

**PRESENTATION OF THE REV. HUGH DONNELLY**  
**FORUM ON HUMAN SEXUALITY – SATURDAY, JANUARY 30, 2016**

I'm very glad to be with you today. I'm grateful to the Presbytery of Hamilton for being proactive on this topic. Events such as this are immensely helpful to the church: they give us a chance to ponder deep questions of theology & spirituality in a place other than a debating floor. It's easier for us to *hear* one another when the very purpose of the gathering is *listening*. And I am very grateful (and humbled) to have been asked to be a part of this event.

I have served faithfully as a practical theologian (a minister) within our denomination for 20 years. I take the bible seriously. I love scripture. I love wondering about scripture. I love exploring what might have been going on in the hearts and minds of those who wrote those sacred words, and what motivated them to express their faith—their understanding of God—the way they did, using the words, metaphors, and stories they used.

My love for scripture—and my study of scripture—has caused my understanding of God to evolve and grow in ways that I did not intend, in ways that have surprised me. And as I prepared for today, if I could say there's one theme that seems to have emerged from my reflecting on today's topic, it's this idea of *surprise*: as soon as when we think we have a handle on the divine, God pushes the boundaries we set and surprises us with something new.

I grew up on PEI, in a small, conservative town, and attended Sunday school at Kensington Presbyterian Church. We didn't really talk much about homosexuality in the church in those days: we were still recovering from the surprise that women should be permitted to be ordained. But if the topic of sexuality did come up, I would hear people quoting the typical scriptures, a practice called *proof-texting*, when a text is chosen to support an already established viewpoint.

So I grew up thinking that homosexuality was a sin. I never really questioned how those oft-quoted scriptures were actually *used* to support that particular theological viewpoint. I simply took it for granted that the texts must be right. Then, surprise! Rev. Berdan entered my life. She took the pulpit at Kensington when I was in my late teens, and she and I became good friends. And one day—I remember we were fishing for freshwater trout at a river down the road—we started talking—for some reason—about sexual orientation.

And during the conversation I remember saying to her, matter of factly, "Well, homosexuality is a sin." I naturally assumed that she would agree. After all, wasn't that obvious? Her response surprised me: "Are you sure about that, Hugh?" "Well, it says so in the bible, doesn't it?" I retorted. "It all depends on how you choose to read the bible," she replied.

That was a life-changing moment for me...I'll never forget it. I had never (really and truly) considered that there could be different ways of reading scripture. After that conversation, I began to listen more carefully to her preaching and teaching. And I discovered she was bringing something new to the church: she was helping us to explore the *context* of scripture *before* we jumped to the question *What does this text mean for me?*

In other words, she helped us to think about what the the words of scripture might have meant for the people who were writing them. What was going on to make them express themselves in that way? What were the authors' contexts: their cultural, social, political, theological contexts?

Fast forward to my first year in seminary at Knox College in Toronto. I became good friends with a Presbyterian minister, Tom. Tom was an awesome minister: Personable. Great preacher. Compassionate beyond belief. When he wasn't working at his church he was involved in downtown ministries helping street-people. As a freshman in seminary, I looked at him and said to myself, "That's the kind of minister I want to become."

Well, it was several months later I finally met his significant other, a person who happened to be a man. Tom told me that night that he had to come to trust me before he felt safe enough to introduce me to this individual who was central in his life, this person with whom he shared everything. Tom lived in constant fear of the church, because he knew that if his Presbytery discovered that he was living with a man, it could be devastating for him. Now over the next months I got to see Tom and his partner together—as a couple; I got to experience the genuine and deep love that they had for one another.

Today, whenever a couple comes to me and asks me if I will perform their marriage, I meet with them a few times and I watch to see how they interact with one another. And the question I have in the back of my mind is: "Does the love that this couple shares with one another reflect the kind of love which I believe God has for the world?" In other words, "Does what they share as a couple *add* love (which I always consider to be sacred) to the world?"

That question came to my mind as I saw Tom and his partner together. They really loved one another. In fact, the love they shared seemed more...loving!...than some of the heterosexual couples I knew at the time. They were monogamous. They were committed. My experience with Tom and his partner came as a surprise to me....because when I first got to know him as a human being and as a minister, I had no idea he was gay. And I'm glad it worked out that way, because in those days, if I knew someone was *gay*, then that would be my *definition* of them: *gay*.

