible to discussions about human sexuality and what the Bible does and does not say on this subject. In the second, four Biblical scholars wrestle with the Biblical account of the destruction of Sodom, a narrative that has particular power, especially in the African context. The third section comprises Bible studies of the sort that can be used in parish forums and for small group study. The book concludes with personal testimonies from individuals whose attitudes on issues of human sexuality and justice are deeply rooted in their Christian faith.

We hope that this resource can go a long way in helping others begin the journey of asking God how we should relate to one another.

TO LIFE!

PART I

Is it in The Bible

Is it in the Bible? Understanding the critical role of the text of the Bible in African Christianity by Masiwa Ragies Gunda

A Presentation made at the Kenya Consultation on the Bible and Human Sexuality at Jumuia Conference Centre and Country Home 29 July – 1 August 2013.

Introduction

Friends, the Bible is a site of struggle, a place where different groups get their supplies of ammunition to condemn sexual minorities. Some sexual minorities also mine the text of the Bible for ammunition to defend themselves as fully created and blessed by God and therefore with the same rights as all other human beings, especially the heterosexual majority. Through group Bible studies at our previous consultation in Durban, doubt was sowed among many participants who had come with the sole purpose of showing everybody else the “true and right” way! These Bible studies and personal engagements between sexual minorities and straight participants, some who had never come face to face with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) people, led to “confessions” of transformation from many.

Through small group Bible studies with people of differing backgrounds, views and sexual orientations, the abstract became personal. It was then that participants requested greater focus on the Bible. Through Bible study the Bible became a friend, a partner with whom we could converse and dialogue, and as we explored biblical texts as a group, we felt God was indeed with us! What happened in Durban is the reason we are here today. Having been asked to speak briefly just in order to open discussion, debate or dialogue for the coming days, I thought I would speak on the most common question in African Christianity when Christians are faced with a challenging situation. Make no mistake about it, human sexuality and the questions we have to deal with in this consultation are indeed challenging for most African Christians. The question, friends, is: Is it in the Bible?

Is it in the Bible?

Friends, I invite you to walk with me in this short journey as we explore the possibilities that arise from this short but clearly heavily pregnant question. I want to begin by making a serious claim regarding this question: Any attempts at understanding or appreciating the effects and impact of the Bible on African Christian perspectives regarding sexual minorities must begin by confronting this fundamental question. In other words, I am insisting here that everything else that we may do to humanize sexual minorities will not be taken as decisive until and

unless we make use of the Bible to demonstrate that we are saying and doing is actually prescribed in the Bible. Some of you may already be jumping the gun and seeing the critical importance of the Bible in African Christianity and obviously the centrality of the text of the Bible in critical contemporary discussions. Let me therefore join you by dissecting the implications, explicit and implicit, emanating from this fundamental and foundational question. When properly and carefully dissected, this question alone can open doors, widen horizons and deepen foundations for this consultation.

This question has, more often than not, been used in a literal sense, in other words: *Is it in the Bible?* can be rendered as *Is it written in the Bible?* In many other places across the world and even in Africa, people seek the “sense” of the text when confronted with contemporary situations that demand that we respond as Christians. On the fate of LGBTI people in Africa, however, this question has been used to close the door towards the “sense” of scripture and has left open only the door towards the actual words written in the Bible. African Christianity is thus essentially dependent on the text of the Bible and must search the words of the Bible to prove or disprove the validity and relevance of certain Christian claims. While some in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America have come to realize that sexual minorities are “created in the image of God” just like the heterosexual majority, there are still many across all the continents who do not accept this understanding. In Africa, that group finds justification in their insistence about what is actually written in the Bible. Any understanding that does not quote verbatim a Bible text is dismissed as this-worldly and therefore invalid for determining the right Christian conduct. This understanding explains why the discussion of same-sex relationships and practices is centered on the “texts of terror” that are translated as explicit condemnations of such relationships and practices.

This literal approach results in the prevalence of proof-texting by Christians, who take a few verses from the Bible out of context and deploy them to settle contemporary questions. Once a proof-text has been identified, people who use this method assert that there can no longer be any discussion that does not question the “truth of God.” It is as though all one needs to do is quote the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 to settle arguments about the morality of same-sex relationships. The fact that the preceding narrative in Genesis 18 and the parallel narrative in Judges 19 might lead us to a very different interpretation than the one insisted upon by those who prefer to cite proof texts is ignored because those passages do not supply snappy argument-settling quotes. The prohibitions against same-sex intercourse in Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13) are equally proclaimed irrespective of the fact that they stand in between many prohibitions to which we do not pay heed today. The New Testament is equally invoked, especially the condemnations in Romans 1. Many African Christians take great comfort in believing that “what I am saying is what is written in the Bible.” Unfortunately, interpreting the Bible in this way leads many Christians to believe that the evil perpetrated against sexual minorities is demanded by God. Friends, I am saying, this

question is a murderous question that when not checked, can lead to massive persecution not only of sexual minorities but various other vulnerable groups in society.

One curious and problematic feature of arguments based on proof texts is that the words of the Bible are understood as coming from God, without any clear attempt at explaining how exactly they are to be attributed to God. Without such an explanation, we are left with no option but to speculate that the words are understood as literally coming from God, either verbally or in their written form. Most importantly, the words as they appear in the Bible belong to God. Arguments, interpretations and critical theological themes based on the meticulous study of the text are seen as “worldly attempts at undermining the word of God.” Where some advocate the movement towards the “sense” of scripture in dealing with the subject of sexual minorities, those against the inclusion of sexual minorities have argued on the basis that scripture that is “explicit in its condemnation” is certainly without “error” and hence demands “no interpretation on the subject!” Their interpretation is not interpretation, they say; it is merely a reading of what is written in the Bible!

The timelessness of the Bible is also an issue. As Christians we believe, to varying degrees, that we are “part of the intended audience” for the Bible. This belief includes those who assume that they are the direct audience; that the words of the Bible were written for them even if they were written two and half millennia ago. These are the kind of Christians who think they can trace their own genealogy back to Abraham. The other group is of those who see themselves as only indirectly linked to the Bible because their faith has made them religious descendants of a people who once lived in the ancient Near East, now Middle East, some millennia ago. Among African Christians, the former are the majority. Many African Christians seek a greater association with the ancient Israelites, and this quest has even influenced African scholars such as David Adamo who is investing resources in the search for “Africans in the Bible.” In this context, timelessness can be taken to mean that all that must have been written for all generations was indeed written down and it is in the Bible. Each generation must therefore search for all they need in the Bible because it is already there. This is not too difficult to accept if God is all-knowing, the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. God already knows everything and if the Bible is his word then it should “know” everything; what is in the Bible therefore *is* God’s and what is not in the Bible is *not* God’s. Finally, what is in the Bible is relevant at all times, to all peoples, in all places.

My last take on this foundational question is that it carries with it the echoes of Martin Luther’s “*sola scriptura*.” This is interesting, since it comes from a cross-section of society—those who may have heard about Luther and those who have never heard of Luther and who possibly will never hear of Luther in this life. Clearly, this echo is a leftover from the heydays of missionary activity. Missionaries, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, had one visible instrument that they used, that is, the Bible. Even if they used tradition and magisterium as among Catholics and Anglicans, those instruments were not visible. Hence the power of the missionary

was associated with the single visible instrument. African Christians have therefore remained enthralled at the Bible at the expense of the other pillars of Christian faith. This insistence on “sola scriptura” explains why African Christianity, at least in its self-affirmation, is seen as “biblical Christianity.” On the subject of sexual minorities, the question implies and explicitly states that only the Bible can validate any claims made regarding Christian faith and practice.

Friends, we must bear in mind that we must grapple with the Bible if what we produce is to make inroads among those Christians who remain skeptical about our intentions and faith. As we continue to seek understanding on the subject of sexual minorities and most importantly, as we continue to seek the face of God among sexual minorities, I suggest that we also consider the following points:

Friends, the first question I am putting to you as a response to the foundational question is: what if we do not want what is written in the Bible? This is a question that at face value is thrown back at me by those who pride themselves for being “Bible warriors” who are ever faithful to “what is in the Bible.” Yet on further analysis this is actually a question that the same group should grapple with because it is necessitated by those who claim to rely on “what is in the Bible.” Friends, there are many things that are written from Genesis 1 through to Revelations 22 that we ignore or reject. In Exodus 21:7-11, the Bible clearly gives us guidelines on how to handle the business of selling our daughters into slavery. In Acts 5, in no uncertain terms, it is written that the crime of Ananias and Saphira was their failure to give all the proceeds from the disposal of their belongings to the community. It is written, but do we like it? What happens when we do not like what is written? Alongside these texts are those texts such as Leviticus 18:22 which says “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman: it is an abomination.” Apparently this one many Christians do like! Clearly, as Christians we censor what we do not like while exaggerating the importance of what we like. But let us critically engage with ourselves about how we should deal with those sections that especially “offend us” even though they are in the Bible because the hermeneutics that we use in disarming them may help us in disarming those verses that sanctify prejudices against sexual minorities.

How should we understand the timelessness of the Bible? Clearly, looking at all groups engaging the Bible as Christians, there is no fundamental difference when it comes to understanding the Bible as timeless. Our differences emanate from the interpretation of timelessness. Does timelessness militate against a rational and conscious appropriation of the Bible? Is timelessness an inherent quality of the text or its core-message? Friends, allow me to reiterate my point here: the question is not whether the Bible is timeless, that is a given; rather the question is: how is the Bible timeless and how do we engage with that timelessness to remain faithful to the transformational faith centered on the transformational Jesus Christ? I honestly would have been happy to come here and prescribe for you how we should understand the timelessness of the Bible but I am as lost as everybody else. Therefore, we should huddle together in groups and in plenary and continue to ask and seek clarity from ourselves and from God. I, however, am clear in my mind that

the current selective use of timelessness cannot be the basis upon which the faith we have in Jesus Christ and in God can become transformative in our lives.

The last question I will bring to our attention in this consultation is also pertinent, especially within the African context. I say the African context because it is what I am well-versed in; it may very well be the same in other continents. We are gathered here as a group, a family for some of us but like any other family, there are different individuals making up this family. We have bishops and clergy and ordinary Christians in our family. Interestingly in this family, some are straight while others are LGBTI. Finally in our family, we also have some academics. These differences mean we are not exactly “one” even if we belong to “one family,” and our perspectives on a variety of subjects may be affected by who we are.

That being the case, and as this set-up is a microcosm of the macrocosm (of the Anglican Communion or Christian family throughout the world, or maybe even the human race), how do we reconcile our different perspectives? How do we reconcile the critical research and study of the Bible in the academy and the confessional and pragmatic needs of the ordinary Christian? It is pertinent that we seriously discuss how we can bring the two groups together in the search of solutions to the challenges we face today. In most African societies, there is mutual mistrust between Christians and scholars, even if the scholars are also Christian. The critical nature of scholarship sometimes unsettles ordinary Christians but especially Christian leaders who feel threatened by the existence of a conscious group of followers. The challenge is how can we help in building bridges between these two groups because clearly, any success depends on that collaboration. Throughout this consultation we should devote time to finding each other and this can be easier if we can begin by finding what makes us not find each other? What is it that makes me, as a scholar, not find my brother who is not a scholar? What is it that makes me, as a Christian (leader), not find my sister who is a scholar? Introspection is critical to being a Christian.

Friends, in my thinking, it is when we begin to grapple with these paradoxes that the complexity of our engagement with issues of gender, sexuality and a raft of other contemporary socio-theological challenges becomes clear. Let me leave you with some questions that I do not understand also: Is it possible that *it can be in the Bible, even if it is not in the Bible literally*? Alternatively, is it possible that *it cannot be in the Bible, even if it is in the Bible literally*? If this be true, friends, how are to know when it is in the Bible or when it is not in the Bible? As we congregate here to discuss as friends and as family, I cannot cease to wonder! We are all clear in our minds that God is present among us! We are speaking in hushed tones because some groups who have made it their business not to entertain discussions about and with sexual minorities think that they are everywhere. This, friends, has led me to realize that: Some things are present in their absence while others are absent in their presence. We certainly can see the light at the end of the tunnel, we just cannot see the actual distance to the end of the tunnel!

Sexuality: A Survey of the Word of God

By Deirdre Good

Introduction

Since the Bible is a collection of books containing multiple voices collected over centuries, it contains different and even opposing viewpoints on many topics, including this sexuality. God declares all creation good (Gen 1:31) and part of fruitful creation is to multiply. The perspective is male, and biblical laws sought to maintain the binary distinction between male and female present in creation and to channel male sexual energy into marriage, family, reproduction and child rearing. But Genesis describes male dominance as a result of the fall. Sexual mutuality is regained in the Song of Songs, which affirms mutual sexual desire. In other books of the Bible, sexual potency indicates power: Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines, for example, symbolize the power of his rule. In the New Testament, concerns about purity prevail. Jesus affirms marriage and sexual continence for followers whilst condemning divorce, adultery and desire for another man's wife. But in the resurrection there will be no marriage, he tells followers. Assuming the transience of the present age, Paul sometimes promotes marriage and sometimes abstinence.

Language

To understand the distance that separates the Bible from our world, consider the language different biblical books use to speak about marriage and family. The Hebrew language has no verb "to marry," no nouns "marriage" or "family," nor does it have a specific word for wife or husband. Instead we find a sentence, "X takes Y as (his) woman" (e.g. Gen 28:2; Matt 1:20) in which a man is the subject and a woman the object. The sentence infers ownership (of a woman by a man) in a context of marriage. This is language of social exchange, not individual affections. If the man has more than one wife, then he possesses more than one woman. The sentence also implies patrilocality: the bride moves to the house of the groom where the new unit creates what we might call an extended family. In the household of this extended family are also slaves who relate socially and sexually to the man.

Both in Hebrew (the language of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) and Greek (the language of the Second or New Testament), the word for man (Heb, *ish*; Greek, *aner*) is translated "husband" when translators deem it appropriate. Similarly, woman (Heb, *ishah*, Greek, *gunē* like the Latin word, *mulier* used in the Vulgate) indicates both "woman" and "wife." Hebrew and Greek societies probably assume that all men and women are married. There is no word in Greek or Hebrew that exactly corresponds to the modern word "family"; the closest Greek word, *oikia*, or *oikos*, means variously household or house, like *bet* in Hebrew, which similarly means house and can be used for household in the sense of family lineage. Our word "marriage" is a contemporary word implying a unit that does not convey the notion of possession found in biblical texts. Even if the woman is taken by a man from close kinship groups, other women in the household (slaves and dependents) relate

to the man as inferior and subordinate. This implies sexual availability: Abraham, for example, has sex with Hagar, an Egyptian slave in his household (Gen 16); Jacob has sex with Bilhah and Zilpah, two female slaves (Gen 30). Biblical texts do not describe or reflect on being single. Women are not autonomous beings in that world. Biblical laws stipulate female virginity (Deut 22:13-22) and therefore control of women's bodies.

Adultery

Adultery, the sexual congress of a male with a married or betrothed woman, is severely punished (Exod 20:14) as a crime of property, not sexual, offense. The property in question is the woman's sexuality, which her husband, not she herself, owns. Hence adultery occurs when a man has sexual relations with a woman married (or "owned") by another man (Deut 22:22-24). If the woman is a slave, widow, or prostitute then no crime has taken place. If the woman is under the authority of her father, the man must pay the woman's father a bride-price and take her into his household as his woman or wife unless the father refuses (Exod 22:16-17; Deut 22:28-29). But laws against adultery, Jesus says, are not the point. Sexually desiring another man's wife contravenes God's law (Matthew 5:8). Control and regulation of male sexual intent is the issue.

Regulation of male sexual desire includes all forms of child sexual abuse probably including pederasty (Mark 9:42-48). Further, John the Baptist (and presumably Jesus) condemns Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife (Mark 6:17-18) on grounds of incest (Lev 18:16). We know Jesus opposes divorce.

Marriage and Polygyny

Genesis identifies human physicality in two creation stories. The second creation account of Genesis 2 shows a concern for relationship, "it is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18); so God created woman to be a suitable companion to man. Taking a rib out of his side, God fashions a woman. Their sexual connection is explained positively: "therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). The man and the woman are thus "bone of bones, and flesh of flesh." Some may see this as "hetero-normative marriage," but the text does not speak of marriage. Even if we infer marriage from statements about the man and the woman (2:25, "the man and his woman/wife were both naked, and were not ashamed"), what is normative about a rib-less male that "cleaves to his wife/woman" as a means to wholeness? Genesis 3 describes patriarchy and hierarchical sexual relations as a result of human disobedience, not sexual relations. Descriptions of barren women in subsequent narratives (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Hannah and Elizabeth) indicate that reproduction is not a male accomplishment but a blessing from God.

A positive view of sexual relations continues in the Song of Songs read descriptively not allegorically. In it, a woman pursues a man for sexual relations. The text speaks of the erotic yearning of the man and the woman rather than sexuality per se.

Nothing in the text speaks of marriage or procreation. By speaking positively about longing, the text provides the only biblical metaphysics of sex:

"Love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave...Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it" (Song of Songs 8:6, 7).

Reflecting ancient Hebrew and later Greek and Roman cultures, the Bible considers marriage as a social and legal agreement to secure alliances, to engender children and through them future generations, to care for the elderly, and make provision for the inheritance of property. It cements political alliances and connects clans. To the marriage, a bridegroom brings a betrothal gift or "bride-price" that compensates for the loss of a daughter to her family of origin. Examples include: Jacob, who gives fourteen years of labor to Laban in exchange for Leah and Rachel in Genesis 29; Deuteronomy 22:29 stipulates 50 shekels as the proper "bride-price;" and David, who gives Saul a hundred Philistine foreskins for his daughter Michal. The bride brings to the marriage a dowry (property, clothing, jewelry, household goods) as security in case of widowhood or divorce.

Marital delight is clear. Sarah remembers sexual pleasure with Abraham (Genesis 18:12). New bridegrooms are exempt from military campaigns for a year in order to cause their wives to rejoice (Deuteronomy 20:7; 24:5). Intact families demand sexual fidelity, and the best way to ensure this is for the man to find sexual satisfaction in marriage (Proverbs 5:18–19). Women's sexuality is guarded. A woman's virginity before marriage ensured identification of the paternity of her first child. Biblical laws discourage (but do not prohibit) adultery by married men (Deuteronomy 22:22–28). The commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Exodus 20:17) is directed at husbands not wives. While polygyny (one man possesses sexual rights over many women) exists in the case of Israelite kings (David and Solomon) and patriarchs (Abraham), it may depend on the man's wealth, the need for alliances in the case of rulers, and women's shorter life-spans. Marriage of one man and one woman is assumed in Genesis 2:24 and the Song of Songs.

It seems that both men and women could divorce. Deuteronomy 24:1–4, often cited as a divorce text, actually describes the case of a man seeking to re-marry the same woman. The Elephantine papyri (6th century BCE) from a Judean settlement in Egypt contain documents in which a woman divorces her husband. Given the importance the Hebrew Bible accords to marriage, it is no surprise that the Bible commends having children, particularly sons (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 127:3–5). It is never too late: Sarah conceives at the age of 90 with God's help (Genesis 17) thus fulfilling God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven (Genesis 17, 22). At the same time, biblical texts describe the dangers of childbirth and high child mortality in a society with life expectancy of 30 years for women and 40 for men. To order sexuality, laws forbade sexual contact with women during menstruation (Leviticus 18:19), i.e., at times less likely to result in conception. This also helps explain the prohibition of same-sex relations (Leviticus 18:22–23). Nevertheless, in a culture that values sons, Ruth 1:16–17 describes the loyal refusal of Ruth to leave her mother-in-law Naomi in language

that is often read aloud in Christian weddings. Naomi's neighbors describe Ruth as worth more than seven sons to her mother-in-law (Ruth 4:15). In fact, by describing strong bonds of affection between Ruth and Naomi and also David and Jonathan, (2Sam 1:25-6), it may be that behind the texts, some same-sex friendships express more companionship than does marriage.

In the New Testament, Jesus values marriage (John 2:1-12) and is described as a bridegroom in the gospels (John 3:29; Mark 2:20). The gospels preserve Jesus' citation of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 describing marriage as an indissoluble bond sanctioned by God. We know Jesus opposes divorce (Mark 10:1-9). As we noted, John the Baptist (and presumably Jesus) condemns Herod Antipas' marriage of his brother's wife on grounds of incest (Leviticus 18:16; Mark 6:17-18). In the resurrection, Jesus says that there will be no marriage (Mark 12:25; Matthew 22:30).

Rape

Several narratives describe attempted or real rape of men and women by predatory males. In Genesis 19, inhabitants of the cities of Sodom attempt to rape divine beings under the protection of Lot. Although the divine beings manage to escape, such evil inhospitality secures the city's destruction. Judges 19 describes the gang rape and murder of the Levite's concubine in Gibeah. The depravity of the attack indicates a pre-monarchic state of tribal warfare since in the following narrative the tribe of Benjamin is almost eradicated. After Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13), the narrative describes his change from lust to loathing.

God

From a theological perspective, the Bible understands God to be alone. But the monotheism of post-exilic prophetic literature in Second Isaiah is challenged by other passages: Ezekiel 1:27, for example, describes the divine loins; Yahweh is metaphorically husband and father to Israel in Hosea, for example, while in the New Testament Jesus is God's Son. Historically, the God of the Hebrew Bible exists with a consort: At Kuntillet 'Ajrud, for example, archaeologists have found an 8th century BCE depiction of two figures with the inscription, "Yahweh and his Asherah." But the Bible itself contains other, more female images of a God of mercy (*rahamim*) connected to the Hebrew word for "womb," *rehem*. An older description has God writhing in labor pains whilst giving birth to Israel (Deuteronomy 32:18). Whether God is portrayed as male and/or female, the Bible goes to great lengths not to describe God as sexually active, although occasional statements indicate that biblical writers experimented: "I have produced a man from Yahweh!" Eve exclaims in Genesis 4:1.

Paul, deuterio-Paul and the Pastoral Epistles

Paul shares a Jewish belief in the goodness of God's creation of which marriage—and sexual relations within marriage—is a part. In Paul's letters, women and men

experience sexual desire or “burning.” But since marriage and sexual relations are part of the present transitory age, Paul deems marriage inferior to singleness. Sexual intercourse outside marriage with any woman is immorality (*porneia*) and Paul cites Genesis 2:24 to argue that sex with an immoral woman creates a bond that undoes the bond of that man with Christ.

Paul sees same-sex intercourse in Romans 1 as a confusion reflecting disorder that ensues when people exchange worshipping God for idols. His assessment is that such relations transgress Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, pervert God’s intention, and thus bringing shame on all parties. Like contemporary Stoic philosophers, Paul advocates self-control of passions and avoidance of excess. Marriage is a remedy for those unable to practice restraint. 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, indicates that his response to a Corinthian statement, “It is good not to touch a woman,” includes admonitions to mutual care, respect and agreement in contexts of marriage. Perhaps because of the shortness of time, Paul does not discuss procreation as reason for marriage (cf. Jer 16:1-2).

In the New Testament, we see married, widowed and single women in leadership positions: Prisca and her husband Aquila were associated with house churches in Ephesus and Rome (1 Corinthians 16:19 and Romans 16:3-5); Nympha hosts an assembly in her house (Colosians 4:15); Lydia, a household owner whose household probably included slaves, deals in purple cloth in Thyatira (Acts 16:11-15, 40); and Junia was an apostle before Paul with her husband Andronicus (Romans 16:7). We can see the contours of households and family life in the world of the New Testament when we read household codes prescribing household relations by including slaves, former slaves, clients and dependent workers in a household. If they were read aloud in assemblies, the household codes directly addressed wives, children, fathers and slaves as well as husbands as heads of households. How would Nympha react when she heard in Colosians 3:18, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord!” Did it have an effect on her life or was it simply repeated traditional teaching? 1 Peter 3:1-2 and 1 Timothy 6:1-2 reveal that wives have joined different assemblies (churches) without their husbands, indicating that some women made independent choices to join groups.

We may compare Luke 8:1-3, where Joanna, wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, is one of the followers of a peripatetic Jesus. If Joanna follows the mission as a woman who has separated from her husband, then perhaps Luke is emphasizing the magnitude of personal sacrifice which disciples are willing to make; but then, where is Joanna getting the resources she is using to support the mission? Independently wealthy women did exist in Jesus’ world, but one of the socio-economic reasons for opposition to divorce was the destitution it often imposed on a divorced woman. Another possibility is that Joanna has not, in fact, separated from her husband, but has gone on mission with Chuza’s permission or perhaps even under his direction. Luke may be implying that Chuza, the steward of Herod, approves of the mission sufficiently to be willing to second his wife to it and undergo the consequent deprivation. However things stand with Chuza, Joanna, unlike other disciples, is not

described as having left anything; she remains "the wife of Chuza" and she witnesses the empty tomb in 24:10.

The letter to the Ephesians contains a "household code" in which duties for household members are described, particularly the married couple, whose relationship is compared to Christ and the church. Here the metaphor of Israel as God's wife, familiar in Hosea, is recast not in terms of faithfulness or unfaithfulness but in language of hierarchy, respect, and love. In fact, although there is language of mutual submission in reverence for Christ for husband and wife (5:21), and although there is no verb in the Greek text of Ephesians 5:22 (a fact ignored by most modern translations), still, wives are enjoined to be inferior in their subjection to husbands in everything as the church is to Christ (5:24). Husbands are to love their wives and make them holy as Christ purifies the church, his body (5:25-7). For the author of Ephesians, a patriarchal household reflects the relationship of Christ to the church. To what extent this reinterprets Paul is a matter of debate.

