

**“A New Thing?”**

**Matthew 5:17-20, Galatians 3:26-29, Isaiah 42:19**

**Collegiate Presbyterian Church**

**August 1, 2010**

**Sermons by Request: Same-Gender Marriage**

**I.**

Imagine with me that you are playing a card game.

The name of *this* particular game is “Church.”  
And let’s imagine that every time you are dealt a hand,  
you find you have the two of clubs.

The two of clubs means  
you have been dealt a same-gender sexual orientation...  
you have been dealt the gay card.<sup>1</sup>

So the question becomes: What are you going to do with it?

Holding that card in your hand.  
how are you going to play the game called “Church?”  
What you find is that the rules keep changing  
depending on which church you are in.

In one church, your two of clubs is a huge problem  
and according to their rules  
you should get rid of it as soon as possible.

It is a very, very bad card...  
and IF you choose not to discard it...  
IF you choose to hold on to it...  
the game is over for you: you lose.

The rules are different at the church down the street.

Like the first church,  
they see that gay card as a big problem,  
yet they also understand you can’t just decide to discard it.

Which presents a dilemma...  
because if the two of clubs is  
not something you can just get rid of,  
then all you can do is keep it close to your chest;  
especially if you feel called to be a leader in the church.

As long as you hide your card,  
you can still play the Church game,  
but if you decide to play it  
you know the attitudes toward you will change

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<sup>1</sup> This image is found on pp. 105-107 of William Stacy Johnson’s, *A Time to Embrace: Same Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006),

and they will never allow you to be a game leader.

Now, across town  
the players are much more accommodating.  
They know that anyone who is dealt the gay card  
has family and friends,  
neighbors and work associates.  
Though they also see the two of clubs  
as an unfortunate card to have  
and certainly wouldn't want it themselves,  
they do try to support you and help you to play it responsibly.

There are other churches, of course.  
At one, the players see your card  
as no different than any other card  
and think whoever has it  
should be treated like everybody else.  
And as far as being a leader,  
it doesn't matter what particular cards you hold...  
what matters is the gifts you exhibit  
as you play all of your other cards during the game.

Then there's one church  
that has looked at the rules of all the other Church games...  
and seeing how insensitive and unfair they are  
have decided it's best  
to just start over from scratch and write new rules.

And still another church  
will see your two of clubs  
as cause for gladness and celebration.  
You won't need to hide it,  
and you certainly won't need to leave the game  
or make up a whole new game.  
Just play your card  
in the most joyful and fulfilling way you can.

If you were to go to the vast majority of churches in Ames  
holding your two of clubs in your hand,  
here's what I think you will find.

In some you will hear  
your identity and behavior condemned from the pulpit,  
and you will be told to repent of it all.

In others, your same-sex orientation will be tolerated,  
but not your same-sex behavior.

In others, your orientation will be accepted...  
and within certain parameters your sexual behavior as well.

Just don't expect to ever be a leader there...  
and don't look to your pastor and congregation  
to consecrate your marriage if that is what you feel led to do.

Of course, there are Christian congregations  
that are open and affirming of gay life and love...  
and in Ames I know of at least two churches  
which will perform the rite of marriage for same-sex couples.  
Yet, for the persons who asked for this sermon that is simply not enough!  
Just because gay and lesbian persons have some "place to go" here in Ames  
does not mean we can ignore the question we are being asked:  
Will gay, lesbian, and other gender-varied persons  
find their place within the fellowship of this church?  
And more specifically, will those persons  
whose same-gender orientation is firmly established,  
and whose desire is to enter into exclusive,  
committed, lifelong relationships,  
will they find a blessing for their relationships here?<sup>2</sup>

I spent the lion's share of my sermon-writing time this week  
just deciding where we should go next...  
trying to discern what God's Spirit  
might be saying to and through me.  
And what I decided might be most helpful  
is simply to share with you what I heard the Spirit nudging me  
to think and talk and pray about.  
There are three things.

Even though we've been debating this question of same-gender marriage  
for over thirty years,  
it seems to me that Presbyterians  
have expended most of our time and energy  
wrestling with the question of ordination standards –  
with the question of who can  
and who cannot be leaders in the Presbyterian church.  
The advocates for full-inclusion have been pushing the church  
to recognize that Christ is present and alive in our gay brothers and lesbian sisters.  
And they are still pushing the church  
to affirm their deep faith and devotion and their spiritual gifts for leadership.  
And as you may know, as recently as last month,  
our General Assembly responded to this push  
by voting once again to change the language  
related to ordination standards in our Book of Order.  
However, what some folks are realizing  
is that in this thirty year struggle over ordination standards...