Even before they were a *human being*, they would be *gay*. We do that to each other: categorize others, label people...Why? Because often we are afraid of people who are different. We don't understand them. And so we define *them* in categories which *we do not wish to be*. We feel we have some kind of power over someone when we can box-them-in in some way. It keeps them at arms-length from us. Assures us that we are not like them.

I would consider this human proclivity a symptom of our brokenness, and something which we need to confess. Jesus Christ, after all, came to reconcile us with one another. I got to know Tom as a *human being* before I was *able* to categorize him as *gay*. I witnessed—and indeed, was the recipient of—his God-given gifts for ministry before I was permitted an opportunity to have my own prejudices bring in to question the validity of those gifts. And, in turn, that experience enabled me to see the love he shared with his partner as an embodiment of divine love.

I'm grateful for that experience with Tom; I'm grateful that he allowed me to get to know him as a human being before he came out of the closet with me. But there is a flip side to that: isn't it tremendously sad that the *church*—of all the world's organizations—that the *church* should be the thing to be feared...I wonder what Jesus would say about that.

Now what happened to me next came as another surprise. I began to question my own understanding of scripture. I had grown up thinking I knew "what the bible said," and, for me, that meant quoting the often-cited biblical texts which were used as a guide for ethical issues. I heard other people say them, so I said them, too. But I said them without really learning about them.

So, I began ask myself some hard questions, then, like: "Have I been using biblical texts to support my own biases and prejudices?" The only way to find that out, would be to learn more about scripture; and considering today's topic, to learn more about the texts which are often used to condemn homosexual lifestyles.

I am, therefore, going to explore a few of those texts. What I share with you is a product of my journey, my attempts to understand scripture. I don't claim to present the "authoritative word" on these texts; rather I hope to show that multiple interpretations are possible, making the "authoritative word" elusive to all of us.

Leviticus 18:22 is one of those texts. The law (directed towards men in a patriarchal society) says: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." This law is part of a much larger collection of laws called the Holiness Code.

I once heard Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann speak, and he talked about two main streams of thought and theology which run through the Old Testament: one of them has an emphasis on *Purity*, another has an emphasis on *Justice*. And sometimes those two things come into conflict with one another. What happens when adherence to a law causes us to neglect the needs of the "orphan and the widow"? (in other words, the outcast, or the vulnerable people in society).

This law from Leviticus emerges from one theological way of thinking—the *Purity* stream of thought. Now the law itself is embedded in a whole series of laws on topics as diverse as: laws about what foods should be considered clean and unclean (did you know that pork, rabbits, camels, and rock badgers, are not to be eaten?); laws about how to deal with people who have skin diseases (they are to live alone and have little or no contact with the rest of the community); laws about bodily discharges (women who are menstruating—and anyone or anything they touch—are to be considered unclean; and if, for example she bleeds through a miscarriage, she is considered unclean, kept isolated, and can only return to the community after a sacrifice of two birds, to be killed as a *sin* offering); and laws about such things as sacrifices, how to harvest crops, how to handle slaves.

Now a little later on, there is a list of penalties for violations of such laws, and death is to be meted out to magicians, adulterers, those who offer gifts to pagan deities...the list goes on...I find it interesting that Leviticus 18:22 should be used so freely (today) as proof of divine condemnation of homosexuality lifestyle while so many other laws are completely ignored.

And the question I have is: What criteria does one use to determine the (present day) acceptability of one law, over the hundreds of others which we choose to ignore? Is it appropriate for us to be picky-&-choosy about the Levitical purity laws? Some of the laws are quite odd (and even humorous) when applied to our 21st century North American context because those laws reflect the thinking, the culture, the geography, the economy, and the theology of a people with a fundamentally different worldview than our own.

*Our* society is not a tribal, agricultural, patriarchal society which is ok with slavery, constantly at war with neighbouring cities, and suspicious of every ethnicity other than our own. The laws which they wrote—and which we receive in Leviticus—were created for their own particular *context*. It would be ludicrous for us to make the claim that those laws—as a set—should be lifted up from their own context, carried thousands of years later and thousands of kilometers away, and plunked down into a completely different context and agree that they are equally appropriate for us. No one would suggest such a thing. It's laughable.