The author of the Pastoral Epistles (1, 2 Timothy and Titus) commends self-control (Greek, *sophrosune*) as a key virtue particularly in relation to sexuality (2 Timothy 1:7; Titus 1:8; 2:2, 12). The self-control of older men (Titus 2:2) is not that of younger women. Their self-control is being chaste in relation to their husbands and in managing the household (Titus 2:4-5).

Eunuchs

Jesus commends to the disciples becoming voluntary eunuchs in Matt 19:12. This leads us to conjecture that disciples as eunuchs existed in the Matthean community. They have voluntarily given up all honor deriving from family, possessions, and wealth and are exclusively loyal to the kingdom. Honor and status (central values in the world of the New Testament) derives from the heavenly Father. Status acquired through proximity and service to the heavenly Father cannot be passed to one's heirs. To Peter's poignant question posed after Jesus' teaching about eunuchs, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus offers status and power not in this world, but in the next. Jesus promises Peter that when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, those followers will also sit on twelve thrones, "judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life" (19:27-29). If some of Matthew's disciples are taking Jesus' injunctions seriously enough to make themselves the equivalent of children or slaves, they have no heirs or possessions in this life. In Matt 19:12, Jesus is not talking about single people, be they unmarried or widowed, or people with celibate vocations. There are many other ways to commend sexual continence: for example, Paul boasts of his unmarried state, and praises the single person and the widowed without ever mentioning eunuchs.

We must survey roles and functions of eunuchs in Israelite, Persian, Hellenistic Greek, Nubian, Byzantine, and Chinese history. If eunuchs are full members of the Matthean community we see roles and titles in the whole gospel differently.

Matthew's community is neither ascetic nor celibate: the passage includes children in the community and mothers as an important part of the whole gospel. The injunction of Matthew 23:9, to call no man father on earth, "for you have one Father, who is in heaven," is often understood to describe Matthew's community as one of equals under one heavenly Father. Those who obey the command to "call no man father" must also surrender their own right to be called father with all attendant privileges. They must surrender also their claim on their offspring, who become children of the one Father in heaven. But a begetter's responsibility for care and nurturing of the children remains part of his responsibility toward the whole community, even after he has become, effectively, Isaiah's "dry tree," a eunuch. Here is another way that some "make themselves eunuchs" for the sake of the kingdom. In a community where some cannot beget, one way to ensure equality may be to require that all surrender the privilege of fatherhood.

Jesus' commendation of those who become eunuchs specifically undermines male heterosexual privilege. At the heart of Jesus' message commending certain social behaviors for men and women lies a refusal to claim the privilege and power of the father, which belong only to God. In contemporary discussions of sexual identity, Matthew 19 reminds us that Jesus commends to some of his disciples the absolute severing of family ties and complete subordination for the sake of the kingdom.

Despite all attempts to make it say more, the Bible really has very little interest in sexuality. Exhortations to practice acts of charity are far more prevalent in the Bible than injunctions to be fruitful and multiply.

In her 1992 book "In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth," Tikvah Frymer-Kensky argues that because Israel's God incorporated all the character and functions of the female goddesses, gender disappears from biblical monotheism. Consequently, in the recitation of the Genesis creation narrative, for example, humans need not be concerned about creation or continuity of fertility in the earth. Epitomized in the creative word, God has power over fertility, creation, and reproduction. Israel's heroes Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson, and Samuel are all born after divine action opens wombs that were closed. Stories of their birth convey the message that God alone can cause conception.

As for gender, Frymer-Kensky argues that the Bible does not see men and women as being different in essence. They are socially unequal, and women are subordinate; but they are not inferior in any intellectual or spiritual way. She sees the Bible's positive evaluation of women as one of the beneficial effects of biblical monotheism, but she also notes negative effects of the Bible's removal of gender from the divine, particularly the fact that the Bible, and Judaism and Christianity in general, have so little to say about such important things as human sexuality and reproduction. "The Bible never really incorporates sexuality into its vision of humanity or its relationship with the divine," she writes (187).

Similarly, the New Testament says little about human sexuality. A Christian doctrine of marriage developed well after the time of the New Testament, namely, in the patristic and early medieval periods. Attempts to ground Christian definitions of the sacrament of marriage in Paul's counsel that marriage was safer than unconsidered celibacy (in 1 Corinthians 7), in the metaphor of the marriage of Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5, and in Jesus's prohibition of divorce (Mark 10:2–9, Matthew 19:3–9 [cf. 5:31–32], Luke 16:18) were made well after the time of the New Testament. These texts do not, together or separately, comprise a coherent statement on marriage, nor were they intended to. Attempts to use, for example, Jesus's statements to uphold the sanctity of heterosexual marriage must heed one thing: Jesus's statements link marriage and divorce. Jesus never considers marriage apart from divorce. Even if Jesus's prohibition of divorce views it as a concession to human failure to live out marriage, divorce/marriage is a given in all three Gospels.

If we recognized that sexuality is marginal in biblical tradition, that the Bible has no vision to help integrate human sexuality, and that a Christian theology of the sacrament of marriage is patristic and medieval, what might be the consequences for our contemporary debates about sexuality in the church and elsewhere? One is that because sexuality seems to be of no great concern to either God or Jesus according to the biblical record, we need to recognize this gap before we rush to fill it. Minding this gap helps us understand that while the Bible recognizes the power of the erotic (think of the biblical laws regulating sexual behavior and the statement in the Song of Songs, "for love is stronger than death"), it is in fact the ideations, imaginations, and fantasies of scholars and religious people that have created modern discourses about sexuality in ancient Israel or in the New Testament. Rather than promoting discourses that regulate and restrict human sexual behavior, we could affirm that a gap is a space into which we must put different discourses. Minding the gap helps us understand that, except for pederasty and adultery, we have no biblical mandate to argue on the basis of sexual practice for the exclusion of anyone from Christian communities or for the exclusion of ourselves from community with others. Precisely because of this gap we can afford inclusion to differently constituted families and households.

PART II

What was the sin of Sodom?

Re-reading Genesis 19 in its literary context: a Contextual Bible Study

By Gerald West

Introduction

Shortly after the 2008 Lambeth Conference I was approached to collaborate with an international research project on how ordinary lay Anglicans around the world understood the debates their bishops were involved in with respect to homosexuality. Colleagues from the University of Leeds, who were coordinating the research project, wanted to do focus group discussions with Anglican congregations in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa. I, together with colleagues from the Ujamaa Centre,¹ agreed to participate in the project but pointed out that ordinary Anglicans would not speak openly about “such things” in a focus group discussion. We suggested, instead, that we construct a Contextual Bible Study that would open up discussion on “such things.” The Contextual Bible Study could then be used, we suggested, as a first step into a focus group discussion. Our colleagues from the University of Leeds agreed, and so Khawulani Ntuli and I set about constructing a Contextual Bible Study on “homosexuality.”

In this article I will describe the work, what we learned from it, and how it led to a revised form of the Bible study, shaped by another context—the context of gay and lesbian Christians.

Contextual Bible Study

There are various ways of describing the Contextual Bible Study praxis,² but here I will focus on a series of interconnected “movements” that shape the collaborative reading process. While a little abstract at this point (and some might want to skip this section), these movements will take on a fuller form when we come to the actual Contextual Bible Study.

¹ <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za>

² Gerald O. West, “The Contribution of Tamar’s Story to the Construction of

² Gerald O. West, “The Contribution of Tamar’s Story to the Construction of Alternative African Masculinities,” in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Tamar Kamionkowski and Kim Wonil (London: T&T Clark, 2010); Gerald O. West, “Do Two Walk Together? Walking with the Other through Contextual Bible Study,” *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2011); Gerald O. West, “Deploying the Literary Detail of a Biblical Text (2 Samuel 13:1-22) in Search of Redemptive Masculinities,” in *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J.A. Clines*, ed. James K. Aitken, Jeremy M.S. Clines, and Christl M. Maier (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).

The overarching movement is that of “See-Judge-Act,” a process formed in the worker-priest movement in Europe in the 1930-40s. This movement begins within the organised formations of the poor and marginalised as they analyse (“See”) their context, “from below. This analysis of “reality” is then brought into dialogue with the “prophetic” voices of the Bible, enabling “the God of life” to address (“Judge”) the social reality. Through this dialogue with the Bible “the shape of the gospel” is used to plan a series of actions (“Act”) that will bring about transformation of the social reality, so that all may have life, and have it abundantly.

Within this overarching movement there is another movement, from “community-consciousness” to “critical-consciousness” to “community-consciousness.” The “See” moment of social analysis generates a particular contextual concern that becomes the “theme” for the Bible study. The engagement with the Bible (the Judge component) begins with a community’s “thematic” appropriation of the biblical text being used (“community-consciousness”), allowing every participant to share their particular understanding of the text. This moment not only makes it clear to the participants that the Bible belongs to them, it also offers a history of how that text has been received and understood in a particular community. The Bible study then moves into a series of re-readings of the text, slowing down the process of interpretation, using the resources of socially engaged biblical scholarship (“critical-consciousness”). The particular sets of “critical” tools that constitute the trade of biblical scholarship are offered to the participants as additional resources with which to engage the biblical text. After a series of “critical-consciousness” questions, the Bible study moves back into “community-consciousness,” as the participants appropriate the biblical text for the particular social project identified in the “See” moment.

With respect to the particular biblical “criticisms,” there is another layer of movement. The movement begins within the “See” moment with an initial thematic “in-front-of-the-text” engagement with the text (“community-consciousness”), bringing the generative contextual theme of the community workshop into dialogue with a particular biblical text. The interpretive process then slows down, entering the “critical-consciousness” moment via a literary engagement with the text. Though a form of “critical” engagement, focusing “on-the-text” is an egalitarian entry point to “critical-consciousness,” enabling all participants to engage with the detail of the text. In most cases, literary engagement leads “behind-the-text” to a socio-historical engagement with the text, as participants probe the world that produced the text, seeking for lines of connection between both the literary dimensions and the socio-historical dimensions of the text and their contextual realities. While these dimensions of the biblical text are the focus of these second and third moments, the process moves in the fourth moment back “in-front-of-the-text” (into “community-consciousness”), as the participants now appropriate this critically reconstituted text for their particular project of social transformation (“Act”). Together, as the examples that follow in the next section of the paper illustrate, these concentric and intersecting movements constitute the Contextual Bible Study process.

Jim Naughton 12/31/2014 2:36 PM

Comment [1]: Not sure what this means. Maybe “The movement begins within the ‘See’ moment, when the issue that concerns the community is articulated before the reading of a potentially relevant biblical text.”?

So Contextual Bible Study begins and ends under the control of a particular local community, who use the resources of the Contextual Bible Study, along with a range of other resources, to plan for and implement community-based action. The socially engaged biblical scholar is already involved in the struggles of particular communities for survival, liberation, life, so that the invitation to do Contextual Bible Study together comes from within this larger praxis. More than half a century of liberation hermeneutics has demonstrated the usefulness of the critical capacities of biblical scholarship to particular liberation struggles. More than twenty-five years of Contextual Bible Study has demonstrated the usefulness of this particular form of liberation hermeneutics to a range of struggles, both in South Africa and beyond.

Working with ordinary Anglicans

The Contextual Bible Study that Ntuli and I prepared took the following shape. This Bible study was used, with the support of the diocesan bishop, the Rt. Rev. Rubin Phillip, across a range of quite diverse Anglican congregations in the Diocese of Natal, within the Pietermaritzburg area.

Anglicans and homosexuality

1. Listen to Genesis 19:1-13. This story has often been used to address the issue of homosexuality. In groups of two, share how this story been used to address the issue of homosexuality in your context.
2. Let's now engage the story more carefully. This story is part of a larger story in which three men/angels visit Abraham. How does Abraham receive the men/angels in Genesis 18:1-8?
3. How does Lot receive the same men/angels who come to Sodom in the evening?
4. Why is Lot so insistent that the men/angels do not spend the night in the city square?
5. How do the men of Sodom receive the men/angel strangers?
6. What is Lot's status in the city of Sodom?
7. Why are the men of Sodom so abusive to the strangers and to Lot?
8. In what situations in our societies do men rape men?
9. Are men who rape men homosexuals?
10. In what ways does this story address issues of hospitality, rape, and homosexuality?

11. Is this text a useful biblical text in discussions within the Anglican church about homosexuality?

We were not surprised that this Contextual Bible Study was well received in each of the congregations; neither were we surprised that it created a sacred and safe place in which to talk about things we do not normally talk about in church. After nearly two hours participants were amazed to realise what they had been talking about!

Each of the clusters (indicated above) of questions were discussed after participants had been divided in small groups, facilitating participation. Question 2 made a significant contribution, prompting a re-reading of Genesis 19. The cluster of Questions 2 and 3 drew attention to the narrative similarities between the plot of Genesis 18 and the plot of Genesis 19, offering the option of reading Genesis 18-19 as one story. The cluster of Questions 4-7 focused on the narratively implied power differentials between the “men of Sodom” and these two sets of strangers, “the men/angels” (recent arrivals) and “Lot” (a resident alien). Including Lot as an “alien” brought to the attention of the participants a detail not readily recognised, namely that Lot too is threatened with rape precisely because he too is a stranger/guest/alien in Sodom (verse 19:9).

The cluster of Questions 8-11 moves the Contextual Bible Study back into “community-consciousness,” inviting the participants to bring their re-reading of this text into dialogue with their African contexts, and then into dialogue with their Anglican contexts. Question 9 dealt directly with one of the concerns/confusions often associated with this text, allowing participants to explore their understandings of “homosexuality.” Questions 9 and 10 invited interrogation of this concern/confusion. Question 11 took the discussion directly into the discourse within Anglicanism.

The consensus among participants was that this Contextual Bible Study had been empowering, enabling them to engage the detail of the text and through the textual detail the larger question of what and how the Bible might be used to engage with homosexuality. Furthermore, the Bible study did create a safe and sacred space for the focus group discussion that followed.³

Working with the Gay & Lesbian Network

Some years later, having worked with the above version of the Contextual Bible Study in a range of church and community contexts, we were prompted by a new context to revise this version. In 2013 the Ujamaa Centre entered into a formal partnership with the Gay & Lesbian Network in Pietermaritzburg. Most of this collaborative work has been in the context of hate crime against gays and lesbians, but we have also used these workshops to address LGBTI issues more generally.

³ <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/15/2/3.html>

During our work together it became clear that many gay and lesbian activists linked to the Gay & Lesbian Network had been driven from their churches by the Bible. They were puzzled that we worked with this homophobic text, but accepted that there might be strategic reasons for using it in working with church leadership, who were the focus of our collaborative work. Because the Ujamaa Centre was aware of the damage the Bible had done to the LGBTI community, we were careful in how we worked with the Bible when we worked together, and made no attempts 'to defend' the Bible. Indeed, part of our contribution within the church and community is to work overtly with the conversational/contested nature of the biblical text.

And while we did not expect those associated with the Gay & Lesbian Network to participate in the Contextual Bible Study component of our joint workshops, most did join in. After we had facilitated the above Contextual Bible Study in one of our workshops, there was considerable interaction between Ujamaa Centre staff and staff and activists from the Gay & Lesbian Network. They wanted to know more about Genesis 18-19, and wondered whether we could develop a format of the Bible study that could be used with church-alienated gay and lesbian Christians, who would need more "biblical" input and a shorter timeframe for the study as a whole. We had been working on shorter (and therefore more directive) versions of our Contextual Bible Studies for sites in which there was not the opportunity for two-to-three hour Bible studies. While we were worried about the more directive orientation of these formats given our understanding of the importance of duration to the process, we recognise that in certain contexts there might be a place for a more directive stance.

What follows is the format we devised and then facilitated in workshops where there was a critical mass of church-alienated gay and lesbian Christians. In April 2013 we did this version for the first time, in a workshop funded by the Church of Sweden titled, "Sexuality, culture, theological tradition, and the Bible."

Re-reading the story of Sodom

1. Listen to Genesis 19:1-13. This story has often been used to address the issue of homosexuality. In groups of two, share how this story been used to address the issue of homosexuality in your context.

Let's study the story more carefully. Is this a story about homosexuality, or a story about hospitality?

2. This story is part of a larger story that begins in Genesis 18. The story begins with three men visiting Abraham.
How does Abraham receive these strangers in Genesis 18:1-8?

3. On the same day, in the evening, two of these men leave Abraham's home and journey towards Sodom (Genesis 19:1-3).
How does Lot receive these same strangers (who are described as both 'angels' in 19:1 and 'men' in 19:5)?

4. The men of Sodom, in contrast, do not receive the strangers/angels with hospitality. Instead, they insist on raping/"knowing" the strangers. Why do they choose to "receive" these strangers by raping them?

5. What is Lot's status in the city of Sodom? What does his status among the men of (19:9) tell us about why the men of Sodom threaten to rape him?

6. In what situations/contexts in our societies do men rape men? Why do men rape other men?

7. Are men who rape men "homosexuals?"

Summary input (after discussion): Clearly Lot recognises that these are heterosexual men, for he "offers" his virgin daughters to them (19:8). While Lot's treatment of his daughters as his property to with as he wants is unacceptable, what it makes clear is that Lot recognises that the men of Sodom are intent on using sex to abuse and humiliate. This is a story about rape.

8. Is it important to re-read this text as a story about hospitality, not a story about homosexuality? If so, why?

9. It is important to recognise that this story is not read as a story about homosexuality in other biblical texts that refer to it. How do other Old Testament texts characterise this story? See Isaiah 1:7-17; Ezekiel 16:49-50. How does Jesus characterise this story? See Luke 10:10-12/Matthew 10:14-15. What is the "sin" of Sodom according to these texts?

The overall frame for this workshop was the See-Judge-Act process, so participants were expected to include some form of action plan in response to this Bible study as part of their response to the workshop as a whole.

While we had a similar response from church leaders to this version of the Contextual Bible Study on Genesis 19 as we had had to the previous version, what was most significant was the impact this study had on gay and lesbian Christians who had been alienated from their churches and the Bible. By re-reading this story through this process, one participant said, "it takes away the power of the text over us as homosexuals, for we are told that homosexuality is the reason for the destruction of the Sodom; we are told that we pose a threat to the church, that we will bring destruction on the church". "Many have left the church because of this text," another explained, "it has chased us out of the church." Another participant

shared that in her context “Everyone claims to know what this text is about! It will not go away, it must be re-read.”

Other participants asked, “Why is it that we have not questioned the interpretation of this story?” And still others wondered, “Perhaps this re-reading enables us to go back to the church.” And others turned the text around, arguing that, “The church is like Sodom, just as the men of Sodom wanted to subject others to their power, so the church wants to subject us to its power. Re-reading this text reminds us to question each and every text; God himself will come down to judge the church, just as God himself came down to judge Sodom!” This theme was taken up by others, who asked, “Could not this text, as it is interpreted by Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jesus, be read as a story about receiving and welcoming homosexuals into our churches?”

I recorded these contributions with the permission of the group, taking notes on the PowerPoint version of the Contextual Bible Study publically so that everyone could see what I was writing and could confirm that I had recorded their comments correctly. They wanted to be heard and they wanted their responses to the Contextual Bible Study to be shared with others.

Conclusion

Contextual Bible Study is a process, caught up in the ongoing praxis cycle of See-Judge-Act. As our South African context shifts, so must a particular Contextual Bible Study. These Contextual Bible Studies may not be appropriate to every context, but they have been useful across the African continent, including a range of Anglican churches. We encourage those who read this to use them, guided by our practical guide, *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*.⁴

Further reading

- West, Gerald O. "The Contribution of Tamar's Story to the Construction of Alternative African Masculinities." In *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Tamar Kamionkowski and Kim Wonil, 184-200. London: T&T Clark, 2010.
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⁴ <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Practical.aspx>

Sexual Vulnerability: Reading Genesis 19:1-38.

By Dora Mbuwayesango

Genesis 19:1-38 is a story about the rescue of Lot and his family during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This destruction had been predicted to Abram in the previous chapter. We are first introduced to Lot as Abram's nephew (11:27) whom Abram took along with him when he left Haran for a land to be revealed later (12:1-5). Abram and Lot parted ways when Lot chose the plains of the Jordan, which turned out to be Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abram stayed in Canaan (13: 1-18). Lot settled in Sodom. The stories in Genesis 12-50 present stories of the origins of the different peoples in the biblical world, with the main focus on the origins of the Israelites. Chapter 19 is a story that describes the origins of the Moabites and Ammonites. Thus the story of the rescue of Lot and his family concludes with narrating how his daughters made him drunk in order to have sex with him (19:30-38).

Like Abram earlier, Lot provided ideal hospitality to men who turned out to be divine messengers. He bowed down with his face to the ground and begged and persuaded the men to come to his house and spend the night. The men reluctantly accepted Lot's offer of hospitality and were treated extraordinarily well with a feast and unleavened bread (verses 1-4). In Lot's case, there is a detailed depiction of how the rest of the men of Sodom responded to the presence of the male guests. Before they retired for the night, all hell broke loose as the men of the city—young and old—surrounded the house and demanded "to know" the men. Lot interpreted the demand as a threat of sexual molestation (gang rape). He offers to "take out" his virgin daughters in an effort to satisfy the corrupt Sodomite men who were threatening to break down his door (verse 9) in an attempt to molest Lot's male guests (verse 5).

Some contextual information will aid our understanding of this story. The narrative is being constructed in a patriarchal context and promotes androcentric (male-centered) and heterosexual ideology and interests. In a patriarchal society women are considered secondary and inferior to men. In fact, a woman is considered the property of a man, a father, a husband, or even a brother. This view of women's status is reflected in the area of sexuality. While a man owned his sexuality, a woman's sexuality belonged to a man. A man had ownership of his wife's sexuality for his sole use and his daughter's sexuality until he transferred it to her husband. A man did not own the sexuality of another man. The rape of a woman was not considered a crime against the raped woman but against her husband or father if she was not married. A man committed adultery against another man, but not against his own wife. A woman committed adultery against her husband or, if she was not married, against her father. All these elements in the patriarchal context inform the confrontation between Lot and the men of Sodom concerning the male visitors.

Jim Naughton 9/7/2015 12:55 PM

Comment [2]: Meaning that the children they gave birth to became the Moabites and Ammonites?

The two male visitors are vulnerable in Sodom because they are powerless. Ordinarily, the expectation was that such men would receive protective hospitality from the male citizens of a city like Sodom. It is ironic that they were offered hospitality by a man who was not a citizen (see also Judges 19). The protective hospitality of Lot was not adequate to withstand the threat from the men of Sodom. Their demand for Lot to hand over his male guests so they could molest them was a way of demonstrating that Lot was as vulnerable as his male guests. The men of Sodom were not asking for consensual sex from the two men, but were demanding that Lot hand over his male guests to be sexually molested, literally gang raped. But Lot does not have the right or authority to hand over the sexuality of these men. Under his roof, these men are his responsibility to protect.

Going out to talk to the men may have been Lot's attempt to meet them as equals. He offers the men what he thinks is a viable alternative to the sexual molestation of his male guest: the sexual molestation of his two virgin daughters. This horrifying offer stems from the patriarchal ideology that Lot completely owns the sexuality of his daughters, although there were prospective sons-in-law whom Lot failed to convince to flee Sodom before its destruction (verses 12-14). The daughters offered up by their father as substitutes for his male guests are spared, thanks to the miraculous intervention of the two male guests who turn out to be God's messengers (verses 10-17). Not all women offered up as substitutes for males are spared (see Judges 19). At least, here in Genesis the false alternative is rejected as shown by the actions of the two divine messengers.

When Lot offers the men of Sodom his daughters, they are infuriated and their words indicate that what they want to do to the men is not homosexual sex but gang rape: "Now we will deal with you worse than them." The men wanted to show the two visitors who was in control in Sodom, and when Lot tried to speak to them as equals, they threaten to treat him worse than they had planned to treat his male guest. The wicked male crowd wanted to break down the door, but the male guests inside pulled Lot in and blinded the crowd so they could not see the door. Thus, Lot was saved from the mob and also saved from not having to do the vile thing of sacrificing his virgin daughters to be violently molested by the wicked crowd as happened to the woman in the book of Judges.

The story of the rescue of Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah reveals some troubling views and assumptions about human sexuality. Human sexuality that is influenced by or promotes patriarchy makes some people vulnerable. The disadvantaged members of society can be oppressed and mistreated. The men of Sodom wanted to sexually molest the powerless male visitors to their city and Lot wanted to offer his powerless daughters to be molested instead. The role of the church is to step in and be messengers of God who protect the disadvantaged and the powerless.

Discussion Questions

Who are the vulnerable persons in the story and what makes them vulnerable?

How do societies make people vulnerable?

Who are the vulnerable in society today and what should be the role of the church and individual Christians as it relates to the vulnerable?

What are the false alternatives that church is offering in how to think and act in the area of sexuality?

Who are the persons today you identify as divine messengers?

Debunking the Sin of Sodom

By Masiwa Ragies Gunda

Introduction

In the many discussions, debates and confrontations surrounding LGBTI persons and Christians the world over, Sodom plays a critical role. In many communities, populist reactions have been whipped up by invoking the danger of ending up like Sodom, that is, with the total extermination of a city and its people. Laws, especially emanating from the Victorian era in British history, were enacted to punish Sodom-like vice and give the state the moral justification to look at itself as acting on behalf of God. The underlying belief in all this contemporary usage of the image of Sodom is that Sodom was destroyed because of its sin. That sin is widely presented as "homosexuality."

This brief study seeks to survey the understanding of the sin of Sodom in the Bible. The name Sodom, which occurs for the first time in Genesis 10:19, occurs 48 times throughout the Bible. The bulk of the usage is within the Old Testament and nine verses in the New Testament that make reference to Sodom. This piece seeks to establish how these texts understood or interpreted the Sodom narrative. Of especial importance are the post-Sodom destruction references to the name Sodom. The name Sodom occurs 27 times in the Old and New Testaments after the destruction of Sodom narrative in Genesis 18 and 19.

