

In the fall of 1992, I was in a small group with seven other students and a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, when someone asked how the group felt about the ordination of gays and lesbians. I was stunned at the question, as I did not know that ordination was on the table for discussion in our denomination. So, I sat quietly listening to the teacher and a couple students politely comment on the issue. Finally, our professor said, "If anyone believes that he or she has a call to ordained ministry, who am I to deny that call. I would support the ordination of gay people as well as straight people." The professor, Sarah Juengst was someone I had grown to love, admire and greatly respect during my first semester of seminary. However, when she shared her opinion, I strongly disagreed, and when class ended, I walked to her office to express my disagreement and disappointment. I said, "Sarah, homosexuality is a sin in the Bible, right? What about Sodom and Gomorrah?" I realized that this story from Genesis was the only scripture I could recall, and of course, would later learn that homosexuality is not even the issue in that story. After about ten minutes of discussion, Sarah asked if I would like to do an Independent Study with her on this topic during the spring semester. Immediately, I said yes. That was the beginning of my journey of discernment about the place of gays and lesbians in the church of Jesus Christ, almost 24 years ago.

About that same time I was reading my theology professor Shirley Guthrie's classic book, *Christian Doctrine*, written not for seminary students, but for lay people in Presbyterian pews. In the beginning pages, Dr. Guthrie issues a warning about reading scripture: "Bible study in itself is no automatic guarantee of good theology. First, there is always the danger that we will find in the Bible only what we take with us to it – that we will use it confirm what we already think and will hear only what we want to hear. Because they already hated Jews before they read the Bible, some German Christians once found in the Bible justification for slaughtering millions of Jews. Because they wanted to keep their human property, some American Christians once argued from the Bible that it is right to buy and sell human beings. Mean people usually find a mean God in the Bible, and superficial people usually find a superficial God. Comfortable, powerful people usually find that their Bible supports social and political conservatism; poor, exploited people usually find that it supports social and political reform or revolution."

Secondly, Dr. Guthrie says, "The Bible is not one book but a collection of writings composed by and for ancient near Eastern people over a long period of time. It bears witness not to general, timeless truths about God, but to the way different people and groups, using different ways of speaking and thought forms, discerned the word in the work of God in their particular time, place, and situation. All of them lived with a prescientific, preindustrial worldview, in a patriarchal–hierarchical society that generally treated women as inferior, accepted slavery as normal, and did not even dream of all the complex problems and needs of the society we live in today."

Well, that convicted me! I realized I had taken preconceived notions, some that were completely false, into my study of scripture. In fact, when I agreed to the Independent Study, I fully intended to refute and discredit Sarah's position and support my own position that gays and lesbians had no place in ordained ministry or leadership in the church. Dr. Guthrie's words offered a new and necessary perspective and corrective.

So, with this fresh approach, beginning with scripture, I researched the subject of homosexuality historically, legally, sociologically, psychologically, biologically, ecclesiologically, and theologically. (Your session included many articles and discussions with divergent opinions about what the Bible does and does not say about homosexuality, as well as what we call today "same-sex relationships" and I refer you to our church website or to the handbooks in the office so you can make your own informed decision). I read studies on human sexuality. I visited the Metropolitan Community Church in Atlanta, which had begun nationally some twenty-five years earlier to provide a Christian sanctuary for LGBTQ+ people, since so many churches rejected them. Meeting in an old movie theatre, I remember it as among the most welcoming congregations I have ever visited. I talked to friends and professors who supported Sarah's position, as well as friends and professors who supported my position. Among our classmates was an openly gay student, the child of missionary parents. Perhaps my most important learning during this time is that I could respect, admire and love others who had differing opinions from mine on this very important issue, and we could all live together in the same seminary community, continuing to worship and serve the God in Jesus Christ, whom we adore.

As I began to write the paper, I knew that my beliefs were changing, at least minimally. I had moved from a closed position of certainty, if not smugness, to an open position of uncertainty, and a willingness to stay on the journey. I have no doubt that it was the Holy Spirit opening my heart and mind, because I remember thinking that I did not want to be changed and fought it, even in my prayers. So, instead of writing a paper to refute the opinion of my professor, I opted instead to write a dialogical paper, a conversation between someone who opposed the ordination of gays and lesbians and someone who supported ordination, using experiential, relational, and academic research gathered from this multi-disciplinary approach.

Eight months later, I used part of my paper in a final exam for a Christian Ethics class, continuing to wrestle with ordination. While I expressed my ambivalence at the end of the paper, I also closed with several quotes from the semester, which I hoped would guide me forward, including: "To be truly ethical requires that we continually challenge ourselves, and here's the hard part, and let ourselves be challenged by others, to visualize a dynamic God at work within and outside of the Bible."

Today, within the Bible, I see a dynamic God in Jesus Christ, who is so much more than a Savior who died for the sins of the world. I see a Redeemer committed to justice, creating an inclusive, adopting, welcoming Kingdom of God, where there is room for all children gay and straight. I see a Jesus who would not let scripture create a barrier to his ministry of restoring to community, the lost, the rejected, the discriminated against, overturning the purity codes that determined who was clean and who was unclean, who was in and who was out.

And because Presbyterians believe that it is not scripture written thousands of years ago that is the last word, today, outside of the Bible, I see a dynamic God in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit at work restoring gay and lesbian people to the church that for so long has at best tolerated their presence. I see our church giving full inclusion to their participation in our life together, just as they have been fully included in society. That means that when we baptize a child in our church, that little girl or boy can grow up to be confirmed, eat at the Lord's Table, and be ordained as a deacon, elder, or pastor. In other words, that child has all the rights and privileges of full membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

And, although marriage is not something that happens in every life, my hope is that for all couples, gay or straight, who are members or are related to a member of Mt. Bethel, who want to be married, who desire to make a covenant together with God their Creator, who hope to experience the same blessing that my wife and I experienced in 1978, when we gave our lives, not to the congregation of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, not to the Pastor Doug Oldenburg, and not to the session..... my hope and prayer is that all couples of any sexual orientation may have the holy, sacramental and joyful experience of giving their lives to God, in the presence of family and friends, in the church of Jesus Christ, who has at long last, welcomed them fully, openly, genuinely, and unconditionally, to the home where by the grace of God, each one of us has been welcomed, the home where we are all one in Christ.

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