

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

FEBRUARY, A. D. 2017

TWO SERMONS BY

THE REV. JONATHAN BRATT CARLE

ON

THE PROBLEM OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

REFERENCING

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

AND

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

THESE SERMONS ARE AN EFFORT TO GIVE THE CONGREGATION
THE TOOLS NECESSARY

FOR

“GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF OUR HOPE”

IN WELCOMING

THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

HERE WE SEEK TO FAITHFULLY

MAKE SENSE OF THE TENSION

BETWEEN

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

PREACHED AND LIVED BY JESUS CHRIST

AND PAUL’S CONDEMNATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY

CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND SPIRIT

BLESSÈD TRINITY OF LOVE

NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

“But I Say To You...”

February 19, 2017

Scriptures:

Leviticus 19, Psalm 119:33-40, Matthew 5:38-48

Let us pray:

Holy Spirit, continue to open our eyes to the reality of the Divine Life – the Trinity’s Life of Love and Righteousness. We ask this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

There is an important event narrated in the Gospel lesson today... I wonder if you’ve noticed it, overshadowed as it is by the obvious teachings of Sermon on the Mount. We often fixate on what Jesus is saying, and miss the staggering implications of what Jesus is doing: for his action resides in plain view, but remains hard to see. The event in question is this moment in his ministry when Jesus publicly and emphatically *evaluates* the scriptures. It should be striking that he does so at all, but what is most important for us is his method for discerning what is true. This moment reveals that when Jesus evaluates the scriptures of his people, **his interpretive lens is love.**

May I have your undivided attention please?

Clear your minds of all other thoughts.

Forget what you did this morning.

Forget what you will do later today.

Forget yourselves and fixate on *this* for a moment:

Jesus *judges* the truthfulness of Scripture by asking of each teaching whether it prompts in us the love of God and the love of neighbor.

We will apply Jesus’ interpretive principle in a moment; but before that, let us study the example Jesus gives at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. Please take the pew bible under the seat in front of you and turn to page 5 in the New Testament...

Matthew 5:38-39 says this:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...”

When Jesus says, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” he is quoting the Law of Moses - Exodus chapter 21 – which, in his time, remains the oral and literary receptacle of the sacred and timeless truths of his people. To contravene the Law of Moses was a kind blasphemy that could get you killed. Here’s the passage from Exodus:

When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (Ex. 21:18-24)

Notice this carefully, dear friends: what Jesus is saying is that this teaching from Exodus is wrong. Retributive justice will never bring about the Kingdom of Heaven because it contravenes the love of neighbor – for every person in the human family is our neighbor. Moreover, not only is the scripture wrong, but the common cultural wisdom which comes from it is wrong as well. Look at how Jesus continues in verses 43 and 44:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’
But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

There is no scripture in the Old Testament that teaches us to “hate our enemies.” Trust me, I looked. But this is the implied teaching of the Law:

“If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

How can you pluck out someone's eye without hating him. How can you cut off someone's foot without hating her. How can you burn people without hating them? You can't. So “hating one's enemies” becomes part of the religious culture of ancient Israel as a legitimate implication of the Law. This is seen in many different narratives, but is most dramatically depicted in the Psalms of David.

Psalm 143 reads:

In your steadfast love cut off my enemies,
and destroy all my adversaries...

and Psalm 59...

For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips,
let them be trapped in their pride.
For the cursing and lies that they utter,
consume them in wrath;
consume them until they are no more.

or Psalm 55...

I am distraught by the noise of the enemy,
because of the clamor of the wicked.
For they bring trouble upon me,
and in anger they cherish enmity against me.
Let death come upon them;
let them go down alive to Sheol;
for evil is in their homes and in their hearts.

or Psalm 35...

Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me!
Let them be put to shame and dishonor
who seek after my life.
Let them be turned back and confounded
who devise evil against me.
Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the Lord driving them on.
Let their way be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the Lord pursuing them.

Let all those who rejoice at my calamity
be put to shame and confusion;
let those who exalt themselves against me
be clothed with shame and dishonor.

