

South Bay Community Church
Sermon Reflections
Courageous Conversations – Love Comes First
23 & 24 July 2022
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Scripture Texts: Luke 19:1-7; Mark 2:13-17

Sermon Preamble

The title for this message in the Courageous Conversations Sermon Series is, “Love Comes First.” The Courageous Conversations Sermon Series will continue over the next year. God calls us to love people, including LGBTQ+; love does not mean agreement, but it does mean acceptance. God wants us to feel empathy, compassion, grace, and mercy. God directs us to open our heart to love with abandon like Jesus. We may not agree with one’s choices before God, but God’s grace applies to us all. Broken relationships cause hurt and withdrawal from the people of God where there should be acceptance, belonging, and community; this often leads to a turning away from the faith. The Big C Church (worldwide body of Christ) is at a crossroads, and to many it is imploding and splitting over the issue of human sexuality. Let us look to Jesus, as the Living Word, in action. How did Jesus respond to those regarded as sinners? The grace and truth in love trumps all.

Onlookers taking issue with Jesus in personal relationship with sinners

We are looking to Jesus as the living Word in two short accounts from the scriptures.

Scripture Account 1: “Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus! He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way. When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. ‘Zacchaeus’ he said. ‘Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your house today.’ Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. ‘He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,’ they grumbled.” (Luke 19:1-7).

Scripture Account 2: “Then Jesus went out to the lakeshore again and taught the crowds that were coming to him. As he walked along, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at his tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me and be my disciple,’ Jesus said to him. So Levi got up and followed him. Later, Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. (There were many people of this kind among Jesus’ followers.). But when the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him eating with tax collectors and other sinners, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with such scum?’ (Mark 2:13-17).

Both of these stories ended with onlookers taking issue with the company Jesus was hanging out with. In the first scripture story, Zacchaeus had great excitement and joy because Jesus was coming to his home. But the crowd grumbled, displeased because Jesus was going to the home a tax collector. Tax collectors were despised in Jesus’ day because they were often crooked. They typically were Jews who worked for Rome to collect taxes from their own people, but they were known for charging a little more to keep some for themselves. They were considered traitors of their own, and not a servant or follower of God. The second scripture story has a similar theme. This time it is religious leaders, the church folk, who take issue with the company Jesus is with. Not only is Jesus spending time with tax collectors, but also with other disreputable sinners. The description of disreputable is in the eyes of the religious church folk; they were not disreputable to Jesus. But still, to the religious folk, these people were unholy, unclean and unwelcome to be in the presence of the so called “righteous.”

In biblical times and now, love comes first

The conventional practice in biblical times was for sinners to be shunned and kept outside the fellowship of believers. The expectation was for them to repent, make restitutions, and sacrifices. Only then, would they be welcomed to be part of the spiritual community. In other words, they would need

to get on the right side of God first; only then would they be accepted. For the religious folks of that day, it was scandalous for Jesus to be hanging out with them, and for them to be hanging out with Jesus. The unspoken comments were: How could Jesus be with those kind of people? How can Jesus just accept them like that? It is like Jesus is condoning what they do and who they are.

That was over 2,000 years ago. Sadly, in so many instances, it feels like the big C Church is still missing the point that Love Comes First, as modeled so faithfully by Jesus time and time again. Grace, mercy, and truth are a bundled package, and they are wrapped in love. Love is what Jesus embodied everywhere he went and in everything he did. Jesus love and compassion always led the way and always came first. These biblical principles bring us to our courageous conversation topic for this message related to Human Sexuality.

Hurt and pain from the Christian Church on matters of human sexuality

Historically, Christians have been known to treat the LGBT+ community with very little empathy, concern, or love. In that lack of love, the wake of hurt, shame, and pain is long and wide. That hurt and pain arises from silence when someone took the risk to share same sex attraction to being shunned, judged, and even asked to leave in some churches. The byproduct from such encounters too often is pain, abandonment, and rejection.

In some spaces, the church continues to wound deeply. A Pastor in Texas made headlines just last month for preaching a sermon in which he said, “Gays should be convicted in a lawful trial; they should be sentenced with death; they should be lined up against the wall and shot in the back of the head. That is what God teaches. That is what the Bible says. If you don’t like it, then you don’t like God’s Word.” The truth is that application is nowhere in the Bible. He got that from Leviticus 20:13 that spoke about homosexuality being an abomination to God, and in that culture, the penalty was death; but that is not what God is saying to us today. Reading that can make us angry and make us want to cry.