Summary of the Sodom Narrative

From Genesis 10, we are introduced to a place that is called Sodom. In Chapter 10 we are told that Sodom was outside the territory of Canaan but was adjacent to Canaan and possibly in the direction opposite to Gaza. This suggests that Sodom lay southeast of Canaan since Gaza was southwest of Canaan. Genesis 13, in a clear retrospective reference, refers to the destruction of Sodom while characterizing the people of Sodom as "wicked and great sinners against the Lord" (vs.13). This is the region that Lot chose to settle in as he parted ways with Abraham.

In Chapter 14, we are then told of a war waged by two coalitions, one of which included a King Bera of Sodom. In these pre-destruction narratives, one could argue that Sodom was another normal kingdom neighbouring Canaan in the ancient days. From Genesis 18 through 19, however, we encounter the narrative of the destruction of Sodom beginning with the arrival of three unidentified guests at Abraham's Oak of Mamre place. After Abraham shows great hospitality to the strangers, the Lord eventually self-identifies and then goes on to declare the mission that has brought the messengers down this way—which is to destroy Sodom because of its wickedness. Two of the guests proceed to Sodom and upon their arrival are welcomed by Lot, who invites them to come into his house for the night before they can proceed on their journey. When they enter Lot's house, we are again informed of the great hospitality shown by the host towards total strangers.

Later the same night, the "men of Sodom, both young and old" come to Lot's house demanding that the visitors be released into their custody so "they can get to know

them." Lot being aware of what it meant for the men to be "known" by the men of Sodom pleads on their behalf and even offers his two "virgin" daughters to the men as a way of appeasing them and possibly saving the dignity of his visitors. The visitors eventually react by striking the men of Sodom with blindness and then instruct Lot to take his family out of Sodom. Lot and his family escape Sodom, though Lot's wife is "turned into a pillar of salt" because she failed to obey the strangers' instructions. In this narrative, it is clear that Sodom was destroyed because of the wickedness of the people who lived there. The question that comes to mind is; "what was the sin of Sodom, or alternatively, in what ways was that wickedness manifested?"

Sodom in the Old Testament

The first post-Genesis appearance of Sodom is in Deuteronomy 29:23, where the focus is not on the sin of Sodom but on the extent of the destruction that was visited on Sodom and her neighbouring cities. In this text, we are informed of the aftermath of the destruction, which left the area uninhabitable to any form of life on land or water. In Deuteronomy 32:32, Sodom appears to be used metaphorically and sarcastically, as the source of all bad things or as the model of all those who are in opposition to the ways of God. Even though there are clear indications that the activities of the people of Sodom were evil and maybe even contagious, the actual deeds or deed are not mentioned explicitly. On the basis of these two texts, we are not in a position to answer our leading question: what was the sin of Sodom?

The name Sodom also appears in the prophetic books, and that is where we now turn. In Amos 4:11, there is reference to the overthrow of Sodom by God and it is offered as a warning to Israel to beware the fate of Sodom, which could also befall them. Amos, however, does not mention the sin of Sodom that caused the Lord to overthrow it. In Zephaniah, Sodom is mentioned again. "Therefore, as I live, says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever. The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them. This shall be their lot in return *for their pride*, because they scoffed and boasted against the people of the LORD of hosts" (Zephaniah 2:9-10). The prophet Zephaniah identifies "pride" as the sin of Sodom and sees the same as infecting the people of Moab and Ammon.

In Isaiah 1:9 and 10, the name appears once in each verse. In verse 9, the name is invoked in such a way that it speaks about the extent of the destruction of Sodom. The implication in verse 9 is that no survivor was left behind to propagate the lineage of Sodom. The destruction, therefore, was total extermination of a people. In verse 10, the name is now being used metaphorically to refer to all rulers who preside over wickedness. Such rulers are now metaphorically associated with the "rulers of Sodom." While the texts implicitly accuse Sodom of sin and wickedness, the nature of the sin is not explicit. The same applies in Isaiah 3:9, where the people of Judah are accused of being like the people of Sodom, who never tried to hide their sin or wickedness. They are accused of displaying their wickedness in public, yet

even here the wickedness is not explicitly mentioned. The last mention of Sodom by the prophet Isaiah is in chapter 13:19, where the fate of Babylon is compared to the end of Sodom—that is, destruction.

In Jeremiah, we encounter yet another interpretation of the Sodom narrative. Beginning with chapter 23:14, Sodom is again used as a standard with which the fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem could be compared. In this text, however, there are now some sins that are clearly identified and associated with the history of Sodom and still being practiced in Jerusalem. "But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: *they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness*; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah" (Jeremiah 23:14). While these sins are observed among the prophets of Jerusalem, it appears from the use of Sodom that such sins were also associated with the people or men of Sodom. In Jeremiah 49:8 and 50:40, there is again reference to the extent of the destruction, a total annihilation of the population of Sodom and the total extermination of the ability of the land to sustain life ever after! The same could be said of Lamentations 4:6, which also mentions the destruction of Sodom in the spur of the moment. There is no mention, however, of the sin of Sodom.

Outside of Genesis, the prophet Ezekiel is one of those who make reference to Sodom many times. The name Sodom appears six times in Ezekiel 16 from verse 46 to 56. Even though Sodom and Samaria are personified, verse 46 helps in identifying the historical location of Sodom relative to Judah; the two are like twin dominions. In verse 48, the text alleges that a comparison of the deeds of Sodom and those of Judah clearly shows that there are differences between the deeds: "your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done what you and your daughters have done." At this stage, it is not clear whether Sodom did more or less when compared to Judah. In verses 49-50, Ezekiel goes a step further by mentioning the sins of Sodom. "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: *she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me*; therefore I removed them when I saw it" (Ezekiel 16:49-50 emphasis added). Among the sins of Sodom were pride, having excess food and refusing to assist the poor and needy. They did not see hospitality as a virtue! In the following texts, there is a promise to restore Sodom and other punished states including Judah.

In the New Testament, the name Sodom appears for the first time in Matthew 10 and Luke 10 in the narrative on the mission of the twelve disciples. In both texts, Sodom is used as an example for those towns and cities that would refuse to welcome the twelve. In both narratives, the disciples are instructed to shake off the dust from inhospitable towns and cities thereby making such towns candidates for destruction, which would be worse than that suffered by Sodom. It would appear that the sin of Sodom, according to the interpretation of the narrative by our Lord Jesus Christ, is that of inhospitality. In Matthew 11:23-24, Sodom is again used in a comparison between "then and now" with Capernaum being accused of being worse

than Sodom since Capernaum had witnessed many miracles and other demonstrations of power, which were never availed to Sodom. In Luke 17:29, the focus is on the mode of destruction that visited Sodom, that is, the raining of sulphur and fire. The sin of Sodom is, however, not mentioned. From these Gospel passages, only the sin of inhospitality appears to be explicitly associated with the people of Sodom, and that understanding is coming from our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Romans 9:29, the Apostle Paul makes reference to Isaiah's use of the Sodom narrative. He acknowledges the commonly understood extent of the destruction of Sodom, which is that it was total and left no survivor from among the men, women, and children. The only difference with Judah was that the Lord had left some survivors. In 2 Peter 2:6, the Sodom narrative is once again used as a lesson to the present generations. While the focus is frequently on the destruction and wickedness of the people of Sodom, 2 Peter focuses on the act of God of saving Lot, the righteous man living among wicked people. While destruction is the sure fate of the wicked, it is also emphasized that even when the righteous are ensconced among wicked people, the Lord will come to their rescue. Coming to the letter of Jude, we encounter the first association of the sin of Sodom directly with what is now being interpreted as "homosexuality." "Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, *indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust*, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 1:7). This is possibly the first time in the Bible that the threat to gang-rape the visitors is interpreted as the sin of Sodom. In Revelation 11:8, Sodom is used metaphorically or cryptically as it appears in an apocalyptic text but even then, there appears to be an association between the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom and what will befall some contemporary kingdoms fighting against the superpower of the time. There is clearly no mention of the sin of Sodom.

Summary: The Sins of Sodom

In the survey above, a handful of sins have been linked with the destruction of Sodom, among them being pride, excess of food, refusal to assist the needy and poor, inhospitality to strangers, sexual immorality and same-sex lust. It would appear that the sin of inhospitality could have been the umbrella sin covering a host of manifestations of wickedness committed against vulnerable groups in Sodom including the strangers who happened to pass through Sodom. Most telling about the question of the sin of Sodom is the interpretation of the sin by none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. His answer is that the people of Sodom were guilty of inhospitality! Only, when same-sex practices are driven by inhospitality can they be equated to the sin of Sodom.

May the Lord bless us in our quest to sustain life in our communities that we may never again proclaim destruction on people who have not committed any wickedness by simply accepting that the Lord has made them different! Difference is not inhospitality; however, forcing some to be like me when the Lord has made them different can end up being inhospitality! Are we not the ones after the fate of Sodom?

Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19: A Third Opinion

By Robert W. Kuloba

Abstract:

This study is called a third opinion to Genesis 19, which deals with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The “Sodom and Gomorrah” story has been central in the theological and legal polemics associated with homosexual orientations. In the contemporary debate on homosexuality, there are two opinions 1). That “Sodom and Gomorrah” is destroyed due to homosexuality 2). That “Sodom and Gomorrah” is not destroyed due to homosexuality but inhospitality. In this article, I opine that either argument in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is falling prey to the writer’s ideological bias, which considers Sodom and Gomorrah as the “other” and perpetually inundates the voice of “Sodom and Gomorrah.” I also argue that either judgement condemns the reaction without considering the action of “Sodom and Gomorrah.” The methodology used is textual analysis, using the paradigms of David Clines’ *left to right* and what Cheryl Exum would probably call *defragmenting bodies*.

What is the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? That is the question! But before tackling this question, I should mention that this short study is not to judge any of the views in the debate or demean a group of people who subscribe to a certain line of thought, but to make a critical analysis of the Sodom texts, with the hope that it might offer an objective view in the debate. In other words, I am appealing, especially to any authority or government organ that might find my views unbecoming that this is an academic article, and I am exercising my freedom of thought.

The biblical “Sodom and Gomorrah” has been an enigma in a number of ways. Many questions have been asked about these states or cities: Did Sodom and Gomorrah exist? Can we recover the exact location and the remains of Sodom and Gomorrah? What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? There have not been conclusive answers to any of these questions. In recent histories, the resilience of the enigma has been manifested in the debates over legislation regarding homosexuality. Homosexuality is caricatured as the sin of Sodom; and synonyms and related vocabularies to homosexuality are words like sodomy, sodomize, sodomitic—all coined from the biblical Sodom.¹ In these debates, opponents to homosexuality have energized their antipathy with the view that biblical “Sodom and Gomorrah” were destroyed due to acts of homosexuality. Those sympathetic to homosexuality, however, argue that the two cities were destroyed due to inhospitality. Either side of the arguments lack

¹ In recent histories, most anti-homosexuality laws have been called sodomy laws.

sufficient proof or justification from the Bible and overlook the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the Bible text.

In other circles, there are doubts about the existence of Sodom and Gomorrah as densely populated cities in the Jordan Plain during the early patriarchal age.² Those inclined toward a scientific approach to the Bible, and who conceptualize Genesis 19 in terms of volcanic activities query the story on grounds that the 'latest volcanic activity in that region took place thousands of years before Abraham...'³ In fact, Soggin states in part that: "...We do not have any evidence affirming that the region was once fertile and densely populated and then destroyed by the combination of earthquakes and volcanic explosions."⁴ Others have declared the story as a myth without historical validity. For example Miller and Hayes think that:

*[T]he Sodom and Gomorrah story reflects yet another motif pattern known from extra-biblical literature, that of divine beings who visit a city to test the hospitality of its people and eventually destroy the inhospitality. One can compare in this regard the Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon. The presence of such traditional motifs in the biblical narratives raises the possibility that at least some of these narratives are purely products of the storyteller's art, which of course raises serious questions about their usefulness for historical reconstruction.*⁵

Archaeologists are equally muddled in their never-ending works and arguments over the remains of these ancient cities. Different archaeologists have named different sites as the biblical "Sodom and Gomorrah."⁶

Though, in scientific terms, Sodom and Gomorrah may be a myth or a reality that is buried in unexcavatable rubbles of ancient civilisation, the two ancient cities live in the Hebrew Bible,⁷ but as fragmented bodies. Sodom and Gomorrah are killed off as condemned cities. Their bodies are fragmented, and what is preserved of them are mutilated details—only enough to be useful for the ideological embellishment of the writer.

² J. Alberto Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah* (Brescia: SCM Press, 1993), 100.

³ Albert J. Hoerth, *Archeology and the Old Testament* (Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 98.

⁴ Soggin, 10.

⁵ J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 60.

⁶ See; W. F. Albright, "The Historical Background of Genesis XIV," *Journal of the Society of Oriental Research* 10, no. (1926): 231-269.; W. E. Rast and R. T. Schaub, "Survey of the Southeastern Plain of the Dead Sea," *ADAJ* 19, no. (1974): 175-185.

⁷ At least in one extra-biblical document called Ebla tablets. The Ebla documents are dated to 3rd millennium BCE and were written in a language similar to Paleo-Hebrew. See; Keith N. Schoville, *Biblical Archaeology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 242-246. Sodom and Gomorrah are also attested in ancient histories of Strabo, Josephus and Tacitus. See; D. N. Freedman, G. E. Wright, and E. F. Campbell, *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* (Anchor Books, 1961), 46, 64-67. Though Abraham is not associated with Ebla but Haran, the later was in the vicinity of the former, and it is argued that the civilisation of Ebla significantly influence the Hebrew culture. See Peter C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 96. Sodom and Gomorrah are also attested in ancient histories

Genesis 19 in the ideological context of the Hebrew Bible

My study of Genesis 19 is anchored on the basic assumption that the Hebrew Bible is an ideological text. The Sodom and Gomorrah texts serve a certain ideological purpose in the context of Genesis. The writers composed these texts for the consumption of their customers in a certain ideological environment. Like any other digests, the stories are customised or configured to suit this ideological purpose. The characters in the story are configured or disfigured in relation to the ideological values of the writer and his or her audience. The embroidery given to the characters in the texts by the writers had to energize the ideological convictions. Inevitably, the writer presents ambiguities in some scenes, and the audience, who is guided by the ideology, interpret the scenes "correctly."⁸

The Bible writer, guided by the notion of divine choice has not concealed the tendency of "othering" nations and their people as evil—the people who do detestable things against the writer's God. The internal evidence in the text reveals that the story of Genesis was a purposefully retold story to explain certain realities: For instance Genesis 16:14 "...it is still there to day," 19:37 "...Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today," 19:38 "...Ben-Ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites of today," suggests that the texts are written from the perspective of a certain time frame of the writer. Thus, there are, inevitably, a lot of logical and factual flaws meant to justify and concretize a certain ideological world view.

Many of the modern readers unfortunately read the Bible as interested parties, and have always approved the ideology of the writer about other nations: they are evil nations that had to be eliminated in order to establish the holy nation. What the narrator approves is what is ideal and what he reprimands is what is wrong. The readers read with what David Clines calls "reading with the grain of the text" that advocates the *right to left* understanding of events.

Methodological considerations:

The methodology used in this article is textual analysis, using the paradigms of David Clines' *left to right*⁹ and what J. Cheryl Exum would probably call *defragmenting bodies*. Reading from *left to right* is an approach that directly confronts questions of value and validity. It is a reading by way of critique, which is using the standards and moral values that come into play when reading other literatures like newspapers, essays or novels. In reading any of these literatures, Clines observes, we get engaged as thinking, feeling and judging persons, asking

⁸ On ambiguities in art, see; Judith Farr Tormey; and Alan Tormey, "Arts and Ambiguity," *Leonardo* 16, no. 3 (1983): 183-187.

⁹ Clines in his reading of the Ten Commandments, invents a metaphor of reading them from *left to right*. In this metaphor, reading from *right to left* is adopting the ideology inscribed in the text. Literally, reading from *right to left* means falling in with the convention that Hebrew texts are read on that direction; it also signifies an acceptance of convention, and adopting the world of the text, the world and worldview of the author and the original intentions of the text. See: David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26.

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Comment [3]: What does this mean?

questions such as: Is this true? Is it the case? Can I accept it? Besides, I am reading chapter 19 together with other texts in Genesis that mention 'Sodom and Gomorrah.' Fragmented characters in the Hebrew Bible inevitably present ambiguous imageries, and as Exum opines, these fragments have not been taken in traditional biblical scholarship as fragments of the larger story but as the *story* in its gestalt.¹⁰

Genesis 13

This chapter introduces a dispute between Abra[ha]m and Lot over the grazing land. The dispute is resolved by the two parting ways, with Lot going to the Jordan plains, and Abra[ha]m living in Canaan. Sodom and Gomorrah are introduced as part of the well-watered land of Jordan—akin to the Garden of Eden or Egypt (Verse 10). However, the writer's attitude against Sodom is not esoteric: without mentioning any particular sin, the people of Sodom are ebonized as very wicked and sinning greatly against the LORD (Verse 13).

In Genesis 14

This chapter introduces a war scene in which Abra[ha]m also participates as a combatant—at least in an effort to liberate Lot. In this chapter, Sodom and Gomorrah are part of the five distinct kingdoms in the Jordan plains, which for 12 years have been subjected to foreign domination of Elam. But during the 13th year, these five kingdoms (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboyim, and Bela) rebelled against Elam. The rebellion resulted in the battle of Sidiim, in which Elam and her three allies (Shinar, Ellasar, and Goyim) militarily defeated the five Jordan Plain kingdoms. The battleground is described as full of tar pits in which some of the kings (fighters?) of Sodom and Gomorrah fell, while others escaped to the hills (verse 10). The war losses fell heavily on Sodom and Gomorrah and her allies in terms of goods and humans.

Verse 13 introduces an anonymous character—the informant who escapes from the valley of Sidiim battlefield. This character is constructed as one who knew Abra[ha]m and his relationship to Lot, and is driven to inform Abra[ha]m about the fate of Lot in the hands of the Elamites. In the turn of events, Elam and her allies—who had defeated the five Jordan states—are defeated by the heroic character—Abraham. Verse 15 intimates that Elam and her allies were decisively beaten and defeated. The victorious Abraham does not only liberate Lot but also the goods and people of Sodom—men and women.

Verses 17-24 present the victorious Abraham being approached by the defeated and humbled king of Sodom in the valley of Shevah. The victorious Abraham is also blessed by another character called Melchizedek¹¹, the King of Salem¹² and priest

¹⁰ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women : Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*(Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 9.

¹¹ The Hebrew מֶלְכִּי־צֶדֶק means 'my king is righteous'. a play on words

with these words, *“Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.”*¹³ The King of Sodom acknowledges that Abraham may keep the plunder of war, but asks him to release the people of Sodom.¹⁴

This chapter conceals Abraham’s territorial interests, and presents the character as one who fights to liberate his kinsman Lot. Abraham also has an ambivalent attitude towards Sodom. He does not show hostility or animosity, but he is not an ally. He is neither interested in the Sodomite’s wealth nor totally forbids it in his camp. In the name of his God, he does not want to be enriched with the wealth of Sodom. The story however ends without clarity regarding either the status of Elam in the Jordan kingdoms or the fate of “Sodom and Gomorrah” and her allies as sovereign states. Reading this story in relation to the general portrait of Abraham, the character is presented as a blessing to Sodom. Defeating the Elamites and returning the captives of war back to Sodom signifies restoration of the plain kingdoms.

Genesis 18

Chapters 15, 16 and 17 all end without the mention of Sodom and Gomorrah. These sections of Genesis are fully devoted to Abra[ha]m: his covenant with the divine, the birth of Ishmael and the circumcision covenant. However, chapter 18 introduces an important element in Abraham’s family: the arrival of the three angel-men with the good tidings of a son. Accordingly, Abra[ha]m is enchanted by the sight of the three men whom he welcomes into his family as guests.

Verses 1-15 do not entail much conversation between Abraham and the angel-men. However, this encounter accentuates two issues: hospitality and the idea of a son. Abraham is presented practicing the ancient traits of hospitality—giving the men water to wash their feet and serving them a great meal. The muted conversation ends with the promise of a son to Abraham, though the idea was laughable to Sarah—serving as the appropriate introduction to Isaac’s name¹⁵ later in Genesis 21.

Verses 16 to 33 reintroduce “Sodom and Gomorrah”: The angel-men intimate their plans to destroy Sodom. Verses 18 and 19 seem to relate that the angels’ action is in the interest of Abraham:

¹⁸Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children

¹² Salem, in Hebrew שֶׁלֶם is commonly associated with Jerusalem. In Psalms 76:2, it is associated with Zion, the place of the tabernacle and His dwelling place.

¹³ Elam is here presented as Abraham’s enemies.

¹⁴ The King of Sodom is portrayed to be rich and would care less if Abraham retained the goods captured from the Elamites.

¹⁵ Interestingly, the boy’s name קִיץ has a masculine 3rd person singular prefix to denote “he laughed or he will laugh.” Who laughed—Abraham or Sarah?

and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

Verse 19 intuitively interesting ideas: Abraham is chosen. He will direct his children to keep the way of the Lord—doing what is right and just. As a result, the Lord will fulfil what he has promised to Abraham. What is the way of the Lord (וְהָיָה דֶרֶךְ)? What does it mean to do right and live justly (צִדְקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט)? דֶרֶךְ in other texts like Deuteronomy 32:4 and Amos 8:14, the answer to these questions refers to certain designated behaviours, manners, customs or conduct. צִדְקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט. The choice of Abraham and his children to become a great nation is in itself “othering” other peoples as the rejects of the divine. The דֶרֶךְ יְהוָה (way of God), like righteousness and justice, denotes ethical conduct of this chosen community, and it is the yardstick by which judgement over Sodom is passed. “Sodom and Gomorrah,” in other words, are wicked because they don’t know the way of God and are devoid of justice and righteousness.

However, verse 20 presents the plan for destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as the response to an outcry (וְצַעֲקַת סֹדֶם וְעִמֹרָה) and the grave sin that is unmentioned. The language of this verse is similar to that of Exodus 3 and Judges 6:6-7 especially with the usage of the word צַעֲקָה (outcry), which appears in the context of victims of violence or oppression. Upon hearing the צַעֲקָה God would come down to intervene in agonising situations.¹⁶ Interestingly, whereas in Exodus and Judges the victims of violence are mentioned as children of Israel (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), in the Genesis context, Sodom and Gomorrah are the subjects of violence, and the victims who make the outcry are anonymous. Indeed, וְצַעֲקַת סֹדֶם וְעִמֹרָה like וְצַעֲקַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל should probably be translated the “outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah” rather than “the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah”¹⁷ as rendered in some English translations like the English Standard Version (ESV). This section of the text also presents Abraham as an arbiter for Sodom and Gomorrah, but the fate of these kingdoms is solely determined by the divine. It is also worth noting that the way events are arranged and sequenced in chapter 18 is not accidental: Arrival of angel-men and the commodious reception offered by Abraham, the promise of a son to Abraham and the revelation of the intention to destroy “Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Genesis 19

Verses 1-3 share the hospitality motifs with chapter 18. The angels arrive in Sodom in the evening. Incidentally, Lot is strategically situated at the gateway of the city of Sodom. Like Abraham, Lot is not presented interrogating the visitors. Rather, he acts

¹⁶ In some cases, the outcries are directed any other figure of authority as kings (see 2 Samuel 19:29 and Jeremiah 11:12).

¹⁷ The rendition in the LXX of this phrase suggests a plenary genitive noun that produces both subjective and objective notions. Sodom and Gomorrah are both subjects and objects of the outcry, which is overheard by God. This could suggest that there were both victims and culprits in Sodom and Gomorrah. See Wallace’s definition of plenary genitive in, Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basic: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 119-120.

hospitably to grant them a good reception. He bows down to the ground in humility, and implores the angels to spend a night in his home, where he provides them with water to wash their feet, and some food to eat. Lot is depicted as one who first saw the visitors, and thus took them to his home.¹⁸

Verse 4 presents a scene where ‘all the people’ (כָּל הָעָם) of Sodom ‘both young and old’ (וְעַד זָקֵן מִנוֹעַר) surround Lot’s home demanding to know the guests in Lot’s house. The verb יָדָעָה from root יָדַע (to know) is in cohortative mood,¹⁹ which expresses a wish, or a request for permission, that one should be allowed to do something. In the first person plural forms, as in this case, the cohortatives include a summons to others to help in doing something. The people of Sodom entreat Lot to help them to know the guests. The people of Sodom were determined and interested to know who the guests were.

In the Hebrew Bible, הָעָם may refer to the totality of the population or a distinct social group that always influences political events in ancient kingdoms (2 Kings). They intervened after assassination of Amon (21:23-24) and death of Josiah (23:30) to elevate a proper Davidide to the throne; (cf. too 14:21). It is also used to mean the army (Numbers 31:32, Joshua 10:7; 11:7, 1 Samuel 11:11, 1 Kings 20:10).²⁰ The construction זָקֵן וְעַד מִנוֹעַר denotes the entire population of Sodom, both young and old, men and women (נוֹעַר [young] in relation to Genesis 24:14 includes both sexes). Verses 6-9 present a twist in the play: with ambiguities surrounding the usage of יָדָעָה, the section is often given a sexual nuance. This is in correlation with incidences like: Genesis 4:1 and 1 Kings 1:4 where יָדַע has sexual meaning. יָדַע is a verb used for ‘having sex’ especially man with a woman. But interestingly, there are no parallel texts in the Hebrew Bible that attest that homosexuality is rendered with verb יָדַע.²¹ Illicit sexual practices in the rest of the Pentateuch are associated with different verbs like שָׁכַב (see Leviticus 18 and 20, also Exodus 22:15).