There is much prophetic wisdom in the Psalms, much that will comfort us in times of need, and much that reveals God's call to holiness of heart and life; but the Psalms also mention vengeance against one's enemies over a hundred times! Jesus and David are quite different, are they not? And even though Jesus considers the psalms of his ancestor to be prophetic, he nonetheless evaluates and judges them on the criteria of whether they will help bring about the kingdom of heaven. And not every verse of the Psalms will pass muster at the Sermon on the Mount.

At this moment in his sermon, Jesus shows that the creation of a community, and society, and world that are moral and just – that is, the kingdom of heaven – can only happen where the love of God and the love of neighbor rule all our other affections. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus indicts all religious culture in which morality is prescriptive, regulatory, and finite. Instead, he introduces a system of values in which flourishing life together is the possibility, hope, and promise against which we are to measure every thought, word, and deed.

Simply, that which does harm is immoral.
For Jesus, what is moral gives life. What is immoral deals death.

Abundant Life Together in the Image of the Triune God is the moral compass of the kingdom of heaven; and it is not based on a rule book, but the common sense of the divine love of the Trinity for all created things – a love which is literally personified in Jesus. Listen again to the common sense at the end of his Sermon:

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *so that you may be* children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Perfection, you see, is not a matter of being able to say that you've done everything on one list and avoided everything on another. Perfection has to do with love.

Perfection has to do with love.

Perfection has to do with love.

When Jesus says, "Be perfect..." what he means is, "Love everyone whole heartedly: like my Father, who sends rain on the just and the unjust." And so the prayer of the disciple is never, "Lord, help me to do the right thing." No this is *not* our prayer. Our prayer must always be, "Lord, make my love more perfect." For, as surprising as it may seem, there are degrees of perfection: inasmuch as we love, we are perfect. And the recovery of the Image of God in our temporal and spiritual lives has to do with learning how to love from Jesus.

Let us turn now to an application of this insight into how Jesus evaluates the scriptures of his people.

†††

Under the guidance of the Spirit, a small group of people from this church has been discussing the difficulties presented by our desire to welcome everyone and also remain faithful to the scriptures. Specifically, how can we resolve the tension between homosexuality and certain portions of the Bible which condemn it? The difficulty for any follower of Jesus is the tension between Paul's negative understanding of homosexuality and the moral compass of our Lord, who teaches – as we have seen – that what is moral is life giving.

Some may say that homosexual love is immoral, therefore, because it does not produce children. But this is to say that the only point of sex is progeny, which leaves out the covenantal – *the covenantal* – significance of sexual intimacy between two human beings. Let us leave that point until next week and do one homily at a time... our task right now is to let Jesus and Paul speak for themselves.

Paul's position is most clearly outlined in Romans, chapter one. We're going to use the interpretive principles of Jesus to evaluate this passage. Turn in your pew bibles to page 152 in the New Testament and follow along, beginning at verse 18:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who – by their wickedness – suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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; 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. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, 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.

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. (Romans 1:18-28)

From this passage we may infer three things about Paul's understanding of homosexuality:

- 1) The root problem of all evil, including sexual immorality, is idolatry, as summed up in verse 23: "they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles..."
- 2) Homosexual desire, therefore, is a function of idolatry. Deluded and corrupted by the worship of idols, both men and women have their minds twisted, and one result of this twisting is to be attracted to someone of the same sex.
- 3) Paul tries to validate his theological point with what he considers universal common sense: heterosexual intercourse is "natural" such that homosexual intercourse must be deemed unnatural. Therefore, if homosexual urges are unnatural, they must come from a twisting of the mind, which God – in his wrath and jealousy – does not prevent.

Now...

Paul's letters have been long accepted universally as Scripture by the Church. And as such, his teaching on homosexuality seems unassailable. This is a problem because gay and lesbian people who happen to be Christians know that their sexuality and attraction to the same sex is not a function of idolatry. In fact, I don't know a single gay or lesbian person who has ever had any explanation for their sexuality besides the fact that it is as natural to them as being right or left handed, or being blue eyed or brown eyed.

