

This message was prepared for the Tontogany Presbyterian Church by Rev. Pamela Short
The fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Ordinary time, the thirteenth day of July
in the year of our LORD two thousand and fourteen.

This is a topical message about same-sex marriage. "Gay" is used in its most general sense, and is meant to encompass a variety of sexual orientations, such as lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, queer and gay.

Because of the topical nature, I have drawn from a wide variety of scriptures for this message. They are offered here from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

Eight passages of scripture that mention some sort of same sex behavior:

Group One: Context: Stories of violent rape and the condemnation of it in the letter by Jude.

Genesis 19:1-29

1 The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. 2 He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." 3 But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. 4 But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; 5 and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." 6 Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, 7 and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. 8 Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." 9 But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. 10 But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. 11 And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. 12 Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. 13 For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it." 14 So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, "Up, get out of this place; for the Lord is about to destroy the city." But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting. 15 When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city." 16 But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city. 17 When they had brought them outside, they said, "Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed." 18 And Lot said to them, "Oh, no, my lords; 19 your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. 20 Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!" 21 He said to him, "Very well, I grant you this favor too, and will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. 22 Hurry, escape there, for I can do nothing until you arrive there." Therefore the city was called Zoar. 23 The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar. 24 Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; 25 and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. 26 But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. 27 Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord; 28 and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and

saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace. 29 So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.

Judges 19:1-30

1 In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. 2 But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months. 3 Then her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. When he reached her father's house, the girl's father saw him and came with joy to meet him. 4 His father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him three days; so they ate and drank, and he stayed there. 5 On the fourth day they got up early in the morning, and he prepared to go; but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, "Fortify yourself with a bit of food, and after that you may go." 6 So the two men sat and ate and drank together; and the girl's father said to the man, "Why not spend the night and enjoy yourself?" 7 When the man got up to go, his father-in-law kept urging him until he spent the night there again. 8 On the fifth day he got up early in the morning to leave; and the girl's father said, "Fortify yourself." So they lingered until the day declined, and the two of them ate and drank. 9 When the man with his concubine and his servant got up to leave, his father-in-law, the girl's father, said to him, "Look, the day has worn on until it is almost evening. Spend the night. See, the day has drawn to a close. Spend the night here and enjoy yourself. Tomorrow you can get up early in the morning for your journey, and go home." 10 But the man would not spend the night; he got up and departed, and arrived opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys, and his concubine was with him. 11 When they were near Jebus, the day was far spent, and the servant said to his master, "Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it." 12 But his master said to him, "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." 13 Then he said to his servant, "Come, let us try to reach one of these places, and spend the night at Gibeah or at Ramah." 14 So they passed on and went their way; and the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin. 15 They turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. He went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night. 16 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.) 17 When the old man looked up and saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city, he said, "Where are you going and where do you come from?" 18 He answered him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; and I am going to my home. Nobody has offered to take me in. 19 We your servants have straw and fodder for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and the woman and the young man along with us. We need nothing more." 20 The old man said, "Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square." 21 So he brought him into his house, and fed the donkeys; they washed their feet, and ate and drank. 22 While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him." 23 And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. 24 Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; 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." 25 But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. 26 As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light. 27 In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. 28 "Get up," he said to her, "we are going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home. 29 When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb,

and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. 30 Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, "Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.' "

Jude 5-7

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: 2 May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance. 3 Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. 4 For certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. 5 Now I desire to remind you, though you are fully informed, that the Lord, who once for all saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. 6 And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day. 7 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. 8 Yet in the same way these dreamers also defile the flesh, reject authority, and slander the glorious ones.

Group Two: Context: Holiness code from the Old Testament

Leviticus 18:22

22 You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13

13 If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

Group Three: Context: Apostle Paul's letters to new churches which included those coming out of Pagan worship practices. Please note that scholars disagree on the proper translation of words in these passages. Part of the problem is that in I Corinthians 6:9, Paul uses two Greek words that are not found anywhere else in either the New Testament or in other ancient Greek literature. (below those two words are translated "male prostitutes" and "sodomites")

I Corinthians 6:9-17

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, [users of pornography/prostitution] idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, 10 thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. 12 "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. 13 "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." 17 But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

I Timothy 1:8-12

8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. 9 This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, 10 fornicators, [users of pornography/prostitution] sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching 11 that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Romans 1:18-27

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; 21 for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 23 and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

The following stories do not deal directly with same-sex behavior, but rather provide a context for times when laws were changed.

