

Readings from Our Diverse Traditions – Part of the sermon

A Reading from the Wisdom of Romans 1:24-32

So God abandoned them to their hearts' desires, which led to the moral corruption of degrading their own bodies with each other. They traded God's truth for a lie, and they worshipped and served the creation instead of the creator, who is blessed forever. That's why God abandoned them to degrading lust. Their females traded natural sexual relations for unnatural sexual relations. Also, in the same way, the males traded natural sexual relations with females, and burned with lust for each other. Males performed shameful actions with males, and they were paid back with the penalty they deserved for their mistake in their own bodies. Since they didn't think it was worthwhile to acknowledge God, God abandoned them to a defective mind to do inappropriate things. So they were filled with all injustice, wicked behavior, greed, and evil behavior. They are full of jealousy, murder, fighting, deception, and malice. They are gossips, they slander people, and they hate God. They are rude and proud, and they brag. They invent ways to be evil, and they are disobedient to their parents. They are without understanding, disloyal, without affection, and without mercy. Though they know God's decision that those who persist in such practices deserve death, they not only keep doing these things but also approve others who practice them.

A Reading from the Wisdom of Luke 7:2-10

A Roman army officer had a servant whom he loved. The servant was sick and almost dying.

The officer heard of Jesus. So he sent some of the leaders of the Jews to him. He asked him to come and heal his servant.

They came to Jesus and begged him very much. They said, 'He is a good man. You should come and do this for him. He loves our people and he built the meeting house for us.' Jesus went with them. When he came near the house, the officer sent some friends to meet him and to say, 'Sir, do not trouble yourself to come further. I am not good enough to have you come into my house. And I did not think I was good enough to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. I myself am a man who takes orders, and I have soldiers who take orders from me. I say to one, "Go," and he goes. I say to another, "Come," and he comes. I say to my servant, "Do this," and he does it.'

Jesus was surprised when he heard this. He turned to the people who followed him. He said, 'I tell you, I have not found a Jew who believes as this man does.'

The men who had been sent to Jesus went back into the house. They found that the servant who had been sick was well.

Today's Reflection – "No and Yes, Part Three" Rev. Martha Daniels

Let us pray. Holy Wisdom, shine on us today. By your light, show us the path of grace and hope. In all your names, amen.

We're now in Part Three of our series on No and Yes, examining paired Bible verses that condemn, and then lift up or support the LGBTQ+ community. I'll remind you that the research I'm using is not original to me—I am not a Biblical scholar, I didn't have time to study Hebrew and Greek in seminary, although some of my colleagues were required to do so. Much of what I will say is drawn from people who have studied the Bible for years, taught it

in seminaries and graduate schools—and some of these ideas have been around for thirty years or more. They have been written about by mainstream scholars in major traditions—Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, even United Methodist and Roman Catholic. Just so you know these are not tin-foil hat ideas I made up to make myself feel better...

Romans. Well, it's a letter written by Paul to the Roman Christians; it was probably written before the Gospels were written down. It's probably authentic, at least partly. Which parts are subject to lengthy argument, and I'm not going to get into that here.

My concern is more about the tone in this passage. Does it sound at all familiar to anyone? Have you ever heard anyone talking in similar fashion? Who talks about other people in this way? Well, anyone who wants to put another group down, pretty much. That's how Group A will invariably describe Group B, if Group B are their enemies. Has anyone seen propaganda posters from WWII? Some of them are benign—trying to get people to grow Victory Gardens and save rubber and observe the blackout, “Stay Calm and Carry On!” Sort of thing—but others are racist and violent. In the US, Japanese soldiers are portrayed as buck-toothed, bright-yellow, bayoneting babies with a grin; Germans are fat and foolish, committing sexual assault on beautiful French women (you know she's French because she's wearing fishnet stockings). Of course, in Germany, the roles are reversed, and it's black American soldiers assaulting lovely German frauleins. And so on. Just as we discussed with the Sodom story, the other—the person you don't know, the person you think you don't want to know, the person who is opposed to your religion, your way of life, your economic system, who is invading your country—is made into a murderous, violent, sexually different, rude, nasty, brutish,

horrible person. Because, of course, that makes it easier, that makes it OK, for you to attack or kill them.

Now, Paul wasn't inciting anyone to kill these fallen-away Christians, of course. But he was making them seem as awful as possible, barely human anymore, to deter the Romans—and others who would read his letter—from failing to follow his directions as to what was needed to be a good Christian. Remember, this was the early church—it wasn't really even clear what it meant to be a "Christian," at this point. So Paul really wanted them to follow his path, his ideas, what we would call his theology.

It always comes down to control and power, doesn't it?

But what happened was that in later centuries, this passage has been read as condemnation of all those things as moral laws. And here we are. As I said last week, context matters!

On to Luke! Please!

Several things to note in this reading. This is an officer of the occupying army; and yet he has come to respect and honor the religion of the area, to the point of supporting the building of the local synagogue. He has the respect of the local elders. That's not minor. Imagine the kind of relationship that implies—the mutual trust built up over time, as the centurion helped the Jewish community, and they understood he would not hurt them.

And then the relationship between the centurion and the servant. Most translations use what I call "weasel words;" that the servant was "dear" to him; or worse, "valuable;" or "meant much;" or "was special." From all my research, that's not what the Greek says.

The word is “loved.” He loved the servant. This was someone very special to him. Now, we can have another discussion about why he was still a servant if the centurion loved him so much—that would be a good conversation to have—but the point I want to make is that the centurion loved him. He loved him.

And the elders of the synagogue were quite fine with it. They came to Jesus asking him to help this servant of the centurion. We don’t know, but it’s quite probable that the servant was the sexual partner of the centurion—this was accepted in Roman society of the time, but not so much in Jewish society. The Jewish elders, though, are willing to ask for Jesus’ help with the sick man—again, the trust and the relationship with the centurion were clearly quite strong.

The centurion shows his own faith and trust in Jesus—and is rewarded.

This story portrays Jesus apparently healing the male sexual partner of a Roman military officer—with no condemnation of the servant or the Roman officer, either for their relationship, or even for the Roman occupation of Jesus’ own country. Acceptance. Tolerance. Healing. Comfort. Grace.

No judgement. No hatred. No refusal to treat or care. No rejection because of who either of them were or who they loved or who they worked for or where they lived or where they were from. Jesus listened to the centurion’s fear for the man he loved; Jesus cured the man who needed help.

May we all find that comfort and healing in the world. May we all offer that love and grace to the world. In all God’s names, amen.