

Today's sermon is the final part of our three-part series on same-sex relationships. So far we've mostly focused on the five Bible passages that most directly talk about same-sex relationships.

We've looked at Romans 1, where Paul's main point is that any conversation about ethics and judgment has to start with me, that I need to look to my own sins and let God deal with others. And I talked about the difficulty with the voices of Romans 1, the possibility that chapter 1 is a rhetorical set-up where Paul isn't speaking for God or himself, but rather mirroring the biased perspectives of his audience so that he can correct them in chapter 2 and beyond.

We've looked at the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, which I understand to be a story about gang rape and abuse of power, not at all about a relationship of love and commitment.

We've looked at the prohibitions of the Old Testament Law against male-with-male sex and other laws around sexual practices in Leviticus 18 and 20. These laws were central in the ancient Jewish understanding of the purpose of sexuality and, more importantly, their identity as a people. However, to vastly oversimplify things, in the New Testament, Jesus and his followers talked about a new identity of the People of God, grounded in Spirit and Love rather than Law. And they talked about a new standard for sexual behaviour, and for all Christian ethics, so that the Law has been set aside for the higher standard of Spirit and Love.

We looked at 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, and 1 Timothy 1:5-10 as examples of this new identity of God's People. Although Paul points to some kind of male-with-male sex--and there are serious translation issues around whether that is all male-with-male sex or just a specific situation—Paul was pointing that out as a former way of thinking, a past identity that has been washed away as Christians take on a new identity in Jesus. I said that Paul doesn't see straight Christians and gay Christians, Paul sees simply Christians, who are free to make choices about life, and sexuality, on the basis of what is loving and healthy and good for the church.

## The Bible says...?

Romans 1-2: "You the judge are doing the very same things..."

- is Paul voicing the biased views of his audience?

Genesis 19: Sodom and Gomorrah

- how is a story of brutal violence relevant to our situation?

Leviticus 18 and 20: "Do not defile yourselves... I am the Lord your God"

- do the old rules apply under the new standard of love?

1 Corinthians 5-6: "This is what you used to be...but you were washed in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ"

- what does it mean to honour God with our bodies?

1 Timothy 1 – "the aim of the law is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith."

- what place does the law have when we live in love?

And that brings us back to Romans again, where I see Paul describing a gospel of true freedom, a deep grace where God is present with sinners, where we are set free from condemnation to pursue that path of love over Law.

It's all so simple; I can't believe it took me almost an hour to say that the first time.



There is an endless amount of depth to go into there. There are lots of other things to consider, and there are other ways to read these texts faithfully.

There's also another other angle to consider in this. Now, "Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve" isn't particularly subtle... but there is a decent rationale behind it.

Ron Sider is a Mennonite theologian, one of those very smart people who happen to disagree with me. You may have seen his article "A Biblical and Better Way" in the latest *Canadian Mennonite*. In that article, Sider writes this:

*The primary biblical case against homosexual practice is not the few texts that explicitly mention it. Rather, it is the fact that again and again the Bible affirms the goodness and beauty of sexual intercourse — and everywhere, without exception, it is sexual intercourse between a man and a woman committed to each other for life.*

*In the creation account in Genesis, the "man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame" (Gen. 2:25). Their sexual attraction is good and beautiful. A whole book — Song of Solomon — celebrates the sexual love of a man and a*

woman. Many Old Testament laws and proverbs discuss the boundaries for sexual intercourse — and always it must be between a man and a woman. Jesus celebrates marriage (John 2:1-11) and tightens the restrictions on divorce — again, always in the context of a man and a woman. Paul urges a husband and wife to satisfy each other’s sexual desires (1 Cor. 7:1-7).

This affirmation of sex within the life-long commitment of a man and a woman provides the context for understanding the few texts that explicitly mention same-sex intercourse: Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10.

<http://www.canadianmennonite.org/articles/biblical-and-better-way>. Jan 14, 2015)

In other words, if the Bible describes marriage as between one man and one woman for life, and all sexual activity outside of marriage is sinful, then same-gender sex cannot be within marriage and so by definition is sinful.

Fair enough, that’s solid logic. But is that really what the Bible says about sex and marriage—“everywhere and without exception” as Sider says? I think that’s an incomplete picture. To consider that, let’s take a look at the history of marriage in the Bible.

We’ll start at the very beginning, a very good place to start... Genesis chapter 2:

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it...

<sup>18</sup>Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." <sup>19</sup>So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air... but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. <sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup>And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup>Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;

this one shall be called Woman,<sup>[e]</sup>

for out of Man<sup>[e]</sup> this one was taken."

<sup>24</sup>Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. <sup>25</sup>And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

There we go, God made Adam and Eve, that settles it. But that’s not the end of the story.