Presbyterians look to the Council of Jerusalem in the following story for their decision making process:

Acts 15:1-31

1 Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. 3 So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. 8 And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; 9 and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. 10 Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11 On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." 12 The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. 15 This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, 16 "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David,

which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, 17 so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things 18 known from long ago.' 19 Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.

21 For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues." 22 Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, 23 with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, 25 we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." 30 So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.

The story of the Daughters of Zelophehad and inheritance laws
Numbers 27:1-11

1 Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hephher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. 2 They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, 3 "Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. 4 Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." 5 Moses brought their case before the Lord. 6 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 7 The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. 8 You shall also say to the Israelites, "If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. 9 If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. 10 If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. 11 And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses."

The story of sharing the Gospel with Gentiles
Acts 10-11:19

1 In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. 2 He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. 3 One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." 4 He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; 6 he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." 7 When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, 8 and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa. 9 About noon the next day, as

they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15 The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. 17 Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate.

18 They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. 20 Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." 21 So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" 22 They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." 23 So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. 24 The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. 26 But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." 27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; 28 and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" 30 Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. 31 He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' 33 Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say." 34 Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." 44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

1 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" 4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. 6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up,

Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' 10 This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; 14 he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" 18 When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Gay marriage and the Bible:

For some Gay Marriage is as odd as a purple cow
For others as obvious as stripes on a Zebra;
For some it is considered an outrage, a scandal;
For others it is pure and holy, nurturing and good.

Ironically, at a time when more heterosexual people are choosing to live in intimate relationships without a legally binding license and without the covenant of marriage within the church, gay people who have made a monogamous commitment to one another are seeking the right to be married, not only in the eyes of the state, but with the blessing of their faith community.

Their cries have awakened the church to take a fresh look at both their stories of disconnection, and fear, of abuse and misunderstanding
as well as Biblical narratives that have informed and have yet to inform our understandings of God's best for human intimacy.

Listen to a few stories... (these stories are all from people who are people I know)

Hi. I'm August.

From childhood, I have been faithful to a church that hasn't been particularly faithful to me or to my decades long partner. We met in church and have been blessed to live our life in communities that loved us, embraced us and hoped that I could serve them as a faithful pastor. Our regional denominational leaders would have nothing of it—neither of blessing our life together or pondering the notion that the Spirit may even call the likes of us.

Inherently, we knew God's Grace was sufficient. We knew when we were young that we should never enter into a marriage where we questioned our very nature. Instead, we chose the life of fidelity together. We remain puzzled by the obsession to our kind; perhaps hopeful that the Church will one day see how selectively and narrow scripture has been used to condemn us. We are more than a little fearful that children still have to face the same fears as countless others before them who knew that to be different was to be an alien from those they love and even brutalized by them and others. We offer peace from our home to yours--that your children may know the unconditional love of Christ.

Hello. I am Aubrey.

In 1975 I married my college sweetheart, and we left Ohio for North Carolina, where he went to Duke Divinity School. Starting in 1980, we began to struggle with his sexual orientation, which we defined as bi-sexual for quite a while. We—and especially he—spent a lot of time in therapy, and a lot of time in prayer. We loved each other. We were Christians. What could we do? In 1988 we finally separated and divorced. He had become more and more depressed, even spending three weeks in a psychiatric hospital, largely because of the lie he was living as he pretended to be a straight man. I agreed to the divorce when I recognized that in this marriage, neither of us was happy, and we were hurting our children's chance of happiness as well. To me, his orientation felt like an act of God: This is the way God created him, along with his blue eyes and his left-handedness, and there was nothing either of us could do to change that fact about him.

Good morning. I am Esmerelda.

My great aunts lived together for more than 65 years. They were nurses in the Army during two wars, beginning with the First World War. I loved to visit them when I was young – they had dogs, a lovely house by the beach and a phone that you could pick up and put to your ear like a megaphone. When I was in my twenties, my mother and I got into a huge fight about them. In her rage, she said, “Don't you know they are lesbians?” My response was, “It never occurred to me.” She said, “But they shared the same bedroom.” My response: “All I know is that they loved me”

I think of them when I visit my daughter and her partner, who have been married for longer than anyone else in my or their generation. Our family has learned about the stability of patient gentle love from my daughter and her wife. We have watched them go through horrible, long term illnesses with love incarnated. We have stood with them when they have survived flooding and when their hearts have been broken by the death of children. Did I mention that one is a chaplain in a pediatric oncology ward? And the other? A minister in a mainline denomination.

