

## ***God's Presence . . . and Ours***

Ephesians 4:1-6

Sermon by Dan Schrock

February 9, 2014

Sexuality Series 4

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (NRSV)*

**U**ntil today, I've never prepared a sermon on gay and lesbian relationships for this congregation. I've avoided this topic because the issue has been so contentious and emotional for Mennonites in the last 30 years. In families, congregations, conferences, and in the denomination, we have vociferously disagreed with each other over this. In 2011 during the denomination's biennial gathering in Pittsburgh, I sat at the same table with a delegate from another state who was furious—I think that word accurately describes her emotional state—who was furious with the denomination's current position on gay and lesbian sexual relationships. In 1986 and 1987, our two predecessor denominations passed resolutions on sexuality. Among other things, these resolutions said that gay and lesbian sexual activity is—like premarital, extramarital, and abusive sexual activity—wrong. These denominational resolutions also committed us to continuing conversation on these questions, which I take to mean that we want to keep learning from each other as new insights emerge.<sup>1</sup>

These resolutions were approved 27 and 28 years ago. Many of you here today were not yet born or were still small children. On the other end of the age

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<sup>1</sup> The statements are available in parallel format at <http://ljohns.ambs.edu/Resolutions.htm>.

spectrum, many Mennonites who were alive then and who voted on those resolutions are now dead. In the 28 years since those resolutions were passed, some significant things have shifted in the church and in the culture. In this sermon I want to name some of these shifts.

**B**ut before I do that, it might be good to say a few things about our congregation. As far as I know, our congregation has never passed a statement on sexuality. When it comes to gay and lesbian relationships, I do not think we could find much agreement in our congregation. We've never polled ourselves on the question of same-sex relationships, but we certainly wouldn't all agree. And even if we could come to agreement now, the pace of change on this issue is happening rapidly enough that I wonder whether people who are in the congregation ten years from now would still feel that the agreement fairly represented their views.

This is why I've avoided preaching on this topic. What can I say that might be useful to all of us instead of making us disgruntled with each other? It's easy to talk about topics we mostly agree on, like peacemaking. It's much harder to address a topic like gay and lesbian relationships where we fundamentally disagree. Somehow I have to be a pastor for all of you. So what can I say that might be useful to all of us?

One possibility is to discuss the seven biblical texts that seem to mention gay or lesbian sexual behavior. The difficulty is that biblical scholars and theologians—including Mennonite biblical scholars and theologians—have major disagreements with each other about what these texts mean. Bible scholars don't even agree that these seven texts are primarily about gay and lesbian sexual behavior. The arguments that scholars make on one side or the other are long and

complex. Sometimes they are also very heated and contentious.<sup>2</sup> Instead of trying to summarize these pro and con arguments in a sermon—which would be an impossible task anyway—I’ve simply made a footnote in the text of this sermon that refers to some of that scholarship. If you’re interested in pursuing it you can go to our congregation’s website, download the sermon, read the footnote, and look up some of that scholarship. If you choose to do that, my advice would be to try reading some authors who have a different position than the one you hold.<sup>3</sup>

**W**hat I want to do instead is to outline some of the shifts that have happened in the Mennonite Church USA and in American culture since our predecessor denominations passed those resolutions on sexuality 28 years ago. Some of us celebrate these shifts while some of us mourn them. Whether you love them or hate them, these shifts are happening and I see no benefit in ignoring them. I think we should recognize these shifts because they are affecting the way we collectively think about gay and lesbian relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> One example of how contentious Bible scholars can get is the email conversation between Robert Gagnon and Dale Martin (neither of whom are Mennonite) at <http://www.robgagnon.net/DaleMartinRobertGagnonExchange.htm>

<sup>3</sup> The seven texts are Genesis 19, Judges 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10. In chronological order by date of publication, Mennonite writings on gay and lesbian sexuality include the following:

- C. Norman Kraus, ed., *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2001).
- Willard M. Swartley, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment* (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 2003).
- Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation, *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality* (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 2008).
- C. Norman Kraus, *On Being Human: Sexual Orientation and the Image of God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

Some Protestant writings include:

- Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).
- Dan O. Via and Robert A. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2003).
- Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, revised ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

So what are some of the shifts in MC USA? Perhaps the most obvious shift is that more congregations now welcome covenanted gay and lesbian couples than thirty years ago. True, some of these congregations have been disciplined, but more recently some congregations have retained their conference membership without restrictions. As a result Mennonite congregations as a whole now have more members in same-sex covenants than they did three decades ago.

A second shift is that at least two conferences, Central District and Western District, now appear to implicitly allow pastors to perform gay and lesbian covenant ceremonies without revoking their ministerial credentials.<sup>4</sup> Thirty years ago no Mennonite conference would have allowed pastors who officiated at a covenanting ceremony for gay or lesbian couples to retain their ministerial credentials.

A third shift—and a potentially momentous one—just happened a few months ago in the Mountain States Mennonite Conference, which includes congregations in Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Over a year ago, First Mennonite Church in Denver hired Theda Good, a female pastor who is in a covenanted relationship with another woman. After a lengthy discernment process, Mountain States Conference agreed to license Theda, making her the first pastor in MC USA who's in a committed lesbian or gay relationship.<sup>5</sup> No way would this have happened thirty years ago.

Some of us will celebrate these shifts while some of us will lament them, but they have happened.

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<sup>4</sup> Joanna Harader, the pastor in Western District who married a lesbian couple and who was allowed to retain her ministerial credentials, writes about her experience at <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-12/so-much-unity>.

<sup>5</sup> "Mountain States first conference to license pastor in same-sex relationship," *The Mennonite*, December 1, 2013. [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/16-12/articles/Mountain\\_States\\_first\\_conference\\_to\\_license\\_samesex\\_pastor](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/16-12/articles/Mountain_States_first_conference_to_license_samesex_pastor). Partly in response, some pastors in the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference have asked the denomination to take action against Mountain States Conference. See <http://transformationletter.blogspot.com/>.

Now let's look at some shifts in American culture in the last thirty years.

The first shift is the well-known fact that seventeen states along with Washington, D.C. now permit gay and lesbian couples to marry. In addition to those seventeen states, four more states recognize civil unions and partnerships. Beyond those twenty-one states, five more states have recently taken steps to end the ban on same-sex marriage within their boundaries.<sup>6</sup> By now about 45% of Americans live in states that offer some type of recognition for gay and lesbian couples, whether marriage, civil unions, or some other provision. This is a big shift from just twelve years ago when no state permitted gay marriage. Massachusetts, the first state to legalize same-sex marriage, did so only eleven years ago.<sup>7</sup>

A second shift is that a slight majority of Americans—58%—now favor gay and lesbian marriage.<sup>8</sup> Before about 2011 most Americans did not approve of such marriages, but that year a majority of Americans started favoring gay marriage. A significant detail in this data is a demographic difference: younger adults more often favor gay and lesbian marriage than older adults. Only 39% of people over 55 years of age think same-sex marriage should be legal; but 70% of people aged 18-34 think it should be legal. If these demographic patterns continue to hold steady,

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<sup>6</sup> Seventeen states that permit same-sex marriage: California, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, Maine, Maryland, and Washington. Four states that recognize civil unions and partnerships: Oregon, Nevada, Colorado, and Wisconsin. Five states that are taking steps to end the legal ban on same-sex marriage: Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Utah. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/same-sex-marriage/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/11/06/from-here-on-out-legalizing-same-sex-marriage-becomes-harder/> and <http://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/blog/2013/11/18/ten-years-ago-supreme-judicial-court-legalized-gay-marriage-massachusetts/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/same-sex-marriage/>

then as older Americans die and younger Americans become a larger percentage of the population, the overall support for gay marriage will gradually increase.<sup>9</sup>

A third shift has come via legislative rulings, most notably from the Supreme Court. Last summer the Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act from 1996 which had prevented the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriage.

