

Plenty Good Room?

TEXTS: Romans 1: 18-32; Acts 10 and 11:1-18

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Romans 1: 18-32

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

26 For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them.

Acts 10

10 In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ²He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' ⁴He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' ⁷When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

9 About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ¹⁴But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' ¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

17 Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' ²¹So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' ²²They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing

man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.’²³ So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.²⁴ The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.²⁵ On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him.²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, ‘Stand up; I am only a mortal.’²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled;²⁸ and he said to them, ‘You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.’²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?’

30 Cornelius replied, ‘Four days ago at this very hour, at three o’clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me.’³¹ He said, “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.”³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.”³³ Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.’

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality,’³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said,⁴⁷ ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Acts 11:1-18

11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God.² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him,³ saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying,⁵ ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me.⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air.⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’⁸ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were.¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house.¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter;’¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’

William Sloan Coffin Jr. says:

"For Christians the problem is NOT how to reconcile homosexuality with Scripture passages that condemn it, but how to reconcile the rejection of homosexuals with the LOVE OF CHRIST."

YET... for many in the Church the problem HAS been how to reconcile an open door to LGBTQ folks with a passage like Romans 1...
a passage of clear condemnation...
a passage where the lines "DO NOT TREAD here" seem clear.

Coffin puts his finger on the major controversy concerning a full welcome of LGBTQ folks in the Church:

Is the Bible an unchanging rule book?

Or is the Bible a guide for what it means to love like Jesus loves?

These are important questions as we look for a scriptural basis for welcoming.

How do we interpret the Word?

And what are the questions and rational that we bring to the interpretative task?

I began this sermon preparation wanting to know how to deal with a passage like Romans 1...a passage where "DO NOT TREAD HERE" and condemnation seem clear. IN looking at this passage, like any text, we need to ask questions like:

What is the context?

What was going on in Rome & the ancient world?

Why might Paul have written this?

And in exploring these questions, we might learn about the excesses of the Roman Imperial rulers and about Gaius Caligula, in particular.

Here was a former Roman Emperor whose enormous greed, huge arrogance tortuous murders and uncontrolled lust, were well known And there is a striking similarity between Paul's language and the lifestyle of this Roman emperor who lived in perpetual incest and held large banquets, parading his sexual escapades, where his sisters would be lying beneath him and his wife lying over him. In addition, he was well known for engaging in homosexual exploitation and abuse.

Finally, a military officer (whom he had sexually assaulted) joined a conspiracy to murder him,

which they did four years into his reign.

Nero, who was Emperor at the time of Paul's writing was known as another "Caligula" in every respect.

When Paul writes..."men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own person the penalty for their error," one wonders if he was thinking

about the abuses of this emperor. And when he writes about women exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural, one wonders if he was picturing the public orgies of Gaius Caligula's sisters lying underneath him.

We know that when a national leader models uncontrolled lust and sexual promiscuity, it casts a shadow over society, wreaks havoc and is confusing.

Gaius Caligula's lude sexual behavior, coupled with a practice in 1st Century Rome (and other places in the ancient world) in which older men of status would regularly take pubescent boys for sexual pleasure and use them as sex slaves, well, there are good reasons someone wanting to instruct Christians about the WAY of JESUS would write exactly what Paul does to the believers in Rome.

When HARM is being done, we are called not only to name abusive behavior and clearly advocate for the Way of Love, Justice, & Peace.

And if we continue reading the list of SINS at the end of Romans 1, Paul continues describing these sexual predators as:

"those who not only do NOT acknowledge God, but also are filled with every kind of injustice, malice, envy, murder, rivalry, treachery, slander, arrogance (and more)... those with no conscience,"

"And THESE," Paul says, "are deserving of death."

Did Paul understand all homosexual activity to be unnatural and evil? From all evidence the answer is "YES"...that was Paul's understanding.

Yet...it is also clear that Paul had no concept of what we know today as a sexual orientation that is not "hetero."