This is a story about *shalom*. You may remember a while back we talked about sexuality as a search for *shalom*, “nothing broken and nothing missing.” Here in

the midst of God's good creation, God notices a something not good, that the man is alone. The *adam* is incomplete. And so God creates helpers for the *adam*. First the animals, but that doesn't satisfy what the man needs. And so God reaches into the man, and transforms the internal to the external to create Woman, as one who is like the man in order to satisfy his longing.

And so, two become one flesh. This is the picture of shalom—there is now nothing broken, nothing missing.



But like I said, the story doesn't end there. It's but a paragraph later that the man and the woman are made aware that they still have desires, they're still missing something. And so they take the forbidden fruit and eat, and suddenly realize that they're also broken, and they're ashamed. And quickly they turn on each other, at least the man does, and their perfect relationship sours.

God tells them of the consequences of what they've done, and for the woman it's pain in childbirth, and the power of her husband over her. And the man has to deal with thistles and stuff. ☺ (There's a slight power imbalance, and we'll get to that in a minute.)

What just happened? Where's the *shalom*? We have man and woman, but now there is shame, and conflict, and pain, and frustrated desires and power dynamics. Two become one? Only for a moment.

That story carries on for centuries. The Father and Mother of God's People, Abraham and Sarah, what a relationship. They use sex to get what they want, from their neighbours, from each other, from God. Isaac and Rebekah, from all accounts

a faithful and loving relationship, their story ends with Rebekah deceiving and manipulating her husband on behalf of her favourite son. Moses fought with his wife. The royal families of Israel and Judah were famously cavalier with their marriages and their sexual activity. Ezra and Nehemiah, priest and prophet of the Jews on the return of the Jews to their homeland after the Babylonian exile, Ezra and Nehemiah ordered, in the name of God, all of the men who had married non-Jewish women to leave those families in order to make new marriages with Jewish women.

And there are many other stories of sexual exploitation and marriages gone wrong.

My point is that a significant part of the biblical story is that male-with-female sexual activity does *not* bring *shalom*. In large part, it's about the futility of sexual activity outside of the covenant of love, for sure. But part of the story is also that, even within a faithful marriage, *shalom* is fleeting. The whole picture isn't just that heterosexual sex within marriage is goodness and beauty. It certainly is, and Sider is right to emphasize the celebration of the Song of Songs. Heterosexual sexuality in marriage *is* good and beautiful, but it's also full of this other stuff: selfishness, temptation, manipulation, unfulfilled desires, even loneliness and rejection. It's incomplete; it's not *shalom*.



Another piece that Sider's depiction of biblical marriage leaves out of the picture is whose story this is. This jumped out at some of you right away in the Genesis 2 story. In this story, it's the Man who is made in the image of God, and it's Adam's loneliness that God is concerned about. So the animals are made to fill the needs of

man, then the woman made out of man in order to complete the man. Even this Garden of Eden ideal of *shalom* begs the question: *shalom* for whom?

It's a male-dominated story in a male-dominated world. We've already seen this in Genesis 3, where the consequence of sin for the woman is that she's to be defined by her relationship to her husband and her children, where the man, while he has to work harder, still has the right of self-determination through his accomplishments.

This power imbalance really stands out in the Leviticus 18 text we looked at last week. The Law was written by men for men. Men are the active partners in sex: they do the lying and taking and bedding. Men are the active partners in marriage: they give their daughters to other men, they take foreign wives as plunder in battle, they fight the temptation to take another man's wife. Women are passive, property to buy and sell in marriage, empty vessels to be filled in procreation.

And that plays out in the rest of the Old Testament narrative. One of the only ways a woman can gain power over men is through the exploitation of her body and sexuality—those women willing to seduce and sleep with hapless males occasionally have a prominent role in the stories. But the men don't appreciate this exercise of feminine power; those women are looked down on as harlots and temptresses, because they're operating outside of this male-dominated institution of marriage.

Whose story is this? Is biblical sexuality beautiful and good for women?

And women aren't the only ones left out of the picture. I talked at length last spring about eunuchs, men who were castrated or otherwise incapable of sexual reproduction. These men were considered unclean and kept out of the Temple religion, their well-being sacrificed for the good of the nation. And couples unable to have children, those were also considered to be cursed and cut off. As were foreigners, those who were not circumcised. And slaves, those were an afterthought, often taken advantage of and bought and sold for marriage and sex.

We have to hear all of those stories when we consider biblical sexuality. Heterosexual sex within marriage is beautiful and good, but it's also unequal, oppressive, exclusory, manipulative, unfulfilling, lonely, and incomplete. It's not the ideal for everyone.



The good news is that God is also not content to leave us there. Alongside this picture of heterosexual sexuality is a hope of another biblical and better way.