So, what makes it appropriate for us to extract selective portions of those laws—such as the one condemning homosexual acts—and agree that this one applies equally in our context? What criteria are we using to make that decision?

And another thing that I think is important to look at: What did *homosexuality* mean to the drafters and enforcers of that law? And did it mean the same thing to *them* as it does to *us*? I do not believe that the word homosexuality *did* mean the same thing to them as it can mean to us.

Take the example I gave earlier of my acquaintance Tom. Here we have a gay couple, in a *committed* relationship, in a *monogamous* relationship, where there is an *equal sharing* of power (no power abuse involved) —it's consensual in every respect. I strongly suspect that *that* definition of homosexual relationship would not even have been considered a *possibility* in the days Leviticus was written. No one could have imagined such a relationship.

If this is possible, then, is it fair for us to use this text as a condemnation of *all* forms of homosexual relationship as *we* understand it in our context? I don't think it *is* fair to do so. I think it's akin to using scripture as a weapon. Wielding a sword. Is that what the church is called to do?

In the New Testament, very little is said about human sexuality, and when it *is* said, it comes from Paul, not from Jesus. There is, however, one passage from the gospel of Mark which is often used to support an understanding of biblical marriage. It's Mark 10:6, where Jesus says, "But from the beginning of creation, God made them, male and female; for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife..."

Now this passage is *not* a passage about homosexuality. It's a passage about relationship and divorce. The context of the story is: some lawyers are attempting to draw Jesus into a debate. Their argument concerned a particular law relating to legal divorce, an obscurely worded law found in Deuteronomy, and how that law should be interpreted. One side said that divorce should be permitted for one reason and one reason only: *infidelity*." And the other side said that the grounds for divorce could be anything at all, not just infidelity.

One day they tried to draw Jesus into the debate. "So what do you think Jesus? Divorce for unfaithfulness, or anything at all?" Jesus thought both sides were way off track. And to support his view, Jesus quoted a story from Genesis: "*At the beginning of creation, God made them male and female...What God has joined together, let no one separate.*" True to form when Jesus was invited to join in on a debate, he always seemed to come way out of left field, bringing a fresh, unexpected, and surprising perspective that knocked everybody off guard. And this time, Jesus answered their question by quoting a passage from the creation story in Genesis; he was quoting a *story*, a *poem*, a *song*... not a law-book!

I think what Jesus is doing here is changing the focus of the whole argument. You see, for years the topic the lawyers had debated was *divorce*. *Divorce* was the center of their attention and discussion. Their assumption, of course, was that divorce was a completely acceptable practice. Jesus, however, cut right to the heart of the issue and challenged the acceptability of that very assumption. Is divorce really and Ok thing to do? he asks. Is it a practice *approved* by God? Jesus changes the focus (of the debate) from the subject of *divorce*, to the subject of *right relationship*.

Jesus was changing the focus (of the debate) from the subject of *what the law allows* to the subject of *what God may desire* for a relationship. The Pharisees were so busy arguing over the grounds for

getting *out* of a relationship that they forgot to ask themselves what God intended for a human relationship in the first place. And so Jesus reminded them: In the beginning, God created all that is. And it was out of great love that God designed the universe; out of great love God designed humanity. And God's desire and intention was that everything in the created order would reflect that love, thrive in God's goodness.

Jesus reminded them that it was God's hope that divine love would *fill* all relationships that exist between people: relationships such as marriage and partnerships; friendship between peers; family ties between parents and children, sisters and brothers. All relationships would be characterized by deep love. I think it does a great disservice to this text to remove it from its relationship context – its *spirit* rather than *letter of the law* context – and make the claim that it somehow demonstrates divine disapproval of loving, homosexual relationship.

Also interesting to me is how so many people (who use that text) choose to ignore the verses which follow in which Jesus appears to *prohibit* divorce and states that those who divorced are committing adultery. To overlook that explicit part of the text and in the same breath say that this passage points to a prohibition of gay relationship seems terribly ironic to me. We remain quite selective in what we choose to pay attention to in scripture.

And as for the passage from Genesis 1: it is a poem, a song, a description of an ancient people's understanding of the order of the universe and God's role in creation. Genesis 1 piece of artwork, not a sexual law-book. And Genesis 2 is an etiological story, a story which was an expression of an ancient people's understanding of why the world was the way it was. It was never intended to be read as a prescriptive, or proscriptive, story regarding human sexuality.

