Ascension Sermon -- 8/20/2017 Gay Rights and Gay Wrongs

 Or “What should we say when someone asks us about gay marriages?”

Text: 1 Corinthians 6:9b-11

I’m glad I’m not a politician – forced to appeal to people’s darker side of self-interest, suspicion and fear, forced to deal in half-truths, especially during an election campaign, and forced to accept compromise as the best attainable outcome. In politics 51% right is considered a great victory. And it seems to me that nothing is sacred if one must give it up to get 51% of the people on your side. But God’s Word does not allow compromise on matters where God speaks. That makes a pastor’s job easier than the politician’s. My job is to proclaim to you “the whole counsel of God” -- everything the Bible says. I don’t have to try to make it appealing to the majority of people. Ultimately it doesn’t matter if any human likes what I say as long as I faithfully preach and teach God’s truth.

In this sermon we look at one of the issues on the minds of people today – an issue on which God’s Word speaks – and speaks clearly. Our sermon theme is GAY RIGHTS AND GAY WRONGS or What Should We Say When Someone Asks us about Gay Marriages? We will consider two main points with regard to this subject: 1. THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD GO I and 2. THAT BY THE GRACE OF GOD CAN CHANGE.

Let’s admit it at the outset – Christians can come across as self-righteous and narrow-minded when they say that something is wrong according to God’s Word. So let’s try to correct that right away –

The almighty God, Creator of the universe, has established a system of right and wrong for his world. It’s called God’s Law. It spells out for us God’s unchanging will for his creatures. The basics of God’s moral code have been written into each person. And lest that inborn knowledge of right and wrong be twisted or perverted, God also gave us his law in written form – in the pages of the Bible. Moreover, God built into each human creature a conscience which says there’s a coming judgment. The conscience tells us that the divine Judge’s standard is perfection and that anyone who falls short of that standard deserves eternal damnation in Hell. The message of conscience is repeated in the written words of the Bible. “Keep all my decrees and laws,” God says, “and follow them…. You are to be holy because I the Lord am holy” (Lev 20-22-26). Everyone who listens to his conscience, everyone who listens to the Bible, knows that we have a serious problem. We have not lived up to God’s Law. One’s sinful weakness might be womanizing; another’s might be greed. Your particular weakness may be alcohol; mine may be pride. We have misused God’s name, despised preaching and the Word, disobeyed our parents, disrespected those God placed over us in government, hated our neighbor, betrayed confidences, coveted our neighbor’s spouse or property, and the list goes on. We all sin, and we all deserve damnation.

But Christ came to our rescue. The Gospel tells us that. For 33 years Jesus lived a perfect life on this earth under the Creator’s law, tempted in every way – so his righteousness could be given to us. Then he died on the cross – the most horrible injustice – until you realize that he was guilty – guilty of every one of our sins for “the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.” The Good News of the Bible is that the benefit of all Jesus did is given to us as the gift of God through faith. And even faith is God’s doing. For God called us to faith through Baptism and the Bible. Most of us he called to faith back when we were very young children. God’s power tools, Baptism and the Word, produced faith in our hearts. And God worked the conditions and chose the people that brought us to those tools. Nearly all of us were born where Christian churches are everywhere and at a time when being a member of a Christian church was the thing to do. Nearly all of us were taken to church and Sunday School as kids. None of that was our doing! God did it for us through people he placed in our lives – whether our parents or others in the family or a Christian spouse or a Christian friend.

Others were born and continue to be born under totally different circumstances. Many were born and continue to be born into broken homes, unchristian homes, homes with no interest or time for the children at all. Many were and continue to be born into homes where they are surrounded each day by immorality and depravity of every sort. And let’s be honest, now church is not “in” and children who are being brought regularly to church and Sunday School are the minority. The mixed-up values of many and their morally degenerate lives are not reasons for us to feel self-righteous. Would you be any different if you had been born under those circumstances or into those homes? There but for the grace of God go I is the only honest attitude to have as we look out at the morally troubled and lost of our world. All are sinners – so are we! All who are saved and called to faith are in that blessed state alone by the grace of God!

We have no right whatsoever to be self-righteous Pharisees regarding sin and our salvation. There is reason, however, for us to be concerned about sin, and good reason to be eager to share the Good News of God’s salvation. Take that attitude with you as you consider the subject for today.

The basic doctrine of the Bible regarding human sexuality is this: MARIAGE IS SACRED. God established the basic plan for society. He made male and female the way he did, so that they fit together as husband and wife in marriage – a lifelong union built on a commitment to unconditional faithfulness. “Marriage should be honored by all,” the Bible says. All sexual intimacies outside of marriage are adultery. In all such cases what God intended to be pure and good between husband and wife has been adulterated, something impure has been mixed into it.

Bible passages like the one we read as today’s epistle lesson include homosexual activities among the sinful offenses that separate a person from God and bring damnation. Notice that the list does not single out homosexual activity as one particularly evil sin. The list included idolatry – that is, placing anything higher than God in our lives. It includes all forms of sexual immorality and adultery – any violation of the sanctity of marriage including unfaithfulness in thought, word or action, any violation of the sanctity of marriage through divorce or premarital sex. The list includes thievery, greed, drunkenness, slanders and fraud. All sins separate us from God. All sins, if we continue in them, carry the threat of eternal damnation. We dare not regard one form of sin – usually one that doesn’t particularly plague us – as worse or more dangerous than another. We are not to look down our self-righteous noses at those we regard as more sinful or evil than we.

