

The Bible, homosexuality and fertility: a reading.

Preface.

This paper was developed from a workshop given at the Diocese of Missouri's annual convention in November 2000. Both the workshop and this paper are intended to give lay people and clergy the tools necessary to use scripture as a contribution to ethical discussion. All too often, particularly concerning how the church will respond to questions of blessing same sex unions and ordaining non-celibate gay persons, scripture is adduced to end conversation rather than to bring clarity to the discussion. Many committed clergy and lay people, confronted with a 'proof-texting' use of scripture, either dismiss scripture as culturally limited and so of no use to the current discussion, or turn to other strands of scripture without engaging seriously what scripture can contribute to our discussion. It is hoped that this paper, used as a discussion guide, will help laity and clergy in congregational or diocesan setting seriously seeking the voice of scripture to make a richer use of the Bible than is often heard in the church's debates.

First, a word about how scripture will be approached. Each particular book of scripture is written in a particular social context. Author(s) and audience are confronting specific social, historical and political circumstances. The texts that make up our scriptures were written and compiled over the course of at least ten centuries. It can safely be assumed that the situations and even crises that brought author to set pen to paper changed dramatically over that time span. It will be important to understand as well as possible what circumstances confront author and audience. Each author and audience endeavor to answer the question of how God remains faithful to God's promises and character in a new set of circumstances. As long as a particular way of approaching God 'works,' or in other words, as long as a social construction and organizational principle (e.g., monarchy/priesthood or nomadic tribe) functions to hold a society together and prospering, there will be no need to write down its primary narrative. Everyone in the social structure will know the story and understand how God can be approached and how God is involved in the ongoing history of the community. Periods of social and political upheaval (e.g., the founding of the Davidic monarchy in I and II Samuel, or its collapse in II Kings and Jeremiah) will require great creativity on the part of the community to maintain a sense of God's active presence in its history. Each of the books of the Bible is a product of such creativity. Each book seeks to understand God's faithfulness in the face of a crisis or a radically new set of circumstances. Each book represents the author's and audience's experiment with a new social configuration that gives each person an accepted place and brings each into relationship with God. It will be crucial for us to understand the shift in circumstances or crisis that calls each book into being. Only in that way can we understand how the community understood its relationship with God (theology) and with each other (ethics).

One of the most important questions we can pose to a book of scripture is what community is being constituted by it. For instance, the histories narrated in the books of Samuel and Kings constitute the communities of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The uses made of those

histories by the deuteronomic school constitute the community of Judeans in Babylon. Knowing the boundaries of a community is one of the most important ethical questions we can pose to scripture. Knowing who is included and what behavior is expected of those so included in the various communities which have given us our scriptures will be an important part of this discussion.

It will also be assumed that authors (and audiences) are familiar with texts written previously. These texts have become important to us because they illuminate a particular community's struggle to understand God's intention for them in their historical situation. These texts have been used in this way over their whole existence. Many of the texts of scripture comment on, incorporate, argue with and interpret for a new context earlier texts written in a different context. It will be important to trace the use of a text throughout the history of the formation of scripture.

By dealing in a specific way with the social context into which a particular text was written, the text also identifies and constitutes its audience. The text sets the limits of the community which makes use of it and defines the relationship of its members to each other. The United States Constitution is an excellent example of how a text calls a society into being. Responding to a crisis in social organization, the text 'constitutes' a new social experiment. An example of the way in which a text defines a community might be the way in which the Bible with and without the apocryphal books defines Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican communions as against Protestant communions.

Second, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the Bible in reality says nothing about homosexuality, because homosexuality as a category of human identity did not exist until the Nineteenth Century. For the authors of the Bible, sexual preference as a component of the human person would not have made sense. Gender and preference are socially and culturally defined, and homosexuality as a category was not available until the Nineteenth Century.¹ When

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I define homosexuality as an exclusive erotic preference for persons of the same gender as a defining element of personality. Certainly, same gender sex acts took place before the Nineteenth Century, but in many instances, did not involve erotic preference. Same-gender erotic preference existed before the Nineteenth Century, but it was usually not exclusive. What develops in the Nineteenth Century is the understanding of the human person as an object of knowledge (see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York: Pantheon, 1971, *passim*, but esp. pp. 307-318), and with it, a psychological view of personality and of sexuality as an element of personality. This view sees homosexuality as a variant of human sexuality. Because homosexuality as a category usually carries with it the connotation of deviation from the norm, most gay people use other appellations. For the purposes of this paper, I will try to use the term neutrally. The word itself, homosexual, and the category it expresses, appear in the English language in 1891. For a full treatment of the definition of homosexuality, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 41-46, especially notes 3, 4, 5 and 6. Boswell's "Introduction" is also very helpful background for this

the Bible and ancient literature speak about sexuality, the categories used for understanding human relationships are different than the categories we use. It will take a suspension of our way of looking at the world to be able to step into the world of the Bible.

Acknowledging that the Bible does not, in fact, say anything about homosexuality, because its authors couldn't have known what we mean by that term, does not however obviate the need to look carefully at those texts used in the current debate about homosexuality. It will be important for us to identify how those texts would have functioned in the social and cultural setting that gave them birth, before we can admit them in any constructive way to the use of the church. This article will look at those passages of the Bible which have been used to condemn sexual relations between people of the same gender. We will need to ask exactly what the passage is condemning in the author's social and cultural setting and why, in order to bring the author's argument forward to the present day.

Hebrew Scripture

Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-29).

▲ We all know the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. God destroyed the cities because the outcry against them was great. What was the crime? "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin is so grave" (Genesis 18:20).² The three men, the angel of God, who have just visited Abraham and Sarah, go on to Sodom. God, in the persons of the three visitors, reasons with Godself to let Abraham in on God's intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of the outcry against them. Abraham makes bold to bargain with God to save the cities if fifty righteous people can be found, and argues God down to saving the cities for the sake of just ten righteous men. The three messengers arrive in Sodom, and stay with Lot. The men of Sodom gather outside Lot's door and seek to have the men given to them in order to abuse them. Lot instead offers his two virgin daughters, but the angel of the Lord causes a bright flash which blinds the men of Sodom. God is convinced that the outcry is correct, and instructs Lot to leave immediately with all his family.

▲ There is much which troubles us about this text. We can assume that the abuse which the men of Sodom seek to perpetrate on the three men is sexual, because of Lot's offer of his virgin daughters instead. This is a "text of terror," in which the sexual abuse of women is assumed as acceptable. But also troubling is the question of why the men of Sodom would want to abuse the three visitors. I will take this question up later in this paper. We must remember that Lot was also an outsider in Sodom, a resident alien. The rules of hospitality require that the three men be given shelter in the city and it is worth noting that only an outsider, a resident alien, offers them hospitality. By contrast, Abraham had readily fulfilled the obligations of hospitality, bathing their feet and offering them a meal.