The most traditional approach to Gay relationships from a Biblical perspective goes something like this:

God brought a man and a woman together in the Garden of Eden. Whenever marriage is talked about in Scripture, a woman and a man are involved. Likewise some passages call out homosexual behavior as sin. Therefore gay marriage is not only an oxymoron, it is a relationship that cannot be blessed by God.

Now a more recent approach:

Yes, God brought a man and a woman together in the Garden of Eden. However, marriages beyond the garden were chiefly property transactions or at times political alliances. Thus to hold up examples of Biblical marriages any time after Eden makes for a murky application in our western context. Likewise, bible passage that have been used to condemn homosexual behavior as sin have been taken out of context and translated in ways that mislead the reader. Therefore, new studies are needed.

Now I know some who say no study is needed.

It is obvious that homosexuality is a biological predisposition and thus not a choice and therefore not to be condemned.

Others counter:

A predisposition is different than a behavior. No one, heterosexual or homosexual has a human need to act on their sexual urges. As a nurse, I would affirm that, contrary to popular belief, no one has ever died from not having sex.

Studies do show, however, that loving relationships, as defined as nurture and devotion, are needed if humans are to thrive.

My own thinking has evolved considerably.

I began with an understanding that homosexual behavior is sin. I was quite sure that the Bible made that clear. As an adult, I had the opportunity to enter into conversations over the years with a variety of gay men who were committed to Christ. Each of the men was in a long term monogamous relationship at the time of our conversation. What was obvious to me was that while they felt a wall of hostility between themselves and the church, there was no such wall between them and God. I asked myself, “How is it that people who are engaged in sinful behavior are at peace with God? How is it that they show evidence of the gifts of the Spirit, and not only the gifts, but more importantly the fruits of the Holy Spirit? love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) And so, after seeing their fruits of the Spirit, I asked myself, “What is sin?”

I had assumed sin was something that goes against God’s moral code. Jesus seems to challenge my limited definition. Jesus was constantly calling out the Pharisees about their sins, (Matthew 23) even though they kept the moral code perfectly. Jesus greater concern was in the realm of devotion to God and compassion for others. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Is it possible then, that sin is anything that keeps me from loving God and loving others?

The next thing someone pointed out to me was that Jesus is silent on the subject of homosexuality. Completely silent. While Jesus talks about money and poverty and marriage and divorce and fear and enemies and mercy and healing and prayer and peace, Jesus never brings up the topic of same-sex relationships. Well, some would say, Jesus doesn’t bring up the topic of cigarettes either, but that doesn’t mean smoking is good for us.

And so let’s move on to the passages of scripture that do speak about same sex behaviors. There are 8 such passages in Scripture.

I have printed them in your bulletin so that we can look at them in units. Three passages deal with violent gang rape, Genesis, Judges and Jude’s reference to Genesis. It is easy to see that these have nothing to do with two adults in a devoted, monogamous relationship.

The next set of scriptures have to do with worship and purity codes from Leviticus. Historically, the church has chosen to keep some of these codes and ignore others. It is interesting that sitting between the two verses listed are several other admonishments such as:

Don’t harvest the edges of your fields, but leave them for the poor (Leviticus 19:9)

You shall not eat anything with its blood in it—thus don’t order your meat rare (Leviticus 19:26)

You shall not shave the hair off your temples or cut your beard (Leviticus 19:27)

You shall not put two kinds of seeds in the same field (Leviticus 19:19)

You shall not wear a garment made from two different materials (Leviticus 19:19)

While there are some Jewish, some Islamic and some Christian groups who seek to live by the Levitical holiness code, most have chosen to keep some of the codes/laws and not keep other portions. If anyone wishes to study this further, I would be happy to do so.

The next set of scriptures all come from Paul’s letters to the churches. These churches were made up of both Jews and Gentiles, including those who were emerging from Pagan worship practices.

