

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Reformed and Always Reforming: Race
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Jeremiah 31:1-9; Acts 10:9-33

1946.....1946 gave us the first meeting of the United Nations. The Philippines gained independence from the US in 1946. and the New York City Ballet was established in 1946.

It is hard for me to imagine a world where these institutions don't exist. New York without its own ballet company. The Philippines as a territory. Yet they are all only 75 years young. The world I find hard to imagine was exactly how the world was until recently.

There is something else that happened in 1946 I want us to recognize today. In 1946 a new translation of the Bible was published. The Revised Standard Version, RSV. This translation was the first time the word homosexual was in the Bible. Let that sink in. Seventy-five short years ago was the FIRST time ANY Bible included the word homosexual.

As hard as it is to imagine the world without the United Nations. It is just as hard to imagine Christianity without its theology around homosexuality, and yet they are both only 75 years young.

We have been using these first weeks of 2021 to remind ourselves of how far the church has come, how we have followed the urgings of the Spirit to reform into a better understanding of God. This sermon feels a little different. It is a confession that sometimes we fail at this task. That sometimes the changes are not Spirit led.

Before I get too far into this I want to invite you all to a Facebook Live I will be doing tomorrow at 7pm. It will be on the church's Facebook page. During that time I will be answering questions. If you have any questions throughout this sermon please email them to me bethany@fpcbirmingham.org. I will keep them anonymous. I will go through the questions I receive the best I can and you can ask live questions in the chat. Even if you don't have questions, join us!

I will also be loading up my manuscript with extra resources. Lectures about the history of homosexuality, websites with more Biblical support than I have time to give today, and news information about a documentary coming out later this year about the RSV translation. There will be tons of ways for you to continue learning on this topic. The Spirit is talking to US about this issue so let's listen and take action.

The section of scripture I just read to you is a great place for us to begin listening. It's an incredible story about Peter, the rock of the church, learning who the gospel is meant for and who God calls worthy. This is a story about God calling us to be in community with those who other Christians would turn their backs on. This is a story of radical reformation and stunning inclusion.

In this story Peter takes a moment to meet with God in prayer. During this time he gets hungry and God sends down a picnic blanket of animals for Peter to eat. Peter is shocked to see animals the Torah forbids to

be eaten, unclean animals. He refuses the heavenly meal three times. Every time he refuses, God says, "How dare you call what I have made clean, profane." These things are God given and yet Peter cannot break free from the theology and rules he has learned from other people. Peter's stubbornness wins out and the picnic blanket is taken back up to heaven.

Peter is then interrupted and told someone is looking for him. As he gets up to go see who it is, the Spirit stops Peter and urges him to hold off judgment. She says, "No matter who this is, I want you to at least go and hear them out." Peter agrees to do this and immediately regrets it because the people looking for him are "unclean;" they are Gentiles. They are outside of God's salvation; they aren't God's chosen people, but the Spirit's words ring in Peter's head and he agrees to go see why he is being summoned.

When he arrives at the Gentile's house it gets worse. A whole crowd of Gentiles have gathered and they beg him to tell them about Jesus. The picnic from God finally clicks for Peter. Do not call profane that which God has made clean.

Peter thought he knew the mind of God. He thought he had interpreted scripture correctly to exclude Gentiles. There are scriptures that speak about excluding foreigners, so Peter's theology is not an ignorant one. What Peter's theology does is neglect to include the wholeness of God's word. He forgets that in the first chapter God creates all of humanity and says it is very good. Not just good, which is what everything else in creation is called, humanity is very good.

So if God says humanity is very good, it would also track that humanity would be put into the clean category and not seen as profane by God. To God, humanity is very good, clean, and to prove even further which category humanity is a part of we get a special gift, the image of God is given to all of humanity, not just some, all of us.

The image of God is expressed through our unique identities. God has many interests and each one of us expresses a different part of God's image. God is not bound by gender so we express the vastness of God's gender in our own individual identities. God is extrovert, introvert, ambivert, all in one, but we express God's image in one of those ways.

I express this part of God's image in my identity as an extrovert. This past year has made it painfully obvious how much my health depends on my ability to be among other people. I tried to change this part of my identity. I tried to revel in the solitude: to read more, to call more people. I even tried taking walks in parks where I knew I would at least see another human, but nothing I did made me feel like I do when I am with other people. I cannot change my identity no matter how much I want to because it is wrapped up with God's image in me. I am made to express this part of God to others.

If being an extrovert became unacceptable in our culture, the pain I went through last year would become my life. Sure, I could cover it up. I could claim to be an ex-extrovert. But when we suppress a part of our identity it makes us rot from the inside out. When we deny the image of God to shine through us it festers as shame and guilt.

This is because we are calling something profane which God has created clean. Humanity is created very good with God's image printed on our identity. Sexuality is a part of our identity. Part of the gift God gives us when we become image bearers. Doubt me? Spend the next week trying to not love who you love, not being attracted to who you are attracted to. No, don't do that, it is painful and futile. We cannot change our God given identities because they are the image of God we have been entrusted to carry, and our God given identity is very good. Our identity is something God has made clean.

Peter's understanding was wrong. By offering Peter animals that would be classified as unclean, God wanted Peter to see there is nothing inherently profane about what God has created or gifted to him. And when God sends Peter to the Gentiles, God makes Peter put this into practice. Peter gets it right this time, including the people who everyone else had declared profane because God had shown Peter they are created, and very good, and clean too.