▲ In the current discussion, this story is often adduced to show that God has condemned Sodom and Gomorrah for the homosexuality of the men of Sodom. Certainly the men of Sodom

² Scriptural quotations are from *New American Bible*, unless otherwise

intended to rape the three visitors, and Lot sought to "buy them off" with his virgin daughters. This impression is strengthened by the appearance in English of a form of the name of the city of Sodom to describe a sexual act. The laws of a number of states in our country use the word sodomy to refer to anal intercourse. Sometimes the reference is to forcible anal intercourse or rape, but sometimes also to consensual anal intercourse. It is easy for us to assume that sodomy, as we know it, was the crime in view in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. But what does the rest of the Bible say about the crime of Sodom? We need to look at other places in the Hebrew Scripture where references to Sodom and Gomorrah appear.

☉ Isaiah 1:9-20. "Unless the Lord of hosts had left us a scanty remnant, We had become like Sodom, we should be like Gomorrah" (v. 9). "I have had enough of whole-burnt rams and fat of fatlings" (v. 11). Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there is in view a conflict between the worship of Yahweh and the worship of the local gods of Canaan. The local gods are fertility gods, Baal and Asherah. Baal and Asherah are local variations of the dying-rising son-spouse and his mother-bride, who guarantee the fertility of the land and of the animals and people who live on it.³ Several forms of worship are offered in the cult of Baal/Asherah. Sex at the high place or the holy place was one of the primary forms of the cult. Throughout the Hebrew Scripture we can find evidence of the struggle of Yahwism to eradicate this practice. Again and again, prophets call on the holy people to destroy their high places, to cut down the pillars and the terebinths (holy oaks). There may even be a hint of this cult in Abraham's meeting of the three visitors under the terebinths, and in Sarah's conception after their visit. The hint is strengthened by the detail that, along with bread, Abraham offers his guests veal with milk and curds (Genesis 18:8), a practice forbidden elsewhere in the Hebrew Scripture (Exodus 23:19 and 34:26, where it is connected with a fertility offering of cereal, and Deuteronomy 14:21). Is the author telling us that Yahweh, not Baal and Asherah, brings about fertility, and then even in impossible circumstances? Another practice of the cult was the sacrifice of children to return to the mother-goddess some of the fruit of her body. This practice echoes in the Hebrew Scriptures in the prohibitions of the offering of children to Molech (a word which means lord or husband, a name for Baal). Does the story of Abraham and Isaac represent a stage in the development of the cult of Yahweh when the sacrifice of a ram was substituted for the sacrifice of the first-born male child? Whole burnt offerings also seem to come under condemnation for the same reason. Communion sacrifices seem to be the order of the day for the early cult of Yahweh (see I and II Samuel). Whole burnt offerings, or whole buried offerings returned to the pair of fertility gods an exchange for their gifts. Yahwism doesn't seem so interested in keeping the divine figure fed as in the meal shared between the divine and the community of human worshipers. The divine and human are bound together by the sharing of substance in the shared meal.

☉ In Isaiah 1:9-17, worthless offerings, new moons and festivals are roundly condemned. I suspect these are part of the cultus of fertility worship (v. 13).⁴ "Your hands are full of blood!

3 ³For an extensive treatment of fertility cults, see Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), passim, esp. pp. 3-

4 ⁴The dying/rising son-god is often depicted as a bull and connected with the moon and its cycles of dying and returning. The god's festivals were held at the monthly return of the moon.

Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow" (v. 15-17). The prophet is condemning the adoption of practices from the surrounding peoples. With the adoption of monarchy, these practices are also adopted. The king is the divine/human guarantor of the fertility of the land, and is also supposed to guarantee justice. However, the king's palace is the copy of the gods' palace, and must be splendid. Consequently, the King employs forced labor, to the detriment of justice. To invite the blessing of the gods on the land the King has many wives and concubines, and also supports the cult of sacrifice to the gods. The daily burnt offering at the temple served as a display of just how good the gods had been to the King and the King's people. In adopting the monarchy and associated cult, the holy people have neglected the justice of Yahweh. The crime of Sodom and Gomorrah, according to this author, is the adoption of the fertility cult and the neglect of the orphan and widow, the care of whom the justice of Yahweh had particularly imposed on the holy people. "How she has turned adulteress (other translations use harlot), the faithful city, so upright! Justice used to lodge within her, but now, murderers. Your silver is turned to dross, your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and comrades of thieves; Each one of them loves a bribe and looks for gifts. The fatherless they defend not, and the widow's plea does not reach them" (1:21-23).

☉ Isaiah 3:8-26. "For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen: because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. Their partiality witnesses against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it" (vv. 8-9, RSV). Here, partiality is the crime of Sodom. As in chapter one, it is the failure of the powerful to hear the plea of the powerless that the prophet has in view. "The Lord enters into judgment with his people's elders and princes: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the loot wrested from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding down the poor when they look to you?" (vv. 14-15). This failure of justice is connected to ostentation, especially in women: "the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with necks outstretched, ogling and mincing as they go, their anklets tinkling with every step" (v. 16). Again, this is a "text of terror": God will punish them by causing scabs on their heads and exposing them to shame. I suspect here as well, the prophet is objecting to practices that he associates with fertility cults.

☉ Ezekiel 16:30-63. Many of the prophets use harlotry as a metaphor for idolatry. Sacred prostitution was a part of some fertility cults. Sacred prostitutes, both male and female served at the high places, or in the temples of the fertility gods. Judean prophets scolded Samaria and the Northern Kingdom for being syncretistic in religion. Elijah had excoriated Ahab for marrying Jezebel and setting up a temple to Baal in Samaria. Judean prophets also called the Northern Kingdom for flaunting wealth: beds inlaid with ivory, eating lambs from the flock and calves from the stall, drinking wine from bowls, making songs on musical instruments and anointing with finest oils were all seen by Amos (6:4-6) as signs of conspicuous and inappropriate display of wealth. In the prophetic imagination, there is a connection between the display of wealth, sacred prostitution and idolatry. Ezekiel uses the image of lovers as a metaphor for Judah's

The sacrifice of the bull leads to the productivity of the land. See Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, pp. 54-

practices besides Yahwism. He even suggests that Judah had practiced child immolation: "Therefore, harlot, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God: Because you poured out your lust and revealed your nakedness in your harlotry with your lovers and abominable idols, and because you sacrificed the lifeblood of your children to them..." (16:35-36). Ezekiel scolds Judah for the flaunting of wealth (just like Isaiah). "And look at the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were proud, sated with food, complacent in their prosperity, and they gave no help to the poor and needy" (v. 49).