In fact, I know gay and lesbian people who worship the Living God as best they know how, and have fervently prayed their entire lives for God to deliver them from being homosexual. My own father is one such person. The very strange thing is that God never seems to answer this prayer.

So what is going on here? Paul's teaching and our experience of Jesus don't line up. Paul teaches us to condemn. Jesus teaches us to love. One thing at least is clear: to tell people who have no control over their sexual attractions that they are unnatural, shameful, and possessed of a twisted mind does not lead to abundant life together. Rather the opposite. It leads to communities where

some are in and some are out. So we see that not only is Paul's teaching problematic, but the religious culture that the Church has built upon his teaching is *downright cruel* and, as such, impedes the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. If we take Jesus at his word and draw the conclusion that what is true and right and good is life-giving, then we must pause with serious doubt about the truthfulness of this particular passage of Romans and its effectiveness in the formation of Christian community.

You have heard it said, "Paul condemns homosexuality and therefore so must we."

But I say to you, "On this point Paul is wrong; and in order to be faithful to the love of God revealed in Jesus, we must figure out how to make sense of his error."

Trinity United Methodist Church is a community where everyone is welcome, regardless of his or her gender identity and sexual orientation. We feel this is our calling because it expresses the love we feel for each other in our hearts. We now must move beyond mere sensibility, however, to a theological and biblical understanding of how this welcome reflects the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. We must be ready, as Peter says in his first letter, to "give an account of the hope that is in us": the hope we have for the reconciliation of the whole human family under the banner of the Cross. Next week, we will take up this task of making sense of Paul's error. In the meantime, try and be like Jesus: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven..."

May it be so, in the power of the Spirit of Life.

Amen.

“Eyewitnesses”
2/26/2017

Scriptures:
Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 2, 2 Peter 1:16-19, Matthew 17:1-9

It is often surprising to me how the Revised Common Lectionary¹ and the progress of the liturgical year fit the needs of the Church. Last week, a study of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount provided the insight and permission we needed to wrestle with the tension between the reality of homosexuality in human biology and Paul’s misunderstanding of it as unnatural and shameful. Today we are afforded the same grace by the story of Israel and Jesus and the early Church. The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ and the revelation of his glory make it all the more baffling that his ministry ends in execution on the Cross. But we realize – as Jesus leads Peter, James, and John back down the mountain – that God uses divine power for one thing: to give the Creation life, and to redeem that life when it has been lost and stolen. So Transfiguration Sunday comes every year right before Ash Wednesday, because glory without flourishing life together is no glory at all; and the revelation of God’s loving purposes can only lead us to self-inspection and repentance.

For those of you who were not here last week, we have been talking together as a church family about how to repent from the Sin of denying full inclusion in the life of the United Methodist Church to people who identify as homosexual and/or transgender. We have realized that the first problem that we must overcome is the problem of Scripture. The various texts of the Bible do not always seem to agree with each other in what they say, or in what they imply. But the two gospel lessons from this week and last, the Sermon on the Mount and the Transfiguration of Jesus, provide us with a window into a new way of perceiving the Living Word. The struggle to reconcile the community of the church is of primary importance today, but the broader subject of how to faithfully read the scriptures is absolutely paramount and covers every question of our time in history. Some may find this study tedious or overbearing, but I hope you will trust that I would not have embarked upon it unless it was of the utmost and vital importance to the life of the Body of Christ. So get comfortable, get out your bibles, and open your hearts.

In today’s Gospel lesson, we come across one of Matthew’s major themes: Jesus is the new Moses. Matthew’s narrative has several direct comparisons between Moses and Jesus, but the one which occurs *with* Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration is perhaps the most striking. In Exodus, the peak of Mount Sinai is wreathed by a flaming and glorious cloud from which the voice of God comes forth. Here on the Mount of Transfiguration, it is not just the cloud that erupts with light and sound, but *Jesus himself* emits a terrible light: his body and his clothes become “dazzling white” such that the disciples fall on their faces in wonder and fear.

¹ A three-year cycle of scripture readings.