Now, on to Paul...One of the more commonly quoted texts condemning homosexual activity comes from the book of Roman, in the first chapter. Paul includes a description of general human sinfulness, saying "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth." Further on, he adds: "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless."

This text is the one from the New Testament which some people see as the clearest divine judgment against homosexuality, and indeed, homosexuals. Is this the only way of reading this text, however? Is it a responsible use of scripture to lift out those few verses—which were written with particular social, political, religious, and theological contexts in mind—to move them across time and space, drop them into a completely different sets of contexts, and make the claim that apply as directly?

I don't believe it is a responsible use of scripture to do such a thing. We do not know precisely what Paul had in mind when he wrote those words. Was he including—in his condemnation—one of the ways *we* can think about homosexuality: that is, committed, monogamous, consensual relationship between two people of the same sex? We don't know. But I suspect not.

There seem to be no Greek or Hebrew words that describe *our* understanding of committed gay relationship. Paul condemns *μαλακοι*, and *ἀρσενικοῖται* in 1 Corinthians 6. The first word is translated *soft* (whatever that means in reference to sexual practices). And the second word is very rare and seems to mean – inferring from ancient Greek texts since it appears nowhere else in the NT – “a corruptor of boys.”

It was not an uncommon practice among the Greeks for older men to groom younger men by (among other things) engaging in sexual relations with them. Certainly not consensual, certainly not an equal-power kind of relationship. To assume that these Greek words refer to *all* homosexuality (thinking in particular about the kind of relationship Tom & his partner have) is a big jump, an inference which may not be at all justified by the text.

But let's get back to Romans. Now what's interesting about the way we tend to read Chapter 1 of Romans, is that we ignore Chapter 2. [I gleaned some interesting information about Romans from Prof. Katherine Grieb of Virginia Theological Seminary, in her book *The Story of Romans*]

The church in Rome was a mixture of Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians groups. And these two groups probably didn't always get along so very well. They had trouble understanding each other, and would make harmful judgments about the other (the way people quite naturally do when having to be in community with those of radically different cultural and religious backgrounds. Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity were very different flavours of the faith).

Now in Chapter 1 of Romans, we have this lengthy description of human sinfulness. Well, why would Paul start his letter in this way? According to Grieb, this chapter is directed to the Jewish Christians in Rome, because this chapter describes the typical Jewish prejudices of the “sinful gentile.” Paul is playing a bit of a game with his readers here in Chapter 1; he's painting a picture of the sinful gentile which he knows they will agree to! He's eliciting from them their proclivity to judgment! And that's exactly what Paul wants to do. He's hooking them and they don't know they're being hooked!

So after those Jewish Christians shout “Preach it, preacher!” Paul says something startling in Chapter 2: he says: “Aha! Gotcha!” Paul then holds up a mirror to those judgmental Christians. And then, in the opening verses of Chapter 2 he says: “You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another, you are condemn yourself.”

Much of the rest of Romans is a discussion on how the Jewish Christians can actually see that the gentiles are included in God's grace. This text not only springs a trap on those of us —whoever we are—who are inclined to pass judgment on others without recognizing the extent of our own sinfulness, it also raises serious doubts about whether anyone will be found righteous in the sight of God.

Romans 1 & 2 are intended to make us humble. Richard Hays of Duke Divinity School says: “Paul's warning should transform the terms of our contemporary debate about homosexuality: no one has a secure platform to stand upon in order to pronounce condemnation upon others. Anyone who presumes to have such a vantage point is living in a dangerous fantasy, oblivious to the gospel that levels all of us before a holy God.”

Throughout Romans, Christians are called to *faithfulness* to God's will as best we can discern it; and to *humility* as we think about the judgment of God that we all face; and to *charity* for those with whom we must reluctantly disagree on this admittedly complex and controversial issue. With this

alternative interpretative possibility in mind, maybe Beverley Gaventa (formerly of Princeton Theological Seminary) has it right when she says: that to use Romans chapter 1 verses 18 to 32 “to justify the exclusion of persons who are homosexual would be the *greatest* distortion of Romans and its claims about God’s radical and universal grace.”