The root יָדַע denotes one basic aspect—to know or have knowledge of something or somebody you didn’t know before. The Hebrew lexicon of Brown, Driver and Briggs, as well as Strong’s lexicon attach other meanings to this basic aspect. These include: perceive, find out and discern, distinguish, experience, recognise, have knowledge, be wise and others. In Genesis 29:5 and Exodus 1:8, this root is used in the context of having knowledge of, or forming acquaintances with somebody. Reading יָדַע in this respect is logical to me, given that the people of Sodom had good reasons to know the identities of the people who have visited their territory.

¹⁸ The rest of the people then saw watched from a distance and saw Lot with the visitors going to his house.

¹⁹ For the functions of cohortatives, see; Wilhelm Gesenius, E. Kautzsch, and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2d English ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 319-321. § 108. Accordingly, this mood stresses the determination underlying the actions of the people of Sodom, and their personal interests in their actions.

²⁰ Kuloba Wabyanga Robert, "Athaliah of Judah (2 Kings 11): A Political Anomaly or an Ideological Victim?," in *Looking through a Glass Bible: Postdisciplinary Biblical Interpretations from the Glasgow School*, ed. A.K.M Adam and Samuel Tongue (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 142.

²¹ I read the story of the Levite in Judges 19 in the same way as Genesis 19.

Lot does not want the Sodomites to know his visitors. The scene is sexualized when Lot requests that the Sodomites know his daughters instead. The daughters are presented as having not known any man (לֹא יָדְעוּ אִישׁ) before. It is also difficult to understand why Lot would offer his daughters to the men of Sodom if he understood them as homosexuals. It would have been sensible if Lot offered himself or his sons if there were any, since as Brawley argues of ancient Near Eastern hospitality, “protection of strangers in one’s house took precedence over the love of one’s children.”²²

Conclusions

The question still remains: What is the sin of “Sodom and Gomorrah”? The case for homosexuality in the ancient Near East has already been challenged by James Neill who observes that homosexuality was commonly practiced in the region at that time, and that pre-exilic Israel was not hostile to homosexual practices. That hostility to homosexual practices is the invention of the second temple period when Israelites returned from Babylon.²³ He further argues that pre-exilic Israelites participated in Canaanite ritual practices that included numerous sexual rituals—homosexuality inclusive.²⁴ This would seem to support the contention that Genesis 19 is a story retold from the writer’s time and socio-ideological point of view. However, Neill is bent to the argument that Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed due to their inhospitality to the strangers. This view, in my opinion, is similar to the view that the cities were destroyed due to homosexual practices in that they both emerge from the ideological point of view of the writer. Both views equally criminalize Sodom and Gomorrah using the ethical standards of the writer. To uphold this notion is to silence “Sodom and Gomorrah.” It is to assume that a terrible event was retribution for a terrible sin, without having real knowledge of that sin.

“Sodom and Gomorrah” is still a dismembered whole in the Book of Genesis. Many of the essential components are missing, and we are faced with the ambiguous piece of literary art. However, from what has been gleaned from the textual fields of Genesis, we speak of Sodom and Gomorrah as distinct kingdoms, naturally gifted with water and fertile soils. They were wealthy as attested in chapter 14. The location of Sodom and Gomorrah attracted the attention of foreigners like Lot who went to live there, and others like Abraham, apparently as distant admirers. The region was also a political hotspot: The King of Elam had subjected the region to vassalage, apparently collecting tributes from the five kingdoms of the Jordan plains. Following the rebellion, Elam with her allies waged a fierce war against the Jordan States in the valley of Sidiim.

²² Robert L. Brawley, *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 21.

²³ James Neill, *The Origin and Role of Same-Sex Relations in Human Societies* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009), 94.

²⁴ Ibid., 95-97, 100.

If the sovereignty of Sodom and her allies was secured, thanks to the agency of Abraham, the region must have remained anxious and conscious about their political and territorial future. It was the obligation of all the people of Sodom—every man and woman, young and old to be alert of any potential political threat, including the strangers. The angels that visited Sodom are strangers. They did not introduce themselves to the people or the authorities in the city. Their arrival aroused suspicion, and more so, being in the house of another foreigner—Lot. Reading this story alongside Joshua 2 (see also Numbers 13), we are confronted with the motif of spies in the ancient military and political intelligence organizations.²⁵ It is logical to state that, the people of Sodom, conscious of their political and military vulnerability, would demand to know the identities of the visitors in their territory. The writer of Genesis may have found currency in these people's attitudes toward foreigners as he or she constructed portraits of Abraham and Lot that were flattering by contrast. Worth noting is that Abraham and Lot had no particular political and territorial interests to protect.

I opine that Sodom and Gomorrah is a political and military story that is purposefully crafted and retold from the ideological point of view of the writer. The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis²⁶ are distorted and corrupted to serve the role of masking the characters with ambiguities. The added detail of “so that we may know them” (וְדָעוּ אֵתָם) is as such assumed to be the sin or wickedness of Sodom. It is the strong view of this paper that the desire of the people of “Sodom and Gomorrah” was to know the strangers in this political hotspot. The action of Sodom was that of defending the political and territorial integrity. This does not however neglect that possibility of sex—and more so homosexual rape. Sexual violence against men was part of the weaponry in armed conflicts of the ancient world. Militaries of ancient states like Persia, Egypt, and Amalekites²⁷ sexually raped their military enemies as a way of humiliating them. It is worth noting that to argue that “Sodom and Gomorrah” were punished for lacking hospitality overlooks the reception Sodom gave to strangers like Lot and his family. Because Lot and his family did not show any military and political threat, they are welcomed to live in Sodom. The visitors, however, may have been perceived as threatening.

The absence of extra-biblical accounts about the reasons for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah subject the afterlife of these kingdoms to the ideological bias of the Bible writer. Though recent archaeological findings have found ash and burnt materials in the sites that are thought to be “Sodom and Gomorrah,” these burnt materials can be associated with war, as indeed ancient militaries practiced scorched earth policies. In neo-Assyrian materials, Tukulti-Ninrta II (890-844) in his

²⁵ See also; Peter Dubovsky, *Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and Its Significance for 2 Kings 18-19* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 2006).

²⁶ Ezekiel names the sins of Sodom as pride, plenty, thoughtless ease fullness and neglecting the poor.

²⁷ Sandesh Sivakumaran, "Sexual Violence against Men in Armed Conflicts," *The European Journal of International Law* 18, no. 2 (2007): 257-8.

attack against the land of Mushki boasts of burning down cities with fire and crops of the field.²⁸ If any rival state like Elam returned to torch down Sodom and Gomorrah, it would have burned easily given the combustible materials in the vicinities of the Dead Sea. But throughout history, the flames in the burning of Sodom are inevitably thought to be from the finger of the God of Israel.

²⁸ Michael G. Hasel, "Assyrian Military Practices and Deuteronomy's Laws of Warfare," in *Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E Kelle; and Frank Rietel Ames (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 71.

PART THREE: Bible Studies

A Bible Challenge and Study of Genesis 1-2 By Tobias Stanislas Haller. BSG

This exercise begins with a challenge.

Before opening the Bible, jot down on paper the key events of the creation account as you remember them. This may be done alone, or in a group; if the latter, it might be a good learning experience to make your own notes individually and then compare them with what others recall.

After you have your final notes, read the first two chapters of Genesis, and then reflect on how the text compares with your unaided effort at reconstructing it from memory. Note in particular:

- Anything you left out
- Anything you added
- Any differences in sequences of events

For the second part of this exercise, re-read Genesis 2:4-25.

After reading the text carefully, reflect on the following questions

- What sorts of discoveries take place in this account? By whom and with what results?
- What was the reason for creating the animals, and what was the result?
- What is the primary difference between the animals and the woman, in terms of origin, and Adam's reaction?
- A favorite hymn declares, "For force is not of God." How does God relate to the man in this text? In what respects does God give instruction, and in what respect does God react to the human condition, situation, and context?
- Why are Adam and Eve not ashamed of their nakedness? What does nakedness mean?
- How does this text inform your own relation to God in terms of your relationship with the world—natural, animal, and human?

Women's Sexual Vulnerability: Reading Genesis 39

By Dora Mbuwayesango

The story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 39 is one of many stories in the Hebrew Bible that details the difficulties surmounted in leading to the birth of a male heir. It is significant to note that no biblical narrative makes reference to a man's impotence or sterility as the cause of childlessness. The major obstacles to the birth of a male heir are the wife's barrenness and the premature death (or unavailability) of a husband. Also, it is important to note here that a woman could be characterized as barren if she has only given birth to daughters because she would not have provided a male heir to carry on her husband's patrilineage. In the case of barrenness, God intervenes and resolves the problem of the disrupted patrilineage by finally making it possible for the once barren women to conceive and bear a son(s) for her husband (Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel). In cases in which a husband is unavailable, the women (Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth) work to secure a legitimate man to reestablish the disrupted patrilineage.

Er, who is Tamar's husband and Judah's firstborn son, died without an heir because God put him to death for his wickedness (verse 7). The patrilineage of even a wicked man should not be disrupted, so Judah orders his second son, Onan, to "raise up seed" for his brother by performing "the duty of a brother-in-law" for Tamar (verse 8). Judah ordered Onan to have intercourse with his deceased brother's widow in order to reestablish his brother's patrilineage. Onan, however, saw the disadvantage in aiding the reestablishment of his dead brother's patrilineage, and instead of acting as a sperm donor, Onan spilled his sperm on the ground while having intercourse with Tamar (verse 9). This act of Onan displeased God who puts Onan to death (verse 7). Judah is now left with only one of the three sons his Canaanite wife, Shua, had produced for him.

With three sons, Judah's patrilineage should have been secure, but now he is left with only one son, Shela. Instead of passing on Tamar to Shela, Judah sent her back to her father's house to "remain a widow" until Shela was old enough to take a wife. Judah wanted Tamar to remain obligated to his family to provide an heir, even though he had no intention of marrying her to Shela—for *he feared that he [Shela] too would die, like his brothers (verse 11)*. Tamar as a widow obligated to Judah's family was to be celibate while waiting for Shela to grow up!

The double standard in patriarchy concerning male and female sexuality is reflected clearly in Judah's dealings with Tamar after Shua's death. A widower has a specified period for mourning after which he can resume his normal activities (verse 12), including sex with prostitutes. After this period had passed, Tamar learned that her father-in-law would be passing through her village. Determined to trick him, Tamar took off her widow's garments, which signaled to other men that she was

unavailable for sex, and put on different clothes. She sat by the roadside, where her father-in-law, who had not fulfilled his promise to give her to Shela when the boy was fully grown, would see her (verse 13-14). When Judah saw Tamar out of her widow's garments, he thought she was a prostitute whom he could freely proposition for sex (verses 15-16). Judah was willing to pay with a kid from his flock that he would send later. Tamar demanded surety and Judah was happy to surrender to her his signet, cord and staff—identity markers. Note that through the extensive conversation, Judah did not even recognize his daughter-in-law's voice. Judah has sex with his daughter-in-law (taboo), which he would not knowingly do, and the sex results in conception.

Tamar returned to her status as a widow and Judah tried to send back the fee he had arranged to pay her, however the friend he sent on this errand cannot locate Tamar. Judah decides to let Tamar keep his identity markers because searching for her would have made him a laughing stock for having sex with a woman he could not identify, and demanding his identity markers back would have made it appear that he could not afford to pay for sex with a prostitute. He was an honorable man who paid for what he owed, even to prostitutes.

Three months later, Judah heard that the daughter-in-law whom he had no intention of giving to his only remaining son had committed adultery and was now pregnant. Judah's reaction brings out another double standard in patriarchy about the sexuality of men and women. Judah wanted Tamar to be burned (death penalty, verse 24); however, he changed his mind when Tamar produced the identity markers for the man who was responsible for her pregnancy (verse 25): "Then Judah recognized and said, 'She is more righteous than I, for I did not give her to Shela my son.' And he did not lie with her again" (verse 26). Judah admitted his guilt while at the same time exonerating Tamar's actions. Tamar behaved the way she did because she had no other way to continue Judah's line (verse 14, 26). The reference to Shela throughout the chapter serves to underscore this point. Tamar is forced to take risks that were unnecessary and dangerous because of Judah's demands and deception.

The story concludes with the notice of the birth of twin boys and their naming—Perez and Zerah. But notice that Judah is not depicted naming the children which leaves an ambiguity to whose patrilineage is reestablished. Is it Er's or Judah's? The story helps us to interrogate views of sexuality that are oppressive and that make other people vulnerable in society today.

Questions for Discussion

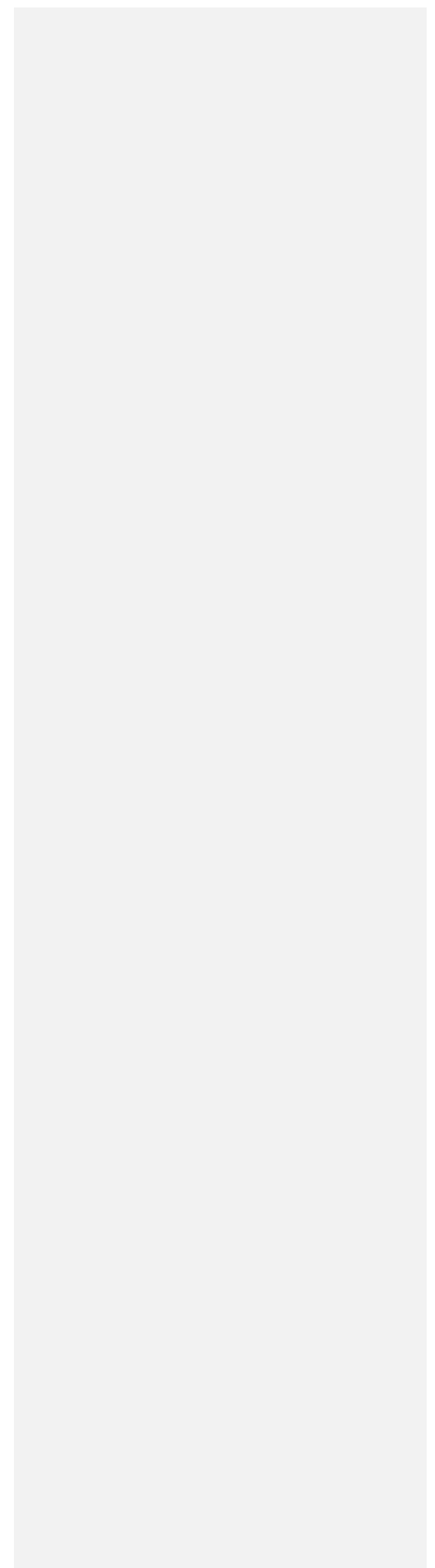
Which of the characters do you identify with and why?

Is deception ever acceptable behavior? If so, in what circumstances?

How does your view of sexuality make other people vulnerable?

Jim Naughton 9/7/2015 1:35 PM
Comment [4]: Yes?

Have you ever had to change your mind in situations you thought you were right? What made you change your mind and what was the result?



Judges 19: 1-30: Sexual Violence worse than Sodom

By Masiwa Ragies Gunda

Judges 19 tells the story of a man, a Levite, who is unnamed, who came from the "remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim" (verse 1) who, as was the custom then, took a "concubine from Bethlehem" (verse 1). Frequently, the fact that the woman is called a concubine distracts us from pursuing the story fully because we are horrified by our categorization of concubines socially. What is important is that in ancient Israel a concubine was essentially an accepted part of marriage practices, hence the practice was not stigmatized in the way it is now. Having identified the two main characters in the narrative, the story tells us that their relationship, like many, had its ups and downs. Hence, having quarrelled over some subject, which we are not told, the woman left the man and returned to her father in Bethlehem (verse 2). After some four months, whatever had transpired had subsided and the man decided to go and reclaim his concubine, so he journeyed to Bethlehem accompanied by his servant. His mission was "to speak tenderly to her and bring her back."

In Judah, the woman's father received the Levite with joy and instead of questioning him on the problems that had led his daughter to return home, the father decided to offer the man hospitality. For three days "they ate and drank" (verse 4). The best way of welcoming strangers and sojourners was by providing them with shelter and food. On the fourth day, the man from Ephraim wanted to leave, but the father, in a show of friendliness, offered him more food, and as they lingered, he sweet-talked the man into spending another night. On the fifth day, the father again tried to sweet-talk the man into abandoning his journey for that day but the man finally decided to leave.

The sun was setting by the time the Levite, his concubine and his servant arrived near Jebus (later Jerusalem), which was not yet an Israelite town. The servant of the Levite suggested to the master, "Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it" (verse 11). The servant not wanting to risk being attacked by wild animals and robbers in the dark of the night opted to trust fellow human beings. The master, however, understood human beings differently. His response was: "We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah" (verse 12). The man from Ephraim does not trust foreigners or strangers; he does not think the foreigners will respect him and be hospitable to him, his concubine and his servant. He is prepared to take the risk that comes with trying to reach a town of Israelites.. The man relies on convention to classify people as hospitable and inhospitable. The traditions of the Israelites were replete with stereotypes under which foreigners were almost always looked upon with mistrust. This is evident in Abraham's travels in Egypt (Genesis 12: 11-16) and Gerar (Genesis. 20:1-7). In both cases Abraham says that Sarah, his wife, is actually his sister, and offers her to a powerful man to secure protection. Suspicion of foreigners is also evident in Isaac's travels in Gerar (Genesis. 26:7-10) and, of course, in the story of Sodom (Genesis 19.) Certain that

seeking hospitality from foreigners was risky, the man urges his concubine and servant to walk on to an Israelite town (verse 13).

Fortunately (the Levite would have thought), the sun went down on them when they were near Gibeah, an Israelite town belonging to the tribe of Benjamin. The three of them "went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night" (verse 15). It would appear that under regional custom, sojourners and strangers would report to the town square where locals would identify them. It also appears that once in this square, strangers expected to be invited into someone's home. The Levite from Ephraim, being an Israelite, almost expected to be invited into someone's home, but it appears that his party sat there for some time without anyone taking them in. The town square was a public space in a very visible part of the town where public events would be hosted but also where strangers exposed themselves hoping to be assisted. But it was also a place that strangers considered to be safe enough to spend the night, knowing there were people all around them. The local men and women of Gibeah continued to ignore the Levite until a resident of Gibeah, who was not a resident, arrived from his day's work in the fields.

"Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah" (The people of the place were Benjaminites) (verse 16). The theme of a foreigner who comes to the rescue of another foreigner is also present in the Sodom narrative. Having avoided foreigners in Jebus, the man from Ephraim is now being hosted by a "foreigner" in an Israelite town. This foreigner from Ephraim invites the sojourner and his companions to his house. The sojourner resists in the same way the "strangers in Sodom resisted" and the foreigner-host persuades them the same way Lot persuaded the angels, by advising against sleeping in the square (v. 20). Does the foreigner-resident know something about the square? Has the square lost its previous significance and assumed a new role and function

The resident-alien eventually convinces the sojourner and his companions to join him in his house where he "fed the donkeys; they washed their feet, and ate and drank" (verse 21). The actions of this resident-alien clearly reminds us of the hosting of the sojourner by his father-in-law in Bethlehem. It would appear there was a belief that a stranger or sojourner would never finish your food reserves hence such people could be showered with hospitality.

While the host and his guests are eating, the locals make their way towards the house of the resident-alien. The local men, who are not foreigners but Israelites, are described as "a perverse lot." They approach the house and asked the host to bring out "the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him" (verse 22). Here the word translated as "intercourse" is the same word translated as "know" in Genesis 19, the Sodom narrative. In a patriarchal society this demand was doubly wicked because, while raping a woman was considered detestable, making a man into a woman was considered much worse. Men were supposed to penetrate and not to be penetrated.

Realizing what was about to happen, the resident-alien tried to negotiate with the local men who refused. Like Lot in Genesis, he even offers a virgin daughter as well as the concubine of the sojourner with the blank check: "let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing" (verse 24). The men initially appear set on taking the man and humiliating him, and as the threats grew, the sojourner "seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning" (verse 25). The violence that is expressed in these few verses is enough to make a reader want to vomit, and what is even more disturbing is how a patriarchal society has seen fit to sacrifice the dignity of a woman in order to protect that of a man. Yet it is worth noting that latter day moralists who have built a system of repressive laws on the attempted homosexual rape of the divine messengers in Sodom (Genesis 19) have not seized up the heterosexual gang rape of this woman as evidence that all heterosexual males are depraved.

The result of the all-night orgy at Gibeah was the death of the concubine, killed by the amount of abuse she suffered at the hands of Israelite men. The sojourner takes the corpse of his concubine with him back to Ephraim where he dismembered her body and sent body parts to all tribes of Israel, which then waged a war against Benjamin to avenge the murdered woman. This sad story raises various fundamental questions that are essential as we ask God to give us direction in our quest to understand and appreciate our LGBTI brothers and sisters.

Questions for Discussion

Who are the victims in this story?

How does the society in the story make some people vulnerable and easy prey?

Who are victims in our society and how does our society create situations that make some people easy prey?

How does this story challenge the dominant readings of Genesis 19 in our Church and society?

What lessons do we get from this story about human sexuality and its ethic?

Isaiah 65: 17-25: Envisioning a new Community

By Esther Mombo

The book of Isaiah is a collection of oracles from the school of Isaiah of by his disciples. Chapters 56-66 are known as III Isaiah and reflects the situation after the Exile, probably from 538 BCE. Its style and thoughts are continued from the tradition of the first Isaiah. When these chapters of Isaiah were written, the Temple had been reconstructed, the sacrificial system was renewed, and the priestly cult was firmly established. But these chapters reflect disappointment and disillusionment, because the glorious restoration and the answering faithfulness of the people foretold by the second Isaiah and other prophets had not materialized. Hence in this chapter some passages threaten judgment upon those who do not repent, other passages exalt Jerusalem and restored community. The prophet inspires a lofty vision for the people of God, so that they may return to be faithful to the covenant relationship.

Read Isaiah 65:17-25

1. What is this text about?
2. What are the features of the new community envisioned in this text?
3. By What means will a New Heaven and New Earth be created?

The passage speaks about the life of the new community that God will usher in. It will be a time of joy and peace. The Hebrew word for shalom is used to refer to wholeness, wellbeing, security, prosperity, justice and righteousness with God as its source. The state of wellbeing is also relational. Jesus too proclaimed the reign of God where each one found a wholeness and fullness in life, individually and collectively.

1. Is there need to envision a new community in our context?
2. In what ways has our society hindered people to experience fullness of life individually or collectively?

The Israelites strongly believed that they would realize the promise of God in their lifetime here on earth. But in the Christian tradition, the text has been interpreted in a way that has led to an otherworldly religion, or rather, a shallow spirituality, where the promise of new heaven and new earth remain solely as a futuristic vision. But God's presence is here with us now, and envisioning relates to hope for the present as well as for the future. This envisioning should strengthen us in our struggle for a transformed society and in such a mission each one of us is a participant and there are no spectators.

1. In the light of what we have been discussing in in this conference, how does one create a new community?
2. What resources do we have in creating a new community?
3. Share one thing you plan to do in creating a new community

Joseph –A Different kind of Father: Studying Matthew 1:18-24 and 2:13-24

By Douglas Torr

The scriptures are mostly silent about the childhood of Jesus. Mark and John don't bother to mention it at all. Where there are accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, they are told from the perspective of the faith of the early church. They are told in order to show that Jesus is the Savior, that he is the one the scriptures foretold, and that he is greater than Moses the liberator, the prophets of the Exodus, and even King David. They are written to emphasize that he is both God and one of us.

Despite the fact that these are not historical events, there are elements of history involved. This is certainly the case with Joseph, father of Jesus. Matthew and Luke both mention him, but it is Matthew who gives him a greater role. We need to look at what Matthew's picture of Joseph may have to say to us as the LGBTI community.

In many ways, Joseph is a very marginal character. Despite this, he enabled the ministry of Jesus to happen. Through him Jesus was able "to save his people from their sins." Sins here could refer to freedom from oppression, exile, and foreign domination, as well as separation from God. In the same way that Joseph enabled liberation and healing to take place for Israel, so LGBTI communities—marginalized by societies, the law, and even by the church—are still able to help liberation to happen for members of their community and the very society that seeks to oppress, exile or dominate them, by being faithful followers and disciples of Jesus. We help ministry to happen. Joseph is therefore someone we should bring back from the margins and see what he can offer to us in our context in Africa today.

Like the Old Testament Joseph (Genesis 37-50), the Joseph of the New Testament is given dreams. These dreams (Matthew 1:20-23, 2:13, 2:19-20) were given to help him take on the role of being a father to Jesus who was not his child, to take the baby and his mother Mary into exile to Egypt so they would not be killed, and then to resettle them in Israel when it was safe to do so. As in the Old Testament story, Joseph was instrumental in saving and providing for his family in Egypt. So too, in Matthew's story, Joseph the father of Jesus saves his family and provides for the boy Jesus, probably even teaching him how to make a living. We too need to seek dreams from God so that we can be faithful in our discipleship.

Joseph becomes a model for the church of what it means to listen to God even when God calls him to work against the role a patriarchal society expected of him. Joseph did not obey the teaching of Deuteronomy 22:20-21 by having Mary stoned when he learned that she was pregnant and knew that he was not the father. Instead, he listens to the message of God and becomes the father of a bastard, being prepared to endure all the stigma of what this meant in the society of his time.