I think Matthew makes two points in this comparison. The first point is the company that Jesus keeps: he stands here with Elijah and Moses as the heir to the great prophetic tradition of the Hebrew People. Here on the mountain he is transfigured, even as Moses was transfigured; and like Elijah was transfigured when he was taken bodily into heaven by a chariot of fire and light into the flashing cloud of God's presence. So the first point is that Jesus is equal to the greatest of Israel's prophets and will speak the Word of the Lord.

The second point goes further, however, in that the scene reveals Jesus to be greater than the company he keeps. He is more than the *heir* to the prophetic tradition: he is the One who brings that Tradition to its fulfillment, to its completion; he is the prophet who is *also* high priest and high king, whose majesty exceeds all the rulers of the earth. For the Divine Glory which flames about and through him pronounces him Son of God and Beloved, in whom the wisdom and grace and love of the Creator is please to dwell. Thus, in Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, he seeks to make clear that the prophetic clairvoyance of the Son of God exceeds that of all his predecessors: Matthew understands the mind and heart of Jesus Christ as the epitome of human intellect, imagination, and feeling *for all time*, both past and future. *Moses goes up the mountain to receive the Law; in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes up the mountain to give the Law*, and his authority is ratified on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Isn't it disappointing what we are asked to do in response? Isn't almost silly that the denouement of this fantastic narrative is so mundane; to be summed up by the Divine Voice in the most practical instruction: "Listen to him!" The Divine Voice does not say: "turn three cartwheels, throw ten rocks into the cloud, hop like a jackrabbit, roll down the mountain sideways, and then you will understand the mystery of the Messiah and gain secret powers!" This would suit us, because the difficulty would seem to fit the occasion, and we could feel like *we* were doing something special; but the Creator simply says: "Listen to him."

If you're anything like me, you may find this anticlimactic; we don't get much out of this because it is too easy and, frankly, calls for too much accountability. Jesus says love one another, which is easy to do, but we don't do it because, as St. Paul says, we would have to consider "others to be better than ourselves." Nevertheless, the simple commandment of the Divine Voice is for us to pay attention to Jesus:

Listen to him, says the Creator, he speaks for us!

Listen to him, says the Creator, he knows our heart and mind and purpose!

Listen to him, says the Creator, he will show you who I AM!

Listen to him, says the Creator, he will show you how to be *your* best selves!

Listen to him, says the Creator, he will lead you home to us!

The Divine Love of God is not communicated to us through some mysterious ritual that only the initiated may enjoy. Indeed, the Gospel is infuriatingly simple: everyone – everyone – is invited to this Font where Evil is rejected and Eternal Life revealed; everyone... *everyone*... is invited to this Table, where the food is grace and the drink is love. Indeed, the significance of the Incarnation is that the Divine Being communicates with us in the only form that may be universally understood: the human body!

Jesus is not a teaching, he is a person.

Jesus is not a character in a dusty book, he is a person.

Jesus is not a myth, he is flesh and blood;

...and his Transfiguration and Resurrection are not visions that happened to his disciples, but real events which happened to Jesus himself.

So Peter teaches the church:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been *eyewitnesses* of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Peter’s text give us clarity about what the Scriptures are for us: the testimony of the eyewitnesses, narrated to convey to *every person* the revelation of Jesus as High Prophet, High Priest, and High King. So let me say this as clearly as I can:

Jesus is not judged by the scriptures, but the scriptures must be judged through him.

Jesus is not judged by the scriptures, but the scriptures must be judged through him.

Everything written by human beings about God – every single word and verse of the Bible – must be measured against the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With this insight we begin to further unpack the point of my sermon last week. Let me state that point again:

**Jesus holds the authority, as God in Person,
to correct Israel’s doctrinal and cultural misinterpretation
of the Law given by God to Moses.**

But we must go a step further this week and apply his authority to the texts penned by his followers after his Resurrection and Ascension. Is St. Paul less subject to Jesus than Moses and Elijah? No; he is not! Are we to give precedence over Jesus to Peter's words, or the teachings of James, or John? No: all things are measured against the Person of God Incarnate.

