

I developed this talk at the invitation of St. Frances Cabrini Catholic Church in Minneapolis. They were celebrating their tenth anniversary as a Welcoming parish, having drafted a public Statement of Reconciliation aimed at the GLBT community in 1994. They asked me to address the biblical texts often used to condemn homosexuality. This is NOT my favorite topic. I am not a biblical scholar, and I think there are better ways to employ our energy than dodging the assaults of others. Still, it is perhaps necessary work, and I used it as an opportunity to move beyond the texts themselves to some wider remarks about how we can more creatively—and more faithfully—approach the Bible.

22. Holding our Breath in the Face of Hate: Reading the Bible “Word by Word” in the Spirit of Christ

(October 12, 2004)

My presentation is arranged in two broad parts. In the first half I will speak directly to the biblical texts so often used to terrorize the gay community. This is the least of what I want to talk about, but it is where I will begin. In the second half, I will explain why I think simply “defusing” these few texts is not enough—why I think that we must *and can* do better. And I actually *will* do better: by suggesting what I believe is a far more faithful and promising way to approach Scripture. Finally, I will conclude with a few short reflections on what all of this means when it comes full circle to the practice of our sexuality. And afterwards I’ll look forward to your comments and questions.

Let me first, however, be clear about who I am. I am *not* gay, but I have so identified myself with these people and this struggle that I sometimes speak using first person pronouns. By this I do not mean to blur the distinctions—as though this struggle is the same for me as it is for those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. *It is not.* But I will be restless in the very depths of my soul until *all of us* find a welcome in the church. I have invested my reputation, my livelihood, my scholarship, and my creativity in this struggle—without reserve. I do not speak as a bystander or an interested observer; *I speak as a co-conspirator in the remaking of the church.*

I have two Masters degrees; one in Theology from Wartburg Seminary, a Lutheran school, and one in Christian Ethics from the University of Notre Dame. I have taught college courses in GLBT Theology and have been a vocal and active ally in the Lutheran Church. And for several years I coordinated

the welcoming program for Lutheran congregations in the Twin Cities. But, perhaps more than any of this, I need simply to acknowledge that my life has been leavened—enriched and transformed—by the friendship and grace I have known from GLBT persons. Lastly, while I do bring some significant learning to this presentation, I speak primarily as a poet, as someone convinced that these truths will finally be received not as ideas grasped by our minds but as images embraced by our hearts.

There are six of them. So few passages altogether compared to the entire text of the Bible that we might easily overlook them . . . except that they drip with blood. Surely most Christians who feel compelled to condemn homosexuality on the basis of these texts *do not* endorse violence against GLBT persons. Yet it is undeniable that the violence that does get perpetrated against this community almost always understands itself as legitimated in some way by these texts. They drip with blood whether they were meant to or not. And like a vicious pet dog that has a habit of getting out and terrorizing the neighborhood, *because these texts belong to us—to the church—we do bear a share of responsibility for the havoc they create when they get loose in our neighborhoods.*

So what are we to do? In my title, I refer to ‘Breath’ to evoke the image of God as Spirit, Wind, Breath. And the question before us then is this: when we get clobbered again and again by these texts that can seem so full of hatred for who we are—these texts that lead Pastor Fred Phelps to proclaim “God hates fags”—how in the face of such hate do we keep from having the Breath of God knocked right out of us? That’s the initial challenge.

One way to meet this challenge is to set these texts within their literary, theological and historical context: to understand these verses within their original languages, within the chapters and books where they appear, within the theological perspective of their authors, and within the historical eras that they originated. And this helps quite a bit, because it is very difficult upon close examination to maintain that the Bible explicitly condemns the caring and committed same-sex relationships that seek recognition and affirmation

in the church today. So, while we must do better than this, we can at least begin here.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both clearly voice a prohibition against same-sex activity between men. Both verses forbid a man “to lie with a man as with a woman.” They call it an “abomination,” a translation of a Hebrew word which is rather ambiguous in its precise meaning, but which certainly does not suggest approval.