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.3. These are the fundamental questions Johnson seeks to answer in his excellent book.

over who is qualified to lead the church...  
we may have been putting the cart before the horse.

By that I mean

Presbyterians were being asked to recognize  
gay *leadership* in the church  
BEFORE most people had come to recognize  
gay *people* in the church.<sup>3</sup>

It has only been in recent years

that many Presbyterians have come to recognize  
who is sitting with them in worship  
and singing with them in the choir  
and serving with them on committees and at potlucks.

So in the push to ordain them as officers,

sessions and presbyteries were being asked  
to affirm the *leadership* of people  
that most Presbyterians neither recognized nor understood.

What's so difficult about this is

the bind it put gay and lesbian church members in;  
especially those who knew themselves to be called to ordination.

As Presbyterians we have very high standards of our leaders.

As it is in Scripture,

church leaders must exhibit exemplary character.

Yet, the reality for gay and lesbian folk

is that the church has had high expectations of them  
without offering them the opportunities to show they can meet them.

Again, especially for those members

whose sexual orientation is firmly established

and who are living in exclusive, committed, lifelong relationships,

there has been no publically acceptable way for them  
to show their love... their faithfulness... their character.

Now, please don't hear me saying that over the past thirty years

our church has been uniformly closed and uninviting.

It hasn't.

We have responded

as one might expect of a denomination  
which is "reformed and always being reformed by the Word of God."

There has been a mixture of

welcome and exclusion...

grace and law...

innovation and traditionalism.

Simply by welcoming gay and lesbian persons into church membership,

Presbyterians have pushed our church beyond the blanket condemnation

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, p.54-55

of some other Christian bodies.  
By providing the possibility of blessing gay unions,  
our church has tried to maintain a pastoral balance  
between affirming same-gender love and commitment  
and protecting the traditional definition of marriage.  
And then, just last month  
the General Assembly  
called on the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church  
to provide medical and pension benefits for those  
in committed same-gender relationships and their dependent children.  
However, our policies still prevent  
the full-inclusion of gay and lesbian persons  
in all aspects of the life of the church, including leadership.  
And by limiting marriage to a man and a woman,  
we continue to deny same-gender couples  
a context in which to live out their love and fidelity.

## II.

This leads to the second thing I want to share.  
The longer we wrestle with these hot-button issues,  
the more I'm convinced it's all about which questions we ask most often.  
Because the questions we ask  
tend to reveal what authority we appeal to most.

So let me ask you:

As a follower of Jesus Christ who seeks to know and do God's will,  
what is the most important question you ask  
when you think about same-gender marriage?  
What is the question you keep coming back to again and again?

Is it a question about what the Bible says?

And if so, are you a "The Bible says it! I believe it! And that settles it!"  
kind of person...

or are you more a "WWJD" ... "what would Jesus do?" person?

Is your main question about how marriage has been defined  
throughout the history of Judeo-Christian tradition?

Is your question about what the best scholarly minds  
are now saying about same-gender sexuality?

Is it a question about what to you seems to be fair and just and makes sense?

Is it a question about how your answer, whatever it is,  
will affect the real people you know and love?

What is the question you keep coming back to again and again?

The question I keep coming back to is

not whether all the traditional rules for sexual behavior are being kept...  
it is not about how our tradition has judged one form of sexual expression

as being superior to another.  
In fact, my question is not really about sex at all!  
When I think about human sexuality,  
what I want to know is: “What does this relationship signify about God?”  
What does this relationship  
in which sex is taking place  
signify about God’s intention for relationships?  
I want to know how any relationship, gay or straight,  
incarnates the faithfulness and love of God.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, I’m not the only one who starts here.  
Perhaps the most prominent asker of this question is  
the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams,  
who encourages us to take a step back and ask ourselves  
what the purpose of sexual desire is in the first place.<sup>5</sup>  
Why are we creatures who have been made with sexual desire?  
Some say it’s because desire eventually leads to sex  
which leads to procreation  
which is necessary for survival...  
and they have a point.  
Others say it is part of God’s good creation  
and is intended for our physical release and pleasure and enjoyment...  
they also have a point.  
But the answer Williams gives is that  
human sexual desire is about far more than procreation and physical pleasure,  
because at its depth it signifies the intensity of God’s desire for you and me.  
Especially when it is rightly ordered,  
our desire for another reflects God’s own passion for God’s own people.

What this does is to shift the focus away from sex  
and toward relationships...  
away from the “rules for sexual behavior”  
and toward a vision of relationships  
that are loving and faithful and give glory to God.