▲ Again, the crime of Sodom is connected with the failure of the holy people to preserve justice for the weakest members of society, and this is connected in the prophet's mind with the worship of fertility cult and the ostentation that went with it. It is clear that in the biblical literature outside of the story itself, the crime of Sodom and Gomorrah is the injustice and inhospitality of the people of Sodom that went hand in hand with their worship of what the holy people considered to be idols. The intention of the men of Sodom to rape the three messengers of God is not connected to homosexuality as we understand it as a sexual preference, but is seen as an expression of the inhospitality and injustice that accompanied, in the minds of other authors of Hebrew Scripture, the worship of the fertility cults.

▲ There is another episode in Hebrew Scripture remarkably similar to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah that makes essentially the same point, although in this instance, the perpetrators of the outrage are not foreigners, but members of the tribal confederation of the holy people.

◎ Judges 19 relates the story of the levite and his concubine, at the town square in Gibeah. The levite was sojourning in Ephraim. Levites could not inherit or hold land, and were given access to grazing land in exchange for cultic service. They lived at the hospitality of others. This levite is living in the remote hill country of Ephraim. His concubine left him and went to live with her father in Bethlehem for four months. He journeyed there to sweet-talk her into returning. As he is making his way back from Bethlehem, he turns aside to spend the night at Gibeah. He, his concubine and his two asses, wait in the town square to receive hospitality. The first crime of Gibeah is the failure of anyone to invite the levite and his household to spend the night -- "they turned off to enter Gibeah for the night. The man waited in the public square of the city he had entered, but no one offered them the shelter of his home for the night" (v. 15). An old man, also of Ephraim, sojourning in Gibeah, gives him a place to stay for the night. Later that night, the men of Gibeah turn up at the Ephraimite's door and demand he put out the levite so that they might rape him. The Ephraimite is in a dicey situation -- he is living in Gibeah, not as a resident, but as a guest. He is in no position to refuse their request. The levite, knowing his bind, and not wanting to put his compatriot in a worse position, puts out his concubine. The men rape her until she dies. The rape of the concubine compounds the first crime of Gibeah, which was the failure of anyone except a resident alien to fulfill the requirements of hospitality. The rape serves to show the seriousness of the crime.

▲ In the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and of the Levite and his concubine in Gibeah, sex functions as a mode of domination, a way of demeaning another. Other biblical writers use the story of Sodom as an example of the degradation of the orphans and widow in the midst of the holy people. The prophets connected the sex in this story with the idolatry of the fertility cults,

which in the minds of the prophets was also connected to ostentatious wealth and disparity between rich and poor. Sex is the sign of the injustice and degradation of the weak members of society. There are examples in history of victorious armies sodomizing the men of the defeated army as a way of driving the defeat home.⁵ It was not because the men of Sodom were homosexuals, as we understand homosexuality, and wanted to have sex with men as a matter of preference that the outcry has reached God; it was because they wanted to degrade the outsiders in their midst, whether foreigners or widows and orphans. Rape of Muslim women in the Balkans and sex in our prisons are modern examples of this. Orphans and widows are outsiders - outside the structures of legal redress. The society and culture take advantage of the orphan and widow, degrade them, in the same way that the men of Sodom seek to degrade the aliens in their midst. That is why Isaiah and Ezekiel compare the outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah to the outrage of the crimes against orphans and widows in their own times. The crime is not sex -- whether with the men visiting Lot at Sodom, or the levite's concubine, but domination of one over another, of the ethnic insider over the outsider, of the powerful over the powerless. This is not anything like homosexuality the way we understand it, or are engaged in conversation about it.

An Excursus: Fertility in the contemporary setting.

The scriptures investigated so far are the product of the struggle of the religion of the Hebrews (Yahwism) against the fertility cults of Canaan. Fertility, whether of women or of the herds of domestic animals, is where religion had its most important payoff. The fertility cults offered a woman (and her husband) desperately desiring a pregnancy a direct appeal to the gods. A clan or family seeking its own prosperity could appeal to the gods for the increase of their herds, or the fruitfulness of its own land. The cults are connected to the monarchy because the king and the king's land must be the most fertile of all. The most appalling feature of monarchy, in the mind of the anti-monarchical strand of tradition in I and II Samuel is the annexation of fertile land by the monarchy, and the census of men for forced labor and military draft. The worst insult a conqueror could give to a defeated king was to lie with his concubines. Fertility, and the cults of its gods, were at the service of the king and the powerful.

The Hebrew scriptures show a shift over time in emphasis from individual fertility to fruitfulness of God's whole people. The story of Hannah at Shiloh in 1 Samuel is a straightforward appeal for fertility. Mary Douglas has made a good case that the holocaust sacrifices imagined in Leviticus are rituals that can be undertaken locally in an appeal for fertility. The inner organs and the 'shank' of the male animal are washed and laid on top of the sacrifice before it is burned. The shank is in fact a euphemism for the sexual organs of the animal.⁶ By its arrangement, with the

⁵ See Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 75 (n. 61) and pp. 367-369.

⁶ For an excellent treatment of the emphasis in Hebrew Scripture on the fruits of religion being for the whole community, see Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Ms. Douglas also treats the relationship between text and community.

holocaust offering as the entrance to the book, and the sanctity of sex as the highlight, Leviticus betrays its concern for fertility.

The Deuteronomic exclusion of men with crushed testicles (Deuteronomy 23:2) and children of incestuous unions from the community also communicates a concern for fertility of those within the community in appropriate unions. This exclusion, however, undergoes a dramatic change in post-exilic circumstances. The author of Isaiah 56 expressly allows for the inclusion of eunuchs, presumably those made so for purposes of advancement in the royal service in the Babylonian exile. Instead of children as a continuing presence before the Lord in the Temple, the eunuchs who keep God's Sabbath and God's covenant of justice will be given a memorial inscription in the Temple (Isaiah 56:3-5).