For the past 75 years we have been falling into the same hole Peter was stuck in. Peter could only see the verses about excluding Gentiles until God reminded him about the rest of scripture. Christians have been ignoring stories like Peter's revelation about inclusion to instead focus on other verses that have all been influenced by a bad translation of ONE verse.

The mistranslation happened to 1 Corinthians 6:9. In that verse there are two words that appear next to one another, but were combined by the RSV translators to make it say homosexual. The two words are malakoi and arsenokoite (Are-seno-koi-tie). Malakoi literally means soft and is widely used in reference to self-control and cowardice. Arsenokoitai means.....well we have no idea. This is a word Paul makes up. It is not found in any other Greek writing ever, nor does Paul ever use it again to clarify what he meant. He derived the word we think from two words, arsen, meaning "male," and koites, meaning "bed." Paul pulls these two words from Leviticus where it talks about a male not laying in a bed with another male, but what we see in Leviticus is a power imbalance. The words translated into "male" are not the same word. The first time it is a word meaning an adult man and the second word means boy. So the best translation of Leviticus, the scripture Paul is referencing is, "A man shall not sleep with a boy."

I hope we can all agree that pedophilia is very different than two adult homosexual men in a loving, mutual consensual relationship. The writer of Leviticus knew the difference because he clearly chooses the words man and boy to explain the abomination. And no one knows what was going on with Paul when he made up this new word.

But when English translators sit down to translate they have to make choices that make sense. In 1946, the translators thought the word that made the most sense was homosexual.

This choice could have been influenced by an implicit bias slipping into their work, but the more realistic reason is that they wanted to make their fear and prejudice against homosexual people something God agreed with too. Anne Lamott has said, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

Shortly after the RSV translation was published a seminary student wrote a letter to the translators saying that their word choice in 1 Corinthians 6:9 could be used by "misinformed and misguided people to be a

sacred weapon.” That student received a letter back saying, “There may be something to what you say,” and then the exchange was filed away.

It breaks my heart every time I think about this. That a group of people who claimed to love the Bible so much they wanted to retranslate it would knowingly allow their translation to continue to be published with a mistake. Their pride or their agenda against the LGBTQ community outweighed their faithfulness to God. They ignored the urgings of the Spirit in the letter from the seminarian and stuck with the claim that homosexuals were profane, which in reality was something God had created clean.

This is one verse, one word in one verse, but because we are supposed to use scripture to interpret scripture this one mistake impacts our understanding of other verses. Since 1946 anywhere from 6-12 other verses have been used to claim the Bible condemns homosexuality. I do not have time to unpack them all, I will do that tomorrow night on Facebook live. But I will say they all fall under one of these categories. They are either mistranslated, not meant to apply to us anymore since Jesus’ sacrifice, or talking about very specific circumstances. I will also say NONE of them talk about loving, mutual consensual relationships between adults of the same sex.

There is a wrong assumption out there that people who argue for LGBTQ inclusion are twisting scripture to make the gospel appease our culture, when in reality we are the ones who have truly wrestled with these words. We love scripture and know its power to change lives.. When we see a disconnect between stories like Peter’s revelation about what is clean and what is profane and 1 Corinthians, we ask questions of the Spirit.

Those questions have caused a whole generation of Biblical scholars to dig and pull on strings and argue and reveal the truth. The ones who sought to appease the culture were the ones who literally twisted a word in scripture to create a legacy of terror for LGBTQ people. One word has caused parents to turn their children out on the streets, caused people to die by suicide, and turned scores of people away from a church pew.

The damage it has done is immeasurable. And it has only been 75 years. Which means we can turn this around. For the majority of the existence of Christianity this has not been our way. This theology is fresh and new and can be thrown out just as quickly as it has infested our churches. And that is what we will do.

We no longer will allow our sacred scripture to be used as a weapon of terror. We will educate ourselves. We will root out the toxic theology that lives inside us. We will not pass this on to our children and it dies with us. This toxic theology and all beliefs that do not produce the fruits of the Spirit need to be removed so the Church can get back to producing more good fruits. We will stop calling profane that which God has created clean.

Lord, in your mercy, help us make it so. (Resources on the next page.)

Resources:

Video: The Bible: A queer positive book | Rev. Dr. Cheri DiNovo | TEDxToronto

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KK1evMNRVzA>

Video: Kathy Baldock: Untangling the Mess - The Reformation Project in Los Angeles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziCOOdUW8OA&t=3557s>

Article: Biblical Case for LGBTQ Inclusion from the Reformation Project

<https://reformationproject.org/biblical-case/>

Article: Has 'Homosexual' Always Been in the Bible?

<https://um-insight.net/perspectives/has-%E2%80%9Chomosexual%E2%80%9D-always-been-in-the-bible/>

Website: Documentary (not yet released) 1946: THE MISTRANSLATION THAT SHIFTED CULTURE

<https://www.wmm.com/sponsored-project/1946-the-mistranslation-that-shifted-culture/>

Website: More Light Presbyterians' Resources (Books, Bible Studies, and more)

<https://mlp.org/resources/>

Website: Queer Theology (Books, Bible Studies, Message Boards, Online Groups, and more)

<https://www.queertheology.com/>