

Sermon: July 29, 2018; 1 Samuel 18:1-4; 2 Samuel 1:26; 1 John 4: 7ff

One Friday morning in September of 1982 in the chapel service of Eden Theological Seminary, I heard William Stringfellow, lawyer/activist and theologian preach on “Biology as Theology”. I was surprised and astounded.. In fact, I was so deeply touched by what he had to say, that I sat in the pew long after the service was over and simply wept and wept.

For the first time in my life, I had heard a person share in a sacred place about a same-sex relationship. Talking about being gay or lesbian, much less trans or non binary, just did not happen in society back then. I did not think that someone could speak so openly about being gay in my lifetime much less in a “church”. And lo, these many years later, a number of events regarding GLBTQ relationships (including acceptance by law of same-sex marriage) have come to pass in my lifetime.

William Stringfellow preached about his relationship with the poet Anthony Towne. His preaching was not only a eulogy for Anthony Towne, but it was also a sharing of their story that was deeply steeped in their separate and mutual relationship with God. Stringfellow, as many other theologians have said since, made the point that we are to tell our stories of

our relationship to God as understood through the story and lens of Jesus' life.

As soon as I could gather myself to myself that day, I went directly to the seminary bookstore to purchase the book Stringfellow had written called: "Simplicity of Faith: My Experience in Mourning". And as soon as I finished reading the book, having highlighted those words and paragraphs that resonated with me, I sent the book to Amy.

I want to share two quotations from the book, the first:

His (Anthony Towne's) vocation--as that may be distinguished from his occupation--was, in principle, monastic, as is my own. (This is the explanation of our relationship.) That is, he and I have understood that we had been called to a life of prayer and that the practice of prayer is *essentially* political--as matter of attention to events and of intercession and advocacy for the needs of human life and of the life of the whole of Creation. Prayer, in this sense, is NOT pietistic, but on the contrary, radical involvement in the world as it is prompted in the Word of God.

As I mentioned a moment ago, Stringfellow was an activist -- one act was that he and Anthony harbored Fr. Daniel Berrigan. Stringfellow also defended Bishop James Pike against heresy charges. Stringfellow opened my eyes to speaking words of justice even before my seminary did.

Stringfellow also wrote words about the importance of being named--as a child of God--long before my professors or any minister had before, saying, "this naming of a person by the Word of God in the Word of God--transcends and transforms every other sort of identification pertinent to that person." As I was preparing for this historical view of reading the Bible as Genderful, I realized how I have carried Stringfellow's words in my heart for many decades.

Even with Stringfellow's having spoken in the chapel at the seminary, still the whole idea of same-sex love was basically a taboo topic within the culture of the seminary. There were at that time 3 of us students who recognized that we were gay or bisexual and we became a very small support group for one another while living, working, and studying in that time and in that place. Some years later, the seminary became willing to confront its homophobia and speak out on behalf of the LGBTQ communities.

I graduated from seminary in May 1985, and it was in the summer of that same year that the General Synod of the United Church of Christ voted to be Open and Affirming--thanks to Rev. Bill Johnson and Philly's own Nancy Krody, along with a good many other people who were activists

within the UCC who spoke up and for GLBTQ people, not only in our denomination, but for all GLBTQ people. Even so, I did not expect to find myself so quickly pastoring families with GLBTQ issues. There was one couple in a church who had a gay son whom they loved dearly, but had never spoken of his being gay to anyone before me. They were appreciative of the fact that a pastor could tell them that **loving** their gay son and his partner (who lived quite some distance from the small town in which the parents lived) was what Jesus had preached...

While I had worked out my own theology of the love of God for all people--and I do mean all people, I was reading everything I could get my hands on concerning those passages of the Bible that were/are problematic for so many people in so many churches. I read Furnish, Boswell, Scroggs, Countryman and Nelson. However, there were two books that had the greatest impact on my being able to help others who were struggling with those Bible passages. I cannot begin to count how many times I have recommended these two books to those struggling with the church, the Bible and gender issues.

Tom Horner wrote "Jonathan Loved David" in 1979--one of the earlier books that grappled with what the Bible has to say to those who were

seeking answers in the scriptures. Let us hear again the words that Deb read to us a few moments ago:

When David had finished speaking to Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was bound (knit) with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day, and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing and gave it to David and his armor, and even his sword, and his bow, and his belt.

Jonathan gave himself totally to David. These words of the Bible along with David's words upon Jonathan's death are the most positive words, for me, for telling of a same-sex relationship. How can they be interpreted in any other way? these words which David spoke about his love for Jonathan tell us that the love was reciprocal. These positive words in many ways out-weigh all the so called negative texts that have been proven over the years to be culturally not pertinent to homosexuality and should not be used against LGBTQ people.

