

Do Not Point the Finger
Isaiah 58:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20 (*The Message*)
February 6, 2011
Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Let me tell you about my friend Ben. Ben and I were exchange students together. He was in France the year I was in Switzerland at the end of high school. Coincidentally, we both attended the same college in Washington D.C., and became close friends, often eating lunch together in the dining hall, practicing our French and German, and reminiscing about our exchange year. After college our lives took us in different directions. But every Thanksgiving weekend, when I received the first Christmas card of the season, I knew it would be from Ben. In 1985, the card came, and I eagerly opened it, expecting, as always, a card with a snow scene and a hand-written letter enclosed. This year the letter read, "Dear Heather, This has been a tough year. I learned in May that I have AIDS. You may not have known, but I am gay." And the letter went on to describe his despair over informing his former partners and his family. I arranged to see Ben soon after that, and then he moved to his hometown on the east coast to spend the rest of his days. His mother found a place for him to live down the street, and she visited him and cared for him. Ben's father would not speak to him. Only the United Methodist pastor stopped by once a week to see Ben. No one else in town knew that Ben had AIDS and had come home to die. I talked on the phone occasionally with Ben, until his energy gave out. He wrote to me once a week up to his last weeks; he wanted me to know his favorite books. I have saved his letters. Some of them are pages of annotated bibliography, with all the books that had meant a lot to him. His mother called me when Ben died. More than his disease or even his early death, the saddest part of Ben's story is that his family never accepted him openly. His father never spoke with him after learning that he was gay, and although his brothers and sisters saw him at Christmas, their conversations were short, and they avoided the subjects most important to him. Though they had loved him when he was a child, he was no longer truly welcome as a family member.

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people do not feel welcome in churches. Many have been deeply wounded by the church. A number of you have expressed to me your desire to be a welcoming church to the LGBT community.

Many of us have undergone changes in our views about homosexuality. In most churches there are LGBT people in attendance. Likely between 2 and 13% of Western Society is homosexual, depending on what statistics you use. Most families have a relative or friend who is gay. I know that my friend Ben helped sensitize me to the prejudices gay men and lesbian women face. I remember thinking that it took Ben's sickness and death to make the AIDS crisis really matter to me. I was ashamed that I had to have personal experience knowing someone with AIDS to care. When you know and care about someone, you share the suffering. Attending seminary helped me know people of different sexual orientation than my own. At Lake Merritt UMC, where I did my pastoral internship, two openly lesbian couples were very active in the church, people I admired and enjoyed spending time with. The church Jim and I attended in Livermore has an active family that consists of two lovely

daughters, a father and his gay partner and a mother and her straight husband. They often sit in front and behind each other in the front pews.

This is a start, welcoming people and hoping they feel comfortable. But we have a ways to go to be a truly inclusive church. The United Methodist Church represents the same spectrum of liberal to conservative views, as does our nation. The last General Conference, our highest governing body, in 2008, voted to retain the language in *The Book of Discipline* that says:

"The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching" (§161). "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers, and our clergy who perform such services are liable to charges and punishment" (§2702). "Self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church" (§304). This week 33 retired United Methodist bishops released a statement opposing this existing policy.

In essence we have a "Don't ask, don't tell" policy for clergy. And ministers who have married gay couples put their careers at risk. I know a number of retired clergy who have made themselves available to perform holy unions. There may be a difference of opinion here at St. John's about this situation, which is now the status quo in our church. I am hopeful, I am confident, change is coming.

The United Church of Christ has led the way, since the beginning of the gay rights movement in 1969. In 1980 the UCC ordained gay clergy and blessed same-sex unions. The Episcopal Church ordained its first openly gay bishop, Gene Robinson, in 2003, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America voted in 2009 to ordain gay priests. The Presbyterian Church of America has opened the door to ordination of LGBT individuals this last summer. Many clergy in the United Methodist Church are working for change, but, in the meantime, agree to stay together in spite of our differences on this issue.

While I was in seminary, a pastor in Virginia denied a gay man membership in his local United Methodist Church. The Judicial Council upheld the pastor's right to assess a congregant's readiness for membership. There was an outcry. Methodist students held a service in the chapel at Pacific School of Religion that week. I was to preach. We put a chain on the door and made everyone stand outside until we broke the chain and invited people in. Then singing "O For a Thousand Tongues To Sing" everyone flooded into the chapel, received a rainbow stole and worshiped with the commitment to breaking the chains of oppression and opening our doors to all.

