

**When Jesus Met a Gay Man**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss**  
**November 6, 2005**

As I look back at my years of ministry, I realize that at least once or twice a year I have found myself preaching what one might call a “Welcoming Congregation” sermon – a sermon focused specifically on how we treat folks within this congregation and in society at large who happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender. In this congregation, it generally feels like I’m “preaching to the choir” - talking to those who are already committed to the equal treatment of all people regardless of their gender expression or sexual orientation. A few of you may be wondering, “Why’s Bob talking about GLBT issues again, doesn’t he know we’re already on board?”

Well, the answer is fairly simple. While I agree that this congregation is in as good a shape as one might ask for in any group that is growing and always bringing in new members and friends, our broader society still has a long way to go before we even approach basic justice. This last week, the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on the Constitution once again took up S.J. Res.1, the so-called “Marriage Protection Amendment” to the U.S. Constitution. While Wyoming is one of the few states that has so far resisted jumping on the bandwagon of trying to protect us from whatever imaginary damage might be done by extending legal recognition to loving, committed relationships between same sex partners, it is clear that there is still lots of work to be done. Most of that work needs to be done among people whose sole reason for objecting to the legal recognition of same sex relationships is that they believe that blessing same sex relationships conflicts with their Biblically based Christian faith.

Now I know that for most Unitarian Universalists, what the Bible says about same sex relationships plays a relatively small role in our thinking about whether or not we should give them our blessing. As UUs we draw religious inspiration from many sources; direct experience which moves us to a renewal of the spirit, the guidance of reason and science, as well as Jewish and Christian teachings about God’s love. Most of us think that the spirit of the holy still speaks with as much authority and clarity as it did during the time period in which the Bible was written. And yet if we are to transform society, it would be very helpful to be able to converse persuasively with those for whom the Bible is the only authoritative source of religious inspiration. And so this morning, I want to spend some time with you reexamining the Biblical evidence on same-sex relationships.

Imagine that you are the type of Christian who feels that your faith stance must be reconciled with the Bible. Should you celebrate or condemn loving and committed same sex relationships? The Biblical evidence, as presented by the Rev. Jeff Miner and John Tyler Connoley in their book, *The Children are Free*, [available from Amazon.com, or at [www.jesumcc.org](http://www.jesumcc.org)] shows quite clearly that we should celebrate such relationships.

I came across this particular book when we were mailed a free copy in our role as the host of Cheyenne’s PFLAG chapter and I was so impressed with it that I ordered enough copies to be able to give one to any ministerial colleague here in Cheyenne who will promise to read it all the way

through. There are several copies in our Church Library that I hope will see good use. In less than 100 pages, the authors do a remarkable job of surveying everything the Bible has to say about same sex relationships, and understood in a Christian context, it is much easier to make a case for celebration than condemnation.

Now obviously, even though it's a quick read, I can't summarize the whole book in the course of one sermon. And I do want to take you through its main points in case you know someone for whom this would be truly liberating material.

In the first Chapter of *The Children are Free*, the authors address the 6 passages of scripture that are normally used to condemn sexual contact between same sex partners. They examine the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), the passage in Jude 7, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1: 21-28, 1 Corinthians 6: 9 - 10, and 1 Timothy 1:10. What is clear from these passages when they are examined in their original context and the languages in which they were written is that the Bible does condemn homosexual rape or any use of sexuality to humiliate or denigrate another person. It also condemns temple prostitution, whether with a same sex or opposite sex partner. It condemns promiscuity, and adultery, (though a man's having multiple wives doesn't count here) but what it never does is condemn loving committed same-sex relationships.

So if one cannot find condemnation of loving same-sex relationships in scripture, can one find affirmation? Well, if we start by setting aside any prejudices we might have about the subject, the answer is a definite yes.