Back to the beginning. Genesis 1, this time, the other Creation story. In this story, humans are made last, and God says that things are good every step of the way. And humanity is made to serve the earth, to join in the creative and caretaking work of God for the good of all of creation.

And in this story, male and female are created together, both to share in the image and work of God. Collectively, all of us, male AND female, bear the image of God in our shared calling to care for the earth. This is *shalom*, nothing missing and nothing broken, for all.

For sure, we don't get that right very often. The abuse of power, especially sexual power, is part of the story from there on out. But there's also a thread in scripture that stands against the stories of domination.

It's in the story of Abraham and Sarah, who would have been seen as cursed for their inability to have children. But God reverses the curse and invites these infertile old folks to become the parents of a great blessing for all the world.

It's in the stories of Jacob, and Joseph, and Samuel, and David, and Solomon, and Amos, and Hosea, and Jonah, where God chooses not the firstborn, not the pure, not the strong, not the educated, but the second sons, the runts, the unpolished, the impure, even the unwilling.

It's in the stories of Jethro, and Rahab, and Ruth, and Balaam, and Naaman, and even Cyrus king of Persia, foreigners who were faithful and chosen in their own ways.

It's in the stories of Hagar, and Tamar, and Deborah, and Jael, and Abigail, and Esther, and again, Rahab and Ruth, strong women who are praised for their faithfulness to God—even through questionable sexual means in some cases.

And it's certainly in the cries of the prophets, the reminders that God is on the side of the poor, God is welcoming of foreigners. Isaiah even says that God will embrace those eunuchs, with their deviant sexuality and gender identity.

A huge part of the Biblical story is that God chooses and empowers people who fall outside of cultural norms and expectations. Humans set up systems of power and exclusion, and time and again God works outside of those systems.

We say, "God is with us" but God surprises us by working through some of our enemies. We say "God has blessed the wealthy" but God reminds us that God is on the side of the poor. We say "God values children" but God also blesses those who are unable to have children. We say "marriage is good and beautiful" and God says, actually, singleness is a high calling.

We draw our boundaries and set up walls around people who are like us, and God continually pushes those lines and pokes holes in our walls. That's one arc of the Bible, a constant and consistent calling by God to expand our circles, to include those that we've pushed aside.

Truly biblical sexuality has to consider God's constant love for the outcasts of society.

It also has to consider what the New Testament says about marriage. Jesus has a couple of things to say on the topic, and they might be surprising.

For one, Jesus said that marriage is not eternal. A bunch of law teachers once presented Jesus with a hypothetical scenario where a woman was widowed several times (Matt 22:23-33). Since she had married several different men, all legit legal marriages, the teachers ask, whose wife will she be in heaven?

And Jesus answered: “<sup>29</sup> *Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. <sup>30</sup> For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels<sup>[b]</sup> in heaven.”* As a married person, I’m not sure I like this—my wife is part of me, so I can’t imagine an eternity where I’m not married to her. I know, till death do us part, but in many ways two really have become one. But according to this quote from Jesus, “2 become 1” is only temporary.

Jesus also said that marriage is difficult. In Matthew 5 (31-32), Jesus said that *anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of fornication, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

He stated this again in Matt 19 (3-12), and the disciples said to Jesus, if that’s how it is, then it’s better not to marry at all! And Jesus agreed with them: *“Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”*

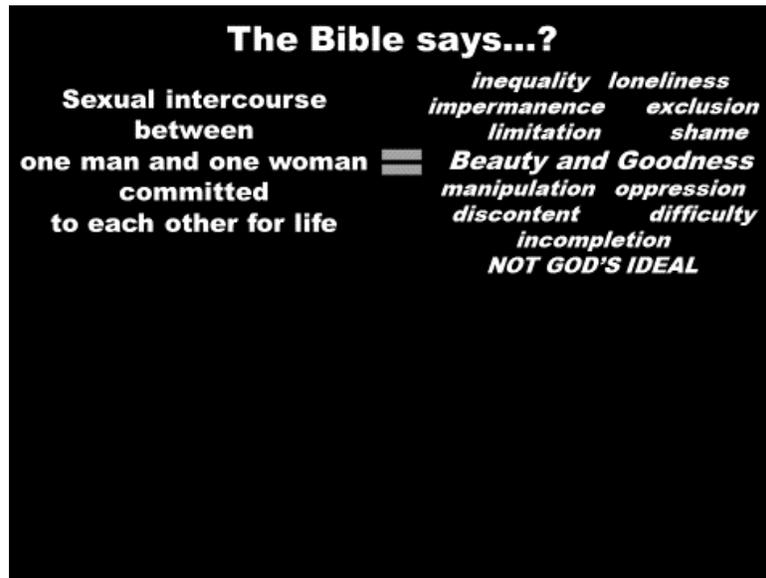
Here are those eunuchs again, and this time Jesus says that the eunuchs are actually better off! If you can accept the celibate life of a eunuch, you should.

