

The Bible Bullets

A bible study prepared by the Rev. Deborah G. Celley
for the Adult Forum discussion at
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Preface to the “.pdf” version

Before becoming an Open and Affirming congregation in November 2000, our congregation participated in an educational and spiritual development program intended to help us discern the voice of the Spirit of God. We were led by a team of church members, who began meeting in 1998 to plan a process by which a congregation of 200 or so Minnesotans could get together and talk about... you know... homosexuality (in church!).

“The Bible Bullets” was prepared for presentation and circulation among our church members. This was one in a series of adult study sessions offered in the program designed by the Open and Affirming Task Force, to whom I am grateful.

This latest version was edited for publication on our church website. Only a few adjustments were made, mainly because I just wanted to make things as clear as possible. Previously unpublished thoughts are highlighted in the blue boxes.

The blessing of congregational polity is that each congregation can respond to the movement of the Spirit as revealed to each congregation in its particular place and time. Not every congregation of the United Church of Christ is Open and Affirming, but each year more churches are added to the roll.

Through a process of study, prayer, and discernment, the members of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Brainerd came to this conclusion: “We celebrate the diversity of human nature and human relationships. We recognize sexuality and sexual orientation as gifts of God. We seek to support relationships and families based on the Christian principles of love, justice, fidelity, trust, and mutual care.”

--Rev. Deborah G Celley
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“Bible bullets” are the bible verses, excised from their literary context, which are used as verbal assault weapons. I first noticed the term used by Mel White in *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*. I am not sure if it is a new term, but I am certain it is not a new practice. Bible bullets have been used for centuries to justify slavery (Ephesians 6:5) and child abuse (Proverbs 23:12-14), and to exclude women from church leadership (1 Corinthians 14:34-35). What follows is a study of some of the most common bible bullets fired at people who are homosexual and at parents, friends and allies of homosexual people.

But first, a note about biblical interpretation. Socially and politically conservative Christians and liberal Christians all claim the bible as an authoritative source of Christian faith. But we differ significantly on matters of interpretation. Fundamentalist Christians

espouse the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, which is the claim that the bible contains the literal words of God. Such a doctrine discourages critical study. One doesn't argue with the literal words of God.

Christians who do not ascribe to biblical inerrancy believe that the bible as a whole reveals the "Word of God," but that it does not contain, literally, the words of God. The bible is of human origin. People of faith throughout ages have found it to be divinely inspired and inspiring, and also exceedingly complex, and at points contradictory. Over the centuries, people of the synagogue and the church developed methods of interpretation, in an attempt to find the Word that is greater than the sum of the words. The United Church of Christ in general, and First Congregational UCC in Brainerd specifically, are part of a tradition that encourages study and interpretation, which is, as we see it, loving God with our heart and soul and mind.

One of our "Pilgrim Fathers," Edward Winslow reported that on the eve of their departure from Holland, Pastor John Robinson assured the departing members of his congregation that "the Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word." In the following study, I hope to shine more light on these difficult texts.

Genesis 19: 1-13

The Rescue of Lot

The sin of Sodom has been so commonly identified as homosexuality that the Oxford English Dictionary defines "sodomy" as "homosexual activity between males." But what is really going on in this story?

To some extent, our interpretation depends on the meaning of the verb "to know" (in Hebrew, *yd'*). It is occasionally used in the bible as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Genesis 4:1, for example). But most of the time it means what it means: to know, to learn about, to become acquainted with, to study. According to Peter Gomes, the verb "to know" is used 943 times in the Old Testament, and in only ten instances does this clearly refer to sexual intercourse (*The Good Book*, p. 152). When a translation is in doubt, students of scripture are advised to adopt the most common reading.

Lot, the new guy in town (v. 9, "this fellow came here as an alien"), was seen bringing two strangers into his house in the evening. The men of the town assembled

outside Lot's door and ordered: "Bring them out to us, that we might know them."

Interrogation, to determine whether or not these men were scouts from an enemy raiding party, may have been their mission.

Setting aside the textual question for a moment, let's look to the larger canonical context of the story. Sodom was doomed by the end of the preceding chapter. Whatever happened (or did not happen) at Lot's door, it was of little or no consequence, the Lord who spoke to Abraham had already decided that Sodom would be destroyed. The visitors were on a mission to destroy the city because of the "outcry" against it (18:20). When God hears an outcry, what God hears is a people oppressed (Exodus 3:7, for example).

