

Why are *they* here?

A primer on gay people in the church

We don't all have the same opinion about a lot of things here at First UMC. This includes our opinions on what God says about people who are not "straight." However, we do agree on what is the most important thing here: Jesus is central to our life and faith. Simple, right? We are Christians living in relationship with God through Jesus Christ and inviting others to do the same. In Christ, our sins are forgiven and God's image is being restored in us. Our primary task is to love God and one another. We have a hope and a future and it is all because of Jesus.

We also agree not to make assumptions. We don't assume that if you think being gay is a sin that you must not love everyone. Nor do we assume that if you think gay is ok that you don't love scripture. Instead, we hope and believe the best of each other because that is what love does. "Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:7). So, we can be at First UMC with differing opinions on a lot of issues, like drinking alcohol or the death penalty or being gay, and still be united by our faith in Christ.

Now that you have heard that your opinion on issues beyond Christ are not the most important thing around here, I'll explain how we can love scripture and each other, and still permit people to live according to their scriptural understanding, or uncertainty, about being gay.

First, Jesus never talked about gay relationships. Jesus talked about love, money, sin and obedience, but never is it recorded that Jesus talked about people being gay. Jesus never said gay was wrong. It's simply not in there.

In fact, nowhere in scripture can you find commentary on a loving committed same sex relationship. The scripture used against gay relationships each have circumstances that point to errant behavior very different from the loving relationships being expressed today. To name a few, Romans 1:21-28 talks about engaging in sex acts contrary to your nature in pagan worship settings (v23). 1 Timothy 1:10 talks about pedophilia, men with boys. Tragically, the harmful practice of

pederasty was socially accepted in ancient Greece and Rome. Leviticus 20:13 is a set of Old Testament laws specific to Israel, in the context of familial relationships, surrounded by other rules and laws that Christians do not, and are not, bound to keep.[1] None of these verses talk about same sex people in a loving committed relationship. It's simply not in there. No same sex couple is condemned in scripture.[2]

So, at First UMC, you don't have to say gay is ok but neither do you have to say that it is wrong. The scripture that people use to form negative opinions are general in nature and should be read in their ancient context and with understanding of recent questionable translation decisions.

This isn't a new idea. We have had similar scripture interpretation and addition problems before. Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22 state that slaves should obey their masters. In the 1700s and 1800s many American preachers used those and other scriptures to preach that slavery was endorsed by God. Thankfully, the mainline churches in America figured out that we were wrong. Now we understand that it is a gross misuse of scripture to try to keep anyone in chains. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1).

Similar conversations have been held around the few scriptures used to keep women silent in the church. Now most mainline denominations realize that the full witness of scripture names a female apostle Junia (Romans 16:7)[3], that Paul talks about women praying and prophesying in church (1 Corinthians 11:5), and that Deborah was a judge over all of Israel (Judges 4:4). It's a gross misuse of scripture to try to keep women silent. Scripture says that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28).

Now is the time for thoughtful Christians to consider if we've been wrong about the few scriptures that have been used to keep gay people from marrying who they love and from following their call into ministry. The debate really caught fire in 1946 when the word homosexual was added, for the first time, to the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible. Translators combined two Greek words and for the first time named "homosexual" in a list of sins (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). The two Greek words that they combined[4] refer to a homosexual act when one person is passive and the other active. Some read this as one person being a victim (passive) and the other person an abuser (active). One poor translation even uses the word "sodomites"

here though the word Sodom is nowhere to be found in the original text.[5] Again, a same sex committed loving relationship is not the topic here.

The adding of the broad word “homosexual” into scripture is considered by many scholars to be the most harmful mistranslation and misinterpretation of scripture since condoning slavery and silencing women. Yet, this has been taught so extensively in our churches that it has become difficult for Christians to consider that this may have been an egregious error.

I have one more consideration for this short response to questions about being gay and being Christian. You may have heard the snappy phrase that God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. This quip misses the deep truths that Genesis reveals to us. Genesis tells us that God created light and darkness, and yet there are the wonderful shades of dusk – not quite light and not yet dark. God created sea and land, and yet there is the wonder of the seashore - sometimes land, sometimes water, and sometimes a combination of the two. We know those in-betweens exist even though Genesis doesn't mention them. Wouldn't it follow that there could be in-betweens of man and woman that are not mentioned? Beautiful subtleties equally as amazing? Saying that God created the light and the darkness was not meant to limit God to just two things. On the contrary, it shows how expansive God's power and creativity are – from the fullness of light to the fullness of darkness and everything in between, God created it all. Perhaps the same is true of the creation of man and woman.

So, as a Christian, you can think that gay is wrong, but Jesus didn't say you have to think it's wrong. There are other very faithful, scholarly, and loving ways to understand the few scriptures that have been taught as restrictive to gay relationships. There are other scriptures that matter, perhaps even more than those controversial ones. When they asked Jesus what the most important commandment was, Jesus had an answer. He didn't say that all the commands were of equal importance. Jesus said that there are two that are of utmost importance: Love God. Love people (Matthew 22:34-40).

It is true that somebody is right and somebody is wrong about this. It is possible that all of the seemingly new thoughts about these scriptures are wrong and that God really does not want us in same-sex relationships. Or it could be that the old way of looking at these


scriptures is wrong, just like we were wrong about slavery and women. It could be that due to our mishandling of scripture we are holding people back from experiencing loving relationships and fully serving God.

I am certain that when we see Jesus face to face, He will let us know who is right, if it is that important. But scripture says Jesus will first ask us, “Did you welcome the one who seemed strange to you?” (Matthew 25:31-46). If you can say “yes,” regardless of your opinion, then Jesus will say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23). See, Jesus really *did* say that they will know we are His followers, not by our opinions, or even our holiness, but by our love (John 13:35).

So, at First UMC, we accept that loving, intelligent believers can understand scripture differently and still be in ministry together. You don't have to think one way or another to belong here. John Wesley said it this way, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.”

Friends, our core faith remains. The main thing is always going to be Jesus. He is the one who lived a life of perfect love, died for our sin, and rose to new life so that we could be forgiven and set free. It is Jesus who calls us together to be the Church, moving in the power of the Holy Spirit to share the good news with the world. It is Jesus who told us the most important things that we could do. Love God. Love people. Let's do *that*, together.

First United,



Rev. Dr. Tish Green

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:16-17)

If you want to love Jesus and people, join me at First UMC.
www.FestusUMC.org welcome@festusumc.org

[1] The Human Rights Campaign website has helpful articles on the Bible and homosexuality.

www.hrc.org/resources/what-does-the-bible-say-about-homosexuality

[2] Scripture does not mention same sex people in a loving committed relationship unless you consider the possibility that David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, or Jesus' prophetic story in Luke 17:34-35 were people in same sex relationships. Scripture doesn't say one way or the other about these couples.

[3] In the 13th century a translation error added an "s" to the name Junia making it appear to be a man's name, though for 1300 years prior it was clearly understood to be a woman. Most recent translations have correctly returned to the female apostle's name Junia.

[4] *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*

[5] Using the word "sodomite" in this scripture, though not true to the original text, is truer to the actual intent of the scripture if you recognize that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were not homosexuality as many have taught. If you read the horrible story of these towns for yourself in Genesis 19, you will see that there is no loving committed same sex relationship considered. There is only rape, violence, and abuse of women and male strangers. The prophet Ezekiel says their sin was their arrogance and their unwillingness to help those in need (Ezekiel 16:49-50).