

In this talk I will first address the questions of how we should understand Scripture, and what kind of authority it has for us, and only then will I discuss the topic of the blessing of same-sex unions as a case study in Scripture's interpretation.

In every ordination service in our Church, the new priest swears that "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament...[are] the Word of God." But what does this really mean? On what matters most, God speaks clearly to us through the Scriptures. There God tell us who He is. Scripture goes on to tell us that because of what has happened in Jesus Christ, God freely forgives us and restores us to fellowship with Himself. So the first lesson of Scripture's

interpretation is to put the first things first, which means putting the good news first.

The Church is a community including people of every race, tribe, type, attraction, and experience. Christians all share an identity as people who have heard this word of forgiveness and grace. Their baptismal identity is “son or daughter of God”, and that identity trumps every other secondary kind of identity we might have, be it Irish or Canadian or middle class or NDP or old or straight or gay. The Bible as God’s Word has authority because through its’ hearing this community is called into being. To be sure, the Bible also has hard things to say: we the broken are not as God intended us. In our own ways we all resist what we do not want to hear. The Church is the community of the prior grace of God which gives us all the courage to hear God’s words of tough love. It’s like the old joke: “I can’t join that

Church, it's full of hypocrites", to which comes back the answer "don't worry, there's room for one more." We all resist things in the Bible, and at least we should admit to ourselves when we are doing so. But the news is good: our resistance and brokenness are precisely what Christ forgives.

The tradition of the Church gives us sound advice about understanding the Bible. If we come across a hard verse, compare it with everything else the Bible says on the subject. When passages seem to clash, read the less clear verses in light of the more clear. When a passage is unclear, make use of reason and tradition to help clarify it (this is what is meant by the three-legged stool of Scripture, reason, and tradition). Make sure that your interpretation of a verse does not flat-out contradict a clear statement of Scripture elsewhere. If someone seems to be latching on to one or two verses in what is called proof-texting, bring those

verses into relationship with the great themes of the whole story: creation, fall, redemption. Have a healthy wariness of our tendency to read in what we wish for. Bear in mind that all the Scriptures are canon, are official, all have a claim on us, lest we pick and choose the parts that suit us. Finally, pay attention to what the words actually say, for they are a gift from outside you, not malleable to our wishes.

What the words actually mean is what the tradition calls “the plain sense” or “the literal sense”. This is not to be confused with “literalism” or “fundamentalism”, which refer to particular theories about how we got the bible and how to read its historical stories. The vital thing is this: we need to pay attention to what the actual words say, for through them God speaks, first to forgive, and also to challenge. On these things the Bible has the power to make itself plain; it is not a puzzle requiring a Ph.D. to decipher.

My generation came up with the bumper sticker “question authority”, and that’s fine, because the Bible can stand up to questions. Its authority is not some heavy fist. It has the same authority as the law of gravity- it tells us how things really are. We can decide it will not have authority over us, but as with gravity this decision doesn’t change reality. And the news of reality is ultimately good: we forgiven sinners have a new identity that trumps all else: child of God.

We can now turn to the case-study before us this morning. In keeping with what we have said already, we begin by putting the first and clearest things first. The most important passage on this subject is Romans 1. The message of St. Paul Epistle to the Romans is that God means to have mercy on all through Jesus Christ. That is where the argument is headed. To that end, he shows how all, Jew

and Greek alike, need that mercy. For this purpose Paul tells how all of us humans have reversed the places of creature and Creator in our hearts. The reference to homosexual behavior in Romans 1 is for him a clear example of this, for it also involves a reversal of the object of affection from what was intended by God. But homosexual behavior is only an example of something true of us all, namely our tendency to turn things away from what God intended. The intention of Romans 1 is not somehow to single this one issue out for special condemnation. There are lots of ways in which all of our hearts are disordered: pride, gossip, greed, lack of charity, lust, premarital relations, and on and on.

This interpretation of Romans 1 is consistent with all other references to the subject in the Bible. It appeals to the major themes of Scripture. It puts grace at the center. It

listens, however hard it may be, to what the words clearly say.

If sound interpretation puts the emphasis, not on what we are against, but what we are for, then our attention must turn quickly from Romans 1 to what the Bible has to say positively about God's intention in creation for human sexuality. Again God's intention is not repressive or judgmental, but gracious. In this regard consider Mark 10:4 ff. Jesus is asked a typical rabbinical question about when divorce is permitted. It is the kind of question we all understand- tell me what I can get away with. But Jesus drives the issue back to what the human being is for, which is to say, back to God's good intention in creation. Listen to Jesus' words: "from the foundations of creation, male and female God created them." Many in our time argue that marriage is only a construct of human history, which is to

say, humans made it up and we are now free to change it at will. But Jesus' own words "from the foundation of creation" means that a Christian can't believe that we just make it all up as we go along; creation has a structure "deep down things", and this includes the complementarity of male and female. And the yet better news comes in Ephesians 5. Paul too traces marriage back to its roots in Genesis 1 as part of God's creation, and then he gives the marriage of man and woman a deeper and distinctly Christian meaning in the order of redemption: he says of marriage "this is a great mystery. I am speaking of Christ and the Church." Note how Paul knits together the meaning of male and female in creation and redemption. This enables us holistically to hold together procreation and mutual joy. The God of incarnation and resurrection is a God who



accomplishes His new work through the renewal and repair of creation in its order and intention, and not by its erasure.