Joseph, as an earthly father, modelled for Jesus and the church what it means to be a man who takes women and children seriously. When Joseph heard Mary was pregnant he was not only just but also compassionate and he sought to secretly

break the engagement so as not to humiliate Mary publicly. He was prepared to risk his own life in order to secure the safety of Mary and the child whom he had adopted as his own. Joseph is the counter to all the bad models of fathering, such as fathers who are absent, who overwork, who are violent, who are abusive, who are addicts or emotionally unavailable, and Rohr suggests we need such a model to heal from male “woundedness.” How can we in the LGBTI community in Africa be the Josephs who hold others, care for them, protect them, love them, advocate for them, so that they too may experience the inclusive and all-embracing love of God?

After reading the texts, ask yourself these questions

1. What is the role of Joseph for the LGBTI community in Africa today?
2. How is Joseph’s family different from other families of his time?
3. What are some of the different kinds of families you experience in your community and society? What are the alternative ways of being family in Africa?
4. How might Joseph’s response to the angel in Matthew 1 give hope and courage to parents whose child’s orientation is different from the dominant heterosexual pattern in the society?
5. How does Joseph’s attitude towards Mary challenge us to be advocates for the rights of women and children in patriarchal society today?
6. Joseph sought to provide safety for his family. How can we as members of Christian communities help our churches be places of safety, healing and refuge for those whose lives are in danger owing to homophobia within society?

Matthew 3:13-17: Starting Near the Beginning—The Baptism of Jesus”

By Fredrica Harris Thompsett

I recently journeyed to Ghana with questions, not with answers. I approach the study of Scripture in a similar way. “Asking questions,” my biblical mentor the African American educator and theologian Verna Dozier was fond of saying, “is our Lord’s favorite way of teaching.” Asking questions grounded in participants’ various contexts is key in building relationships. I have found this to be true both as longtime seminary professor and more recently in the global contexts convened for the Elmina Consultation held in Ghana. This Bible study is organized simply around three sets of direct questions: SEE, JUDGE (or discern), and ACT. Action in response to the text below, it seems to me, is essential and not optional. As it did in Ghana, this text summons me to attend to the full humanity of persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI).

So why have I chosen a text telling of the Baptism of our Lord? As a child, growing up in Michigan’s “Water Wonderland,” I was attracted to this story both by the agency of water, and especially by the word, “beloved.” As an eleven year-old child baptized with my twin brother, I can still hear echoes of the voice of our Rector, Robert DeWitt, naming us as “well beloved children.” What a notion! That touched my pre-teen heart. Much later in my theological journey, I was and am still drawn to Verna Dozier’s robust voice envisioning Jesus’ baptism as grounded and signaling the start of his ministry in Galilee. Whatever else you may discover as you follow the process noted below, I believe that the tremendous power of baptism will become evident right from the start.

Here is the text for this Bible Study: Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

SEE: a) *Ask one person to read Matthew 3:13-17 aloud;*
b) *If another person is using a different translation, ask that person to read.*

- 1) What is happening in this text?
- 2) What images catch your attention?
- 3) What do you see as important in this text, and its context?

JUDGE: *Read again Matthew 3:13-17*

What does this passage say about power and about relationships?
Is a sense of identity is being conferred, if so why?
In your own context what are baptismal practices?
Does this text help you think about your ministry?
Does this text help you reflect on who is included and who excluded?
Who are the persons today that you identify as divine messengers?

ACT : *Read again Matthew 3:13-17*

What stories about baptism are important to retell in your context?
What actions help you bring this passage to life in your community?
What do you believe God is calling you to do in response to this text?

Luke 5: 17-26: Healing a Man, Healing a Community

By Dion Johnson

Luke 5:17-26 (*Common English Bible*)

One day when Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and legal experts were sitting nearby. They had come from every village in Galilee and Judea, and from Jerusalem. Now the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal. ¹⁸ Some men were bringing a man who was paralyzed, lying on a cot. They wanted to carry him in and place him before Jesus, ¹⁹ but they couldn't reach him because of the crowd. So they took him up on the roof and lowered him—cot and all—through the roof tiles into the crowded room in front of Jesus. ²⁰ When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." ²¹ The legal experts and Pharisees began to mutter among themselves, "Who is this who insults God? Only God can forgive sins!" ²² Jesus recognized what they were discussing and responded, "Why do you fill your minds with these questions? ²³ Which is easier—to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? ²⁴ But so that you will know that the Human One has authority on the earth to forgive sins" —Jesus now spoke to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, get up, take your cot, and go home." ²⁵ Right away, the man stood before them, picked up his cot, and went home, praising God. ²⁶ All the people were beside themselves with wonder. Filled with awe, they glorified God, saying, "We've seen unimaginable things today."

Introduction

I have often wondered if this story of Jesus' healing was not mislabeled. In reading this story from Luke it would be easy to focus on the paralyzed man who was healed by Jesus, or on those who object to Jesus' ability to forgive sin, but the story goes far beyond a simple healing and a rebuke to those who are "keepers of the law."

Luke paints for us a picture of Jesus teaching a gathering of religious teachers and lawyers, some of whom had travelled a great distance to hear him speak. But the story quickly turns from Jesus' ministry of individual healing to the healing of an entire community. I would like to suggest that the friends of the man who was paralyzed have no idea what it means to be different, to be in the position of one in need of both companionship and assistance. They can never know fully what it means to be paralyzed, yet they were willing to offer their friend a chance to be made whole. The friends of the paralytic risked not only their own lives, but the lives of those in the house to ensure that one of their own was not without.

Jesus, following the thinking of the time, that illness and disease were the results of sin, either by the man or his parents, forgives his sin. But this episode causes scorn and ridicule from the keepers of the law who say that only God has the power to forgive sins.

In this story, the interactions among the man, the Pharisee and those in attendance demonstrate that not only is the man healed, but the community is "filled with wonder." The man is made whole, but in helping to make the man whole, the

community is made whole as well. Jesus in this interaction teaches, forgives, defends and sends the entire community out into the world. We are called to do the same.

Reflection Questions

What do you hear in this passage?

Who are you in this story? Why do you identify with that character?

How do we live out communal change in our own communities?

Are we able to see the friends of the paralytic as "suffering" with him?

How do we fill our minds with questions and neglect showing mercy or forgiveness in our own lives? In our communities?

Luke 9:28-36 Being Transfigured
By Cameron Partridge

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' 36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

The Transfiguration is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. Long before I had studied its different iterations and its history of theological interpretation, it spoke to me year by year as I successively encountered its three versions on the last Sunday after the Epiphany—Transfiguration Sunday as we celebrate it in The Episcopal Church. I loved how its placement at the end of Epiphany links back to the Baptism of Jesus at the season's start (particularly through the divine voice: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!").

Over time I began to look forward to encountering the story twice in the church year with its feast on August 6 falling amidst the season of Pentecost. I had also seen its iconic depictions with Jesus standing on Tabor's mountainous crown, flanked by Moses and Elijah, with Peter, James and John strewn below. Through these various forms of encounter, the story struck me as so strange and mysterious, so oddly uneventful, that it seemed to point beyond itself. I wondered what deeper meanings the Christian concept of transfiguration might carry, how that idea might extend beyond what happened to Jesus himself, how it might have deeper ramifications for the life of spiritual growth launched at our baptism.

And so I started praying with the story, that it might somehow illumine the particular terrain of my life as an Episcopal priest, theologian, husband and dad, and transgender man in the midst of the intense, swirling conversations in the wider Anglican Communion regarding sexuality and gender. I started reading it as a prism through which the light of Christ can shine into all of these contexts. Pulling apart the English word trans-figuration, I prayed that the illumination of Jesus on Mount Tabor might somehow figure and form me across the barriers of my imagination, to the places in which God is continually calling me to move, dwell and grow. I began to intuit –through the pairing of readings on Transfiguration Sunday in Year C and later through deeper reading in Greek patristic texts – that the idea of

transfiguration might be bound up with Paul's declaration that "all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18).

Although the Matthean version may be the most frequently cited in the theological interpretation of the Transfiguration, I choose to dwell here on Luke's iteration. First, it comes up in worship the most frequently: it is always the gospel for the Feast of the Transfiguration, and since it is also the gospel in Year C it comes up twice in that cycle. Second, and more importantly, over time the Lukan Transfiguration narrative has invited me to perceive and embrace the paschal mystery in new ways. I seek here to highlight and open up that invitation.

As I began to study the texts more closely, I noticed that of the three synoptic versions of this story, only Luke mentions that the time that had elapsed "after these sayings" was eight days. I learned that to some early Christian readers, the reference to eight days signaled new creation, the age of the resurrection.²⁹ To say that this mountaintop event took place "about eight days" after Jesus' previous comments is to suggest that the event itself partook of such newness of life. These "sayings" that mark this eight-day interval were 1) the first of Jesus' three passion predictions in Luke (9:44 and 18:31-33 being the second and third); 2) his statement that those who would follow him would need to take up their cross and to lose their life in order to gain it; and 3) that some of his interlocutors would "not taste death before they [saw] the kingdom of God" (9:27).

In this context the Transfiguration emerges as an important sign of that kingdom. Gazing upon it, we might understand our senses as being mysteriously trained to perceive, to name, to participate in the paschal mystery – in the renewal of creation itself — even before we taste death. This training of a kind of paschal perception suggests that "the Metamorphosis" (as Eastern Christian tradition often terms it) is not only an event in the life of Christ but a catalytic process, a mode of vision that links our internal spiritual growth with our action in the world, our call to participate in every facet of our being with God's call to metamorphose that world.

Intriguingly, while Matthew and Mark use the verb μεταμορφώθη (from which metamorphosis derives) to describe what happens to Jesus, Luke does not use this verb – or any verb, actually. As in the other two versions (the Gospel of John does not tell this story), Luke places Jesus on a mountaintop with Peter, John and James. But then Luke uniquely folds the action into the context of prayer. As Jesus prayed, "the appearance (εἶδος) of his face [became] different (ἕτερον), and his clothes [became] dazzling white (λευκός ἐξαστράπτων)." The verb "to be" gets supplied by

²⁹ E.g. the Venerable Bede in *Postilla super Lucam in Opera omnia in universum Vetus et Novum Testamentum*, 8tt. (Lyons, 1645), t. 6, fol. 186va. Cited in Aaron Canty, *Light and Glory: The Transfiguration of Christ in Early Franciscan and Dominican Theology* (Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 42. The Epistle of Barnabas also interprets "the eighth day" as a day of celebration, when Jesus "arose out of death, appeared publicly, and ascended into the sky." *Barnabas* 15:8, 9.

inference. It is as if the process of transfiguration takes place outside of space and time, as if it is so wholly beyond comprehension that no verbs could properly articulate it. Our imaginations can only grasp at it. Similarly, while in Matthew's version Jesus' face shines (clearly evoking Moses on Mount Sinai), in Luke the clothing dazzles but the appearance of his face is simply *different*. Here again resurrection is threaded through this story. For in no gospel accounts of the resurrection, in fact, do we ever see the process of death turning into life. We see the empty tomb, sign of in-broken divine mystery. We observe Mary Magdalene initially perceiving the risen Christ as "the gardener" (John 20:14-15). And intriguingly, the longer resurrection story of Mark has Jesus appearing to two disciples "in another form" (ἐν ἑτέρῳ μορφῇ) (Mark 16:12), not unlike the *other* form his face suddenly took on the mountain in Luke.

Luke's version of the Transfiguration further points toward the paschal mystery through the conversation between Moses and Elijah who flank Jesus "in glory." Only in Luke do we get to overhear them: "they... were speaking about the exodus he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem (τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτοῦ ἣν ἤμελλεν πληροῦν) (Luke 9:31)." Most translations refer to "the departure [Jesus] was about to accomplish." Yet here at the Transfiguration, Luke is signaling that the paschal mystery itself should be read, should be refracted, through the sacred story of the Exodus: Israel's collective crossing out of Egypt, its wilderness wandering, its entry into the promised-land, its journey "from bondage into freedom."³⁰ Luke's accounts of the resurrection (Luke 24:4) and ascension (Acts 1:10) – "suddenly they saw two men in dazzling clothes" (ἐν ἑσθῇτι ἀστραπτύσῃ) and "suddenly two men in white robes stood by them" – make that link clearer still.³¹ In both scenes, the dazzling men's question immediately evokes perception, both whom and how they are seeing: "why do you look for the living among the dead?" and "why do you stand looking up towards heaven?" (Luke 24:5; Acts 1:11). As the dazzling figures declare "he is not here," the content of Jesus' transfiguration conversation returns full force: the empty tomb and the ascension, as well as the death that precipitated them, stand as a sign of the exodus that is now launched.

In the Transfiguration, whose process exceeds the limits of our language but leaves its dazzling traces everywhere, the paschal mystery opens out to us, impresses itself upon our vision, fills our hearts beyond the brim, draws us into newness of life. By signaling our own engrafting into the mystery of death and resurrection, the Transfiguration can cause us to perceive the mysteries that surround our life through this lens. This renewed perception can help us exuberantly claim transformation as our baptismal birthright. It can affirm the reality of loss and

³⁰ Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1949), 123.

³¹ Fred Craddock, "Luke" in ed. James L. Mays, *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 941. In Matthew's resurrection story, an angel descends from heaven, rolls back the stone and sits on it. In Mark's version a young man dressed in a white robe sits on the right side of the empty tomb. In John, Mary sees two men dressed in white sitting at the head and feet of where Jesus' body had lain. Luke's version uniquely links to the Transfiguration.

death that mixes in with newness of life. Indeed, it reminds us that resurrection is a life we cannot gain without losing what has gone before. It can help us regard as holy the ambiguity with which we may embody this growth in the here and now. Ultimately the Transfiguration reveals the indispensable link between our individual growth and our call to be agents of transformation in our wider contexts, indeed to be participants in God's renewal of creation itself. For this ever-new, unfolding mystery – and the opportunity to share it – I give great thanks.

Reading Luke 7:36-50, 8:3f and 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

By Alice K. Muse

Three words will give direction to this contextual Bible study.

See, Judge and Act

Read the following stories and texts carefully and aloud. Luke 7: 36-50, Luke 8:3ff and 1 Corinthians 7: 17-24.

See

1. What is each text about?
2. Who are the main characters in the passages?
3. What do we know about them?

Judge

1. In **Luke 7: 36-50**, let us enlist the things that the woman does.
2. How do the other people react?
3. How does Jesus react to:
 - a. the woman's actions
 - b. the other characters' actions?
4. Why do the characters behave/react the way they do?
5. In Luke 8, why do the women decide to follow Jesus and support his ministry?

If you were to tell the untold story of the women in both passages, what story would you tell?

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

1. Reading 1 Corinthians 7, what would be your interpretation of the story of the women in the two passages from Luke?
2. What would be your judgment on the other characters?
3. What would you say about Jesus' reaction in Luke 7 based on this passage from Corinthians?

Act

1. Is there anything these stories remind you of in your own context?
2. How can you follow Jesus' example in acting the way he did?

Conclusion

In Luke 7: 36-50 we find the story of the unnamed woman. She is only known to be a sinner or a woman of ill repute, one who had no social standing because of her behaviors. When the woman enters the room, she does not mind any other people but goes straight to Jesus. She knew what she wanted and that it could be given by

Jesus. She was tired of being called names, of being gossiped about. She was aware of her shortcomings in life as far as salvation was concerned. The woman knows that God loves a contrite and broken spirit, and with this she comes before Jesus.

How many tears did she shed?

The other characters are not concerned about her tears but the waste of the oil. Their judgment of the woman does not really mean that they were concerned with the poor. Rather these 'holier than thou' men thought that the woman's actions were meaningless since her fate had been already decided. But Jesus condemns her critics. He even criticizes the owner of the house for failing to do even the least of actions, of providing water for his feet. Rather than water, the woman provides tears and oil. Both tears and oil are expensive, but she was willing to give them in order to receive new life and a new beginning.

In both passages of Luke, we see how Jesus accepts and receives women who had had a bad past according to human standards, who had a marginalized status in the society.

Turning to 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is addressing issues of marriage and singleness. This he did in reference to the service of Christ. For him, those who married did well but the unmarried would do better in the service of the Lord. However, the striking point is at verse 17-20;

Only, everyone should live as the Lord has assigned, just as God called each one....¹⁸ was someone called after he had been circumcised? He should not try to undo his circumcision. Was an uncircumcised person called? He should not be circumcised.¹⁹ Circumcision means nothing, and un-circumcision means nothing; what matters is keeping God's commandments.²⁰ Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called.

In reference to LGBTI people, sexual orientations do not matter much. What matters is the service and devotion we bring to Jesus' ministry of the Church. Suppose the woman who anointed Jesus with oil was a lesbian; Jesus would have just received her all the same. The call here is, come the way you are; come just in the state you met Jesus. In 1 Corinthians, Paul continues to ask,

²¹were you a slave when you were called? Do not be concerned, but even if you can gain your freedom, make the most of it. ²²for the slave called in the Lord is a freed person in the Lord, just as the free person who has been called is a slave of Christ.²³You have been purchased at a price. Do not become slaves to human beings.²⁴Brothers, everyone should continue before God in the state in which he is called.

Studying Luke 10:1-12 in the context of violence against Sexual Minorities

By Masiwa Ragies Gunda

The Method of the Bible Study

This Bible Study will follow the three stage method of See-Judge-Act, a method that has been widely and profitably used in the development of liberation theology and other theologies rooted in the scriptural reflection of faith communities who members are poor and marginalized. In this three-step method, we must begin by identifying prevailing attitudes toward LGBTI members in our society in general but also in our church in particular. This is the "see" stage. It is important to discuss this matter together in groups so that we can come to a common understanding of the realities of our context. What are we seeing?

Once we have articulated our thoughts, we must necessarily attempt to make sense of, or *judge*, what is happening. In order to judge a situation,, we require a moral standard against which to evaluate it.. As Christians, this is the stage where we, out of necessity, turn to the Bible, to the Word of God. At this stage, we read a biblical text and study how that text can help us to make sense of what we observed in the *see* stage of our process. The text of the Bible demands that we wrestle with it, much in the same way that Jacob wrestled with God, until we, with the help of the Holy Spirit, come to an understanding of the text and we hear the Lord speaking to us. Judging a situation is not therefore a straightforward matter as many would assume.

Having successfully judged a situation, we must move to the third step in our method, that is, we must act. How do we put into practice the lessons learned from seeing and judging? The reason we do Bible Study is to allow us as a community to plan how we should act in our daily lives in our communities. The Word of God must give us directions on how we must behave and act toward others.

This method will be used in this Bible Study with Luke 10:1-12 as the focus text.

SEE - Understanding the characterization of LGBTI members in society and church

The key questions for this section of the Bible study are: How are sexual minorities described in our society and church? Why are they characterized in this way? What is the standard being used in characterizing sexual minorities?

We live in a world in which the powerful do great harm to the vulnerable and the powerless. What is even more disheartening is that after enduring the abuses piled upon them, the victims of these abuses are eventually blamed not only for the evil that has befallen them, but also for the evil that has befallen other victims. In many parts of the world today, LGBTI members are abused in unimaginable ways by leaders of societies and churches, yet, these same leaders are quick to blame their victims for a variety of social ills. Sexual minorities have been roundly condemned as ungodly and un-human, un-manly and un-womanly. They have even been labelled as worse than pigs and dogs.

Now that we have identified how LGBTI people are characterized, we must seek to understand why they are being so described. In order to justify discrimination and injustice, the powers-that-be often argue that they are actually not discriminatory or unjust, and that their victims deserve to be excluded from the community, or even from the human family. This strategy is meant to place sexual minorities in a special category whose members do not enjoy the same rights and protections as the rest of society. Even in church it is said that LGBTI people are not made in "the image of God." This characterization paves the way for "just injustice" or "fair discrimination." In essence, all the injustice and violence we observe against sexual minorities is rationalized through these characterizations.

Yet these standards on which LGBTI people are being judged are based not on what God created but what our societies created, that is, the prevailing definitions of femininity and masculinity. In many societies "real men" are assertive, brave, confrontational, sexually active and more suited to outdoor chores while "real women" are submissive, deferring to men in most if not all situations, sexually passive, more suited to indoor chores. Once we arrive at an understanding of how LGBTI people are regarded in our unique contexts, we should move to consider how the Bible, especially our focus text, can help us judge this situation.

JUDGE - Luke 10:1-12 speaking to our context

If we are to apply the story in which Jesus sends forth his disciples to the situation outlined above, the following questions will need to guide our engagement with this text: what is the implicit but conventional understanding of "real men" in the context of this text? How does this understanding relate to the conventional understanding of "real men" in our own culture and context? How does this text challenge these conventional understandings of what "real men" are like?

In order to have fruitful discussions, it can be helpful to read the text aloud in small groups and then discuss it in the light of these questions. We must also try to invert the text and read it in unconventional ways in order to hear the silent voices or the implied voices. Additionally, we must attempt to understand the conventions that informed the understanding of the story as it was told in Jesus' time, and realize that these conventions might not be immediately obvious to us.

This text speaks of two categories of men—"lords" and "laborers" (verses 1-2) suggesting that men owned land and were associated with outdoor chores. Most of the laborers were men since women were responsible for taking care of children within the home. Lords had the power and authority to command other men to do their chores, suggesting that when laborers were sent out by their lord, they inherited some form of authority from the one who sent them. It appears also that "real men" of this era journeyed with certain basic provisions such as purses, bags and sandals, and were particular about what they ate wherever they went (verses 4,7). This understanding of how "real men" behaved appears to be close to what the characteristics we discussed above; these men would have been brave, confrontational and assertive. They were made to be dominant!

Our Lord Jesus Christ refused to endorse the dominant masculinity of his time when he sent his disciples into different towns and villages. This text shows that Jesus Christ subverted conventional masculinity by sending his followers "out like lambs in the midst of wolves" (verse 3). The imagery of "lambs and wolves" fits into the conventional thinking on real men. Real men are supposed to be wolves not lambs, yet Christ sends his men to be like lambs. Real men owned things hence on their travels, they carried certain necessities (verse 4), yet Christ sends out his disciples with nothing. They were going out like men, but not according to the standards of their society. The third and last point relates to what real men must eat. Jewish people were particular about what they ate, and it is to be expected that men would not eat whatever was put in front of them. Viewed in this context, Christ's teaching is revolutionary because he commands his disciples to go about "eating and drinking whatever they provide" (verse 7) in the houses where they are welcomed. This appears to be the eating habit of those who lack; those who eat to survive and cannot therefore afford to be particular. Such men would not have qualified to be considered "real men." In short, this text inverts and subverts the conventional understanding of "real men" and consequently "real women" by prescribing a new standard.

How many times has our world been victimized by leaders who practice a conventional brand of masculinity? How many people have fallen victim to those attempting to prove that they are "real men?" How many people are afraid of going out of their homes for fear of being labeled unconventional and therefore ripe for discrimination and violence? In what ways is Jesus Christ challenging our thinking regarding our LGBTI brothers and sisters? Shall we reject and condemn brothers and sisters who are not man-enough or woman-enough according to our standards, or will we realized that our dominant masculinities and femininities are actually opposed to the masculinity and femininity that is promoted by our Lord, Jesus Christ?

ACT - Where do we go from here?

Critical questions that can guide our discussion in this third and final step are: What lessons have we gained from this text and our context? Is there anything in the lessons that can be put into practice? What can we do to change the situation in our context?

From the text we read above, two lessons stand out and drawing on these two lessons, we can begin the process of dismantling structures that are hurting others needlessly. First, it is abundantly clear that our conventions are suspicious because they are employed to sustain empire and not to affirm life. Second, Christ is pointing us away from empire to an alternative that the forces of empire have labelled as sub-standard. We need always to prioritize life affirming attitudes, attitudes that are non-threatening to those who see us. The disciples who were send out like lambs could not threaten anyone, not even children. In practicing this peaceful ethic, they affirmed life. Empire sends out soldiers, armed to the teeth to scare the life out of everyone, and to demonstrate that life is at the pleasure of empire. We, as followers

of Christ, are called upon to speak out against empire and to comfort those whose lives are being threatened. It is also critical, each time our social conventions come up, that we take a step back and question whose interest such conventions protect and propagate. We need to ask if there are alternatives to these conventions and whether we are not better off with the alternative Christ shows us in this text.

Luke 10: 25-37: The Parable of the Good Samaritan

By Jim Naughton

Before we begin, ask yourself a few questions.

- With what political or cultural movements do you most closely identify?
- What figures in these movements do you look to for wisdom, guidance or direction?
- As a member or adherent of these movements whom do you consider to be your adversaries?
- What groups or individuals do you believe have the most negative impact on the political and cultural life of your country or region?
- What groups or individuals do you believe embody what is worst in the culture of your nation or region?

Now let's consider a story we all know.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the best-known stories in the Bible, and not one that seems relevant, on first reading, to debates on the morality of same-sex relationships. But some years ago, I heard the Rev. Mary Sulerud, then rector of the Church of the Ascension in Silver Spring, Maryland give a homily that has since shaped my thinking on this well known text.

It's typical to understand this parable as an admonition to be kind even to people whom we do not like, or whose values we consider immoral. But maybe identifying with the Samaritan, the one who, after all, has all of the power in this parable, is a little too easy.

Suppose we were to look at it from the point of view of the traveller? You have been beaten and robbed. You are injured, broke and entirely powerless. Two people whom you regard as paragons of righteousness and good judgment see your predicament, but, for whatever reason, they choose not to help you. But a man whom you regard with enmity for his badly mistaken moral beliefs comes to your rescue and demonstrates extraordinary kindness towards you simply because he thinks it is the right thing to do.

The parable makes clear that we don't get to choose the people through whom God manifests divine love to us. We do not get to select the passages down which grace

will roll into our lives. Sometimes God works through people whom we believe God disdains because we have decided God should disdain them.

At the end of this passage, having completed the parable, Jesus redefines the word “neighbor.”