A fourth shift comes from various professional organizations which have recently gone on record to support gay and lesbian marriage. These organizations include the Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American College of Nursing.<sup>10</sup>

Significant shifts are also taking place in the evangelical world, which for a long time was virtually united in opposition to same-sex relationships. A handful of evangelical leaders have recently spoken in favor of same-sex marriage, including Jim Wallis, Rob Bell, and Brian McLaren.<sup>11</sup> A number of other evangelicals are beginning to noticeably soften their traditional opposition to same-sex relationships.<sup>12</sup> One telling example of the shifts underway recently happened at Exodus International, a prominent evangelical Christian organization which for a long time believed that gay and lesbian persons could be “cured” through prayer and psychotherapy. Back in the 1990s I remember a number of Mennonites talking in glowing terms about the ministry of Exodus International. It

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147662/first-time-majority-americans-favor-legal-gay-marriage.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/21/health/american-academy-of-pediatrics-backs-gay-marriage.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/21/health/american-academy-of-pediatrics-backs-gay-marriage.html?_r=0) and <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/influential-pediatricians-group-backs-gay-marriage>

<sup>11</sup> “Evangelical pastor comes out in support of marriage equality,” *Salon*, April 9, 2013, [http://www.salon.com/2013/04/09/evangelical\\_pastor\\_comes\\_out\\_in\\_support\\_of\\_marriage\\_equality/](http://www.salon.com/2013/04/09/evangelical_pastor_comes_out_in_support_of_marriage_equality/) and “Rob Bell on Gay Marriage Support: God Pulling Us Ahead to Affirm Gay Brothers, Sisters,” *The Christian Post*, March 22, 2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/rob-bell-on-gay-marriage-support-god-pulling-us-ahead-to-affirm-gay-brothers-sisters-92395/>

<sup>12</sup> “Gay Evangelicals Press Fellow Believers to Rethink Homosexuality, Stop Stereotyping Gays,” *Fox News*, June 30, 2013 <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2013/06/30/gay-evangelicals-press-fellow-believers-to-rethink-homosexuality-stop/>

came as a big surprise last summer when Exodus International's president publicly declared there is no cure for homosexuality and that reparative therapy offered false hopes to gay and lesbian persons. He formally apologized to gay and lesbian persons, and shortly thereafter the organization closed its doors.<sup>13</sup>

**W**hen Mennonites passed resolutions on sexuality in 1986 and 1987, I was a young adult. Back then I don't recall anyone predicting that by 2014 all these shifts would happen in American culture. My purpose today is simply pointing out that when it comes to same-sex relationships neither the Mennonite church nor American culture is at the same place they were thirty years ago. Big shifts have happened and will probably continue to happen. In the last dozen years or so, some Mennonites who favor traditional marriage have chosen to leave MC USA, while most Mennonites who also want to allow for same-sex marital covenants have chosen to stay in MC USA. It remains to be seen what these shifts will mean for American Mennonites in the next decade or two.

Regardless of what happens in the nation or in our denomination, we at Berkey still need to carry on as a church. We do not agree with each other on this issue and probably will not in the foreseeable future. Therefore the focusing question for our discussions today is this: In a contested environment over same-sex relationships, how can we continue to be "Christ's loving, caring, healing presence" for each other and for people in our world?

One biblical text that might guide us is the passage we heard from Ephesians: "With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [let us] make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the

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<sup>13</sup> <http://wespeaklove.org/exodus/>. See also <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/us/a-leaders-renunciation-of-ex-gay-tenets-causes-a-schism.html>

bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit . . . , one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God . . . of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

I urge us to remember that somehow, God is present in all of this. Ultimately the church belongs to Christ, not to us. In one way or another, the Triune God will take care of the church so that it continues to help love, care for, and heal the world.