

**You Asked for It: What Does the Presbyterian Church (USA)
Really Say about Homosexuality?
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Mark 9:38-50**

Ken and I were college classmates, and when we bumped into each other at an alumni event ten years later, could not have been more surprised that each was a Presbyterian minister. “You never know who God is going to call!” we joked. We lost touch for a few more years, but then found ourselves in the same Midwest city; I as pastor of a small congregation; he in a Ph.D. program. It was then that he “came out” to me; what I learned had been for him a decades-long journey of self-discovery and gradual affirmation of his gay sexual orientation. The journey had included mixed reactions from his parents and extended family, and of course, from the church—including some outright rejection from friends and colleagues. He told me he had decided to pursue more education primarily because he feared he could no longer serve in an ordained capacity. “I don’t want to deny who I am or live a lie regarding the man I’ve come to love and with whom I’m living in a committed relationship.” He finished his degree and got a teaching job out West, but he really missed being a pastor. For many years I’d see him at every General Assembly –the Presbyterian version of the annual stockholder’s meeting—working with various advocacy groups to change the Church’s prohibition of gay clergy. Last I heard, Ken had transferred his credentials to the United Church of Christ, and was happily serving a small parish in New Mexico.

Behind every generalization there is a “Ken.” Not a statistic, not a category, but a real, flesh-and-blood person. This morning as we consider the requested topic of our denomination’s perspectives on homosexuality, think of a specific person you know who is gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgendered. Remember that the policies and practices of

church order affect individuals. For Ken and countless others like him, these policies and practices have excluded them from full participation in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Since 1977, the Presbyterian Church has been debating and legislating about homosexuality. Our theological perspectives are always informed by Scripture, but that's become a battleground too, as the interpretive divide has widened between those who take a handful of verses literally and those who read them through historical context. For example, many scholars believe biblical references to homosexual relations refer to abusive ones involving coercion, ritualized acts with prostitutes, and pedophilia---and not mutual, loving relationships between two men or two women. Old Testament verses often cited are part of a larger body of teachings called "the holiness code" and were meant to help Israel keep its distinct identity while dwelling among communities that were not part of the covenant. Verses that appear to prohibit homosexual acts are alongside ones that forbid mixing fibers when weaving cloth, forbid eating shrimp and other shellfish, and forbid planting two kinds of seeds in a field---whatever reasons prompted such laws then clearly have no bearing today.

So let's explore what Jesus had to say about the matter. Well, that won't take long, because Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. Nothing. It's ironic that something our Lord didn't even weigh in on has become a litmus test of faithfulness to him.

What Jesus said and what Jesus did, however, are persuasive. Through his words and actions, Jesus revealed the height and depth and breadth of God's love. No law was more important to Jesus than the command to love God and love one's neighbor as oneself. The "family values" of God's Kingdom are predicated on unconditional love and welcome. Jesus' conflicts with both secular and religious authorities grew out of these values. He pushed back boundaries, erased borders, and

broke down barriers to say that God's love is for all. Not just the righteous, the rule-keepers and the religious, but everyone. The gospel text for this morning is one of many examples of the surprising spin Jesus continually put on God's inclusive love. Consider the way he blurred distinction in this teaching, and the strong language he uses to caution believers from making the Kingdom less accessible to others. Listen for God's word in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the ninth chapter at the 38th verse. [MARK 9:38-50]

Recently some long-time Fairmount members retired to Arizona. They church-shopped and found what they first believed was a congregation similar to this one—multiple staff, traditional worship, great music program, inspired preaching (if I do say so myself!). But when they went through the membership inquiry class, they were shocked when the pastor distinguished between membership and leadership, explicitly saying that while “everyone” who affirmed Christian faith could join, only those who could comply with the church's constitutional requirements would be eligible to be elected a deacon or elder. When they raised the question, the pastor referred them to the *Book of Order*, section G-6.0106b: *Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.* That single paragraph, added to our constitution in 1996, formalized the prohibition against ordination for sexual minorities. A matter that had previously been decided by congregations in their election of members to be deacons and elders, and presbyteries in their authority to ordain ministers of Word and Sacrament, was now subject to review by the whole church. Our friend and parish associate the Rev. Kitty Borchert has just finished her second term on the equivalent of the Supreme Court of the Presbyterian Church,

and in that role has had to rule on several dozen cases concerning application of this standard in ordination matters. It hasn't been easy, and it has not been without cost. We don't know how many members and ministers, like my friend Ken, have left the denomination because of this exclusionary policy. At the other end of the spectrum, the ambiguities of interpretation have led some congregations (witness Bay Presbyterian Church, for example) to abandon ship for other denominations where the prohibition is absolute and unquestioned.

