



Just Don't Do It, Until . . . : Preaching on Homosexuality

Valerie Bridgeman is founding president and CEO of WomanPreach! Inc., a non-profit training organization that helps preaching women find their prophetic voice. She teaches Hebrew Bible/Homiletics & Worship at Lancaster Theological Seminary.

My own stance in preaching on homosexuality has taken shape in the midst of friendships. As a professor who teaches preaching, I have considered many times how to help me preach on homosexuality, and it begins with this instruction: just don't do it. I often tell students and friends that we ought not to preach on homosexuality—for or against it—until we are willing to dig deeply into the history of our theologies and embedded presumptions on sexuality in general. We don't know how to talk about sex between men and women (the only kind of sex many label “normal”)—how are we to speak about the lives, the experiences, the hopes and hurts of those whose realities are at best an enigma to us and at worst, an abomination to us. Much of what we think about sexuality, in general, needs to be broadened and deepened by exploring new scientific information, biblical viewpoints from a wider lens than our own small communities, and listening to the people about whom we speak.

Don't preach about homosexuality until we are willing to teach our congregations to listen and to be compassionate in our listening. Or, as the Jewish Rabbi Irving Greenberg noted, “The Holocaust confronts us with unanswerable questions. But let us agree to one principle: no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.”¹ In our church communities, SGL (same-gender loving) people are the “burning children” among us. Don't preach on homosexuality until we've found compassion in our own hearts for young people jumping off bridges, hanging themselves in the woods, or taking vials and vials of pills to end the psychic, emotional, spiritual, and physical pain inflicted on them because they are SGL.

Just don't preach a sermon on homosexuality until we are willing to prime our congregations with in-depth, critical Bible study that engages the implication of our theological responses as well as the texts themselves. One would expect that this critical study of the Bible on behalf of the marginalized and endangered would be a natural inclination among Black Christians. After all, as Womanist ethicist Kelly Brown Douglas

asked, “How can a community that has suffered under an oppression covered with a sacred canopy inflict the same oppression upon others?”² In other words, African Americans suffered under a reading of the Bible that condoned and made slavery a sacred right, a God-ordained reality. The Bible has much more to say about slavery—how to treat your slaves, how not to beat them to death, how not to work them to death, as well as the slaves’ responsibility to be “good servants.” One cannot escape the fact that neither the old nor the new Witness consistently expects the eradication of slavery. And yet, somehow, African Americans resisted this biblical witness and its interpretation by slave-owning loving people. Slavery is much more pervasive and persuasive than the biblical witness on same-gender relationship.

In fact, there are texts that might hint as a neutral, if not positive, view on same-gender love relationships. For example, most preachers willingly ignore some texts that might suggest a little more than friendship. David’s relationship with Jonathan is a case in point. Jonathan loved David as he loved himself (1 Samuel 20:17; cf. Ephesians 5:28). When Jonathan is killed in battle, David sings that Jonathan’s love was “wonderful” to him, more than that of any woman (2 Samuel 1:26). A queer commentary might see homoerotic expressions of love. But our biases and our fears won’t let us consider that the beloved David might have been sexually attracted and covenanted to his wives’ brother. Consider that Ruth’s declaration of love and fidelity for Naomi often is used to describe commitment between heterosexuals at marriage altars. We are able to bracket that this proclamation is made in a same-gender relationship. What if we took seriously that Ruth, the woman, said these words to Naomi, the woman, and understood them to mean the same thing we think they mean at the altar between a man and a woman (Ruth 1:16-18)?

We must admit that there is actually very little in the Bible about same-gender relationships. Much of what has been said, for example, about the encounter of angry people in the city of Gomorrah with the visiting angels is just wrong. Since many like to say, “The Bible interprets itself” (a statement I reject; *people* interpret biblical texts), let me at least indulge this sentiment. According to Ezekiel 16:49, the sin of Sodom and her daughters (surrounding cities) was that they were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; “they did not help the poor and needy.” There is no mention of sexuality activity of any sort in the text. If one held to this intertextual interpretation principle espoused, then instead of focusing on sexuality when preaching on Genesis 19, preachers would focus on the fact that Lot threw a feast while he was willing to throw his daughters to the crowd to be feasted upon, for example. There is so much more to mine in that text than the knee-jerk turn to trite sermons against homosexuality.

I am not trying to take on the six or seven texts (that’s all) that speak in negative terms of same-gender sexual relationships. I am making the point that we often miss the point. And, we shouldn’t preach on homosexuality until we have also thoroughly studied those texts that do speak against it. A quick, topical reading of any text is wrong; such reading of texts that can harm SGL people is also wrong.

People can and often do spew venom in the face of people who are members of their congregations, of their families, and of their communities with no thought of the consequences such venom does to the souls of folk (including their own). Partly why such behavior is possible is because people are afraid of growing into a different theological space, afraid that if “that” isn’t true, what else might not be true? In addition, people are deeply afraid of the heretical “slippery slope,” i.e., the fear that they will “compromise” on godly principles as they shift ethical and theological positions.