That week many of us drove to Sacramento where Bishop Shamana served communion in a parking lot on a *door* as the communion table to represent our commitment as United Methodists to an open door and an open table.

You may not feel that the United Methodist Church should ordain gay clergy or marry same-sex couples. I know very capable seminarians and pastors who have left The United Methodist Church because they are gay and choose not to live a life of deceit. I know

families who have left our church because they don't feel accepted openly, given our current statement that "homosexuality is inconsistent with Christian teaching." I disagree with the language of our *Book of Discipline*, but choose to stay and work for reform in the church I love.

You may feel, like many do, that the Bible opposes homosexuality. I'd like to speak to that. There are, at most, 8 references to homosexual behavior in the Bible. Two seem clearly to prohibit sexual relations with the same sex, in Leviticus 20 and Romans 1. The other references are more about opposing violence and or about not offering hospitality to travelers. But in Leviticus in the Old Testament in the Holiness Code, it definitely says: "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" (13). And Paul writes in Romans in the New Testament, describing "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" (26-27). Paul called homosexual acts "degrading." Jesus, on the other hand, said nothing about homosexuality in the Bible.

The way we handle these verses depends on how we read scripture. We can take each verse line by line literally. Those who do that, though, to be consistent should also take the other verses as law, for instance, to refrain from eating shrimp or pork, for that too is "abomination." There is to be no crossbreeding of animals or plants, no cutting sideburns or shaving beards. If a couple commits adultery, both are to be put to death. Jesus clearly prohibits divorce. Should we follow every rule in the Bible literally? The Bible condones prostitution, polygamy, child marriage, sex with slaves, and treatment of women as property. Should we condone these practices?

Progressive biblical scholars do not read verses one by one and take them out of their cultural and historical context and apply them literally to today. Picking and choosing, looking for the verses that support one's own opinions is called "proof texting." To avoid this practice, most churches in our denomination use the Revised Common Lectionary. We preach the text of the week as it relates to the concerns of our people. Today's readings from Isaiah and Matthew are readings that represent the big ideas of the Bible. A healthy way to examine questions about homosexuality and the church is to interpret them in light of the big ideas of the faith. Inherent in the Bible is the love ethic. There really is no sex ethic in the Bible, says Walter Wink, a Methodist minister and professor at Union Seminary (*Homosexuality and The Bible*, 1979, 10, See <http://www.soulforce.org/article/homosexuality-bible-walter-wink>). Literalists talk about the "inerrancy" of the Bible (that it has no error.) Instead of talking about the *inerrancy* of the Bible, we should be talking about its "inherency." Inherent, throughout the Bible, is the big picture of love. We should not be condemning homosexuals; we should not be pointing the finger. We should be asking, "What does it mean to love my gay or lesbian neighbor? We should be questioning the fidelity, honesty, responsibility, and genuine concern for the other in *any* relationship, gay or straight. We should promote the love ethic, for that is the core teaching of Jesus.

Jack Rogers is a former professor at San Francisco Theological Seminary here in San Anselmo. He has written about his own change of opinion, from understanding homosexuality as a sin to understanding sexual orientation as something a person does not choose, so, therefore, it cannot be a sin to be gay. He examines the Bible and the Presbyterian Church and concludes that, like the history of oppression toward African Americans and women, oppression toward gay and lesbian individuals will be looked at in the future as a great societal sin (*Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, 2006). This sin is one we don't have to choose to commit. Inherent in the Bible is love, not hatred.

The big idea in Isaiah is the hope of justice and righteousness. Isaiah, chapter 58, looks at the question of "who belongs?" We are not to point the finger; we are not to speak evil. We are to offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, and then our light shall rise in the darkness. This is the Epiphany message—"Your light will shine!" This is the message of the open Communion table. All are included. All are welcome. Isaiah says, "You shall be the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in" (58:12). There certainly has been a breach between the church and the LGBT community. Perhaps we can restore the streets, open our doors, and create a culture of welcome.

We need a rainbow to shine through the clouds!

Matthew says, "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world." My prayer is that our church will be the light, bringing out all the God-colors in the world.