Our culture in a sexual revolution regarding same-sex marriage

The big C Church of God is at a huge crossroads right now. Our culture is in a sexual revolution that is on a faster trajectory than we may even realize. Hear the results of a Pew Research Center poll. In 2004, 60% of Americans opposed same-sex marriages, and only 31% of Americans supported same-sex marriages. Just 15 years later, the sentiments in the United States had completely reversed. The survey results in 2019 were that 61% supported same-sex marriage, and 31% opposed it. The shift has been steadily towards support of same-sex marriages in religious groups as well. Among the American adults grouped by religious affiliation, support is highest among the Unaffiliated with a solid majority of Unaffiliated supporting same-sex marriage, followed by White Mainline Protestants (like Presbyterians and Lutherans), followed by Catholics, followed by Black Protestants, followed by White Evangelical Protestants. For all groupings of adults by religion, support for same sex marriage is higher than in 2004. Times are changing; times are different.

The shift has also been steadily gaining toward support among American adults grouped by generations. Among Millennials (born from 1981 – 1996), support is highest, with a solid majority supporting same-sex marriage, followed by Gen Xers (1965-1980), followed by Baby Boomers (1946-1964), followed by the Oldest Generation (1928-1945) least in favor of same-sex marriages. For all groupings of adults by generation, support for same sex marriage is higher than in 2004. Whatever generation you are in, the trajectory is moving upward. This is our world now.

In our culture, many nuances of sexual identity in understanding and expressing identity

Same-sex marriage is just one data point around the topic of human sexuality. Like variety in a big forest, this is a big issue with nuances now more than gay and lesbian. These nuances include bisexual, queer, questioning, asexual, and pansexual within the topic of sexuality. Some may feel that the nuances are unnecessary, but they tell us something about our culture.

The nuances reveal at least two things about the times we live. First, for many, sexuality is the primary way of understanding one’s self-identity. Second, in our culture, we place very high value on

understanding and expressing our sexual identity. We must understand that in today's culture, the conversation is not just about sexual intimacy alone. It is about justice and the right to be who you are. It is about one's very identity. In today's culture, to reject or take issue with the sexual behavior is perceived as rejecting the person. In our culture today, our identity is connected with our sexuality. This is the world in which we live and the world that God has placed each of us in at this moment in time. It is a culture in direct conflict with the traditional Christian views of marriage and relationships.

Affirming and non-affirming Christian denominations and churches

Many see human sexuality as the top issue dividing the big C Church today. We saw in the Pew Research Data that Christians are not on the same page. We see this trajectory, and we do not know how to respond.

Churches and entire denominations have split over this issue of human sexuality. The language that has emerged as churches wrestle with the issues is "Same-sex relationship affirming or same sex relationship non-affirming." You will hear more of these terms as churches need to be able to articulate and communicate their stance. Simply stated, a same-sex affirming relationship viewpoint believes and affirms that committed, monogamous same-sex relationships are not sinful before God; this is the same-sex relationship affirming viewpoint by believers. In contrast, there is the same-sex relationship non-affirming viewpoint that God does not affirm same sex relationship; in this view sexual intimacy is a precious gift that God desires within a heterosexual marital relationship. Among believers, there are these conflicting views.

If you internet search affirming and non-affirming Christian denominations and churches, you will find quite a list on both sides including mainline denominations like Presbyterians and Lutherans that are affirming. The United Methodist Church is going through a split as a Methodist denomination has been formed that is affirming. Currently, our ECC denomination is non-affirming. We believe in God's original design for marriage, but this has become a big issue in our denomination as well. There are many believers who see it differently.

What does the Bible say?

For non-affirming believers that believe in traditional marriage and accept the Bible as God's authoritative Word, the scriptural texts seem clear. First, they consider what God established with the first couple in Genesis, before the world became broken, as the model of God's intention and desire for human intimacy. The verses seem clear, like Leviticus 18:22: "Do not practice homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman. It is a detestable sin." "If a man lies with a male, as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them" (Leviticus 20:13). Some people say that a non-affirming view is supported by Genesis 19:5 speaking of Sodom and Gomorrah, but the Bible does not clearly state whether their sin was homosexuality. In the New Testament, "Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Similar biblical principles are in Romans 1:26-27 and 1st Timothy 1:9-10. From a non-affirming viewpoint, homosexuality is a sin and contrary to God's plan; this view supports a heterosexual view of marriage.

Same-sex affirming believers do not believe same sex marriage is a sin. For example, some regard the Leviticus passages as under the Old Testament Covenant Law and no longer relevant today under the New Covenant of grace. They often interpret the New Testament passages as Paul's personal sexual ethic. They look at the psychological pain of the LGBTQ+ community and hold that pain is inconsistent with God's plan for people. They also declare the truth that there are other sins that God does not affirm, but we do not highlight, such as pride, failure to seek justice, and failure to care for the least of people. Sexual intimacy is just one issue. Highlighting these two viewpoints is not meant to confuse, but to share that there are people who deeply love God and see this issue differently. These are not easy matters.