The Good News today, dear friends, is that Jesus sums up all righteousness in as pithy a statement as the commandment of the Divine Voice to listen to him. And you know how this goes: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself: on these two commandments *hang all the Law and the Prophets.*" That's Jesus speaking to the Pharisees. (Matthew 22:37-40) Must we not apply this statement to the New Testament as well as the Old? Indeed, we must:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself: on these two commandments..."

hang all the letters of Paul,
hang all the letters of Peter;
by these two commandments evaluate the letters and Revelation of John;
with these two commandments demand an accounting of James and Jude;
with these two commandments judge the teachings of the letter to the Hebrews...
by these two commandments – judge and evaluate the doctrines of your religion; judge
and evaluated your communities of faith...
with these two commandments **let the ethics of all the world** be judged and hung in the
balance....

Here is the simple truth, dear friends:

**If a verse or portion of the Scriptures
prompts us to do harm to any part of God's creation,
then either the scripture itself is wrong,
or our interpretation of it is wrong.**

**By contrast, therefore, if a verse or portion of the Scriptures
inspires in us the love of God above all else,
and prompts us thereby to give our lives for each other and the stranger,
we may conclude
that we have received the Truth of the Living Word.**

For us here at Trinity, the question lingers regarding the Truth of the Scriptures in terms of the place of gay, lesbian, and transgender people in the family of God. And if we are going to maintain that the Vision statement printed on today's bulletin is the Spirit's gift to us, we must not shirk the most important duty of learning anew how and why the Scriptures are true. Let's read it:

We envision a radically loving community
where everyone belongs,
everyone is supported,
and no one is alone.

We cannot live into this vision and throw the Bible out with the bath water. It is our Sacred Book: the narrative of the *Eyewitnesses*, which contains all knowledge necessary for *salvation*. We cannot throw the Scriptures over because certain parts of it do not jive with our cultural sensibilities or our personal experience of being alive. Rather we must struggle and come to grips with the mystery contained within the words and sentences of these ancient texts. We must apply the revelation of Jesus Christ, whose advent in human form remains the pivotal moment in the history of Creation: the shift from death to life.

As I mentioned last week, St. Paul teaches the Church at Rome that homosexual acts are unnatural and, therefore, shameful: the sign of an idolatrous separation from the knowledge and love of God. The problem with this theology is that it has done irrevocable harm to millions of people and communities for the last 2000 years. People have been burned to death based on his teaching. People have been stoned to death based on his teaching. People have been chemically castrated based on his teaching. People have been cast out from the community and left to starve physically, emotionally, and spiritually based on his teaching. And all these atrocious and horrendous acts have been committed by the Church, in Jesus' Name, who confronted the Pharisees with these colossal and staggering words:

“You judge by human standards; I judge no one.” (John 8:15)

That's in the Bible too!!!
The Gospel of John chapter 8 verse 15.

But it is not a very convenient verse for those who use judgment to retain power and wealth. Nevertheless, this statement is how Jesus criticizes the life of the Pharisees, who have lost all righteousness in their greed and apathy. Paul is a Pharisee, and – by his own admission – it is the deep grief and confusion of his life when it is revealed to him that Jesus transcends everything he has ever held true. He is so confounded by this revelation that he goes blind for three days! It comes as an impossible contradiction to Paul that the One who was crucified is the Messiah. It comes as an impossible contradiction to Paul that life is not understood through a set of rules;

that rules, in fact, don't amount to a hill o' beans difference, and that "the only thing that counts is faith that is made effective through love." (Galatians 5:6). By Paul's own admission, he is fallible and struggles desperately for the rest of his life to make sense of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Issues of gender and sexuality are, perhaps, the most obvious aspect of human life by which Paul is confounded. If you're anything like me, you might be asking this question: "When Jesus was revealing himself to Paul, why didn't he tell Paul about the biological process of evolution?! And when Paul was leading the missionary venture to the Gentiles in the power of the Holy Spirit, why didn't God bother to tell Paul that the importance of the account of creation in Genesis is not *how* things were made but *why things were made?!?"*

Grab your Bible and you'll see immediately what I mean. Turn to page 173 in the New Testament, where Paul is trying to help the Corinthians figure out how men and women should pray. Starting at chapter 11 verse 2, Paul writes:

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

(I Corinthians 11:2-16)

Clearly his reasoning and theology are based on a reading of Genesis which assumes that the first male human being was literally made out of a hunk of mud, and that the first female human being was made out of his rib because the man wasn't satisfied with the company of the giraffes and elephants and birds and bugs in the Garden of Eden.