But there are very good reasons to doubt that this prohibition had anything like loving, monogamous same-sex relationships in mind. First, we know historically that there was same-sex activity between men that the early Hebrews would have known about and might have wanted to prohibit. It fell into two categories. One was ritual sex enacted between male priests at pagan temples as part of various fertility rituals. This form of sexual activity was undoubtedly seen as a form of idolatrous worship, and Israel had a bad habit of trying out the worship practices of its neighbors, so this prohibition may reflect that concern. The other form was a sort of military “hazing” where victorious male soldiers raped the members of the beaten army in a display of dominance and humiliation. This form of same-sex activity is well known still today both in prisons and in war. It has nothing to do with human love, and it would rightly be offensive to Israel’s sense of human dignity. So there are solid historical reasons to say that these verses, neither in the past nor in the present, have the purpose of condemning consensual, personal, gay relationships.

There are also literary reasons to set them aside. Both passages are contained in that part of Leviticus called the “Holiness Code,” a series of strict commands and prohibitions designed to maintain Israel’s distinct identity among its neighbors. The root word for “holiness” here simply means “kept separate,” and the prohibitions of the Holiness Code were determined to define Israel in contrast to its neighbors. In short, if they’re doing it, then we can’t. In this sense the “holiness” of the code is really more about ethnic purity than about human morality. The holiness code prohibits sowing two types of seed in the same field, crossbreeding two types of cattle, storing different types of food in the same cupboard, blending different types of

thread in the same cloth, and so forth. It is a way of drawing clear boundaries between peoples based on how we choose to arrange the world and how others do. So these verses are intended to meticulously craft and preserve the ethnic-religious identity of a people 3000 years ago. Whatever their wisdom then, it does not speak easily to us today. Virtually nothing in the Holiness Code commands our attention any longer—and for good reason.

The other commonly invoked Old Testament passage is the story of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, recounted in Genesis 19. This text quite clearly portrays the threat of gang rape—not consensual sex—yet it still managed to give us our English word “sodomy,” thereby making the mere description of same-sex activity an implicit judgment of it at the same time.

There is much that could be said about this text, but it is enough to mention several things. Sodom and Gomorrah were marked for divine destruction *prior to* the incident at Lot’s doorstep. Whatever they were condemned for happened *before* the angelic messengers arrived in town. In fact, when Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible (except for one obscure reference in the book of Jude) they are universally acknowledged, by both the prophets (e.g., Isaiah 1:10-17; 3:9-15; Ezekiel 16:49) and Jesus (Matthew 11:19,24; Luke 10:12), as examples of communities where injustice toward the vulnerable ran rampant. In short, they were known for their obscene inhospitality—of which their behavior toward the angelic messengers is simply one more bit of damning evidence.

It is hard for us to imagine the esteem for hospitality in the ancient world, but it ran high enough that Lot was willing to offer his own daughters to the crowd—clearly in his mind they were hungry for sexual violence, not homosexual activity. It may also be hard for us to imagine that this text says more about hospitality than homosexuality because *if that’s true*—and I think clearly it is—*then “sodomy” as a derogatory term really names the church’s sin of inhospitality toward homosexuals rather than naming the activity that occurs between homosexuals.* This text, too, does *not* have our gay brothers (or our lesbian sisters) in mind.

Turning to the New Testament, I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:10 both employ obscure Greek words that have sometimes been translated in

ways that appear to condemn homosexuality. The words (*arsenokoita* and *mala-koi*), which literally mean “men who penetrate” and “men who are soft,” may refer to partners in a homosexual act, though we cannot say for certain. But if they do, then historically they most likely have in mind the practice, once common among Greco-Roman men but falling into disrepute by Paul’s time, of pederasty. This involved a heterosexual man taking a prepubescent boy as a tool for sexual pleasure. Such relationships were entirely about the gratification of the man and the domination of the boy; like hazing, they sought to inscribe into the boy’s character and into his body the power structures of a very hierarchical and patriarchal society. Given Paul’s vision of life in Christ where all are members of one body without power distinctions, it would be no surprise if Paul found pederasty a particularly distasteful and anti-Gospel behavior.