Good and faithful Biblical scholars are in disagreement about these texts. Some hold that all of these are talking about any same-sex act. For those who do, then any gay relationship, even when monogamous would not be allowed.

Other scholars say that the context of these verses is that God was seeking to protect the people of God from Pagan practices which included temple prostitution and Roman practices which included child sexual abuse.

It was a common practice in ancient cultures from Rome to China that older aristocrats would take a teenage male from a lower social class as his sexual tool. While the boy may receive food, clothing, shelter and even education, the motivation of the aristocrat was not to further the welfare of the child, but to satisfy his own sexual lust. This was all done out in the open with the full knowledge of the aristocrat's wife, family, associates and government. In fact, it was so commonly accepted in Rome, that the emperor would declare one day a year as a holiday for the boys. They were not to be used for sex on that day.

With God's concern for the poor and the helpless, it is not difficult to see that both the Old Testament and the New Testament would condemn such exploitation, even as we condemn child sexual abuse today.

The ancient culture's same sex practices, therefore, do not compare with today's practice of two consenting adults in a devoted, monogamous relationship.

[If you would like to look more closely at the scholarship and word studies of these passages, I will set up a class to do so.]

Are there any other ways of Biblically approaching gay marriage?
I believe there are additional approaches.

One other way, is to look at the stories in the Bible where new commandments were given. You heard one of those stories told at our celebration of my ordination. Despite the inheritance laws that said only males could inherit, the daughters of Zelophehad, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milka and Tirza, had the courage to ask for a way to survive; they had the courage to ask for a portion of the land; the same blessing that others who had men in their families were receiving. As you recall, Moses' response was to go ask God. God's response was that the daughters were right and a new law should be written.

In the New Testament, there are two stories where new commands are given. One is the church's struggle with whether or not Gentiles should have to undergo circumcision. Everything in the law said, yes they should. The disciples met together in Jerusalem, very much like the Presbies who gathered in Detroit not so long ago. Through prayer and debate, they determined that circumcision was not necessary to be a part of God's household of faith.

Another story is Peter's vision in Acts 10-11, the story told in the children's lesson. Something that had been clearly forbidden and seen as unclean, was now made clean. Peter was to eat, not so he could simply enjoy a wider variety in his diet, but so that he could better proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the God fearing Gentile, Cornelius.

This brings me to today's final approach. Is it possible that by blessing same sex monogamous relationships that the Gospel of Jesus Christ may actually be furthered?

For a case study, I would ask you to consider the church's stance toward divorce. While Jesus speaks clearly against divorce and remarriage (Matthew 5:31-32), the church has decided that not only shall we extend grace for the sake of those who are divorced, but that we should extend grace for the very sake of the Gospel. Can you imagine Tontogany Presbyterian without the gifts, without the faithfulness, without the spiritual fruit of those who have suffered divorce and those who have married divorced persons? Do we really want to say to our children and our world that the Resurrection power of Jesus Christ does not extend to people with broken marriages?

What we have noticed in our family members and friends who suffered divorce, is that despite the pain, life with God goes on in meaningful and rich ways of blessing. We have noticed that the gifts of our sisters and brothers who are divorced are vital to our community of faith both locally and around the world. We have decided and witnessed to the truth that we can better proclaim the Gospel of Jesus with the help of these members of the body of Christ than we can without them.

I believe that the same is true of our sisters and brothers who are of a different sexual orientation. The church has lost a great deal by excluding their gifts. In my own life I have received from them blessings of grace,

 patience,
 understanding,
 kindness,
 instruction in prayer;

I have been the beneficiary of their
 prayer support,
 their generosity,
 their gifts of hospitality.

It is my own conviction that their faithfulness to God and their faithfulness in their personal relationships bolsters the church's own faithfulness to Christ.

In a world bent over in fear and bitterness, cynicism and hostility, it is the Resurrection power of Jesus Christ that give us hope. This power shines with grace and glory; it shines through the mercy, the calling and the joy of all who live out God's gift of sexuality in peaceful and faithful relationships.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen

 And to you:
 May our God of steadfast devotion
 Chatter with you in joyful friendship
 Walk with you in graceful laughter
 And embrace you in
 Kindness
 Beauty
 Mystery
 And
 Peace

I am grateful to those who shared their stories and to the following resources:

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