In another passage on prayer, in a letter to Timothy, Paul makes even more explicit that his theology of human sexuality is based on a literal reading of Genesis. Turn to page 208 for a passage of scripture that will knock you out of your pew. Beginning at chapter 2 verse 8, Paul writes:

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.

[You haven't fallen out of your pew yet... get ready!]

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep *silent*. For [because!] Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (I Timothy 2:8-15)

You get the picture: all of St. Paul's thinking and theology about human sexuality and gender is based on his understanding of Genesis as *literal*. Paul assumes that Genesis is an accurate account of *how* the universe was made. And why shouldn't he? He didn't even know the planet was round, let alone a 4 billion year old blip on the screen of the ol' Milky Way!! His use of the Genesis account of creation as the theological premise against homosexuality is also clear in the famous passage from Romans, which we read last week. Turn to page 152 as we close our little bible study. Beginning at verse 18, Paul says:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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*. (Romans 1:18-20)

Why should we burn, and stone, and castrate, and ostracize people who find themselves to be homosexual or transgender because Jesus didn't see fit to let Paul know that the planet is 4 billion years old and that diverse sexualities are common in the human species, which shares its genetics, in some degree, with every living organism on the planet. Maybe it was enough for Paul to handle the news that the Messiah would conquer death by dying. Maybe it was enough for him to handle the fact that a man does not have to be circumcised in his flesh to become a son of Abraham. Why should we continue to do irrevocable harm to the LGBTQ community when

the One we profess as Lord gives only the commands to love, to show mercy, and to make certain that the needs of the poor are met?

Do heterosexual people worship God as they exercise the gift of their sexuality? Maybe, on a good day transfigured by the grace and life of the Trinity. But more often than not in our society, we learn to imagine sexual intimacy in a way that leads us to express our sexuality as a narcissistic and self-gratifying foible that no service in a church will hallow.

You have heard it said that it is a marriage between a man and a woman that makes sex holy.

But I say to you that it is the giving and receiving of grace that makes sex holy.

Intimacy is not made sacred because a man and a woman are involved, but because the two people give themselves consensually and freely in mutual enjoyment. Sex is sacred when it *becomes* the Image of the Holy Trinity, who live for and with each other in all things.

So let me say to you, in conclusion, that Paul is not wrong about homosexuality because the Spirit is not at work in his ministry; the Spirit is clearly at work in his ministry. He is wrong because – as a 1st Century Palestinian Jew – he remains *ignorant* of certain biological facts about the universe. These facts, however, prompt *us*, in the year of our Lord 2017, to *continue* the human inquiry into the significance of the revelation of the Incarnate God. The scriptures must be our first authority, but cannot be a closed book for one simple reason: the story of God's creation and redemption is not over yet. Don't get mad at Paul because he doesn't know everything. And don't condemn others as if he does. Rather, read intelligently with the eyes of faith: read through the lens of Jesus Christ.

What if the young children we baptize and cherish in this church someday identify themselves as gay or lesbian or transgender. Will we keep the vows we have made to them? How can we raise our children up in the love of the Body of Christ but say they must be heterosexual to be fully part of the family? No one... no one who knows *Jesus and is in love with him* could ever think that was just or true. We want to see more families with young children in our church. What if some of those parents are gay or lesbian or transgender? What if some of those children are gay or lesbian or transgender? So in all things let love abide: not our love, but Christ's love. And let us not judge Paul or each other by human standards, but by the standard of the Cross, where Jesus set aside his eternal glory for the life of the world. Let us go on the journey of discipleship not because we are certain about what is true, but in order to find out from Jesus himself and his Spirit. Let us be transfigured by his love, and follow him down the mountain into the dust and ashes of a dying and sinful world.

In the Name of the Holy Trinity. Amen.