Paul picks up this same theme in 1 Corinthians 7. Following the piece we looked at last week, where Paul described the body as the Temple of the Holy Spirit, now he’s fleshing out what it means to honor God with your body.

Speaking of marriage, *I wish that all were as I myself am (unmarried). But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. <sup>8</sup> To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.*

Paul would be a riot as a wedding preacher: *Don’t do it! Stay single, that’s way better! But okay, if you’re not able to control yourself, I guess it’s better to marry than to burn.*

That's actually what he says. There is no "sex is beautiful and good, and God's blessing for two to become one." No, marriage is *not* God's will for you, unless you're so weak that you can't avoid it. Paul's words, not mine! ☺



It may sound like Paul is knocking marriage, perhaps some sour grapes from a single guy... but really this is Paul playing out to the extreme the point that he makes over and over again in his letters: Jesus changed everything. In Christ we have an entirely new identity, a new way of understanding the world, a new set of priorities.

Galatians 3: <sup>25</sup>*But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian (The Law),* <sup>26</sup>*for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.* <sup>27</sup>*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* <sup>28</sup>*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

Christ is our new identity, entirely. No other ethnic identity, no other social standing, no other gender, we are One in Jesus.

And that is *shalom*, not the 2-become-1 in marriage, but the all-in-One of Jesus.



I've tried to give a more complete picture of biblical perspectives on marriage; I'm sure there's a lot that I've left out.

Looking at this picture, I have a couple of thoughts:

One is that in the Church, capital C, many of us have overemphasized marriage. We've treated marriage as though it's the center of society, as though it's the path to completion, as though it God's will for everyone. At least, far too often we've treated those who are *not* married as though they are broken. And that's not biblical, not according to Jesus and the early church.

The biblical vision for human relationships is not focused on sexual fulfillment, but on *shalom*. And that *shalom* comes not through two individuals becoming one, but through the entire community working and walking together in the way of Jesus. Too often we've been chasing the wrong goals and celebrating the wrong accomplishments.

Two, in this picture, it's not the maleness and femaleness that bring unity, and it's not the sex that makes two into one. To use the Genesis 2 language, it's the leaving and the cleaving that brings unity. It's the covenant love and commitment. It's the refusal to walk away, it's the ability to see things through the others eyes, it's the forgiveness and grace to get through all of this other stuff together, that's what makes a marriage last.

And even that is limited. We can't by our own effort bring *shalom*.

And so, three, the biblical path to *shalom* is Jesus. Our identity isn't in our sexuality, it's not in our marriages or singleness, it's not in our lists of sins we've done or are headed towards in the future. As Christians, our identity is Christ. And our choices, our behaviours, our ethics and morality flow out of that identity in the rule of love.

All of this invites us into two things.

One is grace. It is God that brings beauty and goodness out of our brokenness. *Shalom*, in the glimpses we get in our families and our friendships and our church, *shalom* is always the gift of God. The whole story of the Bible points to this, that we all live by God's grace every moment and every day. And also towards the promise that one day God will bring to us the fullness of *shalom*, nothing broken and nothing missing, truly.

In the meantime, the other word is space.

Even after all of my words, I suspect we still don't all agree... but, in light of God's grace, can we still live together? I have a whole other sermon to give on how that's possible and what that might look like... some other day. Check out a book from Ken Wilson called *A Letter To My Congregation* for a vision of that possibility.

In short, part of God's grace is that we don't have to know the right answers to everything for all time. We've been given room to grow, maybe even to grow some weeds, as Keri's children's story pointed out (Matt 13:24-30). We've been given freedom to choose, real freedom where we can test things out and see what works and live into the consequences. And we are given more grace and forgiveness when that growing and exploring is full of ups and downs.

And through all of that, we've been given the Body of Christ, this diverse and rich community with many gifts, many ways of thinking and feeling and living. And we've been given the Spirit of God, making all of that work, holding us together.

Grace and Space.

Is there is grace enough, space enough in the love of God and the Body of Christ, for my sexuality, for the goodness and beauty and brokenness and limits of my relationships?

Thanks be to God, there seems to be.

Is there grace enough, space enough in the love of God and the Body of Christ for same-sex relationships, for the goodness and beauty and brokenness and limits of those relationships?

Thanks be to God, I believe there is.

Can we give each other grace enough, space enough to live together as the Body of Christ even if we disagree about that answer? That won't be easy, but, thanks be to God, I believe we can.

We began this series with 1 Corinthians 13, and we'll also end it there.

The Greatest Gift of the Body of Christ:

### **1 Corinthians 13 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>[a]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>[b]</sup> but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

