

These Scars, God's Grace

A Sermon Delivered By

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When I left seminary in 1988 with my shiny Ph.D. under my arm, I headed to a capital city in the Midwest to pastor a First Baptist Church that had at one time fifty years earlier been a powerful church. By the time I got to it, it was a church in denial, fearful of its urban context and unwilling to reach out to the community. There were three black members in a church of about 100 in a sanctuary that could seat nearly a thousand. I have a few fond memories of that pastorate. I recall one time after preaching the sermon for the day when a deacon came up to me and frankly informed me that I had quoted enough from Martin Luther King Jr. Little did he know what was in store for him, for within a year, I had arranged with a forty voice black choir to sing in our church once a month simply in exchange for rehearsal space. They were no longer allowed to rehearse or sing in their church since their pastor didn't believe the choir director gave enough money to his church. He locked them out and I opened the door. That open door seems to be a pattern in my life and ministry for which I thank God. Melinda fielded a call one evening at our home from someone who inquired if First Baptist was becoming a black church. I certainly hoped so. By then of course, it was becoming painfully obvious to me that I and this church were mismatched. Which brings us to how I ended up here but I will get to that in a moment.

Another dynamic of denial in that church, though more hidden than the racist paranoia, was its homophobia. Now I had come from Louisville, Kentucky where I and a few other students had created a student group that worked for Jesse Jackson's presidential candidacy in 1984. Kentucky's primaries at that time were caucus driven, not polls. We worked with others in Louisville and won that city for Jackson. This so scared the rest of the state that they replaced caucuses with polls thereafter. But I bring that up to say it was at that time I actually met and worked with persons who were "out" as gay or homosexual persons. I would go to committee meetings and work side by side with these folks. I don't ever recall having a discussion about them other than to simply note that a gay alliance of some sort was also working on the campaign. By the time I got to First Baptist four years later, I had no friend who was openly gay or that I knew was gay.

So when I showed up in 1988 at a time when the AIDS epidemic was roiling in full boil and fear was cascading in sheets throughout churches, I didn't think twice about visiting Bert—a member of my church who was in the hospital with pneumonia due to his living with AIDS. I visited him, prayed with him and when he got out of the hospital and started attending church, invited him to read the scripture and pray during worship. Eventually I asked him to serve on the board. I was pretty naïve back then. On the one hand, it is a little sad that as a man of 35 years of age, I couldn't say I had a gay friend. But on the other hand, once that opportunity presented itself through ministry, I didn't have any second thoughts or hesitation. So we can at least conclude from this that I didn't grow up in a context of bigotry or hatred. That was about to change too, of course, since something called the Moral Majority was about to use the phobia of differently oriented persons as their primary means of raising money. The hatred that spewed out of pulpits across the land took me by surprise and I was honestly stupefied.

For one thing, by the time Bert was standing at the lectern reading scripture and offering a prayer, I was also visiting Pater Noster House; this was a home that a grandmother named Barb had offered for homeless people and by 1988, many of the homeless were men abandoned by their families and friends. She would phone me to come and pray with someone when they were near death. And I would enter that version of Dante's purgatory with all the courage I could muster and I say courage because I knew when I walked in what I would see: rows of beds with emaciated persons lying in various stages of disease. And yet, whenever I went there the angels I saw ministering to the afflicted were gay men and women. So you see, the hatred and demagoguery spewing out of the fundamentalist factories did not connect with my experience of these folks. I saw them tenderly offering care, holding hands, wiping brows, praying prayers for individuals who simply wanted to see or hear from their mothers or fathers one last time but were dying alone in adilapidated house. It was simply impossible to convince me that these people were evil.

For another thing, once Bert was on the board and I was visiting Pater Noster House, word got out to the community that I cared about people, gay people. So it was not unusual for strangers to show up at my office door, wanting to speak with me and pray with me. I got invitations to preach and fellowship with an evangelical group of Christians who would advertise in the paper but not reveal where they met on Sunday for fear of being attacked. These men were as theologically conservative as my church members and Log Cabin Republicans. There went another stereotype out the door.

I am sharing these things with you today because today is *coming out Sunday*—a day dedicated to encouraging gay, lesbian and bisexual persons to come out of the closet and claim their dignity. It is an appropriate time for me to remind us why we are an inclusive church and have been since 1992 when we disaffiliated from the Southern Baptist Convention as they begin their witch hunt, throwing out churches that dared to practice inclusion. And that was the year I showed up here, 1992. Fifteen years. That is a long time. As Deacon Ed Yates said to me last week when I visited him, "it seems longer." I quite agree, Ed! some days it really does.