Because the words in question here are used nowhere else in either the New Testament or in other Greek writings of the era, we can only guess at what they meant for Paul. But to guess that they condemn the committed relationships of gay and lesbian Christians undoubtedly reflects the prejudices of the church today rather than the mind of Paul 2000 years ago.

Finally, Romans 1:26-27 is the most controversial of these passages. It reads, “For this reason [that is, on account of their idolatry] God gave them [that is, the Gentiles] up to 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.”

There are conservative scholars who are willing to admit that none of the other passages constitute a judgment against contemporary expressions of homosexuality, but who still find in this text everything they need to support their view. This passage is tugged at from many angles, pulled in many different directions, and by its many different interpreters. It is a textbook case of utter ambiguity. Much of this has to do with how one understands Paul’s use of “natural” and “unnatural” here, which is far from clear. He certainly does not use the word “unnatural” to show his admiration for same-sex activity, but the word used is not a word of clear condemnation either. It may suggest

moral judgment or it may imply a charge of being culturally backward but not sinful. Both readings can be supported. And later on, in Romans 11:24, Paul uses the same word—”unnatural”—to describe God’s actions in bringing the Gentiles into the church. There it simply means the utterly surprising, who-would-have-guessed character of God’s activity. In any case, it is hardly wise to let so much hate hinge on the interpretation of a single word that is fiercely contested by scholars on both sides.

Rather than try to discuss in detail the many divergent interpretations of this text, we might see that this much *is* clear and acknowledged by everyone: Paul’s purpose in Romans 1 is to declare the utter sinfulness of the Gentiles. But his purpose in Romans 2 is to make painfully clear the equally utter sinfulness of the Jews. Chapter 2 begins, “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment on anyone else you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” Paul is not concerned with the details; *he is concerned to indict the entire human race without exception . . .* and then, in Romans 3, he introduces the grace of God—*for absolutely everyone*. Regardless of Paul’s historical position on “homosexuality” (which remains far from certain), if he were to hear Romans 1 quoted by one group of persons to condemn another group of persons *he would explode in anger*. To use the passage this way flies in the face of the very argument Paul is making, which is to silence judgment and announce grace.

So, to conclude this first half of my presentation, I think we can say with great confidence that the Bible contains not a single passage that can be said to clearly condemn caring, committed, Christian homosexual relationships. The biblical authors simply never imagined and never addressed this issue.

But. Yes, there is a “but.” But even seeing that all of these texts can be disarmed, they *still* dominate the conversation in the church in an irrational and—if we are honest—in a hateful way. We still find ourselves again and again needing to protect ourselves, less from the texts themselves than from the fear and judgment and hate they seem quite able to perpetuate, regardless

of our scholarly insight. How do we explain that? And how do we *change* that?

I believe it happens because the root of sin—the very essence of the human fall—is the temptation to break relationship. And while its extreme form occurs in acts like murder and rape, its more subtle and far more common form is to use morality to break relationship. The narrative of the fall in the Garden of Eden is profoundly true in saying that the root of sin lies in our desire—against God’s better judgment—to claim for ourselves the knowledge of good and evil. Because this knowledge consistently sows the seeds of self-righteousness (or self-loathing) in ourselves, and just as consistently sows the seeds of judgment and exclusion in our attitudes toward others.

God can know the goodness and the evil of our actions and yet love us undeterred by this knowledge. But we, we are entangled—addicted is not too strong a word—in a pattern of using this stolen knowledge to draw lines to define who’s ‘in’ and who’s ‘out,’ who’s ‘us’ and who’s ‘them,’ who’s ‘worthy’—and who’s not. And these six texts play to that impulse all too well. They sit like the tree at the center of the Garden, ever tempting us to eat of their fruit and become like gods. Which is why explaining these texts is not enough. Explanations may afford us a measure of protection from the terror they have often inflicted on us, but explanations are not likely to move the church to offer us the welcome for which we wait.