In the second chapter of their book, the authors point out that there are only two books in the Bible that are named after women. One is Ester, which tells the story of a Jewish woman who becomes Queen of Persia and saves her people from destruction by "coming out" as Jewish to her husband the king. While this book contains an important message for the GLBT community about the importance of "coming out" when the time is right, it is the other book, Ruth, which contains the most powerful message. While the story of Ruth and Naomi is probably familiar to you, and it is certainly one on which I have preached before, it bears repeating that this book of the Bible tells the story of a loving relationship between two women that goes way beyond friendship. In fact, Ruth's famous "Wherever you go, I will go" vow is so moving that it is not unusual for heterosexual couples to use it as part of their wedding ceremonies. While it can be debated whether or not there was a sexual component to their relationship (though certain phrases in Hebrew strongly suggest that there was) there is no doubt that this is the story of two women who were in love, who made vows, lived together for life and vowed to be together in death, loved each other deeply, adopted each other's extended families as their own, and relied on each other for sustenance – as do many lesbian couples today. That the relationship was "blessed by God" can be seen not only from the fact that one of the books of the Bible is named Ruth, but the fact that the writer of the gospel of Mathew includes the name of Ruth as one of only four women named as he lists the genealogy of the 42 generations between Abraham and Jesus.

Nor is it insignificant that the first verse of the Gospel of Matthew, the first book in what is often called The New Testament, reads: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” As we look for other examples of same sex individuals who are both linked in deep loving relationships and lifted up as acceptable to God, the story of Jonathan and David certainly stands out among them. If you are not familiar with their story, read it, or read the synopsis presented in *The Children are Free*. For years I have found it impossible to examine the evidence and come to any other conclusion other than that Jonathan was what in today’s language we would call a gay man, and that David was bisexual. While David was presented in the Bible as a flawed hero, who was nevertheless acceptable to God, interestingly enough, his loving relationship with Jonathan was never presented as one of his flaws.

Another story of interest is the “New Testament” account of Philip’s baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, which is recorded in the eighth chapter of Acts. Careful modern research has revealed that eunuchs, literally “keepers of the couch,” were often homosexual men who by virtue of their lack of interest in women were often trusted around a ruler’s harem. The acceptability of the Ethiopian eunuch in the early church whichever type he was, combined with a passage from Jesus’ teaching recorded in Matthew 19: 11-12 where he accepts those who were born eunuchs, those made that way by others, and those who have chosen to be eunuchs, makes it clear that sexual diversity was acceptable in the early church, and a person’s being gay was not a problem for Jesus when it came to deciding who was entitled to enter the kingdom of heaven.

While many Christians have gotten as far as granting that being gay is not a barrier to being a Christian, many still maintain that a gay or lesbian person is only acceptable in the church if they agree to a celibate life. And so one might well ask is there anything in the Christian scriptures that suggests it might be OK to be in a same sex relationship and not be celibate? The answer is yes, and it occurs in the story of when Jesus met a gay man.

“What?” I can almost hear a televangelist scream, “That’s not in the Bible!” Well, it turns out that thanks to the insights of modern scholarship and the dropping away of the blinders of old prejudices; it actually is in the Bible. We’ve just never thoroughly understood it before.

The story is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew 8: 5-13 and in Luke 7: 1-10. In Matthew, we are told that a Roman centurion came to Jesus to plead for the healing of his servant. Jesus said he was willing to come to the centurion’s house, but the centurion said there was no need for Jesus to do so – he believed that if Jesus simply spoke the word, his servant would be healed. Marveling at the man’s faith, Jesus pronounced the servant healed and he was healed from the very moment at which Jesus spoke the word. Luke tells a similar story though he has others interceding on behalf of the centurion.

How is this the story of a gay man? In the time we have I can only give you the outline and not the full story much less the footnotes, but believe me, the full text is convincing. In the Greek language in which the story was recorded, the word for the Centurion's servant that was used was the word *pais*. In the language of the time, *pais* had three possible meanings depending on the context in which it was used. It could mean "son or boy;" it could mean simply "servant," or it was the word of choice for a particular type of servant – one who was "his master's male lover." In the account in Luke, the centurion's *pais* is further defined as his *entremous duolos*. The word *duolos*, in ancient Greek was a generic term for slave or servant, and was never used in reference to a person's child. That this *pais* was an *entremous duolos*, an honored servant, or as the RSV translates it one "who was dear to him," leaves only one possibility among the various meanings, this was the centurion's male lover.

With this understanding, the story suddenly takes on a new dimension of meaning. How is it that a Roman centurion (the conqueror/oppressor) comes to be pleading with a Jewish rabbi (the conquered/oppressed) for the healing of his slave? The lengths to which he is willing to go, and the risks of rejection and humiliation based on his not being one of those for the benefit of whom Jesus was sent, make a lot more sense when one understands that this was the centurion's beloved companion.