As I read the Gospels,  
this seems to be what Jesus spent a lot of his ministry doing.  
For if Jesus own example can be trusted,  
then following the Word of God...  
following God’s leading...  
does not always mean doing what is written in the book.

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, “Is There a Christian Sexual Ethic?” in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), p.143.

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams in “The Body’s Grace”, reprinted in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., edit., *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002) p. 309-321 and found online at

Instead, it sometimes means deviating from the book  
so that the Word of grace might be brought to life...  
so that the Word might become flesh and dwell among us.<sup>6</sup>  
Jesus was a teacher of the law...  
Jesus was keeper of the law...  
but even more, Jesus was the Savior  
who “made his entire life a sign that speaks for God.”  
He made his entire life a sign that speaks for God.<sup>7</sup>  
And the wonder of all wonders is this:  
what was happening in Jesus can happen in us.  
By the power of Jesus’ Spirit,  
we, too, can become signs that speak for God.  
Our loving, committed, conjugal relationships  
can speak of God’s mercy and faithfulness and love.

I realized that in some way,  
this is the message I preach in every sermon  
at every wedding I officiate:  
Our marriages can be signs that speak of God.  
And for me, the question is whether with integrity  
I could preach that same sermon...  
if rather than a man and a woman,  
it was two men or two women standing at the front of the church.  
My answer to that question is yes.  
Yes, by the grace of God an exclusive, committed,  
lifelong same-gender relationship  
can be a sign that speaks for God.

### III.

Now, having said that, the question is: “What’s next?”  
We all come down somewhere on these matters,  
even if that place is “I just don’t know what to believe.”  
My hope is that when you hear me say where I come down,  
you won’t think that I am abusing the enormous privilege of this pulpit.  
And I surely hope that any differences we may have  
on this or any other matter will not ultimately cause a break in our relationship.  
As your pastor that would truly grieve me.

But what I also hope is that wherever you come down,  
together we will continue to do our best to discern the mind of Christ.  
Because that is what this is all about.  
THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION for all of us is,  
“Where God is in all of this? What is God doing?”  
And as long as we keep on asking, “*Where is God?*”

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Where the Bible Leads Me,” in *Christian Century*, October 18, 2003, p. 59

<sup>7</sup> Williams, “Is There a Sexual Ethic?” p. 140.

and ***“What is GOD doing?”***  
I believe there is hope for us.  
Regardless of my “position” right now...  
regardless of where you come down  
on the “issues” of ordination standards or gay marriage...  
if we are humble...  
if we are teachable...  
if we are willing to be wrong and open being changed...  
if we are all asking “Where is God at work in this?”  
then there is hope...  
because it means that we still trust that God is with us...  
that Christ’s spirit is still at work in his church.

Week before last I had the chance to ride  
to presbytery meeting in Waterloo with Jeff Martin.  
Jeff is the pastor of our Presbyterian church in Ft. Dodge...  
like me, Jeff hails from the great state of Georgia...  
and like me, Jeff has a bit of a Southern accent.

It does me good just to hear him talk.  
Yet, over the couple of years since Jeff arrived,  
it has become quite clear that we are not of one mind  
when it comes to many of the issues facing our church.

Case in point... the last time the vote on ordination standards came through town,  
we stood up and said very different things on the floor of presbytery.

Yet, Jeff invited me to lead their stewardship campaign  
and preach their Consecration Sunday sermon last fall.

All to say that Jeff is my brother in Christ...  
he is becoming my friend...

and while on our ride home from Waterloo  
we were able to engage in a very honest and lively discussion  
about these matters before us today.

Each of us articulated our positions...  
each of us confessed to not knowing what to think or do about some things...  
we found concerns we share in common...  
we found places where we diverge pretty significantly.

But within a couple of hours of arriving back home,  
I received an email from Jeff just saying how much he enjoyed our conversation  
and looked forward to continuing it.

I immediately wrote him back, saying that I shared his sentiment...  
and thanked him for his friendship.

Sometime in the next year or so,  
our presbytery will again be asked  
to vote on ordination standards.

For the fifth time in fourteen years  
we will try to discern whether God is leading us

to change the language of our church constitution  
to open leadership in the church to all persons who  
“joyfully submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ  
in all aspects of life.”

And sometime in the next two years  
all churches and presbyteries  
are being encouraged to study  
both the majority and the minority reports  
of the special committee  
to study civil unions and marriage.

In other words, there is much work still before us.

My hope is that we can continue to do this work  
showing respect for one another...  
bearing teachable hearts,  
with all humility...

And always asking “Where is God in this?”  
What is God doing among us?