Why was Sodom condemned? The prophets interpret the sins of Sodom in this way: Sodom's sin was lack of justice (Isaiah 1:10; 3:9), adultery, lying, and aiding evildoers and being unwilling to repent (Jeremiah 23:14); and the most complete condemnation of all, in the words of Ezekiel:

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. (16:49)

The overwhelming evidence of scripture is that Sodom was condemned for its lack of justice, mercy and compassion.

The story of Lot's rescue is not about homosexuality. It is about God, and how God condemns those who mistreat others, but rescues those who show compassion for strangers. Just like his uncle Abraham in the previous chapter, Lot begs the strangers to stop with him awhile, so they can eat and wash up and rest. Lot risks his own life for the strangers. Therefore, God rescues him from destruction.

(Lot also offers his own daughters to the mob, but apparently, God is OK with that. "Gender bias and misogyny in the scriptures" is a topic for another Bible study.)

It melts down to this: the sin of Sodom is not unrestrained homosexual lust, it is blindness. The people of Sodom were blind to the needs of the poor, even though they had more than enough to sustain life. The men of Sodom were blind to the value of hospitality and kindness, and they were *struck blind* and prevented from seeing Lot's door (19:11), making their metaphorical blindness physical.

This story offers us insight on how we ought to treat people who are deemed “strangers” in our society. Ironically, those who fire this Bible bullet have more in common with the residents of Sodom than those at whom the bullet is fired.

Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 **The Holiness Code**

You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination. (18:22)

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. (20:13)

The intent of the book of Leviticus can be summed up in 20:26, “You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.” The Levitical material dates from the time of the restoration of Israel, after the Persian emperor Cyrus defeated the Babylonian empire. Cyrus’ foreign policy was thus: it is better to grant religious freedom and gain a loyal vassal state than to risk an uprising. Cyrus encouraged the exiles to return to Israel and reestablish their religion.

Babylon had only carried off the best. The exiles were the educated, ruling-class, elite minority. When they returned to Israel, they found a mess. The people who remained behind were poor and dirty, they had intermarried with gentiles, and they were practicing the religions of their gentile in-laws. The holiness code was established to distinguish Jew from gentile, to assert a Jewish identity. In essence, to say, “This is who we are. God has separated us from all the other nations and this is how we demonstrate that we belong to God.”

Some of the pagan religions of that time used male and female prostitutes in their fertility ritual (in Genesis 38:15, Judah mistakes his daughter-in-law for a temple prostitute). The returning exiles implored the people to put away all pagan practices. No one who belongs to the Lord God could also belong to another god. Participation in ritualized sex was forbidden, because it defiled a body that belonged to God.

This theology of the body should inspire each of us to take better care of the God-body entrusted to us. Before ordering lunch from a drive-up window, we should ask ourselves, would I feed this to God? Before lighting up, we should ask ourselves, what will this do to God's heart and lungs? And, certainly before sharing intimately in God's gift of sex, we ought to consider whether the person to whom we are attracted is indeed the right person for God.

Joking aside, I think that the way we treat our bodies matters to God. In the same way that I want my children to see themselves as beautiful, strong, and in no need of a tattoo, I think God looks upon us and wants the best for our bodies. I do believe that God rejoices in our sexual relationships when our relationships are loving, tender, faithful, and uplifting.

Though I believe the holiness code was meant for Israel's protection, and is meant to be, in general, life-affirming for Israel, it is, in the specifics, deadly. Offences punishable by death (according to Leviticus) include adultery (both the man and the woman must be killed, 20:10), and cursing one's parents (20:9).

Leviticus also contains prohibitions against sexual intercourse during a woman's menstrual cycle (18:19, 20:18), and declares a man to be ritually unclean after a nocturnal emission (15:15). Women are ritually unclean during menstruation and after childbirth—for 33 days after giving birth to a boy, and for 66 days after giving birth to a girl!

Clearly we do not hold ourselves to the specific laws of the holiness code in other matters of sexual behavior, social behavior, or diet (the laws prohibiting eating certain kinds of food are in Leviticus). The early church struggled with the holiness code, and came to the conclusion that "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 10:15)

Peter's vision (in Acts 10) clearly lifted the prohibition against eating the "unclean" food. Peter immediately applied this spiritual experience to the question of whether or not to welcome gentiles into the community of believers. He baptized Cornelius and his whole household and did not require them first to be circumcised.