When it come the work of the Spirit of God, Paul’s theology is a perfect example of how divine transformation can come as a surprise. Paul took the Hebrew scriptures very seriously. And yet, after his conversion, Surprise!—something new was happening. Paul was able to reinterpret those scriptures in ways that allowed for a greater inclusivity (an inclusivity which was appropriate for his context). To have gentiles welcomed at the table was a radical departure from traditional Jewish thought. But thankfully Paul was open to seeing how God might be redrawing the maps.

I’d like to spend a bit more time on this subject of inclusivity of the gentiles. You and I take for granted that we are a part of God’s household. But we need to remember that the church started as a *Jewish* movement. And the decision to open the doors to gentiles came as quite a surprise!

There’s a story in the Book of Acts which I think is important for us to pay attention to because I believe it pertinent to our discussion on the dimension of inclusivity which is facing the church today. It’s the story of Peter’s vision in Acts, Chapter 11. To provide a bit of background: at this point in the history of Christianity (the very, very first years), the church pretty well existed only in Jerusalem. In the book of Acts we learn that after the resurrection, the church was born. And the disciples got to work continuing Jesus’ ministry, and the church began to grow. But at first, the church stayed within the umbrella of the Jewish faith.

Christianity, at first, was considered a sect (or a branch) of Judaism. As a result of this, the membership of that new-born church was made up of Jewish converts; there were no Gentile names on the official church roll. And these converts were faithful Jews who continued to obey the laws of Judaism. Like the dietary laws. Laws which our friend Peter, a faithful Jew, upheld religiously. These dietary laws were serious laws, telling the Jews not only *what* to eat and what *not* to eat, but also who it was Ok to eat *with*. And it was *not* Ok—*never* Ok—to eat with Gentiles.

Israel had endured centuries of scorn and persecution by lovingly adhering to these laws. The laws helped keep them distinct, separate from their Gentile neighbours. And the fear was, if Jews began to ignore these dietary laws —and began to eat with Gentiles—then they might forget their identity as God’s people. But then it happened.

*Surprise!* One day, as Peter was deep in prayer, the Spirit intruded. Peter had a vision, and in that vision something like a large sheet —a tablecloth perhaps?—was being let down from heaven. On the sheet were all kinds of different animals: cattle, pigs, snakes, birds, lobster. And Peter heard a voice, “Get up, Peter. Eat.” “No way!” said Peter, upset by the suggestion that he eat animals such as these, because some of those animals were *unclean*, forbidden according to Jewish dietary laws. (Remember, even though he was a follower of Jesus, Peter was still a faithful Jew.) But the Spirit was persistent, and the voice & the vision came to him 3 times: “Get up, Peter. Bon appetite!”

When Peter awoke from this vision, he heard a knock at his front door. Several people were there waiting to take him to the home of a man named Cornelius. But Cornelius was a *Gentile*, a member of the very army that was opposing Israel at that time. Well, Peter went, met Cornelius, and was surprised to discover that this was no chance meeting. The Spirit had sent Peter there. And during his short visit, Peter did two things which would forever change the course of church history: he *ate*

with Cornelius. he *baptized* Cornelius, What? A *Jewish* Christian *eating* with a *Gentile*? ...*baptizing* a *Gentile*?

Peter came to realize that the vision he saw was not really so much about unclean *food* as it was about unclean *people*. "Don't call unclean anything I have created," said the voice. Peter was taking a *very* dangerous step here, because the church had not seen anything like this before. And it was a crisis!

The church members back in Jerusalem were *furious* with Peter for doing such a thing. They hurled criticisms at him: "Peter, are you out of your mind? What's the big idea, eating with Gentiles, baptizing Gentiles? Smarten up, you're rocking the boat. We've never done it this way before." The new-born church was terrified. It did not like being surprised like that. The boundaries which the church had established for itself were beginning to crumble before their very eyes.

All the church had ever known was it's predictable, Jewish existence in Jerusalem. But Peter had jeopardized all of that. Now *Jew* was mixing with *Gentile*. Now in his defense, Peter told the church leaders about the vision he had seen. "It wasn't my idea," he said. "It came as a surprise! It was *God's* idea that Gentiles should have a place in the kingdom."