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This redefinition raises questions for us:

- Who are the people I struggle to treat as a neighbor? What is at the root of this struggle?
- In light of the parable, are there justifiable reasons for excluding someone from neighborly concern? If so, what are they?

It is worth noting, that the Good Samaritan was able to be merciful because he had sufficient resources. It is evident, I suspect, to everyone, that our world has enough need and misery to keep armies of Good Samaritans busy for eternity. So a few more questions:

- What is our role in shaping and nurturing Good Samaritans? What is the role of the church? What is the role of the state?
- And finally, how would it affect your understanding of this parable if either the Samaritan or the man whom he helped were gay?

Luke 13:10-17 – Jesus Heals the Bent-Over Woman

By Evan D. Garner

Luke is the only gospel writer who recalls the story of Jesus healing the bent-over woman (13:10-17). Despite its straightforward appearance, this brief episode brings together many of the themes that make Luke's account of the "good news" distinctive, and the reader who peels back its multiple layers discovers an exquisitely constructed story of physical, spiritual, and social restoration.

The verses immediately preceding this passage (vv. 1-9) provide the reader with some important background information. As he makes his way toward Jerusalem, Jesus continues to distinguish himself and his mission from the religious and political elites and their hypocritical, self-serving ways. After being confronted by those who question him about the fate of the Galileans who seemingly were killed by Pilate while in the act of religious sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple³², Jesus challenges not the sacrilegious murder carried out by Pilate but the faithlessness of those who pose the question: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." The parable of the barren fig tree, which follows in verses 6-9, is Jesus' way of foisting the question back upon the crowd and, thus, Luke's way of posing the question to the reader: will you bear fruit, or will you be cut down? As the reader encounters the story of the bent-over woman, Jesus' demand that everyone bear fruit for God's kingdom shapes how the action should be interpreted.

Luke introduces this transformative encounter by letting the reader know that Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Likewise, Luke includes details about the woman "who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years" and "was bent over and could not fully straighten herself" as part of the background to the story. As a result, the reader knows about the woman even before Jesus notices her. Then, when he sees her, he immediately calls her over into the middle of the congregation. The healing words of Jesus, which follow this invitation, are delivered as a direct consequence of her being noticed by Jesus and welcomed into the center of the synagogue. That Jesus lays his hands on her and announces that she is free from her disability is portrayed as the logical next step in this overall series of healing.

The physical manifestation of the "disabling spirit" is the woman's hunched-over posture, and the triumph of her healing is portrayed both in her being made straight and in her newfound ability to glorify God. Thus, Jesus gives her not only deliverance from a spiritual malady, but also an entirely new posture—one appropriate for praising God. At its essence, therefore, this healing is more than a restoration of her physical stature. It is also the means by which, after an eighteen-year exclusion, she at last takes her place among those who gather for worship. Her inclusion then becomes the focus of the conflict in the story.

³² Fitzmyer, Joseph A. (1985). The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV. In W. F. Albright & D. N. Freedman (Eds.), *The Anchor Bible*. New York: Doubleday.

In response to the healing, the “ruler of the synagogue” takes out his indignation with Jesus upon the congregation, saying, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.” Furious at what has taken place, he frames the issue around Sabbath observance, but, rather than focus his ire upon the one who presumably has broken the law (Jesus), he instead places it upon those who have come to Jesus for help. Jesus fires back at the ruler and those whom he represents, saying, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” By calling her “a daughter of Abraham,” Jesus reveals that the real issue is not one of Sabbath observance but of inclusion among the people of God.

For eighteen years this woman has been bound by Satan, but her unjust exclusion by the religious authorities is the weight that has bent her over, forcing her gaze not up at God but down at the dirt. Because of the “disabling spirit,” she has been denied her rightful place within the religious community, but, despite the opportunity for liberation, the ruler of the synagogue would have her wait even longer. Jesus, however, catches a glimpse of the woman, who was standing in the shadows or perhaps even outside the door. As he sees her, he recognizes a “daughter of Abraham,” and he beckons her to come and stand in the center of the room. Deeply grounded in the *status quo*, the religious leader appeals to the rules of the faith, objecting to the healing and subsequent inclusion as outside the bounds of what is permitted on the Sabbath. In response, Jesus labels him and those like him as hypocrites who hide behind the letter of the law and, thus, maintain a faith that bears no fruit. The subversive challenge contained within the woman’s restoration is an attack on the barren legalism maintained by the ruler of the synagogue. Will institutional religion continue to languish in its fruitlessness, or will God’s people exhibit a faith that bears real fruit?

The power of this transformation is conveyed in the words of a YWCA Bible study, which was quoted by Jeffrey John in his book *The Meaning in the Miracles*: “Brother, if you ever see a Bent-Over Woman beginning to unbend and straighten herself, at the very least you had better give her a little standing room because...that’s *your sister* rising to her full stature – and that’s *God’s kingdom* cranking up!” (emphasis in quotation).³³ That quotation captures the heart of this miracle as more than an individual’s exorcism. This passage represents the banishment of that spirit of limitation that hierarchical institutions like the Christian church continue to use to bind people in a place of exclusion. The true miracle of this passage is Jesus’ ability to return to this bent-over woman her stolen identity as a daughter of God with an active role in the worshipping community. Whenever the religious authorities deny someone a place in the congregation because the rules of the faith would shun that person, those leaders are guilty of propagating a fruitless and barren faith. With

³³ Quoted in Robins, W. S. (Ed.). (1986) *Through the Eyes of a Woman*. YWCA by J. Johns. (2001). *The Meaning in the Miracles*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.

Jesus' help, the community can be made whole again, and God's people can bear fruit for God's kingdom.

The Resurrection and the Life: John 11:17-44
The Rev. Emily A. Mellott

A process for group study or reflection:

Begin your contextual study of this passage with a consideration of your own context.

Briefly discuss:

How does scripture study give life to your community?

See:

Read aloud John 11:17-44

What is this text about?

Read John 11: 45-53

What is the reaction of the community to this miracle?

What does this text tell you about the reasons for the miracle?

Read John 11:1-16

Why is Jesus going to Bethany?

How do these contexts help us understand the text we began with?

Judge:

Read John 11:17-44 again.

Who are the characters in this text? What do we know about them?

Who do you identify with among these characters or groups?

Can you find your relationship with God represented by characters or groups in the text?

How does the community determine “death” and “life” in your context?

How is physical death determined? What are convincing proofs of life?

Are the spiritual proofs of life or of death different than the physical?

How does your community pray when confronted with death?

How do you pray when confronted with destroyed hope, or with loss and grief?

What do you ask and expect of God?

How have you experienced new life in the face of death?

What was the role of your community in that experience? Your own role?

What was God’s role in that experience?

Act:

Read John 11:1-44 a final time.

How does Jesus speak to your community?

What is God calling you to do in response?

Commentary

The miracle from which this story takes its frequent title, “The Raising of Lazarus,” is narrated in a bare three sentences. The bulk of the narration and the frame of the story focus on the response of the living to death and life. Arriving at the tomb, Jesus reacts to the death of his friend with open grief, and with powerful emotion that troubles interpreters and translators. His response affirms the stark reality of death. That reality is further underlined by the narration of Martha’s protest against the stench of death, and the burial wrappings that still enfold a risen Lazarus. John is careful to ensure that we understand the death of Lazarus as wholly real—physical and undeniable.

That emphasis is what gives Jesus’ action its theological impact. While the return of a dead man to life is enough to awaken belief in the grieving community (11:45), Jesus is acting more for Martha, Mary, and his other disciples – already followers who believe that God’s power over death “at the last day” (11:24) is not some distant truth, but a present reality. It is this that Jesus has come to reveal, and its literal consequence, that “those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,” (11:25-26) must transform the believer’s relationship with life as well as death.

This truth challenges the Christian community to expect life, even to give life, in the face of death. As followers of this Jesus, our role is not simply to offer comfort and share grief, as Jesus certainly does. Our calling is to act for the Life that defeats death. This is what calls Christians to act even when evidence suggests hope is gone, and to stand against subtle forms of oppression as well as against genocide and violence.

In addition, the miracle restoring Lazarus to life is clearly linked by its context to the death of Jesus, a death that for John is the leading edge of Jesus’ glorification. That narrative proceeds from death to resurrection and the life-giving revelation of the Father (20:31); it is presented so that we may believe, and believing have life. It is important to note that Lazarus is introduced as Mary’s brother. This is the same Mary who anoints Jesus in preparation for his burial (12:3-7). When Jesus sets out for Bethany in response to Lazarus’ death, Thomas affirms the expectation of the disciples that this action will lead directly to Jesus’ death (11:16). The report of the miracle causes the council to decide to put Jesus to death, fearing that he will otherwise bring the death of their whole nation. This link emphasizes not only the risk of giving life, but also the salvific power of this action for believers and for the world. Giving life in the face of death is not only an act of healing for this family and for their community at Bethany, but an action that directly affects the salvation of the world through Jesus.

As the community of believers we are invited to see ourselves in this story. For that reason, Martha’s conversation with Jesus deserves careful attention. Her greeting to him speaks a fundamental belief in Jesus: understanding the “signs” or miracles that he performs as being of God (11:21-22). Jesus challenges her expectation of the

final resurrection with his present identity as the immediate Resurrection and Life. Her confession in response reveals both that she has not fully grasped Jesus' teaching on the immediacy of resurrection life, and the depth of her discipleship. Her confession of Jesus as Messiah is equal to the confession of Peter narrated in the synoptic gospels (11:27, Mark 8:29, Matthew 16:15-17, Luke 9:20).

None of the actors and witnesses in this story understands the literal change in the believer's relationship with death and life that Jesus calls for in his conversation with Martha. The witnesses among the grieving community rejoice and "believe" on the level of "signs." The disciples who are with Jesus misunderstand his intentions in going to Bethany (11:11-16). And though Martha's confession shows deep discipleship, her protest against opening the tomb demonstrates that she has not understood that Jesus' self-identification as the resurrection and the life must have immediate effect on literal death. The miracle at the tomb is necessary to speak to the reader and the Christian community of the immediate truth of Jesus' power over death, and to engage the community in the giving of life.

This is a way in which the text may speak especially to the experience of LGBTQ persons and communities with the church. In places where the church or the Christian community denies homosexuality and rejects LGBTQ individuals, all experience a death, of sorts. The relationship between LGBTQ persons and the church may be severed as fully as by physical death, and in many contexts, the same deadly severance occurs in family relationships as well. The walls of custom and doctrine can be as impenetrable as a stone-sealed tomb, and opening that tomb brings disturbance as real and painful as confronting the physical stench of decomposing flesh. Such a "death," though metaphorical, is as real to the individuals and communities that experience it as the death of Lazarus.

Equally real is the life-giving power of the community when a LGBTQ person "comes out." It is an accident of language that Jesus' command to Lazarus is "come out!" - the term now used in English for publicly accepting one's identity as LGBTQ. However, this language captures the power that community can have in the experience of new life felt by a person who is no longer burying his or her identity. When Lazarus' community obeys Jesus' order to "Unbind him, and let him go!" they participate in the giving of life, removing the bindings that limit Lazarus to the grave, and freeing him to be fully alive among them.

In some parts of the church, the Christian community has begun to understand a call to participate in "unbinding" LGBTQ persons. Welcoming an individual emerging from a metaphorical tomb of denial, separation, or oppression is an essential part of healing. Further, the call to unbinding also engages Christians in action with the wider community and the state. Our responsibility to life calls us outside our faith community to act against legal and habitual discrimination, and to act in favor of life-giving welcome in the culture of the community and the laws of the state.

The Christian community that fully understands Jesus' immediate victory over death does not wait for a future event of resurrection or reconciliation "at the last day." Instead, the community of the Resurrection and the Life will seek out opportunities to give life: to release people from tombs of violence or discrimination; to remove the bindings and limits that prevent communities and individuals from being fully alive.

John 15:9-17: "This is my commandment"
By Jeffrey D. Lee

Context

It is likely that John's gospel was written in the late years of the first century of the Christian era and perhaps into the second. The communities for whom and by whom it was written were probably made up of Jews who had living memories of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. As they fled Jerusalem, scattered Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean region searched for a new center, with some focusing on the study and practice of Torah and others drawn more to the mystical side of Judaism. It is not hard to imagine John's communities as examples of the latter, some scholars suggesting they were clustered north of what is now the Golan Heights. When these Jews began to learn about Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings, and as they came to believe that he was indeed Messiah, they were drawn to understand him increasingly in more mystical and divine terms.

In the same way that the Gospel of John was not written at one particular time, it probably was not written by one particular person. The community had years to reflect on the stories of Jesus, remembering, retelling and refining them. It is in many ways the most "theological" of the gospels, layering meanings and interpretations on the tradition as it was received and which drew these communities together in the first place. And because these communities had two or three generations to reflect on it, they became clearer and clearer about who Jesus was for them and the boundaries of their communal life. Part of the backdrop of this gospel might well be the "parting of the ways" between these Jewish believers in Christ and other Jews in the synagogue. Here may well lie the roots of the anti-Jewish tone sometimes present in this gospel, the clear lines often drawn between who is "in" and who is "out," who are the children of light and who are not.

In any case, the Gospel of John speaks of a community of believers who have developed a clear sense of their identity as the beloved of God. In their communion with one another these friends of Jesus have discovered the presence of the Risen Christ in their midst, the mysterious action of the Spirit drawing them lovingly deeper and deeper into union with the Father. Through the years, members of the community reflect together on the meaning of this common experience. As in many close-knit communities however, in John's communities there may be a shadow side to this strong sense of identity - an apparent lack of tolerance for different experiences and understandings of the significance of Jesus. Conflict is not absent from the formation of the Beloved Community.

I want to say a word now about the context I know best, namely that of the Episcopal Church in the United States and in particular in the Diocese of Chicago. And I want to speak guided by the methodology of our bible study process, under the headings of see, judge and act.

The text for us this morning is from the 15th chapter of John's Gospel, just a part of a much longer discourse. But there is a particular verse in this section that is precious to me. It is in verse 16 when Jesus says, "You did not choose me but I chose you." He is speaking about a reality I have to learn again and again, that God's love is a free gift, not something I deserve, something I can achieve, something I earn. When I am honest with myself I know the truth of it. For some utterly unknowable reason, God has chosen to love me. Despite myself.

Now here is what I have seen that pertains especially to the matters that have brought us together for this consultation. In the diocese I serve, among dear personal friends, in my own family, I have seen the presence of gay and lesbian persons who have discovered - sometimes to their own astonishment - that they too have been chosen by Christ, called to be his friends, drawn into union with him in the fellowship of the church. I have seen their lives bearing exactly the kind of fruit Jesus promises: peace, joy, faithfulness, self-control, sacrificial love, care for the other, often care for the least of Jesus' sisters and brothers.

From this ongoing experience in the Episcopal Church, in our diocese we have been called to consider, to judge if you like, what the Holy Spirit might be teaching us. In the same way the communities that produced John's Gospel did. If Christ has called all people to himself, if Holy Baptism makes us living limbs and members of the Risen Lord, and so members of one another, despite the accidents of our birth - race, class, sexual orientation, hair color! - then we must decide what it means to find ourselves gathered at the Lord's table. All of us finding ourselves there, not having chosen one another, but finding that we have all been chosen by the Lord who calls us his friends.

It is out of pondering the mystery of such love that we have acted. In our decisions to work for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians I believe we have acted to make real in the sacramental life of the church what is already true in the heart of God.

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

See

Read the text aloud. After a period of silence begin the conversation using the method of "Mutual Invitation."

What do you first notice in the text?

To whom is Jesus speaking?

What are the commandments of Jesus?

What is the difference between a servant and a friend?

What does it mean to "lay down one's life for another?"

Judge

Read the text again. After a period of silence consider these questions or others as they arise.

Who are *not* the friends of Jesus?

Where do you see evidence of the fruits of the Spirit in your community?

Are there degrees of love?

By what criteria are we to recognize who the friends of Jesus are?

What are the implications of this reading for the place of sexual minorities in the church?

Act

Read the text a final time.

If Christ has chosen us, how must we respond?

What fruit do you want to bear in response to this text?

How will you make room for the joy of Jesus in your life? In the lives of others?

Acts 15:1-21 Cultural Identities and Exclusion

By Esther Mombo

Introduction

Throughout the centuries communities have formulated their marks of identity be they social, cultural, political or religious. These marks include symbols or body marks, and circumcision has been one of these. Found in some ethnic communities in Africa and in the Jewish community, male circumcision has been one of the defining aspects for who is included and excluded from membership in certain communities. While this standard may not be openly pronounced, it has been used in certain denominations in my context to deny leadership to some groups.

A story from my context

More than a year ago this story appeared in the local radio news in Kenya: Charles Anyanga, forty five year old from Matunda village, Likuyani sub – county, and a prominent mechanic decided to circumcise himself using a kitchen knife. He decided on this because his friends intimidated him, calling him dirty names and threatening to circumcise him in public together with his nineteen-year-old son.

At first Mr. Anyanga thought they were joking, but he later realized that there was a plan to carry out the threats because he had witnessed two other men being forcefully circumcised in public. Before the community caught up with him, Mr. Anyanga took a knife and circumcised himself. Due to his pain, he cried for help and a lady neighbor came and alerted other people who took him to the hospital, where the circumcision was completed and he was discharged. His need to be accepted into a community that based its identity was on circumcision drove him to this act.

A reading from the book of Acts 15:1-21

The story of the Council of Jerusalem and whether Gentile men would have to undergo circumcision to be included in the early Christian community

Questions for discussion

What is this story about?

Who are the main characters in the story and what do they say and do?

Are there incidents like this in your parish council or synod, and what are the issues at stake?

How does this text help us to discuss issues of exclusion in our contexts?

Both the story from my context and from the book of Acts show the ways in which the identity of circumcision was and is still important in some communities. The book of Acts tells the story of the beginnings of the church and the challenges faced by the church as soon as it moved from the predominantly Jewish group that first

followed Jesus to the Samaritans who were ethnically mixed. We read that many Samaritans accepted the teachings of Jesus Christ. In Acts 10, Peter is sent to speak to the Gentiles and many of them are baptized into the new faith. In chapters 13-14 ministry of Paul and Barnabas is recorded as having been a success among the Gentiles as well. This rapid expansion and the increase in the number of Gentiles being baptized raised concern among the Jews and led to the council of Jerusalem discussed in Acts 15. The issues for the council were based on how Gentiles should be accepted into the faith. Primary questions included what Gentiles should do or how they should behave in order to be full members of the early Christian community. One camp argued, "the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the Law of Moses" (15:8). The law included physical circumcision and dietary and relationship issues.

It is not surprising that the Jerusalem council dealt with issues of identity and inclusion. The deeper issues for me lie in these three areas:

- First, there are those who consider themselves insiders. In this case the earliest followers of Jesus—who were Jewish—behaved as though they had the authority to set rules for those who had come to faith more recently.
- Second comes the determination that the Gentiles had to put on the physical identity of Jewish Christians before they could be fully accepted.
- Third is the fact of power politics at play: The Gentiles are not included in the council, but they are expected to hear and act on the resolution.

The issues from this story remind me of how in the history of the church, we have had our own councils to determine how those we regard as outsiders should be allowed into our community. This is at times based on physical identity, theological positions, or on social and cultural affiliations. Women have long endured this process. Now it is happening to sexual minorities.

But if we realize that we are accepted into God's family through Jesus, many of the issues we have heard and discussed in our different councils are beside the point, and many of the findings of these councils inhibit the growth of a community which the scriptures tell us was open to people regardless of age, ethnicity, gender and or social class.

Questions for discussion

1. What are some of the grounds on which people are excluded from your community?
2. What insights do we get from the book of Acts 15 to deal with issues of exclusion?

While there are texts in Scripture that seek to teach us not to use positions of power to make rules or to exclude people, we seem to work towards exclusion more than inclusion. It is our responsibility to work toward speaking about God's love to all.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Deadly Division

By Emily A. Mellott

A process for group study or reflection:

Begin your contextual study of this passage with a consideration of your own context.

Briefly discuss:

Why do we gather in this community?

See:

Read aloud 1 Corinthians 11:17-26.

What is this text about?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-31

Why is Paul writing to the Corinthians?

What does this text say the Christian community is about?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-34

What is happening in this text?

How do these contexts help us understand the text we began with?

Judge:

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-26 again.

Who are the characters in this text? What do we know about them?

How do you see yourself or your community in these characters or groups?

What are the meal practices in your context? How do meals express relationship?

How do you eat your meals, and whom do you eat with?

Who is excluded from table fellowship in your context, and how?

Have you ever been cut off from the table or excluded from a meal? What happened?

Have you ever been part of a meal where some receive more or better (food, service, or honor) and others receive less? What happened?

Who is honored or well fed at the Lord's Table in your context? Who goes home hungry? Who is excluded or marginalized? What happens in your context when some are excluded, and others are well-treated?

Act:

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 a final time.

How does Paul speak to your community?

What is God calling you to do in response?

Commentary

In the Episcopal Church we hear Paul's tradition of the Lord's Supper in worship each year on Maundy Thursday, and in modified form at each Eucharist, when the tradition is recited in the blessing of bread and wine. This use focuses narrowly on 11:23-26, the *traditio* itself, and removes Paul's use of the tradition from its context in conversation with the Corinthian community. This text, alone or in context, is certainly about communion, about the witness we offer in the ritual memory of Christ.

Placed in context, though, it becomes clear that the text is about division at the dinner table. Paul introduces the *traditio* (11:23-26) as a corrective to Corinthian meal or worship practices, not to establish those practices. He notes that each participant in the meal eats his or her "own supper," suggesting that rather than a communal meal, all are eating and drinking what they themselves provide. As a result, some are still hungry, while others are gluttoned and over-indulged: drunk (11:21). That this is an economic division is reflected in Paul's accusation that they "humiliate those who have nothing" (11:22). In addition, there may be other divisions at the table, as Paul refers to the factions previously referenced at the beginning of the letter (11:18). This is a problem, as Paul – or the tradition he received from the Lord – insists that the ritual meal is to be an active witness, "proclaim[ing] the Lord's death until he comes" (11:26), rather than a simple memorial, and it is clear that Paul believes divisions at the meal disrupt or destroy that witness.

Paul's great concern in the whole of this letter is division within the Corinthian community. He writes in response to reports of that division (1:10-12, 11:18), and argues against division over teachers (1:12, 3:4), sexual morality (7), meal practices (8:9,12; 10:27ff, 11:17ff), and spiritual gifts (12; 14). Some of these divisions may be openly adversarial, others may actually be overlooked within the community – or at least by those who have more privileged positions in the community. That such division disrupts the power of the community to proclaim the gospel, however, is evident throughout the letter, and is highlighted particularly in this text that includes the threat of real, physical death from divided practices at the Lord's Supper (11:29-30). Paul's indictment of division at the table is particularly poignant in contemporary contexts where divided Christian fellowship is more a norm than an exception.

Divisions over the same issues that plagued the Christians of Corinth nearly two thousand years ago have shaped our Christian context today. Denominations have separated over teaching, scriptural authority, spiritual gifts, sexual morality, and other issues similar to those that arose in Corinth. Within denominations divisions still arise, separating congregations and even families, and result in unequal access to the Lord's Table.

Each of our Christian communities and most if not all of our social contexts, no doubt, have such divisions. Each of the congregations I have known has its own way of choosing who receives honor at the table, who is excluded, who is better fed and who goes home hungry. Economic and racial divisions are rampant and often visible in religious communities in the United States, while other divisions are subtler. At the least, bishops and clergy have a privileged place at the table – the worship meal never begins without them, while others may struggle with work schedules, transportation, or other challenges even to arrive. Other divisions at the table are created deliberately, by law or canon, or by unwritten policy and practice. My concern in this writing is how we engage divisive questions of human sexuality in light of this scripture text.

One of the painful effects of division over human sexuality in the Anglican Communion has been the disruption of our table fellowship. When bishops declare themselves and their dioceses “out of communion” with one another; or congregations split, denying their altar to one another; or individuals are excluded from a congregation or church because of their sexual identity, we rapidly lose the ability to maintain a healthy and complete community, and thus the ability to eat the true Lord’s Supper and witness to Christ’s saving action.

Paul tells the Corinthians that willful or accidental blindness to the fullness of Christ’s body are, in themselves, judgment against the Christian community. In the United States, Christian churches are increasingly regarded as irrelevant and intolerant, in substantial part because of our public division over human sexuality. “Irrelevance” and “intolerance” are both devastating blows against the gospel witness of immediacy and forgiveness and against the power of the gospel to change lives and the world. They are evidence of ill-health and even death.

In the Anglican Communion, divisions highlighted by differing responses to LGBTI Christians have been institutionalized in the past decade, dividing families, holy relationships, and the church’s witness and mission. Some church factions have supported political division and institutionalized exclusion through measures ranging from the now-failed campaign against marriage equality in the United States to criminal penalties in Uganda and Nigeria. This visible division and deliberate exclusion undermines the church’s mission of reconciliation and gospel witness. It is a judgment against ourselves, indeed.

Paul taught that our table behavior should proclaim the gospel, and take special consideration of unity, and of those who are “weak,” and those who are “hungry” (8:4-13, 10:15-22). In this context, I have to ask how Christian communities can deny table fellowship to those who are already so marginalized: to LGBTI Christians who have been told that they don’t belong to God, and who yet believe, or who desire to believe and gather at the table. Shared meals and table fellowship both build and express relationships of honor and mutuality. I believe the church is called now, just as Paul called the church in Corinth, to examine ourselves, seeking to truly discern Christ’s body, each time we approach the table. We destroy our own

witness to the saving health of Christ's death, resurrection, and return when we cut off any marginalized person or group from full and honored access to the Lord's Supper. It is our responsibility, for our own health and for the witness of the gospel, to feed those who have been marginalized until no one is hungry.