But, please, don’t preach on homosexuality until we have actually spent time befriending same-gender loving or transgender people. Don’t preach on homosexuality until we’ve actually listened, really listened, to the damage that has been done in the name of God to people who are LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, intersexual, or queer). I will never forget being in a workshop in the early 1980s with Dr. James Forbes. In role-play, we answered the question, “Why does the church and my family reject me?” from the vantage point of a gay or lesbian person. The catch was that we each had to be the gay person asking. My theology did not shift in that moment, but my compassion did. I heard, from my own mouth, the anguish of the ostracized.

So now I advise that preachers just don’t preach a sermon on homosexuality until we are willing to admit that the default characterizations of people with same-gender attractions are often buffoonery stereotypes and caricatures. Words matter. So when the preacher says “those gays,” these two words become shorthand code for a conjured image of out-of-control sex fiends, preying on “real people,” and maybe even having sex with their dog. (Someone gave me these descriptions when I asked, “What do you imagine or see when I say ‘those gays’?”) Preachers have an obligation to examine their own imaginations and presumptions. We must take care of our words. And until we’ve taken violent, pejorative rhetoric out of our everyday language about people who are not heterosexual, we should not preach about it. Then I remembered that none of that information moved me in the beginning. So I decided to tell stories.

When I was a hospital chaplain, I received a call from a nurse at two in the morning. A young man was crying uncontrollably. It was early in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, at the time when hearing “you have AIDS” almost inevitably meant a death sentence. It was when universal precautions meant we did not touch a patient with our bare hands; we always had on latex gloves. I broke several rules in the name of love that day, including holding him in my arms without the universal precautions while he soaked my blouse with tears and snot. When he could finally speak, I learned that he was the disowned son of a Southern Baptist minister. His lover had left him, saying that he could not watch another person die from AIDS. And, he said, I was the first person to touch him skin-to-skin in four years. We cried together. He told me how much he had tried to change; how the church had convinced him that he was going to hell; how he didn’t understand how God could make him gay, and then punish him for being gay. He cried some more. He told me about the destructive behavior in which he had engaged since; his father-pastor had convinced him that he was going to hell anyway. And he cried some more as he told me how much he loved Jesus and was so sad that Jesus didn’t love him. My encounter with him was a critical moment in my own shift.

I thought about the time I was with a young friend when he received a call from a friend. That friend was sitting in the closet (literally and figuratively) threatening suicide because his father and mother had just found his messages to his lover. His father had screamed to him, “I would rather you be dead than gay.” He was contemplating obliging him. We convinced him to let us come to him, but by the time he was going to let us, his parents were “dragging” him to church to pray the devil out of him, he said. We met him at church. I drove into the parking lot of my home church and my heart broke. When we found him, I hugged him. I said nothing. I just offered him my arms.

After years of grappling with the texts, and living among my faithful friends, I now accept that homosexuality is not a choice people make, but a struggle in the human soul to live authentically as she or he is. I know—after years of studying the Bible and teaching the Hebrew text—that we misrepresent God on what is the nature of being human and being godly. People cannot change being gay any more than they can change being six feet two inches. Working as a counselor and preacher, I have seen too much damage of the bodies and souls of people who have worked “to be delivered from a ‘spirit’ of homosexuality.” I’ve rocked in my arms too many people who have been brutalized by a theology that insists that God hates them. I have walked with too many gay/lesbian/trans/bi-/queer Christians whose faith, deep spiritual life, authenticity, prayer life, and integrity runs rings around that of people who want them delivered from who they are. I am converted by what I know about God, by what I know about these God’s people, and by what I understand about our own biblical interpretations. I have decided, given the continued struggle of SGL/LGBTIQ Christians, that I cannot keep silent.

I end with this note: I do have some hope that the Black church writ large will come into its own heritage of standing with and on the side of the least among us, those on the margins. All of the private conversations I have had with people who are recognized conservative evangelicals who admire my stance and my love ethic, even though they don’t believe they can publicly stand with me, fuel this hope. As one friend said, “I don’t know what I think about homosexuality anymore, but I know that we’re going to hell for the way we treat people.” This friend at least made the commitment to stop preaching hatred. It’s a start.

Resources:

- Yvette Flunder. Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005.
- Peter J. Gomes. The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Head and Heart. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996.
- Horace L. Griffin. Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians & Gays in Black Churches. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006.

Notes

1. Irving Greenberg. "Judaism, Christianity, and Partnership after the Twentieth Century," *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, Tivka Frymer-Kensky, ed., <http://lamentations324.blogspot.com/2008/01/in-presence-of-burning-children-part.html>, accessed 8 November 2010.
2. Kelly Brown Douglas. Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective. (3rd printing). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003, 91.