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The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion - In Crisis - Part IV

What does Jesus say about the practice of homosexuality? Advocates who argue in favor of homosexual practice ask this question, first of all, because they know that Jesus says nothing directly about it. The assumption is that, because he says nothing about it, he approves. Is such an argument compelling? I think not.

The problem with their argument is that it proceeds from silence, and the problem with an argument from silence is that it says nothing. Nothing! Does the silence of Jesus mean that he approves of homosexual practice? He says nothing about incest or bestiality. Does he approve of these? Or does the silence of Jesus mean that he considers this particular sin as part of the general notion of sexual immorality, what St. Mark calls *porneia*, (which means every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse, see Mark 7:21) and which is translated in the King James Version "fornications" and in the New International Version "sexual immorality"? I believe the Gospels show that Jesus did not and could not condone homosexual practice. If we consider Jesus' teaching on human sexuality, this will become evident.

The reason that advocates for homosexual practice often cite the silence of Jesus is because they consider him merciful and forgiving and understanding, all of which he certainly is. But if these attributes are true of Jesus, there is also this. He is the Lord, and he does not bend his moral understanding either to human convention or to sinful behavior. The teaching of Jesus on human sexuality is clear and positive, but by contemporary standards, severe. The only thing that matches our Lord's severity in moral life is his mercy and forgiveness.

To begin with, we should look at what Jesus said positively about human sexuality. When the Pharisees asked him if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for every cause, Jesus replied, "Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female. And said for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together let not man put asunder."

The first and immediate reply of Jesus to the question of the Pharisees was to recall for them the creative intention of God. God made them male and female for the sake of a union. So great was that union that the two were to be considered one flesh. Thus Jesus reminded the

Pharisees that the originative idea of male and female was a divinely given complementarity, capable of a union, which, once made, must not be put asunder by the designs of men.

When the Pharisees asked further why Moses had permitted a provision for divorce, Jesus responded, "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery."

From the perspective and practice of the twenty-first century this seems hard and strict indeed. But then it always was and is. Jesus would not permit the casual circumstances and difficulties of daily life to impede the creative intention of God. Man does not comprehend the secrets contained in the workings of human life and in the mystery of human sexuality. But God knows what he has intended and how he can use his own creative purposes, not only for the friendship of the sexes, but also for procreation, human society, and in the grace of the Christian faith, sanctification.

The church of today is far too lenient in matters of divorce and remarriage. We have gone overboard to say the least. Along with addressing the moral problem of homosexual practice, the whole doctrine of marriage ought to be revisited. It certainly will not do for the advocates of homosexual practice to point toward the church's current laxity toward marriage and use that as an argument for greater immorality. The Lord Jesus has given us the definitive form of human sexuality and it is that of the marriage of male and female.

And Jesus goes further than this. The monogamy that Jesus has in mind, which supplies the only proper context for sexual activity, extends not just to the union of the flesh, but to the union of the heart and the imagination. The will that is created for marriage extends to the sphere of the mind.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes this teaching crystal clear. "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

Jesus was severe in his teaching about human sexuality. He understood the mystery of sexual love to be so mysterious and powerful that it must be contained even within the sphere of the imagination. But severe as he was, Jesus was equally merciful and forgiving. When people who forsook the creative intention of God, and gave themselves over to an immoral life, repented and showed their need of him, Jesus welcomed them into his friendship. To the woman caught in adultery, to the Samaritan woman who had five husbands, to the sinful woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus responded with mercy and love. But he never condoned their behavior. He knew their sinful behavior was the sure way to chaos, misery, and death.

When advocates for the practice of homosexuality claim that Jesus supports their activity, because he never said anything explicit about their behavior, they offer an empty argument. What Jesus does say

about human sexuality is clear, and by our standards, even severe. But he is the Lord and he knows the truth of our creation and our lives together in marriage.

Lastly, do we really believe that if Jesus approved of practicing homosexuality that he would not have said so? He did not cuddle with the social conventions of his day. It is evident from our knowledge of Josephus, Jewish priest and historian, and Philo, the Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, both contemporaries of Jesus, that homosexual practice was indeed considered sinful and unacceptable to Judaism. Their attitudes differed sharply with the popular culture of Rome. If Jesus had approved of the practice of homosexuality, he would have said so unashamedly, in contradiction to the Holiness Code of Leviticus, and to the current moral teaching of his day. But he did not. Jesus accepted the moral teaching on human sexuality from the Old Testament, and understood it in its most profound sense, as the creative will of God. On this issue, St. Paul will do the same, and it is to his teaching that we should now turn.

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