I remember sitting in the Foster Room being interviewed by the pulpit committee chaired by Deacon Jerry Davis, a man who knew a little something about *leaning out of the foxhole*, as he put it. Before I tell you what question that committee asked of me that sealed the deal for me, let me share one other thing about my context at the First Baptist Church in the Midwest—a church which, by the way, is now disbanded and is a nightclub of some sort.

When these men came to my office and shared that they were gay and wanted to know if they could worship in my church this is what I felt constrained to tell them: you are welcome in my office and I personally welcome you in my worship but I must be honest with you and tell you that this church is not a safe place. You must decide when and to whom you confide this information. I got so weary of having to say that to people, but honesty mandated it.

So when I sat in the Foster Room and was asked by the pulpit committee of this church how I felt about "homosexuality" and I explained that I believed in a church that would welcome everyone and not discriminate, they in turn responded that this is what they wanted in a pastor. They did not want a pastor who would be unwelcoming of persons of minority sexual orientation. I want you to know just how powerful a moment that was for me then and how very satisfying it is to me today that I can tell persons—all persons—that

they are welcome here. I had nearly given up on the church for its racism and its sexism and its homophobia. To be invited to pastor a church that had the Christ-like vision of including everyone at this table was awesome. I don't know how else to put it. It was and is awesome. Not everyone gets it of course. Like the caller who asked if First Baptist was becoming a black church there are those who wonder if by being inclusive a church is becoming a gay church. I will say what I wrote in 1992 in our statement of disaffiliation from the Southern Baptist Convention: We do not aim to be a white church or a black church; a male church or a female church; a straight or gay church. We want to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Just a couple of months ago, I invited a student and that student's friend into my office at their request for a hearing with me. Their reason for meeting me? They had come to denounce me as a son of Satan because of my and this church's position on being a welcoming and affirming church. I gave them five minutes—since I'd heard that speech before—and they left with denunciation on their lips. This is something else I have learned over the years, friends, both personally and in history. People will demand freedom for themselves but deny it to others. Our founding fathers did this. They claimed independence and freedom while they held slaves. Men have done this to women. Women have had the right to vote in this country not from its birth but only since 1919. People will claim freedom for themselves but deny it to others. Contemporary examples abound from Senator Craig to Rev. Ted Haggard. Repression, self-loathing, and outright bigotry mar our political landscape and our churches. Let me be clear then on this important day, that at least in this holy place, this place of welcome and peace, we welcome all of God's children and we proclaim freedom for everyone, not just ourselves. Let us move now to the centerpiece of resistance when it comes to being an inclusive community of faith. That centerpiece is the bible.

“But what about the bible?” people will ask. Well, let's talk frankly about that. What about it? Are they referring to the bible where Jesus invites any and everyone to come to him? *Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.* [MT 11:32] Perhaps they are referring to the bible where Jesus eats at table with persons the rest of his society shunned: *And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."* [Luke 15:2] Indeed, Jesus practiced a radical table fellowship. He ate with tax collectors, lepers, Romans, women and people like you and me. It could be that those who ask “what about the bible?” with reference to persons who are not straight are thinking of the Gospel of John and its soaring affirmation of God's love of the entire cosmos: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.* [John 3:16-17] This begs the question, of course, as to why the church has for so long felt its mission to be one of condemnation. Catholics and Protestants killed more Christians and in particular Ana-Baptists than pagan Rome. Between the 14th and 17th centuries, the Church burned at the stake, hung or drowned between 50,000 to 300,000 women it considered to be witches. Add to this the miserable record of Christians killing Jews, enslaving and killing Africans and you begin to wonder what in the world the gospel of John has to do with the Church.

Parenthetically at this juncture allow me to offer my solution to the debate raging throughout the Anglican, Episcopalian and yes, Baptist churches as regards the condemning of those churches who ordain gay men and women as priests or bishops. Given the horrific record of the church's condemnation and destruction of persons, let us call a moratorium on

any further condemnations. You see, over time those condemnations can now be seen as treacherous and a betrayal of the love of Christ spoken of in John 3:16. No one today would give a moment's thought to supporting the enslavement of peoples or the execution of women for being women. Which is to say, in another hundred or two hundred years, the world will look back on our own time and the Church's preoccupation with condemning a group of persons who happen to be gay as a treacherous betrayal of the very Gospel it claimed to preach. Now back to bible for a moment and what it says.