In Christian literature, this shift is even more dramatic. In Jesus' time, divorce was allowed for reasons of infertility: a man could divorce his wife for failure to bear children, as well as for infidelity (confusing the paternity of any children). The Pharisees' question to Jesus about the grounds for divorce (Mark 10:2-9, Matthew 19:1-9) was premised on this understanding. Jesus' answer is shocking in his refusal to allow divorce in any circumstance. Failure to bear children, or even infidelity (in the Markan version), do not weigh as heavily as the demands of justice in the relationships in the social formation of the christian communities. Any woman divorced for infertility or infidelity becomes an adulteress, and her future prospects are quite grim. Jesus' concern, at least as it is presented in the Synoptic Gospels, is with a new arrangement of social obligations different from those that constrained the lives of his contemporaries. He consistently refused to recognize any of the social arrangements that were assumed as given if those arrangements made outcasts of anyone. These arrangements were often located in concerns of fertility. The community around him (or the new community that assumed his name) replaced mother, father and siblings in the new order. The Gospels even have Jesus bless barren women (Luke 23:29) and those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom (Matthew 19:10-12).⁷

Paul takes Jesus' insistence on a new social formation one step further by preferring celibacy for all those in his churches, allowing marriage only as a second best (1 Corinthians 7). The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*,⁸ while not canonical, was a popular story in early christian times. In the story, a young woman, Thecla, promised to a well-to-do man she does not want to marry, overhears

She argues that the Book of Leviticus has been laid out to reflect the architecture of the Temple and the body of the worshipper and

⁷ See Elaine Pagels' analysis of the divorce sayings in *Adam and Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988), Chapter 1, "The Kingdom of God is at Hand," esp. pp. 13-

⁸ A translation is conveniently available in Willis Barnstone, ed., *The Other Bible* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984), tr. by Wilhelm Schneemelcher (in Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 353-364, 370-373, 383-387, 388-

Paul preaching. She devotes herself to celibacy, and gets into trouble with her mother and the townspeople. After running away to be with Paul, and rejecting a second marriage arranged by a guardian, she finds herself sentenced to death in the arena for her obduracy. She baptizes herself in a pool with killer seals (!), is delivered from death, and begins a career of preaching. Is it possible that this redefinition of social obligation is what put so many christian communities in the way of social persecution (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:14)? If Paul were advising his communities to abstain from marriage, as he seems to do in 1 Corinthians 7 and in 1 Thessalonians 4, their neighbors would see them as opting out of their social obligations.⁹

Celibacy was a way of escaping social obligation, but also required a new definition of benefit for the community. Producing children would have been seen in the Roman mythology as beneficial to the Empire.¹⁰ For the early christians fruitfulness of life in community has replaced fertility as the benefit of God. Either because the time was short, or because christians were now living a different Empire from the one proclaimed by Rome, bearing children was not their paramount obligation, but had been replaced by living with joy in community.

In our circumstance, the concern for fertility and the manipulation of the fertility cult by the powerful in the time of the monarchy has been replaced by the cult of goods. The power of a king is no longer measured by the number of concubines, the amount of fertile land and the size of the royal herds, but by the gross domestic product. Wealth and productivity are the new fertility. The social obligation to produce children has been replaced by the social obligation to produce and acquire wealth. In the developed countries, children are often an afterthought, among the several accouterments of wealth and status and the good life. Parents often try to live out their dreams of success through their children.

The fertility cults have been replaced by fertility clinics, with their tests, drugs and procedures, none of which comes cheaply. The fertility myth of the ancient world, and the myth of wealth of our contemporary circumstance serve the purposes of the structures of power. Allowing ourselves to be defined in terms of wealth and success enslaves us to the processes of the production of wealth. Given the energy we spend in that pursuit, and the money infertile couples often spend in the pursuit of children, it is a shame that we have no other definitions of

⁹ For an analysis of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* as well as the letters of Paul, see Elaine Pagels, *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*, pp. 16-

¹⁰ Helmut Koester, "Jesus the Victim," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 111, no. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 3 - 15, esp. pp. 10 - 13. Koester argues that Augustus uses the prevalent eschatological and utopian dreams in his own propaganda. The new age inaugurated by Augustus would be marked by peace and security as well as by fruitfulness of earth and fertility of womb. 1 Thessalonians assigns the images of the peace and security promised by Augustus and the *parousia* of the Emperor instead to Jesus. Pauline eschatology would have been politically dangerous. Might the exhortation, in Paul and in the gospel record, to refrain from marriage and childbearing also be politically motivated, as a defiant stance to the Roman imperial

fruitfulness of life available to us. It is tragic that most of us cannot find fulfillment apart from the acquisition of possessions. It is tragic that infertile couples often find no other way to achieve fulfillment than having a child. Scripture insists that the fruitful good of the individual is tied to the fruitful good of the community.

The church needs to be about the work of redefining fruitfulness in community. We need to hold up the ways in which we value and honor people for reasons other than those for which the society at large pays honor. Couples infertile, either by circumstance or choice, could be valued for the contributions they make to the life of their local congregation and to the church at large; for their hospitality, their loyalty to each other, and the sign they are to the rest of the church of the distinction of the churches values from society's. Those who are poor, whether by choice or circumstance, could be valued for sign they are to all of us of the poverty of the production of things as a defining measure of a life.

Such a redefinition would also have an impact on how we deal with gay and lesbian couples. One of our deepest fears about homosexuality is that it is "against nature." When pressed, we mean by "against nature" that same-sex sex acts do not have the potential to produce a child. This is a very narrow definition of fruitfulness. What would happen if we expanded our understanding of 'fruitfulness' to include hospitality and justice for the marginal and joy in the life of the community. Single people, infertile couples and same-sex couples then have the opportunity to contribute fruit to our common life. Using Hebrew scriptures as a guide, our definition of fruitfulness might start with care for the marginal and the extension of the fruits of the community to all, making sure that no one on the margins is ever pushed outside, and that those on the outside are brought inside the margins.

This same discussion could be made to apply to the funding of stem cell research. As a byproduct of the lengths couples are willing to go to seeking a child, many embryos produced in a petri dish remain unused. We are currently engaged in a debate about the appropriateness of using stem cells from these embryos in medicine, with the possibility of using these stem cells to help patients grow new organ and nerve tissue for treatment of various disorders. Again, the question must be raised about how far the fruits of this research will extend to the whole community: will the benefits accrue only to those who can pay?

Leviticus -- the Holiness Code, chapters 17-20.

▲ Leviticus contains the only unambiguous prohibition of sexual activity that looks at first glance like homosexuality. This reference comes in the section of Leviticus known as the Holiness Code. The premise of the Holiness Code is that the people are to be holy (set apart) just as God is holy. By following the precepts of the code, the people will be set apart, that is distinguished from the surrounding cultures. The code's precepts then cover the customs by which the holy people will distinguish itself. The first chapter (chapter 17) concerns the killing of animals, in particular what is to be done with the blood. "Since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on the altar, so that atonement may thereby be made for your own lives, because it is the blood, as the seat of life, that makes atonement. That is why I have told

the Israelites: No one among you, not even a resident alien, may partake of blood" (17:11-12). Pouring the blood on the altar, instead of on the ground, signifies that life belongs to Yahweh, not to Asherah or the earth/mother goddess. Not partaking of blood signifies that the life of the god(dess) is not being eaten when an animal is eaten. Atonement instead consists of offering life to Yahweh (to insure the god joins the meal) and sharing that meal with Yahweh.

▲ The second chapter of the Holiness Code (chapter 18) concerns sexual intercourse. Here particularly the concern is for distinction from neighbors: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites and tell them: I, the Lord, am your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you once lived, nor shall you do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you; do not conform to their customs" (18:1-3). This sums up the total aim of the Holiness Code -- to distinguish Israel from its neighbors -- and connects that distinction especially to sex.