"NATURAL" sexual activity was only that which might lead to procreation and populate the earth. And the term "homosexual" did not even come into being before the 19th Century. And so in Paul's day there was no way of even beginning to IMAGINE people whose NATURAL orientation might be gay or lesbian, or how same-sex oriented folks could be committed to the WAY of Jesus and choose either singleness or life-long covenants with those who share their orientation.

Today we are faced with something NOT envisioned or addressed by Paul, not in Romans 1 or anywhere in the biblical texts: committed relationships of love and fidelity between same sex couples.

Have our LGBTQ brothers and sisters been forced to pay the price for a church that has lost its voice in addressing the current context effectively?

Much DAMAGE has been done to people who have been shamed & shunned because of their sexual orientation, and who've been told by the FAITHFUL that they must never act on this sacred part of who they are. IF you have listened to these folks, then you have heard stories of anguish, depression, anger, and suicidal despair.

But don't get me wrong.

I applaud Paul for writing what he does to the Church in Rome.

Sexual abuse by anyone (by hetero or homo sexual people) is an abomination to God.

And the eroticism Paul is addressing attacks the monstrous ego of the Roman Imperial House, and the prostitution, pedophilia and promiscuity prevalent in Rome. And it is written from the perspective that everyone is inherently heterosexual and anything "OTHER" is about deviance and uncontrolled lusts and passions.

In Romans 1 Paul is describing those who are POWER OVER.

He's describing DOMINATION.

Walter Wink says; "the Kingdom of God is God's DOMINATION FREE ORDER!"

Biblical scholar Derek Flood says that the key question in biblical interpretation is: When it is applied to our lives, does it bring life or death, flourishing or harm? The primary role of Scripture is to lead us to love like Jesus loves.

So if we use Flood's criteria for interpretation or Wink's definition of the Kingdom, here we are in Romans 1, with NO clear connection between people who live with a same sex attraction and enter into relationships of love and fidelity that are life-giving ... and the kind of destructive abuse and promiscuity Paul calls death-producing.

SO back to WM Sloan Coffin who says...

"For Christians the problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scripture passages, but how to reconcile the rejection of homosexuals with the love of Christ."

The love of Christ is equal-regard.

The Spirit of Jesus never stops stretching us, urging us to pray, and calling us to discern together what loving like Jesus looks like here and here and here.

So let's look for a bit at the story in Acts 10 and 11...

It's a story about a wider hospitality that surpasses all expectations...and how tightly closed doors were once opened to people like us...

And it all begins where Pentecost begins, with seeking God in prayer.
 And it involves most unlikely people...a MOST UNLIKELY
 a Roman soldier and his family and friends.
 A man who was "*generous with his resources,
 seeking God's way and praying constantly.*"
 In his silent time with God...Cornelius receives a visitor...
 who tells him to *send men to Joppa
 and ask for one who is named Simon Peter,*
 which he does.

Meanwhile, Peter is also in deep prayer.

He has retreated to the quietest place he can find in the
 midst of the bustling street crowd over the noon hour...
 a rooftop where he can be alone with God And pray...
not the kind of prayer that pulls God to MY way of seeing,
 but the kind of prayer that seeks *the heart of God...*
 The kind of prayer where God is welcomed into all
 our questions, dilemmas and anxieties...
 the kind of prayer that can *disarm* & make us receptive to what God might be
 saying in all the confusion of the culture.

Peter is praying when this VISION of a giant
 cloth drops from the sky...
 A visual with animals that
 have been forbidden foods for the JEWS.
 A vision that says...
 maybe the Holy Spirit is more imaginative than you think.

The poet John Bell writes:
 "*Unpredictable birds of love are here to nest in your hearts and fertilize your
 imaginations and reveal the hidden truths of God's Will*" DO you see them?
 They are FLYING all around us!"
 Maybe the Kingdom of God is more SPACIOUS
 than we know..
 For Peter this is about the "untouchables"
 (literally in the original language these foods were the "ABOMINATIONS"
 (Here are "the abominations"...rise and eat!)

BUT Peter objects...
*By no means... will I profane what is holy to my people,
 open the door to impurity, disobey our scriptures.
 By no means will I cross that boundary!*

"By no means"...

we hear it all the time in our polarized society and in our polarized denomination and in our congress.