This was hard for the church to hear. It came as a shock. (But sometimes God has to use the shock method with this broken thing we call *church*.) Such can be the power of the Holy Spirit. Bold, disruptive, unsettling—surprising! The spirit forced the church to think about God differently, to think about its ministry differently. Since day one the church has had to deal with surprise after surprise. And the church has had to learn to be surprisingly *flexible* as the circle of God's grace has grown wider and wider in newer and newer contexts.

This story from Acts has been a profound one in shaping my own theology of inclusivity. If there's a theme that occurs over and over in scripture, —especially in the stories of the life of Jesus—it's that God challenges our understanding of who's an *insider* and who's an *outsider*. Story after story (both in the Old Testament and the New Testament) illustrate this radically expansive and inclusive nature of God. God always seems to be a few steps ahead of the community of faith.

Since day one the church has been confronted by issues —big issues—large enough to tear the church apart, but which ended up being opportunities for the church to express faithful discipleship. Such evolutionary moments in the life of the church are difficult, because some of us *like* to think of the church as a place of stability, a place where change doesn't happen too often. But really, if there's something we *can* say about the church, it's that it is definitely *not* unchangeable. The church is *forced* to change. It's been that way since day one. And I'm glad for that.

I sometimes hear people say that they are opposed to full inclusion (of those from the LGBTQ communities) because they wish to uphold traditional views of scriptural interpretation, perhaps believing that the mission of the church has been one thing and one thing only. My response would be that the church is constantly in the process of redefining itself. It's never been one thing only, permanent, unchangeable. As I've attempted to communicate today, the church has been surprisingly flexible in re-evaluating its mission, its understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit.

One of the great themes of scripture is God's holy "Surprise!" Take the disciples. At times they were pretty sure they understood Jesus, but time-after-time they got it wrong, and had to be surprised into deeper faithfulness.

Take the nascent church (in my example earlier) which was surprised into a place of greater inclusivity. Or take even Paul. I remember in seminary reading his letters in chronological order, fascinated to discover his evolution of theological understanding. He was not the same kind of thinker at the end of his life as he was at the beginning. (Maybe the surprising born-again experience he had on the road to Damascus didn't happen just once...I think he was born again—in gentler, subtler way—time after time throughout his life, causing him to change, grow, evolve, mature.)

The church has had to be surprisingly flexible in reevaluating its mission. And this has been the case even since the closing of the canon, a gesture which might imply permanence, definition, parameters. The church has changed. It's had to change. For a long time the church thought slavery was acceptable...Surprise! And that women should not be ordained as ministers of Word & Sacrament...Surprise!

In my Presbytery, there are those who believe that inclusivity of those from LGBTQ communities shouldn't even be discussed. "We decided that in 1994!" they say. What makes them think that the church knows the final word on this matter? Do they imagine that Spirit-led transformation has ceased? As the church, though history, has attempted to be faithful to God, there always has seemed to be this prodding—this incessant prodding—of the Holy Spirit, prodding which has continually pushed the church out beyond its comfort zone and disturbed its state of (apparent) contentment.

In the first sermon Jesus ever gives (in Luke's gospel) he challenges the people in the synagogue that day to ponder two examples of God's radical inclusivity: that of God's grace being poured out upon the widow of Zarephath (a woman, and a foreigner) and that of God's healing of the leper Naaman (a military leader of an enemy army). Now you know the story: how do the good folks respond to Jesus' sermon? They run him out of town. How dare Jesus draw God's circle wider than they were comfortable with...And so Jesus spends the rest of his days *with* the very people he preached about: those who were considered outsiders, outcasts, unclean, unworthy. He spent time with lepers, told parables about good *Samaritans* (who were foreigners); called corrupt tax collectors to follow him; spoke out on behalf of the poor; lifted up the work of women and children (who were considered nobodies in that day); challenged *consistently* the theology of the day that said: "We *know* who's in, we *know* who's out, we know who's clean, we know who's unclean."

If I'm to be faithful to God as a disciple of Christ, I need to hear that challenge in *my own context*. Who are the people today whom we consider outsiders? Slaves? Women? Lobster fishermen? No. (At *one* time they may have been, but the church—thankfully—decided to practice the same kind of surprising flexibility as it had in Peter's day.)