◎ The first set of verses regulates degrees of consanguinity allowable for sexual partners. "None of you shall approach a close relative to have sexual intercourse with her" (v. 6). A person (man) will disgrace his father (uncover his father's shame) by having sex with his own mother. The same holds true for sex with a step mother. A person (read man) may not have sex with a sister or half sister, nor with a granddaughter, aunt, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law. A person may not have sex with a woman and her daughter or her granddaughter, nor his own wife's sister. A person may not have sex with a woman who is menstruating. One must presume that some of these prohibited pairings were practiced in the neighboring societies from which Israel was to be set apart. I suspect that the author (or group) have in sight the fertility rituals of those cultures. In the festivals at the high places, or on the threshing floors, did people pair up in any fashion? There are hints of that in European May festivals, which might carry over from the worship of the fertility cults.

◎ That impression is strengthened by finding a prohibition of offering children to Molech right in the midst of the regulations concerning sex. I have already discussed how the immolation of children seems to be a practice of the fertility cults. Immediately following the prohibition of having sex with a person's neighbor's wife we read, "You shall not offer any of your offspring to be immolated to Molech, thus profaning the name of the your God. I am Yahweh" (v. 21). Again, we come back to the main thrust of the Holiness Code and indeed much of Hebrew Scripture: It is Yahweh alone who secures the peace, well-being and fertility of the holy people.

◎ After the reference of immolating children, we find one of only two unambiguous prohibitions of male-with-male sex in the Bible: "You [which all along has meant a male] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; such a thing is an abomination" (18:22). The second follows a chapter later: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them shall be put to death for their abominable deed; they have forfeited their lives" (20:13).¹¹ Immediately following, we find a

¹¹The word abomination implies something disgusting or unclean, not something evil; the LXX has *bdeylugma* (*bdelygma*) which connotes being nauseated. It also carries connotations of idolatry, and hence fertility cults; throughout Hebrew scriptures, idols are called abominations.

prohibitions concerning having sex with an animal (18:23, 20:15). Given the placement of both these statements in the middle of prohibitions that appear to concern fertility rituals, I surmise that the author (or group) has in view specifically male-with-male sex as part of the rituals of the surrounding fertility worship, not broadly homosexuality as a preference as we understand it. Immediately following the prohibitions of male-with-male sex and sex with animals, the Code again stresses the need for separation from surrounding cultures. If the holy people practice any of these things forbidden by statute, they will defile the land, just as the previous inhabitants defiled the land, and the land will vomit them out just as it vomited the previous inhabitants (Leviticus 18:24-30). It is interesting to note that these practices defile the land; the earth/goddess, recipient of blood in child immolation, and site of ritual sex, was made fertile by these practices in the understanding of the worship of the land's former inhabitants. In the understanding of the holy people, only Yahweh can guarantee peace and prosperity. The practices of the fertility cults make of the land something it is not in Yahwism, that is defile it.

☉ Other practices forbidden also reveal something about the holiness of the people. "Do not turn aside to idols, nor make molten gods for yourselves. I, the Lord, am your God" (19:4); Do not reap your field to the edge (v. 9); You shall not steal. You shall not defraud nor withhold your day laborer's wages (vv. 11-13). Partiality in judgment is forbidden (v. 15). Don't slander (v. 16). Hatred and revenge are prohibited (v. 17). Do not breed any domestic animal with an animal of another species (no mules)(v. 19); Don't sow two kinds of seed in one field (v. 19). Do not wear a garment woven with two different kinds of threads (v. 19). There are regulations regarding sex with slaves (vv. 20-22). The first three years' fruit of a tree is considered as its circumcision, the fourth year's fruit is sacred to the Lord (v. 23-25). Do not eat meat with blood in it (v. 26). **Do not degrade your daughter by making a prostitute of her** (v. 29). When an alien resides with you, do not molest him (v. 33).

♠ What is going on here? What do these precepts have to do with one another? The Code shows a big concern for things where they don't belong, linked to a concern for justice. We need to understand the concept of dirty and clean.¹²

♠ A weed is any plant where it doesn't belong, even a plant desirable in one context is a weed in another; a barley plant is a weed in the flower garden. Dirt is anything where it doesn't belong. An ethic based on purity is concerned to maintain the proper boundary; who is in and who is out. Whom you can have sex with is about the edges of the community -- you have to marry a woman who is part of the people, but not part of your family. The concern about two kinds of seeds in the same field, or two kinds of fiber in the same garment, or two different kinds of animals mating is a concern about keeping things where they belong, that is about keeping dirt away from what should be clean. All these practices are enjoined because the Lord is holy and the people must be holy -- that is **set apart** from the peoples around them. The practices of not

"You shall not lie with a man as with a woman, because it's disgusting" would be a good translation. See Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p.

¹²For much of what follows concerning purity, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, second impression with corrections,

gleaning to the edge of the field, not showing partiality favoring the powerful at the expense of the weak are ways of keeping the weakest members of the holy people inside the boundary, making sure that they don't become so degraded that they are dirty and hence excluded entirely. The practice of not gleaning a field to the edge is of particular interest: the bounty of the field is provided by Yahweh, not Baal and Asherah, and the tribute portion ordinarily reserved for the gods is here reserved for the weakest members of society. By making sure the boundaries of society extend to include the poor, justice is cast as a purity issue for the purposes of this code. Justice sets the holy people apart by making sure there are no members of society unclean due to economic circumstance.

▲ Purity is concerned with orifices. When I give this talk in person, I ask someone in the front row for a quarter. When I receive it, I put it in my mouth. I ask what your mother would have said about that. Invariably, the answer is, "Don't put that in your mouth. You don't know where it has been." The boundaries of a society end up being written onto the boundaries of the body. That is why there is such concern about sex and food in the Holiness Code: both involve orifices, breaches in the boundaries of the body. What goes in an orifice can make one unclean. Women, because they have an extra orifice, end up having the boundaries of the community drawn on their bodies in a profound way -- all of chapter 17 of Leviticus concerned women with whom a man might not have sex. This puts women in a very precarious position. When the members of one group want to show their dominance over another group, they often choose ritual rape as the sign. When Absalom rebelled against David, one of his first acts was to have sex with David's concubines in the sight of all Israel (2 Samuel 16:15-22). The Bible is rife with examples of this treatment of women. Our own time has seen some particularly odious examples. In the Balkans, men on each side of the confusion made sex slaves of the women of their opponents. Christians and Muslims alike were guilty of these crimes. Closer to home, when I lived near Providence, RI, I got involved in a situation that shook me. A young Lebanese woman about 16 years old, called the church from the principal's office of her younger sister's school. She was trying to get into a women's shelter, but they wouldn't take her because they claimed she was a suicide risk. I met her in the principal's office and began to hear the story. As it turned out, she had begun to date a young man at her high school, who was not Lebanese. This brought shame to her family, so her brother had raped her, so that she could no longer claim the status of virgin. When her father found out, he asked her to commit suicide. She had taken 20 or so aspirin, but then decided she didn't want to stay in such a restrictive family. Finally, we got a psychiatrist on the telephone who understood the concept of shame in such a culture who assured the women's shelter she was not a suicide risk. After a few weeks in the shelter, the young woman was able to go live with her uncle, who was more Americanized than his brother-in-law. She had not stayed within the proper boundaries.