There is of course a debate about what passages like Romans 1 mean, as you will ably hear in a few moments from Sylvia. Having emphasized what the Bible says positively on the subject of sex, let me turn briefly to describe how the key passages on homosexuality are being read in a new way, and why I myself remain unconvinced. First, some will argue that the passage rejecting homosexual behavior in the book of Leviticus, sitting as it does near the rejection of eating shellfish, are outmoded, since we no longer follow the ritual observances of the Old Testament. But the fact is that other laws in that section of Leviticus, such as the rejections of witchcraft and incest, are still in force. Furthermore, the criticism of homosexual behavior in Romans 1 is obviously in the New Testament. Second, some

will suggest that the Romans passage is referring to something different, namely abusive ancient relations between men and boys, and so is irrelevant to today's consensual, adult gay relations. But this won't work, since the passage also refers to lesbians, among whom we find no such evidence of abuse. Thirdly, some suggest that we have changed our mind on other issues found in the bible, such as slavery, women's ordination, or divorce. But this will not work either, since in some of these proposed analogies there exists already a tension within the Biblical evidence (in contrast to the Bible's unanimously negative view of homosexual behavior). On divorce, we are not asked to bless the divorces themselves, which we are being asked to do in the case of same sex relations.

Fourthly, some argue that we are now in the age of the Spirit, when law has been left behind. But this also will not

work, since even in the time of grace the New Testament has moral exhortations and expectations galore. As for the Spirit, it is indeed among us, but we still have to discern where it is and what it is saying, and to do this we need the Scriptures as guide. A church untethered from Scripture as a norm will be “led by the Spirit” wherever the latest wind of culture or feeling may lead it.

The key passage here is often Acts 15, where the early Church did indeed, by the leading of the Spirit, say something new, namely that Gentiles could be admitted to the people of God without observing kosher rules. Why can't we do the same thing with homosexual behavior? But this argument won't work on several grounds. The admission of the Gentiles was already foreseen in the Old Testament, as is not the case here. The newly admitted Gentile Christians were told in Acts 15:29 specifically to abstain from

porneia, illicit sex, that included homosexuality. Finally, Peter did reread the Old Testament in a radically new way, but unlike Peter, we are not apostles. We as Christians believe that the witness of the Old and New Testament to the risen Lord Christ is the final revelation of God. In other words, after Old and New Testaments there will be no third. This is what makes us different from Bahai, Muslims, or Mormons. If one were to say that as Peter reread the Old Testament, so we will reread both the Old and New, that person would be implying today just such a third testament to a new revelation. To say the Bible has authority includes saying that this cannot be so.

Enough said about the issue itself. I want to turn finally to the ways in which the Bible finally has authority to guide our common life pastorally. First things first: let me reiterate that the Church must be open to all, its great sacrament of

inclusivity being baptism. Within the Church there must be pastoral patience, sensitivity, and subtlety toward many different sorts of struggles that parishioners experience. But today's dialogue is about something different and more specific- whether within that Body we have a warrant to bless same sex unions.

Secondly the disagreement over same-sex unions is really only what therapists call "the presenting problem." As I have already indicated, we must interpret the Bible soundly with the help of reason and tradition. Still, the Bible can only assume its' proper authority among Christians who read it so as to have their imaginations shaped by it. This is surely the longer-term project before us.

Thirdly, I want to say a word about how, in light of the witness of Scripture, we ought to regard one another. †

Corinthians 13 tells us that the greatest gift is agape, caritas,

love. So we ought to think charitably of the motives of our counterparts. Traditionals should understand advocates of the new teaching to be genuinely motivated by compassion.

Liberals for their part may wonder why their counterparts make so big a deal over this blessing issue. Here is how liberals can think charitably toward traditionals. Realize that traditionals would happily acquiesce if this were only a pastoral matter effecting few people. Unfortunately traditionals believe more is at stake. Imagine you want to make a modification to your car. A friend objects, saying that the changes could sever the wire to the steering wheel or the cable to the brakes. You may disagree, but you cannot fault your friend's motives. Maybe the advice will give you pause. Traditionals believe that taking the Bible's

plain sense seriously, and hearing it in light of Scriptures'

great themes, are just such a cable and wire.