Horner also writes about Ruth and Naomi. Many years before I considered becoming a minister, I remember my pastor saying that couples getting married should not use the standard quotation:

But Ruth said, Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

Having attended many weddings, I always assumed that those words were spoke between a heterosexual couple. My pastor did not explain so long ago why he said what he did, but later I understood that the relationship involved two women. While Horner does not say that Ruth was bisexual, it is clear to me that Ruth loved Naomi, but ended up marrying Boaz, so that she certainly could have been bisexual... And if we go to the many scriptures about David, I would guess that he, too, was bisexual. We hear his words of love for Jonathan and we also know about David’s lusting after women.....

After Horner first wrote those two positive passages about same-sex relationships, he then wrote about the many texts that have been used over the years to bludgeon LGBTQ folks...However, I found the book “What the Bible *Really* Says About Homosexuality” by the Catholic priest, Daniel Helminiak to be much more accessible to many people. And I have given that book to very many people over the years of my ministry.

Helminiak wrote: As a Roman Catholic--and more importantly, a thinking person--I do not presume the Bible provides the last word on sexual ethics. In my mind, the matter is more complicated than that. Historical, cultural, philosophical, psychological, sociological, medical,

spiritual and personal factors all come to bear on the matter. Nonetheless, biblical teaching is an important basis for any Judeo-Christian belief. And every opinion, religious or otherwise, should rest on facts. To me this seems to be fact: the Bible supplies no real basis for the condemnation of homosexuality.

Then Helminiak goes on to write about how to interpret the Bible.

After explaining his method, He shares how he (and many others) interpret those pesky scriptures that have been used against all those who do not fit into the culturally accepted sexual ways.

He writes that the “Sin of Sodom” was Inhospitality. He explains very clearly that the word “abomination” really should be translated “uncleanness”--an issue of purity and of the purity code for the Hebrew people. Then he writes about Jesus’ teaching about purity.

Helminiak says: “The only purity that mattered for Jesus was “purity of heart. What does this “cleanness of heart” mean? Some people took it to mean you were not supposed to have “dirty thoughts” You were not supposed to be “impure” in your mind. Of course, “dirty” and “impure” referred to sex: you were not supposed to think about sexual things. What a distortion of Jesus’ teaching! Jesus was not preoccupied with sex. He was concerned about being a good person. About being good to the core....Being a good person--honest, loving, just, kind, merciful, peaceful--is what matters before God.

Helminiak’s words take me to a part my own theology as expressed in our second reading today. Yes, Jesus talked about love: he quoted the

Hebrew scripture about how we are to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul and love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus talked about the kind of love that asks for a person to give one's life for a friend; how we are to love our enemies; and Jesus commanded the disciples to love one another as he loved them.

It seems to me that those words of love are summed up in the writing of the writer of the Gospel according to John in the first "letter" that scholars feel is a companion to the Gospel. Love takes precedence over all the "laws" "rules" "ordinances" or whatever you might call them. When we love God by loving one another--and "one another" means everyone--then we fulfill the law.

The heart of that passage is "God is Love." When we love we become the image of God. The heart of the Gospel for me is that Jesus came to teach us how to love through our being honest, loving, just, kind, merciful, and peaceful. The understanding that the Bible does NOT condemn those who are non-binary is an issue of justice that calls for our being kind, merciful, peaceful, but most of all -- loving.

It would seem, as I think about all that I have just shared, that I got most of my understanding about GLBTQ from books. NOT SO! Every

person I have shared time, pastoral encounters, and friendships has taught me more than I can ever learn from books. I want to name a couple of people who have shared themselves with me in ways that have made a difference in my understanding of GLBTQ issues: our dear friends, Jill & Lana. Their separate lives as teenagers in high school in the Midwest was extremely difficult and their lives as a couple for more than 25 years has been an uphill journey as they are activists in their UCC conference, where they have brought significant changes to the churches of that Conference. And I must add Chris Paige--who will be preaching next week. Chris has taught me ever so much, and continues to teach me, about what it means to be Trans or non-binary...Jill, Lana, & Chris, along with so many others have taught me what it means to love. But the person, as you might guess, that really brings love, and the love of God, home to me is Amy....

The Church has come a long way in the decades since I sat in chapel listening to William Stringfellow share his theology through his love for Anthony Towne. Now when I weep, it is for all the acceptance and love that I/we have been shown not only in the church, but in our culture as two women in a relationship. BUT I also weep that the Church has a long way to go in speaking the word to/for all non-binary folks...Let us do justice, and

speaking not only the words of Love, but let's make Love a verb encompassing all people.

'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; **everyone** who loves is born of God and knows God...

"God is Love. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God **lives** in us, and God's love is perfected in us."

Amen