▲ Temple prostitution (holy men and women),¹³ fertility rituals, were a signs of surrounding cultures, which are degraded. To give one's daughter to the temple degraded her. To follow any

¹³The Hebrew word "kadash" means hallowed or sacred and refers to prostitutes in the temples of fertility cults, that is hallowed to the fertility gods (see Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, pp. 98-

of these practices degrades the practitioner. Lying with a man as with a woman degrades both, because it crosses a cultural boundary into the practice of temple prostitution (fertility worship). What is in view here is not anything like we understand homosexuality as a preference. It is participation in the worship of a surrounding culture. The author (or group) of the Holiness Code is concerned with the boundaries of the holy people. All of the proscriptions and prescriptions of the code are concerned to keep the boundaries intact.

▲ Purity issues can also be used as a way of demeaning outsiders as unclean. New ethnic groups settling in a neighborhood are often accused of eating unclean food. Koreans or Chinese are often said to eat dog meat. Whether or not this is true, the implication is always that ‘they’ are less clean than ‘us.’

▲ Whenever a culture feels itself threatened, the lines of purity are drawn bolder and tighter. The Lebanese culture in Providence, RI, felt under threat of being subsumed into mainstream culture, and so could not countenance the young woman dating an American boy. The Holiness Code is probably Post-Exilic and reflects the conditions and concerns of the small and threatened remnant that returned to Jerusalem. The boundaries will be made quite clear and harsh.

Ezra-Nehemiah and the story of the remnant.

▲ Although Ezra does not take up the question of male-with-male intercourse, the book does give the story of remnant returning to Jerusalem from the perspective of the official, inside point of view. Whereas Israel and Judah, when they conquered a people, put the whole people to the sword, men, women, children and even animals, other nations took a different approach. When Assyria conquered the northern kingdom and Babylon conquered Judah, each of the conquering powers undertook great resettlements. The nobility of the conquered people were deported and resettled in to regions of the conquerors, and minor people of other conquered nations were settled with the minor people who stayed behind. What was being attempted was the removal people from the land where the cult resided. By churning up the lands, the peoples and their cults, the conquerors sought to break down any ethnic identity, and replace it with loyalty to the conquering King. Because the cult of Yahweh was not tied to the fertility of a certain piece of land, the religion of the Jews survived the Exile. But it survived better in Babylon than in Judah: with the introduction of foreign peoples into Judah, the fertility cults were also introduced.¹⁴

▲ The policy of Persia was different.¹⁵ Persia allowed the continuing practice of local cults in their cities. Ezra was allowed to take a group of Judeans from Babylon back to Jerusalem. On returning, the returnees found that those who had stayed behind had taken up the practices of the peoples resettled into Judea. Ezra and the leaders of the people undertake an effort to distinguish again the holy people from the peoples around them. This is the background against which the Holiness Code in the Book of Leviticus is written. I suspect that the Holiness Code or

¹⁴For a description of the policies of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires and their purposes, as well as the survival of Judaism in Exile, see Joseph Campbell, *Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, pp. 213-

¹⁵See again Joseph Campbell, *Masks*, pp. 215-

something like it is the book from which Ezra read before the assembly when the wall and Temple had been completed (Nehemiah, chapter 8).

☉ An important piece of this effort to distinguish the holy people from surrounding cultures is found in Ezra, chapter 9. "When these matters had been concluded, the leaders approached me with this report: 'Neither the Israelite laymen nor the priests nor the levites have kept themselves aloof from the peoples of the land and their abominations (their gods) [Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites]; for they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and thus they have desecrated the **holy** race with the peoples of the land" (vv. 1-2, emphasis added).

☉ Ezra and the leaders reach an agreement: the men, which means the men who had remained behind in Judah, will "put away" the foreign women they had married and their children (10:3). Think of the horror of this. As foreigners and divorced, these women will have no status. At best they can hope their fathers' houses will take them back in (though they will be unmarriageable, and without the return of the dowry, it is unlikely that their fathers would take them in) and at worst, they will be forced to become prostitutes. Here in our own scripture is an example of wholesale ethnic cleansing; justified on the basis that these are foreign women, not our own.

▲ Ezra/Nehemiah shows the tightening of boundaries and their inscription onto the bodies of women when a society is under threat. The small remnant returning to Judah was precariously situated. To maintain identity, they became concerned with removing outside influences (dirt), and did this by divorcing foreign women. This is not a particularly happy episode in the history of the scriptures.

Ruth

▲ Neither does the Book of Ruth address homosexuality directly, but I believe it is important to look at the author's perspective on purity, foreign women and fertility cults alongside the perspectives of Leviticus and Ezra/Nehemiah. I believe Ruth was written near the time of the return from Exile, and perhaps even in response to Ezra's policy concerning foreign wives.

☉ Naomi and Elimilech and their two sons go down from Bethlehem (loaded geography) to Moab (also loaded geography -- recognize it from Ezra?) because of famine in the land. I believe the similarity to Jacob/Israel's sojourn in and Exodus from Egypt is intentional. While in Moab, the two boys marry Moabite women. Elimilech and both sons die. When Naomi hears the famine is over and Yahweh has restored favor to the land, she decides to return to Bethlehem. Her daughters-in-law come with her as far as the border between the lands. Both aver that they want to return with her, but Naomi begs them not to come. She has no more sons in her womb, even if she did, would they wait for them to grow up to marry? The practice in view here is levirate marriage, wherein a brother takes his dead brother's widow as wife to raise up progeny for him to inherit his property. At Naomi's plea, Orpah turns back, but Ruth swears one of the most moving oaths in literature and goes on with her. Boaz, Naomi's kinsman, treats the two widows well, not reaping his field to the edge, allowing Ruth to glean, just as Leviticus enjoins. When Naomi sees the good treatment Ruth receives from Boaz, she encourages Ruth to go out to

the threshing floor at harvest time when Boaz will be sleeping there. Ruth goes out to the threshing floor, uncovers Boaz's feet, and Boaz throws his cloak over her (both euphemisms for sex; feet is a metaphor for genitals, and cloak is also a metaphor for care). In other words, they have sex on the threshing floor. This is one of the rituals of the fertility cults. Boaz sends Ruth home with six measures of barley in her apron. Boaz goes to the gate the next day and finds a nearer relative than Boaz to act as redeemer for Ruth (levirate marriage). He declines because he would not be able to keep Elimilech's field in the bargain. Boaz marries Ruth, who gives birth to Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of David.