In contexts of division over human sexuality, this means ensuring honorable access to the sacraments of the church, and to full membership in the diversity of Christ's body (12:14-27) to those identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered – those whose call to human relationship has exposed them to ridicule, exclusion, deadly danger, or oppression. It means ensuring that such marginalized persons and groups have early and complete access to the feast of Christ, not the leftovers of the more privileged. That witness of radical welcome, of mutual relationship expressed and strengthened in meal fellowship, is what the church is called to offer in remembrance of Jesus, and in witness to the world (11:26).

1 Corinthians 13:1-13: Love - the More Excellent Way

By Mote Paulo Magomba

Through our baptism we have been called into one body though everyone has different gifts. Understanding this diversity of spiritual gifts and how each member of the body relates to another and to the head, who is Christ himself, is crucial to the unity of the body of Christ. But the reality of the Corinthian church, just like ours today, is that the body of Christ is injured, wounded and even broken by misunderstanding, disagreement and division.

First Corinthians is about mending the broken and divided church. Hence, self-giving, Godly-*agape* love is considered 'a more excellent way' (1 Cor. 12:31) to rebuild the church. Paul values faith, hope and love, but considers love as the greatest of all three. By love, Paul means love for God and neighbour and even for enemy. For Paul, all prophecies, tongues and knowledge are imperfect without love. They all pass but love endures forever. We can see that the purpose of God ultimately is love, "for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face..."

According to our passage from 1 Corinthians, there are nine characteristics of love: patience, kindness, contentment, good temper, guilelessness and fortitude.

Patience and kindness are significant in our Christian understanding of the practice of love, for they describe the character of God in His dealing with humanity. The obvious implication of God's patience and kindness is that this is how His people are to behave toward others. Love is patience, it is kind. Impatience and unkindness are a negation of love.

Contentment: Love "does not envy." Envious desire for power and prominence, the desire that wants to overpower, suppress, diminish and belittle others—the poor and the marginalised, women and sexual minorities—the desire that does not want to esteem others, is incompatible with love, which puts its ambitions under God's control. Every Christian must learn to be content (Philippians 4:11, 12).

Humility: Love "does not boast, it is not proud." Having been misled by false teachers, some Corinthian Christians started to 'puff up' as they thought of themselves as having wisdom and knowledge, and as being more spiritual than others (1Corinthians 3:18; 8:2; 14:32). Paul exhorts them to understand that love is not proud. In fact, it is very difficult to be proud and to love at the same time, for pride and love are mutually exclusive. Since love is not boastful or proud, it causes people to humble themselves. Humility is indispensable in Christian living and human relationships in general. There is advantage in humility (1Peter 5:6).

Contentment and humility have helped many Tanzanians to live fulfilling communal lives within their respective ethnic groups. The spirit of *ujamaa*, community-love, before and after the independence of Tanzania, widened the scope of community life beyond that of the tribe alone. But the spirit of community-love is diminishing.

There is an emergence of pride of tribe, pride in titles, positions, power, gender identity and political party.. At home, at the office, in politics, in religion, in market places and schools, these kinds of pride blur the real meaning of love. Even in the church, gender segregation, the dehumanisation of sexual minorities, the scramble for positions, and the obsession with power are rampant. The love Paul speaks of in First Corinthians challenges all of us. We must learn 'to be content' and 'humble [our]selves...under God's mighty hand...'

Courtesy: Love “is not rude.” It behaves politely and gently to all people. In Titus, Paul says, “show perfect courtesy toward all men.” A person whose heart is full of *agape*-love would always seek to speak polite words and do gentle actions. Henry Drummond has this to say:

*Politeness has been defined as love in trifles. Courtesy is said to be love in little things. And the one secret of politeness is to love. Love cannot behave itself unseemly. You can put the most untutored person into the highest society, and if they have a reservoir of love in their heart, they will not behave themselves unseemly. They simply cannot do it.*³⁴

The ungentle heart does things rudely and it leaves many people and things wounded physically, spiritually and psychologically. But love is not rude, it builds up.

Unselfishness: Selfish people insist on their own way, whether in thinking or in doing things. In their hearts they do not have room for other people's ways. But “love does not insist on its own way. It is not self-seeking.”

Michael Cassidy has this insightful comment:

*Paul here calls for generosity of spirit and unselfish consideration of the other person or group beside us. Beyond that he is challenging inflexibility of opinion.*³⁵

We all have our own views and interests, but there are times when we need to be flexible. The Biblical challenge to us is: “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:4). This is not easy. In order to be able to look to other people's interests as well as our own, we need to die to our own selfishness, privileges, ambitions, gender prejudices, homophobia and pride. Jesus Christ, as the divine example of courtesy and unselfishness, teaches us a new and deeper truth about love that considers the other person's needs above our own.

Good temper: Love “is not easily angered.” That is, love is not easily provoked. Love “is not irritable or resentful.” It is not hot-tempered. Rage, quarrels and fighting are not characteristics of biblical Christian love. Naturally, all people get angry, but those whose hearts have been enriched with Christ's love are not quick to

³⁴ Drummond, H., 1953, *The Greatest Thing in the World*, Glasgow: Collins, p.53, 2nd edn

³⁵ Cassidy 1990, *The Politics of Love*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, p.91

anger. Their natural anger is controlled by God's "grace of a good temper."³⁶ Although love is not "easily angered," it is not slow to forgive.

Guilelessness: Love does not count wrongdoings that one has done, nor does it delight in evil. In other words, "Love does not devise evil against someone else."³⁷ It seems to me that a person who has *agape*-love in his heart asks, "what good can I do to others?" And not, "What evil can I do to others?" That is, love does not think on evil, but on good. As Gordon Fee comments, "Love stands on the side of the gospel and looks for mercy and justice for all, including those with whom one disagrees."³⁸

Church and society in Tanzania can both draw on the gift of their African indigenous tradition of bearing with one another that has enabled many tribes to maintain their community togetherness. In this context, community love and tolerance would be highly valued to maintain communal spirit. Christ showed the concrete example of a good temper; also, he is the mediator and the perfect sacrifice for our broken relationship with God, and with our fellow humans.

Fortitude: Paul's description of the character of love is summarized and concluded by these wonderful words: Love *bears, hopes and endures* (RSV). When all has been said and done in their Christian living, Christians are called upon "to *bear and endure* and to be full of faith and hope."³⁹ Christian life, as a way of discipleship, requires the ability to bear with and to endure so that one does not lose hope. Christians need to pray for this power. Paul prayed for Colossian Christians "so that ... [they] may have great endurance and patience" (Colossians 1:11). Commenting on these two words, Cassidy writes,

*The Greek word here for 'endurance' (hupomone) means fortitude to cope with all kinds of circumstances, while the word for 'patience' (makrothumia) refers to fortitude to cope with all kinds of people! How we all need both!*⁴⁰

In different situations and in the midst of various types of people, it is not difficult to lose patience and endurance. But if one has *agape*-love, then one's patience and endurance do not run out. Patient endurance is one of the qualities of *jamaa*-love. Joseph Healey and Donald Syberts comment that patient endurance and resilience are the themes of many African proverbs, because in many parts of Africa there is a basic struggle for survival. As this Swahili (Tanzanian) saying goes: "Patience is the key to tranquillity"; also, "The patient person eats ripe[ned] fruit."⁴¹ Love as patience, kindness, contentment, good temper, guilelessness and fortitude is intrinsically linked with justice. Love does not just end with feelings and positive attitudes towards others. For all the characteristics of love naturally lead to

³⁶ Cassidy 1990, p.92

³⁷ Fee, G.D. 1987, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, N.I.C.N.T, Michigan: Eerdmans, p.639

³⁸ Fee 1987, p.639

³⁹ Cassidy 1990, p.93

⁴⁰ Cassidy, M., 1990, p.93

⁴¹ Healey, J. & Sybertz, D. 1996, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines, p.186

indiscriminate acts of love towards other human beings. True love will not criminalize human beings because of their sexual orientation. Love and justice are innately interconnected. Love as the more excellent way of Christian living is radical, revolutionary love, which will not just standby when human beings created in the image of God are being criminalized and wounded in our African countries, because of sexual orientation.

Revolutionary love does not just care for the wounds, as the Good Samaritan did, but asks, who causes the wounds and why? And how can we stop the wounding? How can we stop the dehumanization, demonization and criminalization of same-sex relationships? This is radical love for God and for our fellow human beings who are created in the image of God and loved by Him.

How radical is your love, and how revolutionary is your sociability? Love is not just about doing good deeds for the wounded, for the oppressed; it is about enabling and promoting justice in the realities of our lives in our respective contexts. Love is about radical actions, revolutionary ways of doing justice for all people indiscriminately even when our own lives are in jeopardy.

The Church in Africa could be the yeast of peace, love, justice, tolerance and unity where sexual minorities are being criminalized, persecuted and jailed. Every Christian is called upon to be a catalyst of love. We can change Tanzanian society, Africa and the whole of the world if we always pursue love and encourage others to do the same. Social and political conflicts, ethnic tensions (even ethnic wars) and persecution of LGBTQI happen because very often people choose the way of hate. As Edgar Brookes writes, "Love is a political virtue...[But t]he world languishes because love is being tried so little."⁴² The first thing to think about in our human relations should be love. If we make love a priority in our human relations we can heal the world. The world longs for healing, as Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane writes,

*'We long for the wholeness of the entire human race. We long for a healed and whole humanity to live and thrive in an environment which is whole; healed of its human-inflicted wounds...'*⁴³

⁴²Brookes, E, 1963, *Power, Right, Law and Love*, Durham, North Carolina: Drake University Press, 1963, p.14

⁴³Ndungane, N, "Journey to Wholeness" in *The ANITEPAM Journal*, No.24 (November, 1999), p.22

Ephesians 1:3-14: New Life in Christ

By Mote Paulo Magomba

Ephesians starts with these words, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1:1-2 RSV). As the quoted words indicate, Ephesians begins as though it were a letter of Paul, but it has different style from Paul's letters; first, it does not deal with a particular social issue but focuses on "universal salvation as a present reality."⁴⁴ Second, it has a notable lack of reference to individuals compared to other letters. Hence, there is a general consensus that Ephesians was written later after the death of Paul, by someone, a Hellenistic Jewish Christian, from a Pauline church heavily influenced by Paul's teaching. Note this Pauline phraseology, "you one walked... we all once lived in the passions of our flesh..." (2:2, 3), which reflects a Jewish Christian perspective common in Pauline writings. So, the author provides exhortations, patterned on a continued interpretation of Paul's teachings, but to a broader Christian audience.⁴⁵ In this way, Ephesians may be considered as a letter addressed "To Whom It May Concern." Or, perhaps more specifically, "To Whom It May Concern in a Christian community in Asia Minor near the end of the first century after Christ."

The community to which the letter is written has been part of Paul's mission work. But this Christian community of Ephesians, to which the letter is written is now endangered by outside teachings of unknown origin and content. They are tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine (4:14). It is not clear from the letter what these outside teachings are, but it is obvious that the unity of the church is threatened. That is why the writer begs the Ephesian Christians to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3).

Ephesians can be divided into two main parts; the first part (1:1-5:20) appeals to the unity of the church by envisioning the Church, the household of God, as a new diverse community of people, Jews and Gentile among whom God's blessings are shared equally. The second part, which is not the subject of our current study, also appeals to church unity through maintenance of household rules, which obviously support patriarchy, gender inequality and the subjugation and domination of others as slaves within the church community. Note this language, "Wives, be subject to your husbands... be subject in everything... children obey your parents... slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling..." (5:22-24; 6:1-3, 5ff). This appears to be a move away from the egalitarian vision of household relationships we see in earlier teachings of Paul in which he asserts that Christians, through their baptism, are made equal. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This oneness in Christ presents a Christology that dismantles patriarchal system in family and church

⁴⁴ Goss, RE, "Ephesians" in Guest, D, et al, 2006, *The Queer Bible Commentary*, London: SCM, p.630

⁴⁵ Goss, RE, 2006, p.230

whereas the Ephesian Christology (also Colossians 3:18-4:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-3:12) supports a patriarchal Christian family as well as a patriarchal church. I concur with R. E. Goss when he argues that this move towards patriarchal system was intended for the churches,

*to find peaceful accommodation with the Roman empire until the return of Christ...[s]ince the patriarchal household was a microcosm for the state, equal arrangement between wife/husband, children/father, and slaves/masters were regarded as subversive of the Roman state.*⁴⁶

This message of accommodation with the Roman imperial powers was an abandonment of the radical message of Jesus who wanted his followers to become salt and light and wanted his church to become an agent of change in the world. And Paul's interpretation of the message of Jesus (in Galatians 3:28) was meant to differentiate the church from the patriarchal and oppressive system of the Graeco-Roman world. Given this tension between scriptural texts, we must critically engage with these texts, and endeavour to understand what they really meant, and what they could mean to us today. The heart of the message of Jesus is revolutionary love, self-giving love; where there is subjugation, domination and oppression there is no real spirit of love. The first part of Ephesians, from which our selected text comes, rightly invites us to be "imitators of God, as beloved children" who should "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (5:1).

As one reads Ephesians, one finds that one of the challenges of the church in Ephesus is a loss of love among Christians that threatens the unity of the church; people have lost love of their neighbours (4:25; 6:10ff). These who have lost Christ-like love have been involved in hatred, malicious talk and anger towards their fellows. Ephesian Christians are challenged to come back to the heart of their salvation, which is divine love, given through Jesus Christ; only through this can they maintain the unity of the spirit. New life in Christ can only be lived out through Christ-like love for each and every member of the household of God. "The law of commandments and ordinances" (2:15) divided the early church and brought about hostility between Jews Christians and Gentile Christians. Jesus broke down the dividing wall and created in himself a new humanity (2:15-17) so that there should be "one body...one spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (4:4-6).

This message was significant for the growing tensions between Gentile and Jewish believers towards the end of the first century AD. At that time, the Christian community was becoming predominantly Gentile.⁴⁷ The message of love, peace and unity articulated in Ephesians was meant to remind Jewish and Gentile believers that the death of Christ had brought to an end the enmity between Gentiles and Jews and had brought them together into a unified community in which they enjoyed a new life in Christ. Christ's death on the cross has reconciled believers to each other

⁴⁶ Goss, RE, 2006, p.231

⁴⁷ Goss, RE, 2006, p.233

and to God. The new life of believers is one of love, peace and unity, also knowledge, freedom and power. There is a contrast between the new, which is modeled on sacrificial love of Christ and his self-giving, and the old life of hatred, conflict, disunity, bondage and subjugation.

Christ's followers are expected to reflect characteristics of their new life in Christ. Believers are expected to see things from the new perspective of life in Christ, which seeks abundant life for each and every human being. Jesus Christ has inaugurated a new people, his people, and he has bestowed upon them everlasting life and new knowledge of God. And when Christ transforms people's worldview they start to see things in a new perspective.⁴⁸

Not long ago, in some African tribes, twins were being thrown into rivers after birth, because they were bad omens. Not long ago, in Shinyanga Tanzania, old women were being killed for being suspected as witches because of their red eyes. Not long ago, albinos were being massacred due to superstitious beliefs in Tanzania. Not long ago, HIV/AIDS was understood by Christians as God's judgement on sexual sinners, and patients were preached against as fornicators in Sunday sermons. The list can go on and on. But the truth is that every generation, in its own context, has had its own blind spots. Transformation does not happen overnight; it is a process. With time, people ultimately come to see the truth and acknowledge it. One only needs to be humble enough, but at the same time bold enough, to acknowledge the truth when it is made known.

If the life of the Christian community in our time were patterned on aspects of new life in Christ, no Christians would be happy to see other Christians being criminalized, persecuted and jailed because of their sexualities. It is sad to see that some Christians, in our time, who claim to believe in the gospel of Jesus, the gospel of love, have joined hands with imperial powers to propose laws for persecution, life imprisonment, and even the killing of LGBTIQ people.⁴⁹ It appears that the meaning of our baptism has been forgotten. For, through baptism each and every one shares Christ's heavenly status with God, regardless of one's own human status or sexual orientation. Laws, ordinances and covenants by themselves have always brought division and hostility in the church community much like we see in Ephesus. In the Anglican Communion today, there is confusion as to what should be our guiding principle. Appeals are made to the Bible, to the proposed Anglican covenant and to culture and Christian tradition. The centrality of love in our life as Christians does not receive the attention it deserves in these conversations. But it is Christ-like, unconditional love that sustains the unity of the Church, mends it when it breaks down and restores it when it breaks up. Therefore, as Kapya Kaoma argues, "we

⁴⁸ Bediako, K., 2000, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, Carlisle: Regnum, p.11

⁴⁹ Kaoma, K., 2014, *American Culture Warriors in Africa: a Guide to the Exporters of Homophobia and Sexism*, Somerville: Political Research Associates, p.30,31

should amplify the voice of the gospel of love, of unity, of acceptance, of equality” to overcome the gospel of hate.⁵⁰

Christian life, which is new life in Christ, is all about love: love yourself, accept yourself just as you are, love God and love others. Love is the foundation of every command in the Bible. According to our passage in Ephesians no one who has faith in Jesus is excluded in the household of God. To conclude, let us speak with the followers of Paul, “So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather you are fellow citizens with God’s people, and you belong to God’s household. As God’s household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Questions:

What does God’s plan of mercy, grace and love set out in Ephesians mean to you?

Have you been encouraged by the extent of God’s love through Christ, which is indiscriminative, all-encompassing and surpasses all knowledge?

⁵⁰ Kaoma, K, 2014, p.118

Part IV Personal stories

Doors for the Life of the World By Cameron Partridge

One morning a couple of years ago after our infant son had kept us up much of the previous night, I found myself on “fort” duty with our three-year-old son. I lay exhausted on the floor in a carefully constructed arrangement of pillows and blankets while three-year-old G engaged me in one of his ever-evolving imaginary worlds. At one point he turned to me and said, “Daddy, I need to get out. You’re blocking the way.”

“Okay,” I groaned, “I guess I’m the door. Hold on, I’ll move.” Then I looked at him again and said, “Hey, G, guess who said ‘I am the door?’” The saying was apparently just offbeat enough to catch his imagination.

“Who?”

“Jesus!” I replied with a sly smile.

He stared at me, eyebrows raised, and repeated, “Jesus said ‘I am the door?’ Why?”

“Well,” I groped for a simple explanation of John 10:9, “Jesus was God who had come to live in our world and to invite us to come into God’s heart. So by saying he was ‘the door’ he was saying he was a doorway to God. He was God’s invitation to us, saying ‘here I am, come in!’”

I don’t recall how G responded beyond a thoughtful assent and return to play. But “I am the door” has since become one of our quirky catch phrases.

Doors or thresholds speak to my life in a number of ways. I am an Episcopal priest and university chaplain, a theologian and an academic, a husband and dad, and a transgender man—that is, I was assigned female at birth and transitioned to male (twelve years ago now). I grew up in the Episcopal Church and have long loved the richness and depth of our theological and liturgical tradition, our emphasis on spirituality and common prayer, and our increasing engagement in ministries of reconciliation and transformation in the church as well as the world. Since being ordained a priest in 2005, I have served in parish, university chaplaincy, divinity school, and broader young adult contexts. For several years I have also been involved in bringing (LGBTI and especially) transgender voices into the wider church conversation. I have also been teaching in theology and gender and sexuality studies since completing my doctorate in 2008.

As my feet are planted in several communal contexts – university, ecclesial, intergenerational, LGBTI – I seek to be a creative, relational conduit within and between them. It isn’t always easy, especially as some of my contexts can be critical of one another. The university can be wary of the church and at times vice versa.

Particularly in my New England context there is an increasing antipathy toward the church among the young adults with whom I interact all the time. The LGBTI community – and especially the transgender community -- is also often leery of the church because of how harshly the church, or portions of it, have judged LGBTI people. Yet at the same time I am regularly moved by how many LGBTI—and especially transgender – people find their way into Christianity precisely through the process of coming out. Our ancient language of conversion and spiritual growth helps lend new depths of storied structure to the identities they are losing and finding. More than once I have been asked for liturgical material to link the taking on of a new name with a baptism or a renewal of a baptismal covenant. This speaks volumes.

Over time I have become aware that those of us who inhabit or are associated with borders—whether those of gender or sexuality, of class or race, of nation—can inspire strong reactions of fear and sometimes of violence. So often we want the world we inhabit to be totally clear, black and white, and yet the world—indeed, creation itself—is much more complex than that. Some of us seem to bring that reality of ambiguity to people’s consciousness simply by living our lives. It is as if we hold up a mirror to the social orders of the world just by walking down the street, purchasing a soda, getting on public transit. And rather than being inspired to engage how we may be called to navigate and honor the dynamic nuance of the world God launched into being, so often we instead seek to eradicate its complexity. We dehumanize one another.

I am increasingly convinced that what divides us both within and outside the church is not so much hatred as it is fear: fear of what is unknown, of what may cause us to see the world and our place within it differently; fear of being misunderstood, mischaracterized and mistreated; all of which can lead to fear of difference itself, fear even of engaging one another about, within and across it. Out of a desire to break this cycle of fear, I seek to be in the world in a way that builds trust, that is curious about difference, that sees all of us as divinely crafted mysteries, turning and unfolding in an intricate, dynamic creation. For me, this way of being is an expression of loving God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength and of loving my neighbor as myself. It is also a practice of doing unto others what I would have them do unto me.

Ultimately, for me the notion of Christ as threshold offers an invitation to at least two things at once. It invites us into a life conversion, of transformation, of passage, of crossing to what lies through that door: the ministry of reconciliation to which God calls us, participation in the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, the peace of God that passes all understanding. But for Jesus to refer to himself as a threshold is also to honor thresholds not simply as pass-through spaces but as holy locales in and of themselves. Thresholds are places of convergence in which the various threads of our lives interweave and meet, become a comprehensive whole. As someone who grew up in earthquake country, I see doorways as the stable places in which to shelter when the earth shakes. They are places of strength that sustain

and remain with us, even as they launch us forward. As we live as the body of Christ in the world, we are both transformed and sustained by the One who is and remains our door, who reminds us that in him we too are doors for the life of the world.

When I share stories with my children—whether biblical, from the wider church or world, from my own growing-up or adult years—I try to instill a sense of openness and wonder, of curiosity and respect for the vast difference and dynamism of the world God created. Through all of this, it is as if an icon of Jesus as threshold—whatever that might look like—mysteriously shines. This icon suggests God’s presence at every threshold, issuing an invitation to connection and growth. For me, that invitation comes across all sorts of boundaries, in many and various vocational contexts from priesthood to teacher to parenthood in all its challenges and quirks. For all of these invitations, for all of the human doors I have yet to encounter, I am profoundly grateful.

Paying the Price of Seeking and Serving Christ

By Mote Paulo Magomba

I love Jesus Christ and desire to serve Him always. I was born in an evangelical Anglican family, and baptised thereafter as an infant. My parents came from an African indigenous religious tradition, but became Anglican Christians during the Great East African Revival (GEAR) in the 1950s. In 1965, my father, Paulo Magomba, started working as an evangelist, and became one of the early Anglican indigenous missionaries to the Iringa Region of Tanzania, which was later to become the Anglican Diocese of Ruaha. So, I was born and raised in an evangelical Anglican faith infused with the GEAR tradition.

One of the characteristics of this tradition was that those who publicly confess their sins and accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour are, in the Swahili language, *waliokoka*, “the saved ones,” and others are the sinners who need to be saved from eternal damnation in the lake of fire. Other characteristics are belief in the final authority of the Word of God, the Bible—literally interpreted, daily prayers and the continued public confessions of sins in fellowship meetings. All of this is understood as “walking in the light.” Growing up deeply in this tradition, reading the Bible and praying twice a day, I consciously committed my life to Jesus Christ. This was the beginning of my journey in search of the true meaning of the Bible, and of my quest to understand God’s love for humanity and what it really means in the life of my local community.

I remember that in a typical African village, everyone was included and cared for; an ethic of love dominated all aspects of community life. But when we came into church services, there were the “saved ones” and the others, the “unsaved ones,” and these “others” to a great extent experienced some kind of exclusion. Women who used make-up, put on trousers and plaited their hair, or men who curled their hair or put on jewellery, were considered immoral and sinful. Drinking alcohol was, and still is, also a sin against God. Again, even these days, as you enter a church service on Sunday, it is common to see men on the right hand side, women on the left and children on the floor. But I came to learn that many times what the church calls immoral acts are just its own patriarchal projections, which are inconsistent with the spirit of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible. I have always wondered what could be a true meaning of God’s love for humanity both within a Christian setting, and without. Does God include some, but exclude others? Many a time, I have been confronted with such responses as “the Bible says” or “it is written in the Bible.”

My enthusiasm to know Jesus better, to understand the extent and depth of the love of God more fully and to comprehend exactly what “the Bible says”, compelled me to join Bible training for a period of 18 months. During this time, I felt the divine call to serve God as a minister in the Anglican Church. Hence, from 1994 to 1996, I attended three-years of ordination training at St Philip’s Theological College, Kongwa, Tanzania and graduated with a diploma in theology. I was ordained a priest on November 20, 1996 by the bishop of the Diocese of Ruaha and served at

Emmanuel Parish of Ismani village in the Diocese of Ruaha for two years before pursuing further studies.

In 2002, I obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in theology from the University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, England. After a teaching tenure at St Philip's Theological College, Kongwa, I went to Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, where in 2004, I completed a Master of Theology degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Rigorous academic work equipped me to participate in contextual biblical engagement, especially reading the Bible for transformation with the poor and the marginalized.