One can imagine the scene. [I want to tell it to you the way it is told in *The Children are Free*] "While stationed in Palestine, the centurion's *pais* becomes ill – experiencing some type of life-threatening paralysis. The centurion will stop at nothing to save him. Perhaps a friend tells him of rumors of Jesus' healing powers. Perhaps this friend also tells him Jesus is unusually open to foreigners, teaching his followers that they should love their enemies, even Roman soldiers. So the centurion decides to take a chance. Jesus was his only hope.

"As he made his way to Jesus, he probably worried about the possibility that Jesus, like other Jewish rabbis, would take a dim view of his homosexual relationship. Perhaps he even considered lying. He could simply use the word *duolos*. That would have been accurate, as far as it went. But the centurion probably figured if Jesus was powerful enough to heal his lover, he was also powerful enough to see through any half-truths.

"So the centurion approaches Jesus and bows before him. 'Rabbi, my ...,' the word gets caught in his throat. This is it – the moment of truth. Either Jesus will turn away in disgust, or something wonderful will happen. So, the centurion clears his throat and speaks again. 'Rabbi, my *pais* – yes my *pais* lies at home sick unto death.' Then he pauses and waits for a second that must have seemed like an eternity. The crowd of good, God fearing people surrounding Jesus probably become tense. This was like a gay man asking a televangelist to heal his lover. What would Jesus do?

“Without hesitation, Jesus says, ‘Then I will come and heal him.’

“It’s that simple! Jesus didn’t say, ‘Are you kidding? I’m not going to heal your *pais* so you can go on living in sin!’ Nor did he say, ‘Well, it shouldn’t surprise you that your *pais* is sick; this is God’s judgment on your relationship.’

“Instead Jesus’ words are simple, clear, and liberating for all who have worried about what God thinks of gay relationships. ‘I will come and heal him.’

“At this point, the centurion says there is no need for Jesus to travel to his home. He has faith that Jesus’ word is sufficient. Jesus then turns to the good people standing around him – those who were already dumbfounded that he was willing to heal this man’s male lover. To them, Jesus says in verse 10 of Matthew’s account, ‘I have not found faith this great anywhere in Israel.’ In other words, Jesus holds up this gay centurion as an example of the type of faith others should aspire to.”

OK, it’s a dramatic story. But what if you’re still not convinced. If you read the full text you can see how these various texts could be interpreted to affirm loving and committed same sex relationships, but obviously some of these passages could be interpreted to condemn them as well. Wouldn’t it be safer to err on the side of withholding affirmation?

Well, not if you approach scripture the way Jesus did. In the third chapter of *The Children are Free* the authors offer a quick synopsis of the various rules contained in scripture. Jewish scholars, attempting to make it possible for observant Jews to follow God’s law exactly, have catalogued 613 commandments in the first five books of the Bible. Some of them have to do with animal sacrifice, some like Leviticus 19:19 forbid us to put on any garment made of two materials – wearing cotton-polyester blends is definitely unbiblical- and some are expansions or explanations about how to live out such rules as the Ten Commandments. Exodus 35:3 for instance, elaborates on what it means to keep the Sabbath, explaining that it includes that “you shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling on the Sabbath day.” This one stood out for me, for I remember my Mother describing how difficult it was for her as child, growing up in a household with a Calvinists minister as a father, trying to get all the cooking done for Sunday before the first star appeared on Saturday night. Given that this was in the days before refrigeration, it’s a wonder that all the children in that family survived to adulthood.

Why is it that few among even the most conservative Christians no longer seek to follow such rules? I think it is because folks have recognized that Jesus himself was often criticized for breaking scriptural rules. He broke the holiness codes designed to protect one’s purity – claiming that it was only the purity of the love in one’s heart that counted, not whether or not one ritually washed one’s

hands or kept the company of “sinners” or those who were deemed to be unclean. When Jesus and his disciples were criticized for breaking the laws about honoring the Sabbath, he responded, “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’, you would not have condemned the guiltless.”

Jesus consistently applied common sense and a rule of compassion in deciding which scriptural laws he thought we should observe. And it would certainly seem to me that anyone who would be a follower of Jesus should do likewise.

Taken together, does the Biblical evidence suggest that we should celebrate or condemn loving and committed same sex relationships? I think there is no doubt about what the Pharisees of Jesus’ day would have said. Nor do I think there is any doubt about what anyone following the spirit of Jesus would say today if they took the time to examine what the scriptures really say. May the day soon arrive when our laws reflect this same spirit of celebration!

SO MAY IT BE!