▲ The Book of Ruth presents the story of a Moabite woman, who has sex with Boaz in a pagan fertility ritual (sex on the threshing floor -- grain-sex link), and becomes the great grandmother of David, the greatest Israelite there ever was. This is a completely different take on the abominations of the nations. The ethics in the Book of Ruth are based on human commitment and loyalty, not on purity. Commitment and loyalty are at stake in the divorce of the foreign women promulgated by Ezra. Both the books of Ruth and Ezra are in our canon. This forces on us the question of how we want to do our ethics. We can choose an ethic based on purity, like Leviticus and Ezra (sending foreign women into prostitution) or an ethic like Boaz' in the Book of Ruth, based on human loyalty and compassion.

David and Jonathan

▲ Much has been written about the friendship between David and Jonathan, but I believe that one must come to the inescapable conclusion that they were lovers. When David and Jonathan are scheming to discover whether Saul hates David, they contrive that David should miss a new moon feast (a fertility rite). At the feast "Saul was extremely angry with Jonathan and said to him: 'Son of a rebellious woman, do I not know that, to your own shame and to the disclosure of your mother's shame, you are the companion of Jesse's son?'" (1 Samuel 20:30). The reference to shame and the disclosure of the mother's shame clearly indicates that Saul is angry at their sexual relationship. Here is David, the future king of Israel, involved with a male lover. Not that we should want to take David as the paragon of virtue, given his encounter with Bathsheba. However, the author of 1 Samuel passes over the affair with little comment. David receives no remonstrance for his affair with Jonathan as he does for the rape of Bathsheba.

Christian scriptures.

▲ The Christian Scripture contains even fewer references to anything that can be termed homosexuality than does Hebrew Scripture. There are two passages in Paul's letters that are often cited in the current debate, and one in Timothy which seems to depend on one of the Pauline passages.

Romans.

▲ The first passage we encounter is in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. In order to understand Paul's purpose, we need to read the passage in its whole context. In chapters 1-4, Paul is making his argument for a community mixed of Jews and Gentiles. The Jews in many early christian communities saw the need that the Gentiles should live by the same code of purity

by which they lived. In introducing himself to the community at Rome, Paul needs to make his argument for including both Jew and Greek without imposing Jewish purity on Gentile Christians. In Romans 1-4, he uses the device of speaking first to one half of his audience, then to the other. Beginning at 1:18, he speaks in a conspiratorial tone to the Jews in his audience. His theme is "We all know how dirty those Greeks are."

☉ Chapter 1, verses 18-32 concern the punishment of idolaters. Paul has in sight Greek culture and mid-eastern fertility cults -- the idols of Baal and Asherah, Dionysus, etc., where sex was part of the ritual. As punishment for worshipping idols, God gives them over to "dishonoring" passions and desires: "Therefore God has handed them over to impurity through the lusts of their hearts for the mutual degradation of their bodies. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped the creature rather than the creator" (1:24). Women desired "intimacies" (or "usefulnesses" -- the Greek supports both meanings) against their "character" (the word *fuvsis* [*physis*] is usually translated 'nature' but means nature as the essential character of something; character is a much more accurate translation in this context). Men abandoned their characteristic intimacies with women and burned with desire, man with man working shame and receiving the inevitable payback for their error among themselves. They are filled with every form of wickedness, evil, greed, and malice, full of envy, murder, rivalry, treachery and spite. Gossips, scandal mongers, insolent, haughty, boastful, ingenious in their wickedness, and rebellious toward their parents (vv. 27 - 31). This is a behind-the-hand, we-all-know address to one half of his audience, the Judeans. We all know how horrible those Greeks are. But notice that the sex, if that's what it is, is called dishonoring, and linked with greed, malice, murder and the like. I suggest Paul is talking about temple prostitution, **exploitative** sex. And the sex is the **punishment** for the sin of worshiping the wrong god, for worshiping the creature instead of the creator. The degradation of exploitative sex is punishment for the worship of the fertility cults.

☉ Then, in chapter 2, Paul, still addressing the Judeans in his audience, accuses them of the same thing. The Greeks, who must have been squirming up to now, begin to see rhetorical plan of the letter. Judeans also engage in gossip, greed, malice, envy and the like. The Judeans are the harder of the two halves of his audience to convince, because it is they who are insisting on purity regulations. Now, by showing them how far short they are of God's ideal, Paul is able to take up his real point -- justification, that is, membership into this new community, comes through faith (Christ's faithfulness), not through the law of purity. "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, though testified to by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through [the] faith [of] Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus" (3:21-24).

▲ Paul's argument in the letter to the Romans concerns God's creation of a new human identity (human being) not based on ethnicity, purity, or any other humanly defined status, but based on death and resurrection with Jesus -- Jews and Gentiles alike. Because each, Jew and Gentile alike, has been restored to dignity by God in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the ethic of Paul's communities will be based, not on purity, but in maintaining the justification and dignity of every member of community. Much of Paul's attention is turned toward food, because food was one of the most important ways of expressing purity. Eating food sacrificed to idols renders

unclean those who are concerned with purity. Speaking of food, Paul says, "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself" (14:14). But a person should refrain from eating meat sacrificed to idols if it harms a brother's conscience. What harms a brother should not be done. Paul's ethic is based on mutual dignity in the Body of Christ.

I Corinthians

▲ Paul wrote this letter to a community known intimately by him, a community he founded. He has no need to argue for the community's existence as mixed of Jew and Gentile, as he does in the letter to the Romans. Instead, he is writing to a community in a cosmopolitan commerce center. All of the various cults and practices found throughout the Roman Empire find their way to Corinth. People in Paul's community are trying a little of this, a little of that. Paul's task in 1 Corinthians is to find a way to frame an ethic that makes sense in light of his dismissal of ethics based on purity (which dismissal was required to find a way for both Jews and Greeks to be in one community). He seeks to base his ethic on a new identity received in community. A person bases ethical decisions on maintaining the dignity of the Body.

☉ In chapter 6, Paul takes up the issue of believers (that is, members of the community) filing lawsuits before unbelievers. The issue is harm to the Body, rivalry, partisanship (see chapter 1). "How can any one of you with a case against another dare to bring it to the unjust for judgment instead of to the holy ones" (v. 1). "Can it be that there is not one among you wise enough to settle a case between brothers? But rather brother goes to court against brother, and that before unbelievers. Now indeed, it is, in any case, a failure on your part that you have lawsuits against one another [in the first place]. Why not rather put up with injustice? Why not rather let yourselves be cheated? Instead, you inflict injustice and cheat, and that against brothers. Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor malakoi; (*malakoi*) nor ajrsenokoi'tai (*arsenokoitai*) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the Kingdom of God" (vv. 9-10).