By no means will I reach out across the aisle...
to those who do not share my values.

The issues facing the church today are not about the *inclusion of Gentiles...*

*(Thank God we're over that one,
or none of us would be here!)*

It's not even so much about women in ministry or about slaves respecting their masters or about divorced people marrying again.

All those prior closed doors have been re-examined in light of the liberating love of Jesus.

Today the question is about LGBTQ inclusion

and who all can be fully welcomed and valued at God's table and into God's ministry and whose marriages can be blessed.

And our call is to be a people of prayer who seek the Spirit who is always saying, "LOOK! I want to keep on astonishing you with how high and deep and how long and wide my LOVE REALLY IS.

BUT no one said breaking down dividing walls
would be easy.

And it's not easy for Peter who PROTESTS a hospitality that goes beyond what he has thus far imagined.

But the Voice in his prayer persists:

*"What God has made clean, you must not profane.
Rise, Peter, kill and eat!"*

SO NOW PETER REMEBERS JESUS...

taking them in the boat to the OTHER SIDE
breaking bread with those deemed unclean,
offering respect where others assumed disdain.

Peter Remembers Jesus repeatedly confronting the Pharisees who held tightly to the purity code against love.

And Peter remembers his own reception of undeserved grace, and he can't come up with one

example of Jesus crossing his arms and saying:

"BY NO MEANS" when it comes
to offering dignity to those who have been marginalized.

Maybe it's these memory of of Jesus

that finally propel Peter to get up and go to the gate where his vision will become REAL-LIFE HUMAN Beings.
Gentiles are waiting at the gate for Peter to come with them to the other side.

What he finds when he goes to Cornelius' house is nothing like he expects: no foul-mouthed soldiers strategizing their next violent attack. No, here are GENTILES sharing their love for God... and hungry for the more of Jesus that Peter brings. Peter's stereo-types are blown out of the water. Here are Gentiles wanting to live Good News, obviously bearing the marks and the fruits of the Spirit.

Maybe it's here that Peter remembers Jesus saying,
"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, that Spirit will guide you into all truth, for the Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you..." "I will be baptizing with the Holy Spirit!"

It's obvious to Peter (and to the witnesses he has brought along) that the Spirit of God has already done the baptizing.
The Spirit is alive in these people who had always been regarded as unclean and unacceptable.
Because of this EXPERIENCE,
Peter decides to break with both the Law of Moses and with centuries of tradition and offer baptism to those whom he had always assumed were outside the wall.
But now the gate has opened and GOD has entered in.

If we wonder for a bit, we COULD ask (and our congregation's proposed welcoming statement invites us to ask):
Have well meaning Christians risked profaning what God has made clean by keeping the door closed to commitments of love and marriage that gays and lesbians wish to make?
Do we not thank God for loving relationships and for the desire to bear witness to that love through faith-filled covenants?
Have we not witnessed the fruits of the Spirit alive in our LGBTQ sisters and brothers?

When news of Peter's encounter in the home of a Gentile reaches the church in Jerusalem, Peter is summoned to come and give account.
*How could you have compromised our traditions and forfeited obedience to our scriptures?
Have you not sold our birthright for a mess of pottage?*

How could you have baptized and blessed Gentiles, as if they were the same as us?

So Peter just tells the story of his EXPERIENCE...

"The Spirit of Jesus told me that:

*"God does not make a distinction
between THEM and US!"*

And I have witnessed that the SAME Spirit of Jesus alive in us
is just as evident in them!

so... *"Who am I to hinder God?"*

When the Messianic Jews in Jerusalem
hear this testimony...

Their protests are silenced.

WOW! WOE... *There is plenty more good room*
in God's kingdom...

MORE than we could have ever guessed!

*Peter's call and ours is the same...to keep on praying and listening
and keep on surrendering to the creative action of the Spirit's love and grace
alive in our hearts, alive in one another, and alive in our life together.*

May Jesus' Spirit keep descending on us at Berkey and lead us on.