

When Christians Get It Wrong: Relating to the LGBT Community

Acts 10:13-15, 27-28

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The Bible says it is an ‘abomination’ to eat ostrich, profane to consume camel, rabbit or pork; to eat lobster or crab defiles the orthodox and requires ritual cleansing (Leviticus 11). You are not to mix meat and milk products; no cheese and sausage pizza allowed (Deuteronomy 14:21). These dietary restrictions were some of the most direct rituals of piety that the Hebrew people had and have; a daily reminder of the covenant with the One God and God’s call to be a Holy People.

The dietary rules of the Hebrew people, although thousands of years old, are still practiced today by some. Orthodox and Conservative Jewish friends continue to observe the ‘kosher’ protocols to greater or lesser degrees.

Then along comes the apostle Peter and his dream in which all of that is swept away in Christ Jesus. He is called by God to the house of a gentile, a Roman Centurion by the name of Cornelius. Orthodox Jews such as Peter would not shake hands with a gentile let alone share their hospitality without becoming ritually unclean. To share a non-kosher meal with a member of the Roman occupation forces could label Peter a collaborator at worst, profane at least.

While the meal is being prepared Peter does into a trance, the consequence of which we hear in our lesson this morning. In the dream all of the profane animals and foods of the Hebrew people are laid out before Peter and God encourages him three times to ‘take and eat’. The Holy Spirit suggests that the dietary laws observed by the Hebrew people for centuries no longer apply for the followers of Jesus. Something dramatically new is happening in the Christian community and by the end of the story Cornelius and his household are baptized into the faith.

Jesus himself will confront the empty piety of the Pharisees’ observance of the dietary and Sabbath laws (Matthew 12:1-8, 15:2-20, Mark 2:23-28, Luke 6:1-5). He will reinterpret the Ten Commandments in startling new ways; “You have heard it said... Thou shalt not murder...but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment...” (Matthew 5:21-22); “You have heard it said thou shalt not commit adultery...but I say to you simple looking at another with lust you commit adultery in your heart...” (Matthew 5:27-28). God did a very new thing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; the apostle Paul summing it up saying, “...if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old is gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

It is in that spirit that Peter says of the ancient gentile contact and dietary laws, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” It is in that spirit that those who abolished legalized slavery ended an industry codified by the Bible for millennium; or the same spirit that inspires women’s equality in society when the Bible relegates them to second class citizenship.

Is God doing something new in the struggle by members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender community for equal rights and status in our society?

Most churches say “no”, including our own United Methodist denomination that prohibits the ordination of self-avowed gays and lesbians, prohibits the celebrating of their unions or marriages, and classifies such folk as “incompatible with Christian teachings”.

In a national survey of those who consider themselves ‘outsiders’ to the Christian faith and especially among young people aged 16-29, the most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are “anti-homosexual” (91%), “judgmental” (87%) and “hypocritical” (85%). (David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, unchristian, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 27) And they are staying away from North American churches by the millions.

Do we capitulate to the changing culture and modify our long held traditions of anti-LGBT policies or do we stand fortress-like against society’s values and assert our traditions? No where does this conflict come more in contrast than over the issue of Gay Marriage.

Please consider the drama entitled “Whom God Hath Joined Together” about to be presented by our Los Altos Methodist Players, directed by Jenni Sivilla-Jones, and co-written by retired United Methodist pastor Rev. Harold “Bud” Tillinghouse and Chuck Myers.

It is purposely provocative; it is meant to bush our buttons and make us think about our own feelings and ideas; such as Jeremiah’s sermon to the faithful in Jerusalem (7:1-15) or when Jesus turned the money changers tables over in the Temple (John 2). You may want to join the discussion groups following the services in the Chapel to ask questions or make statements.

And this play is worship; if God is doing something new today, will we in the churches resist it, hide from it or become mid-wives to the possibilities? Is God in our time and place urging us to learn, once again, that “God has shown us that we should not call anyone profane or unclean?”

[“Whom God Hath Joined Together” and the entire service, can be seen on our website www.laumc.org.]

Amen.