☉ The two words left in Greek above receive various interpretations in the translations: boy prostitutes, catamites, sodomites, perverts, homosexuals -- one can find all of these in the various translations. What do they mean in Greek that they should receive such widely differing meanings? Malakov" (*malakos*) means "soft." It is used of garments. In Matthew 11:8 and Luke 7:25, Jesus asked people what they went out to see in the desert when they went to see John the Baptist, wondering whether they went to see a man in soft (malakov") clothes. Men in soft clothes are found in palaces. The word never means anything other than soft. Ajrsenokoi'vth" (*arsenokoites*) is a portmanteau word; a[rshn (*arsén*) means man in the sense of virtuous, strong male or husband. Koivth (*koité*) means couch, in particular a couch on which one sleeps, and also the marriage couch. Arsenokoi'th" could mean something like "couch men." It could mean men on the marriage couch as well. The only way to be sure of what the word means is to find it used in another context which makes the meaning clear. The trouble is that Paul seems to have invented the word. It is not used anywhere else in Greek literature except here and in Timothy, which is a use that seems to depend on Paul. We can't really know what Paul meant by the word. With the two words, malakov" and ajrsenokoi'th" together, could we try "flabby couch

potatoes"? The surrounding list of offenses would support several interpretations. Certainly fornicators, idolaters and adulterers suggest sexual offense (remember, idolatry in connection with fertility cults suggests sex with the 'holy' men and women). But thieves, the greedy and drunkards suggest wealth and ostentation as the offense: softly dressed men, lying on couches to feast would fit in this list. Paul's list of vices doesn't really give us any help in translating these two terms. Whatever they denote, along with all the other vices listed, we have to imagine circumstances in which they might lead one brother to take another to court.

☉ Then Paul moves on to vv. 12-20: Paul quotes a slogan of the Corinthians to them and then takes it to task. "Everything is lawful to me," write the Corinthians. What about prostitution? Prostitution joins the body of the believer to a prostitute, and by extension, joins the Body of believers (Christ) to the prostitute. Prostitution is exploitative sex, which degrades the woman involved, as we have seen from Leviticus. Prostitution engages the Body of Christ in exploitative, damaging activity.

☉ In Chapter 7, Paul gives advice concerning sex. Sex is not a private matter, but a matter of concern to the whole community. Husband and wife owe each other conjugal sex. The unmarried should remain so, and the married should not separate, even those married to an unbeliever, because sex can be a mode of sanctification for the unbeliever, making the unbeliever clean! (v. 14).

▲ Paul bases his ethic on a new anthropology; the human being is defined by membership in Christ, not by race, nor by wisdom (an individual's attempt to live in harmony with the Logos of the universe) nor virtue or excellence (ajjrethv, *areté*). Being defined by membership in the Body means death to fleshly ways of definition (purity, pleasure, beauty, etc.) So, Paul's bottom line is, do nothing that harms the Body. Most male-with-male sex in Paul's day was a matter of power rather than love -- teacher to student, or prostitution. The height of Paul's community ethic and anthropology is I Corinthians 13, mutual love and respect. Purity, cleanness, no longer matters -- Gentiles were unclean in mind of Jews, and the other riffraff of Paul's communities were unclean in the eyes of all, but Christ had justified them all.

Gospels; oblique references.

▲ There are no direct references to anything that can be construed as homosexuality anywhere in the gospels. There are however, references aplenty to purity, and Jesus' refusal to acknowledge its categories. It would be useful to look at how purity functions in the gospels.

▲ All of Jesus' healing miracles concern unclean persons -- lepers, lame, blind, deaf, mute, the woman with the flow of blood, the Syro-phoenecian woman's daughter and the dead. The dead are unclean and the unclean are partially dead, that is, excluded from the community. Jesus touches them, eats with them and feeds them in the desert (after crossing the water). All of Jesus' purifying miracles occur between a miraculous sea crossing and a feeding in the desert. Jesus is being portrayed as Moses, leading a group of persons across the dangerous social boundary of purity, and forming them into a new people at a miraculous meal in the desert. Like Moses, Jesus is forming a community of people restored from uncleanness by eating with them. It is the table fellowship that renders them clean again (and renders Jesus unclean). Imagine being

excluded from table fellowship for twelve years (in the case of the woman with the flow of blood) or for life (in the case of lepers) and then being invited to table with a teacher. The danger and miracle would be very real. In Jesus' preaching, this is exactly what the Realm of God is.

▲ Paul's concern is identical: mixed table fellowship. Most of Paul's literature is taken up with the difficult reality of finding ways for the two groups, Jews and Greeks, to eat together. In Galatians, Paul excoriates Peter for backing up from mutual table fellowship in Antioch when certain men arrive from Jerusalem. I suspect the episode of Peter walking on the water and losing his nerve in Matthew's Gospel reflects this same episode at Antioch -- Peter never quite made the transition to a mixed community, never quite stepped out of the Jewish-Christian boat. The ethic that replaces purity ethic, both in Paul and in the gospels, concerns not taking away the dignity that belongs to every human by labeling them unclean. Compare with our baptismal vow to respect the dignity of every human being (BCP. 305).¹⁶

Summing up.

As far as I can tell, every reference to homosexuality in the Bible is incidental, not part of the author's main point or argument. Instead, the reference serves to illustrate a point. The New Testament moves resolutely from a purity based ethic (what's disgusting is wrong), to a property based ethic (not taking away what belongs to another, in this case dignity). No longer can we accuse someone of eating dog and thereby dismiss them as unclean. Mark has Jesus say very clearly that it is not what one eats that makes them unclean -- it's not about orifices, about community boundaries. The only boundary we can recognize is dying and rising with Christ as members of Christ's Body, i.e., Baptism, a boundary anyone can cross, if we take the example of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels.

The Canon of Scripture contains at least two perspectives: Purity and Compassion. As we struggle with how to respond to the presence of gay and lesbian Christians in our congregations, we have to choose how to do our ethics. Do we want to circle the wagons and close the boundaries, or have a great feast with all sharing the gifts of any who will come? We can enforce strict boundaries like Ezra, or rejoice in the loyalty of a Ruth, an outsider, a Moabite woman, and receive the gifts she offers. Like Peter, we can draw back from mixed fellowship or we can step out over the waters of Baptism into a new understanding of what makes us human. The Canon of scripture records both options. The choice of how to use that Canon is ours.

¹⁶For a thorough and helpful analysis of the difference between purity ethics and property ethics in the New Testament, see L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: sexual ethics in the New Testament and their implications for today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,