Jesus, the friend of tax collectors and sinners (consult Mark 2:15-16; Matthew 9:10-11; Luke 5:29-30), Jesus, who was criticized for doing his healing work on the Sabbath day (Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-14, Luke 6:6-11), Jesus, whose disciples didn't wash their hands before meals (Matthew 15:2, Luke 11:38), Jesus our Lord perceived that the holiness code had become a great burden to the people (Matthew 23:1-4, 13, 23-24; Luke 11:42, 46, 52). Jesus is the one who comes to lift that burden, and to replace the theology of "holiness" with the theology of compassion." "Be holy (separate) for God is holy," is replaced by "Be loving, for God is love."

A Scattering of Bird Shot from Paul's Epistles

Romans 1:26-27; Romans 13:13; 1 Corinthians 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5, 8

There are several verses from various epistles that are used to condemn homosexual behavior. Paul, like those who formed the holiness code of Leviticus, was most likely addressing pagan religious practices. One disadvantage of the epistle genre is that it is very much like listening to one half of a telephone conversation. The letters that Paul wrote (or that his disciples wrote in his name) were addressed to specific churches, in specific setting, addressing specific concerns. We can't be certain what those concerns were: no one saved and compiled the letters *to* Paul *from* the churches. Our epistles, most likely, represent only a small collection of Paul's writings, his letters were combined and edited and copied and passed along. The potential for misinterpretation is enormous. We should beware of generalizing an admonition that may have applied to a specific person or group of persons in a specific situation.

In spite of the evidence that Paul might not have approved of my ministry (1 Corinthians 14:34-35), I like Paul a lot. His over-arching theme is grace. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

...I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39)

That is a powerful statement of faith. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing. Not our sins, not our perceived sins, not our ignorance, not our doubt. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Those who use the bible bullets (or bible bird shot)

ignore Paul's broader theme of grace, and ignore his pleas to refrain from judging others (see Romans 2:1, for example).

The Shield of Faith

I believe careful study of the scripture in the light of God's grace is the best bible bullet proof shield. It is imperative that we reclaim our scriptures from those who would wield them as weapons! Though these are metaphorical bullets, they seem to inspire real violence, as in the following example:

In preparing for her novel *The Drowning of Stephen Jones*, based upon the true story of a young gay man tossed from a bridge to his death by a group of young gay-bashers, author Bette Greene interviewed more than four hundred young men in jail for various forms of gay-bashing. Few of them, she noted, showed any remorse for their crimes. Few saw anything morally wrong with their crimes, and more than a few of them told her that they were justified in their opinions and in their actions by the religious traditions from which they came. Homosexuality was wrong, and against the Bible. One of those interviewed told her that the pastor of his church had said that homosexuals represented Satan and the Devil. The implication of this logic was clear: Who could possibly do wrong in destroying Satan and all of his works?

-Gomes, p. 146

The gospel of Jesus is a gospel of love. Jesus is compassion in the flesh. Jesus calls us not to judge and condemn, Jesus calls us to love. Jesus himself reached out to all who were outcast. I commend to your study the story of the man born blind, found in the gospel of John, chapter 9.

The man's blindness was thought to be evidence of sin. But who was it that sinned, the disciples wondered. Was it this man, or was it his parents, since he was born that way? The man was touched by Jesus and his eyes were opened. And then Jesus exits the story for a time.

The man was brought to the Pharisees. They could not believe that he had been healed. This man was born in sin, he could not possibly have received a miraculous cure. God could not possibly care for one who was born utterly in sin. Instead of rejoicing with this man, the Pharisees argued with him. Then they called the man's parents in and tried to bully them. Finally, they grew tired of the man, and cast him out of the synagogue. For good. They excommunicated him.

At this point Jesus enters the story again, to assure the man that he is not the one who is in sin. Jesus reprimands the Pharisees soundly: “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.”

People of homosexual orientation have been cast out of their religious communities by religious authorities who cannot believe that the grace of God could include such “sinners” as these. Where is Jesus, in this present struggle? I believe Jesus is the one who meets the outcasts on the church steps, with the assurance that they are not the ones who remain in sin.

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