Indeed, some will respond that our explanations only show that we are looking to explain away those passages that trouble us. That we are not interested in taking the Bible seriously. *And we need to counter that charge aggressively and articulately. Because it is precisely a rigidly literal reading of the Bible that fails to take Scripture seriously enough.* And out of faithfulness to God, we must be willing to say that.

We desperately need to refashion the way that we, as a whole church, tend to relate to Scripture. In our own rush to explain these passages there lies an implicit fear that if we could not explain them we would need to condemn ourselves—even if that self-condemnation flew in the face of our lived existence, our loved relationships with each other and our own interior sense of God’s affirmation. Such willingness—often implied even on *our* part—to

bind the whole of God's mystery to the fixed text of the Bible distorts the very purpose of Scripture.

The biblical text is not sacred because it has captured and frozen the whole of God within its pages. Indeed, this is precisely why God distrusts Israel's desire to build a Temple: lest a fixed structure imply that God is anything less than the Absolute Freedom to Liberate and to Gather that is revealed in the name "I will be who I will be." Rather, the text is sacred because it has the capacity to bring us into a relationship with the Living God, the God who is no less capable of surprising us today than of surprising Israel and the early church in the past. Our primary relationship as Christians is not to the written text, but to the Living God. And whenever we forget this, we are no longer regarding the book as sacred but are beginning to revere it as an idol.

Let me say that more pointedly. The sacredness of this text is *not* that it is untouched, unmarred, by the human limitations—the time-bound knowledge and attitudes—of its authors. *It is*. No less than the stories it contains, the text as a whole bears powerful witness to a God who is willing and determined to take the risk of working within the limits and imperfections (as well as within the best aspirations) of human beings. The Bible is filled with such stories. The sacredness of the text is that, in the midst of these human limits, imperfections, and aspirations, it continues to invite us into real relationship with the God who promises, even today, to be doing a new thing (Is. 43:19).

So rather than just intellectually explaining away the condemnation that these texts have often borne for us, *we must show that we read them as we do out of a deep relationship with the Living God to whom the Bible does bear witness but who the mystery of whom the Bible does not exhaust*. One evocative way we can articulate this is to be clear to others that *we read the Bible faithfully—"Word by Word" while "holding our Breath."*

By the image of "holding our Breath" I mean to say that we read these texts—and all biblical texts—holding in us the loving, creative, and life-giving Breath of God that moved over the face of the deep at the dawn of creation. We read them holding the Breath of God that promised faithfulness to Abraham and Sara—if only they would join in a journey to a land they'd

never seen. And the Breath of God that spoke to Moses from a burning bush and promised liberation to a people in bondage.

We read them holding the Breath of God that filled the prophets' words like Holy Wind: moving Hosea (2:23) to tell those called "Not my People" that they were indeed "My People." Moving Jeremiah (7:4) to warn those chanting, "This is the Temple of the Lord," that no such chanting could limit the Freedom of God. Moving Amos (5:24) to proclaim that the *only* worship that truly honors God is worship filled—like rushing water—with justice and mercy. And moving Isaiah to explode in anger against those who failed to welcome home their own kin . . . and then to boldly declare that God was gathering in these outcasts—and to promise that there were yet more outcasts to gather in (Is. 56, 58). This gathering Breath even inspires the author of Jonah to tell an imaginative tale in which not simply outcasts but Israel's *outright enemies* are gathered into God's care.

Throughout Israel's story of God, this Holy Breath is active stretching the people's imagination about what God can do and about whom God can include in this unfolding story. And because this is the Breath that we hold in our lungs—and in our hearts—as we read the Bible we may lament those texts that fail to billow with this Holy Wind, but they cannot frighten us. *We take Scripture far too seriously for that.* For the very Breath that surprised Israel by blowing into unexpected places has blown into our own lives as well. And who are we—who is anyone—to say that God's Breath cannot do that?