Perhaps when they ask what the bible says they are referring to the holiness code in Leviticus. Many a homophobic sermon is built on a text lifted from that passage. *If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.* [DE 22:22] Oh, I am sorry—this passage is not from Leviticus but from Deuteronomy. But since I have brought it up allow me to simply point out that no former student or church member has called me a son of Satan for failing to enforce this execution order for any in my church who may have committed adultery. With that you can note that when it comes to the bible, people cherry pick all the time. They apply severe passages to others but when it comes to their own lives, they find ways around such passages. The passage from Leviticus I mentioned is this: *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.* [LE 20:13] Before I say a few words about this passage allow me to share one other passage since we're asking the question, "but what about the bible?" This comes from Deuteronomy and concerns rebellious children. Here is what the bible says: **18** *If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him,* **19** *then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place.* **20** *They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard."* **21** *Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death* [DE 21]

My guess is that when those who condemn homosexuals ask the question "but what about the bible?" that they are cherry picking scripture that fits their prejudice. In twenty-five years of ministry, I have not had one parent or one concerned Christian come to me citing the passage from Deuteronomy and asking me to enforce the execution of a rebellious child. That idea is repugnant to us. Yet, somehow, we allow ourselves to take seriously the passage from Leviticus. Why isn't that repugnant to us? With regard to stoning to death rebellious children, we would consider such a passage today to be irrelevant because it is narrowly confined to an ancient time, an ancient culture. In a phrase, we have moved past such notions and consider them less than civilized. My encouragement to you about the very, very few verses in the bible that deal with anything that remotely resembles what we might call homosexual is to put those verses away with the one from Deuteronomy that prescribes death for a rebellious son; put it away with verses like those in Joshua that instruct them to practice genocide in the name of God, killing every living creature —men, women, children, animals—and put it away with those passages in the bible that tell slaves to obey their masters and be good slaves. If they can find a way around those verses, they can find a way around the passage in Leviticus so often cited to harm gay persons in the name of God. These passages are not reconcilable to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Period. Let me conclude this section on the nature of the bible with this rule of interpretation: I judge the bible by Jesus Christ. I revere the bible for it points me to God but I do not confuse it and its complicated interweaving of ancient social mores and customs with the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ. He knew the Levitical holiness code. He renounced much of it—

we saw that in his practice of table fellowship. And when it comes to this issue of homosexuality, he was silent. It was never an issue for him. Why then is it an issue for the church?

The brief answer to that question is that the church, like the bible, is developmental. It goes through stages of awareness and changes accordingly. At one time the church condemned Galileo for suggesting that the earth was not the center of the universe. Now there is a Vatican Observatory equipped with an advanced technology telescope. We develop and change as we gain more information about our world and ourselves.

Once upon a time, the church took the position of Iranian President Ahmadinejad who said recently, "In Iran, we don't have homosexuals, like in your country." The audience at Columbia University rightfully met that statement with derisive laughter. The church had for the longest time taken such a view. It then graduated to another view stated succinctly as "don't ask, don't tell." This is an immoral policy that basically says, we will take your money, use your talents and benefit by your life but do not ask us to acknowledge who you are.

We, the Church, are in dire need of a better way and it is the way of Jesus Christ whose truth sets us free and whose love embraces us all. We ought to prefer a transparency of love where we embrace human beings as complete human beings, loved no less by God than anyone else. I invite you to come out of the closet; I invite you into the life of this church; I celebrate your humanity with you. I urge you—I urge all of us--to live lives worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

Around 1989, a gentleman about 28 years old, asked to see me. I invited him into my office and I listened to Paul as he explained to me how he had grown up in Mansfield, Ohio, a nice all-American town. He shared with me how he had come out to his parents and how his mother told him that she hoped he died before he acted on his sexuality. He rolled up the sleeves of his sweater to show me the scars on his wrist. This had been his response to his mother's abandonment of him. He looked at me in the eyes and said, *Pastor, I love Jesus and I just want to serve him.*

Paul, friends, let us serve him then. These scars are met by the scars and grace of Jesus. All you who love him, come and serve him in this place for here, you are welcome.