So who, for us today, would we say is outside of full embrace of God, or the church? Right now, our denomination says that my friend Tom is outside the full embrace of God. Right now, our church says that the love he shares with his partner cannot be a reflection of divine love in the world. Right now, our church says that Tom has to choose between either (1) expressing love with his partner (2) or expressing his love for people as a minister. By maintaining its present stance on homosexuality, the church is consciously choosing *to limit loving expression in the world*, (repeat: to put limits on love.)

This truly boggles my mind. And it breaks my heart. This, in a world which so desperately needs as much love as it can get? There are so many stories of Jesus releasing people from oppression,

setting them loose to live in community, to share love, to be a full part of loving expression with those around them. He restored them to a state of *wholeness*, where the various parts of an individual became integrated, including the physical and the spiritual.

Maybe this integration even included the various kinds of love people experience: agape (Godly love, compassionate love) phileo (friendship love, familial love) and eros (sexual love). When expressed (in a healthy way) all of these expressions of love I would consider to be sacred manifestations of divine love.

I can't imagine being told that I have to choose which of those of those sacred loves I want to share (at the expense of the other) because I'm not allowed to love in those ways simultaneously. This is so important to me I'll say it again: Right now, our church says that Tom has to choose between either (1) expressing love with his partner (2) or expressing his love for people as a minister.

By maintaining its present stance on homosexuality, the church is consciously choosing *to limit loving expression in the world; it's putting limits on love*. This truly boggles my mind. And it breaks my heart. I hope that I've made myself clear that I do not believe that the Bible is clear on the topic of consensual, equal-power, loving same-sex relationship. I don't believe that any one of us can say—with absolute certainty—that we hold exclusive access to the mind of God.

There have always been—and always will be—different ways of reading, understanding, and interpreting scripture. I heard this referred to once as the *hermeneutic of humility*, by which I mean that all interpretation of scripture is provisional and made in the knowledge that many other, equally serious, interpretations are possible.

Indeed, since the reading of Scripture is always made from the point of view of readers located in different times and cultures, the ongoing interpretation of the typical text is necessarily open ended. And when we reach an understanding of scripture, we must realize that another person may already have, or is about to have, an interpretation that does not fit with ours. This pluralism of texts and interpretations is, of course, really quite obvious. But nevertheless, the church has still struggled to acknowledge it.

Take, for example the differences between the Gospels. We celebrate these differences because the Christian instinct has, at its best, been pluralistic. The Bible does not contain a unified theology; it contains the words of a many different people who came to very different conclusions about who God is and how we are to live with one another.

Scripture is a *written witness* to contextual understandings of God. It cannot be reduced to a single theological message. So I don't believe the Bible presents us with a ready-made dogma; it's an ongoing conversation. And it will mean something different to the church in every context of its life. Having said that, I believe that scripture points us in the direction of *love*. That's what I learn from Jesus. Where love can be found, there is God. And I believe it's time for the church to be surprised yet again and to widen the circle so that it includes all dimensions of my friend Tom's loving life, because I believe the love shared between any people in committed, consensual relationships can—indeed—be beautiful reflections of the love of God at work in our world.

I've tried to communicate to you my understanding that the Bible is not clear on the subject of committed, consensual, homosexual relationship. The fact that we are here at all today is proof of

that. We don't have all the answers. Who possesses absolute truth? Certainly not me. And not you either.

And with all respect to the epistle of Ephesians, the theme of this event – “Speaking Truth in Love” – suggests that someone here does have access to ultimate truth. In his opening comments, Clyde said as point #9: “all biblical interpretation is fallible.” Do I speak ultimate truth? I cannot make this claim. Do you?

Perhaps what we are doing together today—rather than *speaking* truth in love—is *seeking* truth in love. So, for me, there exists this place of ambiguity. But in the midst of this ambiguity, I still need to make a decision on the matter. And so I choose to use as my model for decision making my understanding of the life of Jesus Christ, who was radically inclusive. As far as the authority of Jesus goes, I will use his example—his leveling of the playing field on us all—to remove me from the place of judgment when it comes to expressions of mutual, consensual, sacred love. We have the (1) radical inclusivity of Jesus, paired with (2) this Biblical ambiguity on the topic at hand.

And so I am compelled to lean in the direction of grace, open to the possibility that this day and age might be yet one more example of the Holy Spirit surprising the church with wider grace. In humility, I'm going to make my decision *leaning in the direction of grace*. If I'm going to make a mistake—if I err—I will err on the side of grace.

Thank you for listening.