In January 2005, I was appointed chaplain to the Bishop of the Diocese of Ruaha, who was also, by then, the Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Ruaha. I was involved in community services such as the Kilolo Water Scheme, the establishment of St. Michael's Secondary school in Kilolo town, food relief programmes in Ismani and Pawaga villages, and HIV/AIDS programmes. These were part of the holistic mission of the diocese based on John 10:10 (*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*) It came at a time when the church realized that its approach to community development was rather "top down" and the poor people on the ground were not involved in shaping these community programmes. So, the Church and Community Mobilisation Process approach was introduced, but has yet to yield expected outcomes. Additionally, issues of gender-based violence, sexual violence and discrimination and the challenges faced by children on the streets, "house girls [maids]," sex workers, drug addicts, and many related issues are yet to be articulated in my church context. Similarly, the connection of all these issues to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, especially the increase of new infections in Iringa town, has not been recognized by the church and thus remains largely unaddressed.

One evening, in January 2006, I was on my way home after finishing my day at the diocesan office as bishop's chaplain, when I found 11 children literally sleeping on the ground near the town post office. I enquired as to why they were on the street. One said, "Mum and Dad died of AIDS." Another said, "My parents separated." Still another replied, "My parents cannot afford school uniforms." And others said, "There is no food at home." I visited the boys again to learn more about their plight, and I started providing food for children on the streets whenever we visited them. As I continued to spend time with these orphans and other vulnerable children, I felt compelled by the love of Christ to minister to them in a sustainable way. In 2007, a friend working in a local secondary school joined me, and we found that we had a common goal. We met every Wednesday and Saturday at Uhuru Garden to pray for God's guidance and discernment, and then we would go into the streets, meet children, and provide them with food and counselling. From September 2007, I started reading the Bible with children on the streets, in addition to doing sports and games and providing food and counselling. This contextual Bible study was conducted every Saturday at Community Welfare Centre in Kitanzini Area of Iringa Municipality.

In 2009, I became executive director of Amani Christian Training Centre, in Iringa, Tanzania, where I also taught systematic theology, studied the Bible with students, and also read the Bible with street boys and girls at Iringa Community Welfare Centre. It is my fervent desire to continue serving within the Anglican Church with integrity and faithfulness to Jesus Christ and His Gospel of love. With prayers, I have always endeavoured to read the Bible with an open heart and consideration for the real lives of people in my community. Reading the Bible with an open heart has made me feel the pain and hurt of the people who are suffering, and caused me to ask, "What could that Bible text mean in the real lives of women and children, the poor people on the edges of my city, sexual minorities, victims of patriarchy, tribalism, injustice and corruption?"

In October 2010, on the permission of the bishop of the Diocese of Ruaha, I was able to attend a consultation on issues of human sexuality in Durban, South Africa. At this consultation, I had an opportunity to meet with Christians in faithful committed same-sex relationships. I have known people with same-sex orientation and those in same-sex relationships since the 1980s. In my community, there have been men taking feminine names, and these men have assumed women's roles. Also, there have been men without **beards** and other so-called masculine traits. They stood outside of our conventional cultural gender binary, and the community criticized them for not being male enough. Also, there have been women who did not fit into the gender binary and had moved in with other women and assumed men's roles. The women who loved other women were not attacked, but men who loved other men were. They were called sinners, evildoers, immoral, perverts and all sorts of names by church leaders, preachers, gospel singers and many other conservative Christians. I have always been doubtful of this approach to issues of human sexuality.

At the Durban consultation, through Bible studies, presentations, testimonies and stories of people in faithful committed same-sex partnerships, I had a transformative experience and felt invigorated to venture into a deeper engagement with the Bible on issues of human sexuality, especially same-sex orientation and relationships. I also felt compelled by the love of Christ to try to understand what the Bible really meant to its first recipients, and how we can apply this meaning to our present human realities in our own contexts. What did the narratives of human creation mean when they were first developed, and what would they mean today? Through contextual Bible study, I was able to discover, even more, the image of God in each and every person regardless of their sexual orientation. I knew that suppressing the truth about human sexuality could be destructive. The truth set me free, free to speak out.

On my return from Durban, I shared my story with the bishop, and I found that we had common understanding of the extent of the love of God, and shared the same views on issues of same-sex orientation and relationships. And consequently, in July 2012, when the Chicago Consultation invited me to be its guest at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, my bishop generously granted permission to

Jim Naughton 9/8/2015 10:44 AM

Comment [5]: Beards?

attend the Convention, assisted with U. S. visa processing and provided me with a letter of introduction to the bishop of the Diocese of Chicago and other Episcopal bishops. I had good opportunities to share the gospel of Christ at St. James' Cathedral and All Saints' Church in Chicago. During the General Convention, I freely interacted with all people, whether conservative, evangelical, or charismatic Episcopalians, regardless of their positions on issues of same-sex relations.

On my return from General Convention, a commotion occurred in several churches that threatened to split from the diocese on the grounds that my presence at the General Convention indicated that the diocese supported homosexuality. On August 14, 2012, so much pressure had mounted on the bishop that reluctantly, without any hearing at any church council, he had to suspend me for three months without stipend. Then as pressure kept mounting on the bishop, and indeed to save his leadership position, he verbally extended the suspension for an unspecified amount of time. The letter stated that I had been suspended on the following grounds:

1. For acknowledging that through the Durban Consultation I had gained a new and better understanding regarding same-sex orientation and relationships, and had come to believe that LGBTI people are human beings like anyone else and that they are good people [that is, they are not any threat to society].
2. For stating that the Anglican Covenant cannot work well; it will not put us right.
3. For stating that some of those who are in same-sex partnerships have churches that are lively, so we should listen to their stories to come to a better understanding.
4. For stating that I will share with others what I know so that they can also build relationships with people with same-sex orientation.
5. For stating that some gays and lesbians are in faithful, and loving partnerships and are committed to Christ and the church.

It is disheartening to realize that, speaking against the Anglican Covenant is one of the reasons I was suspended from church ministry, especially considering that the Church of England itself has refused to adopt the covenant. It is also disheartening to know that many Christians are unwilling to recognize the commitment to Christ and His Church that one sees amongst our brothers and sisters who have same-sex orientation.. It seems to me that those who will not recognize this commitment believe that Christian love can only be exercised discriminately; it can extend to some and exclude others. I have repeatedly tried to understand this type of biblical hermeneutic, but I find it superficial and short of deep engagement with the Bible and its core message of divine love for humanity and indivisible justice for all. I have chosen not to be silenced and subdued; I have chosen to suffer for the sake of truth, uncompromisingly determined never to stand by and watch when others are denied their human dignity and oppressed for who they love, and how they have been created.

In January 2014, I embarked on a doctoral research programme on biblical studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. For me, undertaking further studies is the best use of suspension from church ministry – it is a sabbatical leave after 18 years of my full-time pastoral ministry. Thank you all for your prayers that have carried me thus far. This is my personal narrative; it is unfinished story – to be continued...

Blessings upon Blessings

By Ruth Meyers

I'm a straight, white woman, richly blessed in my marriage to a man for over twenty-five years. Throughout my adult life, I've been aware of women who love other women, and men who love other men, and I've become friends with people in lifelong committed same-sex relationships. I've seen in these relationships the same delight in one's beloved, the same negotiation of day-to-day rhythms and responsibilities, the same willingness to forgive that I experience in my marriage. I can't recall a defining moment that convinced me that these same-sex unions are holy, blessed by God, life-giving not only for the couple but also for those whose lives they touch. But I do know the moment when I "came out" in my support for the full participation of gays and lesbians in the life of the church.

Monday, June 26, 2006, was Day 7 of the 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Our church, along with the entire Anglican Communion, was in turmoil. Three years earlier, our church had ordained Gene Robinson, a man living in a partnership with another man, as a bishop, and now we were vehemently disputing whether our actions were in violation of Scripture and Christian teaching. The House of Deputies began debating a resolution that said that we would not ordain any more openly partnered gay bishops, nor would we develop or authorize any rites for blessing same-sex unions; the resolution concluded by apologizing to gay and lesbian Episcopalians and their supporters who would be hurt by those decisions.

The deputy introducing the resolution cited the Archbishop of York, who earlier in the convention had called upon the Episcopal Church to look for the signs of crucifixion in itself. I heard that call in light of my struggles and the rejection I've experienced as a woman called to ordained ministry, told that her ordination was contrary to Scripture and Christian tradition. When I got to the microphone, I said, "I will not and cannot be party to hammering those nails into the hands and feet of my sisters and brothers."

That resolution did not pass, but the 2006 General Convention did adopt a resolution that, in effect, prevented the election of another openly gay and partnered bishop. I was dismayed. I ached for my gay sisters and brothers whose vocations the church had once again rejected.

I also realized that I had found my voice, or, more precisely, that the Holy Spirit had given me the words to speak. As I travelled home from the convention, I prayed that God would show me the next steps, that is, how I could be an effective advocate for gays and lesbians and other gender and sexual minorities.

A few months later, a colleague and I sat at breakfast, sharing our anguish over the final decisions at the convention. We said to each other, "We need to organize, so that the next convention will be different." Our determination to foster change in the

church led to the formation of the Chicago Consultation, a network of Episcopal and Anglican bishops, clergy, and lay people committed to the full participation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians in the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion. In December 2007, we gathered fifty people—bishops, theologians, and other clergy and laity—for an international Anglican consultation held near Chicago. That initial meeting has developed into an international steering committee, with members from both Africa and North America, working together in the belief that God is at work, calling us to enable and accept the full participation of gender and sexual minorities in the church and calling us to deeper relationships with sisters and brothers throughout the Anglican Communion.

My role in this work shifted dramatically after 2009. The General Convention that met in Anaheim, California, that summer called upon its Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to collect and develop theological and liturgical resources for blessing same-sex relationships. I became chair of the commission in November 2009, and quickly I realized that my work required not just creating resources but also developing a process that would encourage the next General Convention to authorize the use of those resources.

As the commission has gone about its work, I have been privileged to hear the stories of lesbian and gay Christians. I wept as I heard first-hand the cost of secrecy in times and places where relationships had to be hidden and blessings could not be openly celebrated. I marvelled as I saw the ways couples had grown together even as the church continued to deny their full dignity and insist that their relationships were not worthy to be blessed. I rejoiced as couples and clergy spoke of the joy that came when relationships could be openly acknowledged.

The most memorable encounter, though, was not with members of the Episcopal Church. In September 2010, I travelled to Phoenix, Arizona, where the House of Bishops was meeting, to introduce the commission's work and invite the bishops' responses. That evening, our work with the bishops completed, my fellow presenters and I sat down for dinner in the hotel dining room. Our presentation had gone well, and we spoke excitedly of the work that lay ahead. As we lingered after dessert, three members of the hotel staff who had served our dinner approached us, one after the other, having overheard our noisy conversation.

The first told us that he was gay and did not know that there was a church that would welcome him rather than condemn him. He thanked us for giving him hope. A few minutes later, his co-worker came to the table. She explained that the first server had been crying in the kitchen because he was so moved by our conversation, and she had encouraged him to talk to us. She herself had stopped attending the church where she was raised, and now she wanted to know where she could find an Episcopal Church that would welcome her. Then, their supervisor came, thanking us for listening to her staff. "We've been listening to you all weekend, and you've given

us hope," she said. A few years ago, she had finally found a church home, but she was dismayed when that community later refused to welcome her gay friend.

"I was hungry, and you gave me food," says Jesus (Matthew 25:35). When I went to that dinner, I expected the hotel staff to feed my body, and they did. But I also met Jesus as they told me how they had feasted on our conversation.

In that encounter in Phoenix, and through the many stories I have been privileged to hear, I have been blessed. The people I have met have borne witness to the compassion and justice of God, and their courage and hope have inspired and transformed me.

All Through it All

By Lowell Grisham

My name is Lowell Grisham. Since 1997 I've served as the Rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas, USA.

I grew up as a white person in the deep South, in Mississippi, during the days of racial segregation and the Civil Rights movement. I have vivid memories of my town becoming a battleground when locals and others from around the South violently tried to prevent a black student from enrolling in our state university. Our civil and business leaders decried the "outside agitators" from the North who were threatening our Southern heritage, our culture, and our traditional values.

As I've experienced the movement for equality sounded from the LGBTI community, I've seen it largely through the lens of my history as a child of those times and that place. The fears of those who sense their traditional values threatened are very familiar to me. The experience of oppression that gay friends give witness to, and their hope, reminds me of black friends and their stories from the 1960's.

I grew up never knowing an openly gay person. They were all around me, but invisible, in the closet! I was an adult in seminary when I first talked to an openly gay person. He was a priest, and I shook my finger at him and sternly told him, "Don't you know your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" He looked directly back at me, his eyes sparkling with utter integrity and conviction, and he said convincingly, "Yes! My body IS the temple of the Holy Spirit!" That was an anomaly for me. I began a process of inquiry, examining the cultural values that I had inherited.

It made a difference to me to learn that most people believe that sexual orientation is given to us rather than chosen. It made a difference to me to meet LGBTI people whose lives were admirable, noble, honest, courageous, compassionate and authentic. It made a difference to me to meet gay couples who had been living together faithfully for more than 50 years. My wife Kathy and I hope to reach that milestone, still ten years away for us.

I relate my experience to two New Testament passages.

I feel like Peter and his experience with the uncircumcised Roman Centurion Cornelius. Peter had a dream of clean and unclean animals, and he heard a voice tell him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Then Peter saw the familiar gifts of the Holy Spirit manifested among those he believed were unclean—the Gentiles of Cornelius' household. Peter responded instantly, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And they were baptized, even though a thousand years of tradition and many scripture passages about circumcision might have appeared to stand in Peter's way. (Acts 10)

I connect my experience with the words of St. Paul in Galatians 5, where Paul identifies the “fruit of the Spirit” as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and temperance.” St. Paul goes on to insist: “There is no law against such things.”

I have seen with my own eyes the fruit of the Spirit manifested in the lives and in the loving relationships of Christian people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. And I am so glad that I have. Because I have experienced so much love and goodness through them and through their friendships that I now cannot imagine how impoverished my life would be without them. They have manifested God’s love to me, and I am deeply thankful.

Things have changed in the American South. Structures of legal racism are dismantled. Racism still runs deep in my region, but restaurants and motels and busses and waiting rooms and schools are open to all. Neither do heads any longer turn, nor do hands become violent, when an interracial couple walks down the street.

A similar assimilation is happening for our LGBTI neighbors. Increasingly the presence of gay couples doing all of the normal things that couples do is normative and accepted in my region. But there are differences.

Among young people, the shift of acceptance is virtually accomplished. Unlike me, today’s young people—gay and straight—have grown up together as friends and classmates. In the spring of 2013, a poll found that 61% of Arkansans under 30 years old support marriage equality.

These changes seem harder for older persons in my culture; with one big exception! In families where a loved one has come out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, blood often overcomes culture. Most families know and love their relatives, and their love overcomes their old values.

But that’s not always true. Some families condemn, judge and even excommunicate their gay family members. This is particularly the case when those families belong to institutions that reinforce traditions of condemnation.

In the 1960’s, most Southern churches sat on the sidelines during the Civil Rights movement. The largest church in the South, the Southern Baptist denomination, was either silent or openly hostile toward equal rights.

My church was different, unique in my town. The priest in my congregation was a model for me. He preached a gospel of inclusion, and he acted on that gospel with courage. He suffered, and his church suffered. Members left and contributions decreased. But over time, his witness was confirmed, and he eventually became our diocesan bishop.

In the South, the same churches that resisted racial integration in the 1960's seem to be the churches most resistant toward the acceptance of LGBTI Christians in the 2010s, but with one big exception. The Roman Catholic Church was prophetic in its support of racial equality. It has been firm in its resistance to the claims of LGBT Catholics, at least among the hierarchy. But my experience with Catholic lay friends tells me that they disagree with their teaching magisterium on this issue just as they disagree with and largely disregard the official position forbidding birth control.

There are also significant differences between urban and rural Southerners. Racial respect and acceptance of LGBT neighbors is slower in rural areas, in impoverished regions, and in towns without institutions of higher learning. But in my observation, acceptance of LGBT persons is proceeding more quickly and with less violence than racial integration did, and that seems encouraging to me.

In my life I've seen the fruits of the Holy Spirit in unexpected places and people. I hope that in my lifetime I will see people of color and LGBTI people receive the full respect and dignity that they deserve as children of God. They are my friends, and I love them. They are our neighbors, and Jesus tells us to "love your neighbor as yourself."

What would Jesus do? Towards an inclusive ethic

By Gerald West

Introduction

I came to faith in the early 1970s, influenced by both the political potential of the gospel in South Africa and the alternative life-style message of 'the Jesus people' who advocated peace and communal living. Jesus was my example of both a politically engaged organic intellectual and an architect of an alternative community. So when confronted by contextual issues that demanded a Christian response, I was always willing to consider the leading question: "What would Jesus do?"

Given my formation in the political struggle against apartheid and in the alternative communities of the Christian left, I was always puzzled that the evangelical Christians I engaged with found it so difficult to consider that Jesus might behave rather differently than the dominant consensus.

As I moved more deeply into academic biblical studies, I realized that asking "what Jesus would do" was more complex than either I or my evangelical friends had imagined. But I have not forsaken this haunting question, even though the answers have become more complex. Indeed, in pastoral contexts when dealing with the issue of homosexuality, I have formulated a rephrased version of this question: "Where would Jesus err?"

The Bible and homosexuality

Whenever I am drawn into discussions by (or whenever I provoke discussions among) Christians about homosexuality, the discussion begins, almost every time, with the Bible. The Bible, it is asserted, 'says' that homosexuality is ungodly and sinful. As a biblical scholar this is where I would flex my scholarly muscles and muddy the biblical waters. My Bible "reading" strategy has been fourfold.

First, each of the texts that have been used to address homosexuality can be engaged in great detail. Each of the texts is full of literary and socio-historical detail, and most of this detail goes undetected in Christian discussion. So delving into the detail can be useful. For example, and very briefly, narrative texts like Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are clearly, when read carefully with attention to their literary detail, about a contrast between generous hospitality (Genesis 18 and Judges 19:3-9, 10-21) and the most extreme form of inhospitality – rape (Genesis 19 and Judges 19:22-26). And legal texts like Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are clearly, when read carefully with attention to their socio-historical detail, not about anything resembling "modern" understandings of "homosexuality." Quite what they are about is not that clear, but probably includes the socio-religious stigma associated with men who transgress the boundary between male and female behaviour. And didactic texts like Romans 1:26-27 are, when read carefully with attention to their socio-historical detail, about advocating the masculine virtue of self-control, so that the early Christian church

would not seem “out of order” to the world of Paul’s time. Again, there is clearly nothing here that resembles contemporary understandings of “homosexuality.”¹

Second, we in the Ujamaa Centre work quite overtly with the notion of the Bible as a contested text. The Bible does not speak with a single voice. Walter Brueggemann’s notion of the Bible having two major theological trajectories in dialogue or even contestation has been very useful.² He identifies a dialogue, across scripture, between a theological trajectory that is inclusive and prophetic and a theological trajectory that is exclusive and consolidatory. He is careful to point out that both are part of scripture. From our experience, once we work overtly with a Bible that is in dialogue with itself, there is an immediate resonance with ordinary lay Christians (though their priests may be more reluctant to embrace this resonance). They are relieved to discover that their own implicit recognition of different perspectives in the Bible is now being overtly declared.

There is dialogue and even severe disagreement in the Bible about a whole range of matters. For example, from as early as 2 Samuel 7 there is an on-going contestation about whether God resides in a ‘tent’ or a ‘temple’. Jesus, interestingly, rejects the notion that God resides in the Jerusalem temple (Mark 13:1-2)! The Bible, as we would expect, also offers different perspectives on matters of sex and sexuality. So instead of stamping our feet and insisting that ‘the Bible says ...’, as if it says only one thing, we should heed the biblical witness itself and engage with the different biblical voices on any subject.

Third, I have rephrased my Jesus-ethic. Recognising that the Bible does not speak with a single voice, and recognising that for Christians Jesus is the fullest form of God’s revelation to us, I have asked myself and others: “Where would Jesus err, on exclusion or inclusion, on acceptance or rejection?” Phrased in this way, even the most hostile of interlocutors has had to pause and reflect. If we acknowledge that there are different voices or perspectives on a range of important issues, like baptism, wealth, leadership, etc, then our appropriation of scripture must be more cautious and more respectful of the detail of particular texts. And when we are not sure what scripture ‘says’, where do we lean or err? If we must take a stand on a matter on which scripture is not clear, as is clearly the case with homosexuality, then we must err; but in what direction do we err? In the direction of inclusion or exclusion? So I have often asked my dialogue partners where they think Jesus would

¹ For a fuller discussion and a more diverse range of scholarly work on these texts see K. Renato Lings, *Love Lost in Translation: Homosexuality and the Bible* (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2013).

² Walter Brueggemann, “Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel,” in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K Gottwald and Richard A Horsley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

err on the matter of homosexuality, given that Jesus says nothing at all about homosexuality. Would he err on the side of inclusion or exclusion?

Fourth, in working with the Bible I have been taught by marginalised communities to come at "the issue" obliquely. For example, the Ujamaa Centre quickly discovered in our work with people struggling to live positively with HIV that they were really not interested in biblical texts about leprosy. What they were drawn to were the biblical texts in which Jesus stood with the stigmatised of his day, over and against those who discriminated and stigmatized. So the recognition and solidarity of Jesus became the focus of our Contextual Bible Study work together.³

Around the issue of homosexuality, in the South African context where our Constitution and law provide for same-sex civil union, I have used the story of Peter preaching in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10:17-48). While our South African churches refuse to marry same-sex couples, the experience of Peter offers resources for a different response. When confronted with Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit, Peter declares: "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can they?" And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:46-48). When confronted with same-sex Christian couples who love God and are filled with the Holy Spirit, how can the Anglican church not declare: "Surely no one can refuse the sacrament of marriage for these homosexual couples who confess Christ and have received the Holy Spirit just as we heterosexuals have, can they?"

It is primarily with a focus on the third and fourth Bible reading strategy that I turn now, briefly, to a Contextual Bible Study that I am working on.⁴

The inclusive ethic of Jesus

The temple narrative in Mark's gospel (Mark 11:27-13:2) has long been an important text in the work of the Ujamaa Centre,⁵ identifying as it does the clear stand Jesus takes with those who are marginalised by the temple-city system of first century Palestine. We have focussed on the economically marginalised, but the temple-city system embodied a range of other forms of marginalisation.

In standing with the marginalised, Jesus took sides, standing over and against the temple leadership. The social and theological contestation between Jesus and the

³ Gerald O. West and Bongi Zengele, "Reading Job 'Positively' in the Context of Hiv/Aids in South Africa," *Concilium* 4(2004).

⁴ For fuller reflections on Contextual Bible Study see my other article in this volume, as well as <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za>

⁵ Gerald O. , "Do Two Walk Together? Walking with the Other through Contextual Bible Study," *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2011).

temple leadership is palpable throughout this text. And those looking on, the large crowd of ordinary people “was listening to Jesus with delight” (Mark 12:37). Jesus is advocating for an inclusive temple, over and against the Jerusalem temple with its exploitative and exclusive practices. Significantly, Jesus uses scripture, over and over again, to contend for an inclusive temple. He is not willing to allow the temple leadership to control what scripture “says.”

Among the various factions of the temple leadership who confront Jesus are the Sadducees. They are the focus of the following (preliminary) Contextual Bible Study.

The inclusive ethic of Jesus in Mark 12:18-27

1. Listen to a dramatic reading of Mark 12:18-27.
2. Who confronts whom in this text? Identify the key characters and what the text tells us about them.
3. Jesus says, twice (verses 24 and 27), that the Sadducees are “wrong.” What reasons does he give to explain to them why they are wrong?
4. While we know little about the Sadducees, biblical scholars and Jewish religious leaders are in agreement that they represented the ‘literalist’ religious group within Judaism in the time of Jesus. They believed only in the written law, the Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy), not the oral law which developed as a form of contextual interpretation of the Torah (the Talmud and Midrashim). So, as we see in this text, they did not believe in the resurrection, because it is not mentioned in the Torah. The main focus of their religious life was the rituals associated with the Jerusalem temple, which is why they confront Jesus. They understood that his presence was a threat both to their theology and to their temple. The Sadducees disappeared from history after CE 70, after the destruction of the Second Temple (Herod’s Temple). Their power base had been destroyed.

Trapped in their narrow understanding of the scriptures, the Sadducees were unable to recognise the new thing God was doing in Christ. Jesus wanted the temple to be “a house of prayer for all the nations” (Mark 11:17). He wanted the temple to be inclusive of all. Yet the Sadducees were using their leadership positions and the scriptures to exclude.

From your reading of the gospels, can you remember other instances where certain people are excluded from the Jerusalem temple? What do these people have in common?

5. Are there those in your church who use the Bible to exclude certain types or groups of people? Share examples from your own church context with each other.

6. Jesus advocates an inclusive theology and rejects those who advocate an exclusivist theology, arguing that they do “not understanding the scriptures or the power of God.” Do you think Jesus might be saying to those who exclude homosexuals, “You do not understanding the scriptures or the power of God?”

7. How can we work towards our churches becoming more inclusive of those on the margins?

Conclusion

This Contextual Bible Study is in a formative stage, so please do let me know if you use it. I would value your reflections on how it might become more useful in making our churches welcoming, affirming, and safe places for LGBTI Christians.

Further reading

- Brueggemann, Walter. "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel." In *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, edited by Norman K Gottwald and Richard A Horsley, 201-26. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.
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- West, Gerald O. "Do Two Walk Together? Walking with the Other through Contextual Bible Study." *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2011): 431-49.
- West, Gerald O., and Bongi Zengele. "Reading Job 'Positively' in the Context of Hiv/Aids in South Africa." *Concilium* 4 (2004): 112-24.

Contributors

Acknowledgments