On the other hand, we dare not minimize the seriousness of sin. The Bible specifically cites homosexual behavior as evidence of a society separated from God and under his judgment. Romans 1 says: “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another…. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error” (1:24-27).

The Bible is clear on it: homosexual activity – as all sexual activities outside of marriage – is sinful. No one can read the Bible’s black words on the white pages and say otherwise. But did you notice the point in Paul’s passage quoted at the beginning of this sermon? Paul lists the sexually immoral, adulterers and homosexual offenders among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Then he says: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified (that is, made holy), you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

God changes sinful people. He changes, first of all, the attitude of sinners. We are led to see our sins as offenses against God. That evil which once looked so appealing to us, we come to see it as something horrible, filthy, something that is hurting others and leading to our doom. God then leads sinful people to Christ’s forgiveness, offered freely to all who sorrow over their sins and believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin. God at work in sinful people changes their attitude. He also changes their life. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation,” the Bible says, “the old has gone, the new has come!” God, who leads us to hate the sin in our lives and the harm that it causes, leads us also to desire to change our sinful life. And then he empowers us to change – to live more and more in a God-pleasing way. We need not find the power to change within ourselves, “for it is God who works in you both to will (that is, to want to) and to do of his good pleasure.” God never says that changing sinful ways is going to be easy. Satan will be in us kicking and screaming all the way. And our old sinful self will continually try to revert to its accustomed ways. But God promises his help and teaches us to say: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Simply put, the message of God’s Word regarding the sin of homosexual activity is this: **That by the grace of God can change.** The almighty God stands by, holding out his hand to pull the sinner from sin and Satan’s grasp. And he desires that the Christians – you and I – be his agents, in love, reaching out to the lost and guiding them to their Savior.

What about the argument that some are born with homosexual tendencies or predispositions? No surprise there. The Bible says that all of us must admit: “Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps 51:5). But there are also indications that some people have an inborn, genetic weakness for alcohol. So should we legalize drunk driving? Some have the inborn character flaw of losing their temper and flying into rages. So should we legalize all violent crimes committed in passion or fits of anger? What about the argument that homosexual tendencies are the result of one’s upbringing or environment? No surprise there either. The Bible warns us: The ungodly “cannot sleep till they do evil; they are robbed of slumber till they make someone fall” (Pr 4:16). But, if a child is brought up in a home where domestic violence and child abuse are the norm, does that mean we should approve – and even – encourage – such a child to abuse his kids and beat up his wife? Some children grow up in homes with uneducated parents. Does that mean we should stop trying to educate kids? Should we organize protest marches against universities and close the doors of schools because they discriminate against ignorance?

No, in all the above instances, we must try to correct and change the situations. We must do all we can to rescue the children from perpetuating the sins and weaknesses which harm them and others. AND WITH JESUS’ HELP CHANGE IS POSSIBLE! Our assignment is clear. Let’s hold forth the LAW and the GOSPEL loud and clear – God’s Law to point out sin, the God’s Gospel to forgive and change, and then the Law again as a guide for the God-pleasing life that is the evidence of faith in our hearts. Our reason for doing this is clear. The Bible says: “If one should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death” (James 5:19-20) Then we also will know the joy of the angels which Jesus spoke about: “I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who (think they) do not need to repent” (Luk 15:7).

We speak up out of love for God and for the sinner. We speak up also out of love for our country, for Scripture says: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people” (Prov 14:34).

By the way, don’t blame our government for the growing acceptance of homosexuality in our land. Government can only do what the majority of its citizens allow it to do. Blame the deteriorating morality in our land on the churches – many of which are unwilling to preach God’s law and condemn what God says is sin. Blame it on the entertainment industry, which these days seems compelled to insert a homosexual or transgender character into every movie or TV show. Blame it on the companies which sponsor those TV shows and support Gay-Pride Marches. And blame it on ourselves as we watch such entertainment, purchase the products of such companies, or fail to testify to what the Bible says when this subject comes up.

So what should we say when someone asks us about gay marriages? I suggest you say something like this: “I believe gay marriage is against God’s law and therefore sinful. I also believe we have a Savior Jesus Christ who is there to forgive sin and help a repentant sinner change.”

I often shock students in other countries by asking them: “Do you have any homosexuals in your congregation?” They invariably answer: “Of course not.” Then I say that I hope our congregations are filled with homosexuals --repentant homosexuals who recognize their sin and are coming to Jesus for forgiveness and help to change.” I’m confident that is attitude here at Ascension also.

Hate has been in the news this past week. In fact, *Hate in* America is the cover story in this week’s TIME magazine. We don’t preach hate against gays and lesbians. We preach love – the love of Jesus Christ to help them in their struggle against sin, and the love of God’s people whom God has placed here to help them – just as we strive to help one another in the battle against ALL sins.