The Presbyterian Church, in its earnest efforts to hold together differing theological perspectives in service to our essential unity, has put itself in the untenable position of speaking out of both sides of its mouth. On the one hand, we have the paragraph that effectively excludes sexual minorities from full participation in the church. On the other hand, our constitution promotes diversity and inclusiveness in the strongest terms: *The congregation shall welcome all persons who respond...to God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the membership and ministry of [Christ's] Church. No persons shall be denied membership because of race, ethnic origin, worldly condition, or any other reason....each member must seek the grace of openness in extending the fellowship of Christ to all persons. [G-5.0103]* And, *[The Presbyterian Church] shall give full expression to the rich diversity within its membership and shall provide means which will assure a greater inclusiveness leading to wholeness in its emerging life. Persons of all racial ethnic groups, different ages, both sexes, various disabilities, diverse geographical areas, different theological positions consistent with the Reformed tradition, as well as different marital conditions shall be guaranteed full participation and access to representation in the decision making of the church. [G-4.0403]* Can you really have it both ways? Christ opened the door of the church as widely as possible; Christ made a place at the Table for everyone who desires the bread and cup offered here. How then can the Church categorically deny ordination to some of those beloved children of God? Isn't

that a stumbling block Jesus warns against creating? You never know who God is going to call!

Along with every other congregation, Fairmount has struggled with these matters. We are deeply shaped by the Reformed theological tradition, and its emphasis on the singular authority over conscience being the Holy Spirit of God, not preachers, sessions, or General Assemblies. We value our connection to the wider Presbyterian Church (USA), and the broader ministries and mission we are able to accomplish through that connection. Part of Fairmount's vitality lies precisely in its members diverse theological and political perspectives (God love ya!). A consistent theme throughout our history has been attention to diversity. You were the first Heights congregation of any denomination to become racially integrated (in 1964); you called an African-American associate pastor—among the first predominantly white congregations to do so; you renovated our magnificent but elevated building to be wheelchair-accessible; you were the first Heights congregation to elect a woman as senior pastor (thank you!), breaking a stained-glass window through which others have now traveled, including most recently Plymouth Church of Shaker Heights. Not all these decisions have met with universal approval, and we continue to seek understanding, particularly in ways our congregation's practices vary from the denomination's with respect to ordination standards. Rev. Dick Clewell will lead a summer school class beginning in June using Presbyterian pastor and former General Assembly moderator Jack Rogers' book "Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality." A Fairmount small group "Beyond Acceptance" welcomes family members who want to learn more. Our congregation is a member of the "Covenant Network of Presbyterians," a group committed to changing the constitution so it reflects a church "as just and generous as God's grace"---their website provides thoughtful resources, sermons, Bible studies, as well as denominational updates.

With this kind of history, you might wonder why the Session felt the need to adopt a “diversity statement” to be used alongside our mission statement as a way of communicating our welcome. The decision to do so was prompted by shared stories within our congregation –some from members who themselves are gay or lesbian, others from family members. Those stories include experiences of rejection, closeting and misinformation. Many Presbyterians haven’t known exactly what the church says, and how that gets practiced in this congregation. The diversity statement makes it plain: *As beloved children of God we welcome all persons to join our family of faith as full participants, regardless of age, race or ethnicity, national origin, gender, marital status, economic status, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, differences of thought and expression, or any other human condition. We celebrate and find strength in our diversity.* I hope the statement will be a catalyst for discussion, not simply about what divides us, but about what unites us, our kinship as members of God’s family, our intent to be Christ’s faithful followers.

But don’t take our “word” for it! The Presbyterian Church’s teaching about diversity is never more evident than here at the table of the Lord. People will come from east and west and from north and south---all different, yet joined by one glorious saving reality: all are God’s beloved.

I invite you now to look at the diversity statement in your bulletin, printed after our mission statement. In a moment of silence, read it for yourself. In your mind’s eye see a person who represents each of the human conditions described in the statement. Picture us all, eating and drinking at one Table, with Christ as the host, in God’s eternal kingdom, together. [few minutes of silence; then invite all to affirm our mission and commitment to diversity, rising as able]

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