By the image of "reading the Bible Word by Word" I am suggesting that any serious and faithful reading of the Bible involves setting every *written* word within the context of the *lived* Word of Jesus the Christ. In his life we see the Breath of God take on full flesh. He spoke always of the Kingdom of God, a phrase that in his day turned the very notion of kingship inside out. Today we might better capture the sense of it by hearing him declare the Kin-dom of God, the divine activity through which God makes all of us kin. In his ministry—from the subversive stories he told, to the bodies he healed and restored to community, to the outcast company he kept, to the festive and inclusive meals he shared—we see an astonishing revelation, a scandalous *enactment* of God's gathering love. It is a love that gathers even when that

gathering angers the religious leaders whose imaginations have grown too brittle to be stretched by God. And it is a gathering love that suffers death without ever betraying or denying those who have been gathered in.

So we read these texts, these words so often wielded as weapons against us, we read them alongside this Living Word who simply says, “Come. Sit with me. Share my table. For I have called you by name, and you are mine.” And when we find ourselves in the company of this One from Nazareth, it is not the intellectual explanations that drain the power from these texts, it is the sheer joy of his presence, and the company of his friends who welcome us. Reading the Bible “word by Word” reminds us that some words are no more than old wineskins, destined to be burst by New Wine.

So we must counter these texts not simply by dismissing them with scholarship—though there is much that we can dismiss in that way. But to really heal the wounds in ourselves—and in our accusers—we must bear bold witness to the overarching Breath of God’s gathering grace and to the Gospel of the same gathering grace made known in Jesus Christ. We can do this by holding our Breath while we read the Bible word by Word.

Finally, if we are blunt, I am here tonight, and you are here tonight, not simply because we are wrestling with the sacredness of this text, but because we are wrestling with the sacredness of our sex. Were it not for that, the text would never become a problem in the first place. So let me close with a few thoughts about the sex that sits at the center of this.

Earlier I suggested that the root of human sinfulness is our addiction to making judgments about good and evil in ways that become judgments about who is worthy of love and life, who is welcome in the “household of us”—which often gets misrepresented as the “household of God.” We do this in many ways, but sexuality has a uniquely powerful place in this dynamic of sin, making it a favorite reference point for conveying or denying worthiness. *Now let me be very clear:* this is *not* because sex is intrinsically sinful as we have sometimes (often!) been taught. *It is because sex is potentially sacred—and is therefore a target for distortion by forces opposed to God.*

While sin is intrinsically about the breaking of relationships, sexuality is our embodied drive to unite with other persons. It is that deep longing to be naked not just in our skin but also in our soul, and to be thus in the presence of another, and to feel ourselves unconditionally welcomed and named worthy by them. Sexuality, in its best expression, is a tactile echo of the tender intimacy with which God knows each of us. And because of that capacity to be a human ground of grace, it becomes a place where sin tempts us to most vigorously divide ourselves and to deny grace to others.

We sense intuitively—but without fully realizing what’s at stake—that what transpires in our sexual encounters is (or can be) something of profound importance. It can also, of course, and for the same reasons, be of devastating consequence or have a cheapening effect. So it is not surprising that sexuality is one of the landscapes on which morality gets turned away from questions of ethical integrity and pressed into the unholy work of measuring human worth.

But I want to leave you with this set of questions, because we really can’t stop here. What might it mean if our sexuality, like the best passages in the Bible, billowed full with the Breath of God? What might it mean to claim our sexuality as a fine place for the Word to become flesh yet again? Playfully put, yet seriously posed, what might it mean to speak of “sex—in the city—of God”?

That’s a whole other talk, but it is *the essential question to ask* as we move beyond these texts themselves. If Scripture does not condemn our sexuality, then what might it offer for positive guidance to shape our sexuality? In treating the texts tonight, I suggested that the Breath of God manifest in Israel’s life and the Word of God manifest in Jesus’ life have been characterized most clearly by acts of care and nurture, welcome and worth-giving, justice and mercy. When the joyful abandon of our sexual relationships, both within the bedroom and within our common life, is also marked as by these things—care and nurture, welcome and worth-giving, justice and mercy—well, that is what sex in the city of God looks like. You see, when our sexual lives display these same features—features which are not tied to the gender of our partner but to the quality of our relationship—then we can rejoice knowing that in our bodies we indeed hold the Breath of God and that in our flesh the Word again becomes Incarnate Love.