God's Word, representing the love character of God and Christ

The encouragement and challenge for us is that as believers, we continue to wrestle with God's Word, seek God's Wisdom, and pray. We must discern what we know, what we believe, and why. If we don't know what we believe and why, then we are susceptible to be adrift with the culture. You cannot watch TV without seeing how our culture has changed. This is our world. Our challenge is to be responsible and have integrity before God to know what we believe and why. We need to be grounded in God's Word in studying it. If we are not sure, then go to God's Word. Let God lead you and guide you. We cannot just go with the changing times.

The principles of God's Word are timeless. We must continue to seek God and understand the times. We must consider how God would have us respond and share the heart of God with others, including our friends, our children, and our grandchildren. How would God have us represent God and God's love around these issues? How does God want us to live according to God's Word, both the Written Word and Living Word in Jesus Christ?

As we ponder the issues for the world, the issues for us are even bigger. Unlike the way so many in the world are thinking these days, our identity is much more than our sexuality. As a believer and follower of Christ, we find our identity in Christ. We are seeking to look and to love like Jesus.

The Challenge when sexuality issues become personal

Often, for a straight person who upholds the traditional view of marriage, these issues become challenging when they become personal. Sometimes, we don't really recognize these issues or we don't really engage with these issues until they become personal to us. We learn to love more like Jesus when the matter becomes personal. The matter becomes personal when our son, daughter, or loved one has come out. The matter becomes personal when we get to know members of the LGBTQ+ community as dear friends in our lives. Our empathy, care, and love take on a new dimension. We don't always know what to do when we face divergent perspectives. We don't want to appear that we are condoning something we do not agree with or believe. We do not know what to do.

Jesus models for us friendship and fellowship with even the despised and marginalized

Let us close as we look at Jesus one more time, specifically what Jesus modeled for us in verse 5: "When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. 'Zacchaeus!' he said. Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today." Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. Zacchaeus was not shunned and invisible to Jesus. Jesus made it personal. When Jesus said he must be a guest in the home of Zacchaeus today, Jesus was initiating a relationship with him. As Pastor Tracy declared a few Sundays ago, when you went in someone's home and broke bread, that was a sign of friendship and fellowship with this person who is despised, who nobody wants to deal with, who is marginalized, and it did not help that he was a tax collector. As we continue to listen for what God is saying to us as we respond to the culture we are in. The culture is not going backwards. It is going to be a tough battle, because this is a new day in our land. As the people of God, we want to create safe, welcoming, and loving spaces for all of God's children. Our invitation is that we love like Jesus, because he first loved us out of his grace and mercy towards us. How can we do anything less?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Sermon Preamble

-These are highlights from the survey of over 1,700 LGBTQ+ respondents across the U.S published in 2016. 80% were raised in a faith community as children. 54% leave their religious community after age 18. 76% of LGBTQ+ people are open to returning to their religious community and its practices. 80% regularly pray regardless of religious identification or affiliation. The majority left because they did not feel safe or were kicked out. Only a small minority left because of the church's theological stance. Six factors were cited that would influence the decision to return to the church: feeling loved 12%, given time 9%, faith community's change in theology 8%, no attempts to change their orientation 6%, authenticity 5%, support of family and friends 4%. In light of these statistics what opportunities exist for the Church to do much better in embracing the LGBTQ+ community for healing and to demonstrate the love of Christ?

Onlookers taking issue with Jesus in personal relationship with sinners

-Describe a situation when you have noticed either onlookers and/or the "righteous religious" folk refuse to have fellowship with someone because they have known sins or they disagree regarding a belief of ours? Why is such refusal of fellowship not following the model of Jesus?

In biblical times and now, love comes first

-In following the example of Jesus for salvation, why does love in establishing a relationship with others come first before sharing the gospel without judging?

Hurt and pain from the Christian Church on matters of human sexuality

-How has the church been known historically and even today to inflict abandonment, pain, and rejection on those of the LGBT+ community?

-Consider how the culture and Law was very different for the Israelites than for us today. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Jesus: "I will not judge those who hear me but don't obey me, for I have come to save the world and not to judge it" (John 14:47). What is the biblical principle from these Leviticus passages for application to today?

Our culture in a sexual revolution regarding same-sex marriage

-How can we better represent God and Jesus Christ to the majority of the religiously unaffiliated and the majority of millennials who support same-sex marriages, even if we do not agree? How do we apply this to other religious groupings and generational groupings all of whom are showing increasing support of same-sex marriages?

In our culture, many nuances of sexual identity in understanding and expressing identity

-When we consider many nuances of sexual identity among the LGBTQ+ community in our culture, how does sexuality relate to one's identity as a person?

Affirming and non-affirming Christian denominations and churches; what does the Bible say?

-What biblical scriptures do non-affirming believers use to support the heterosexual view of marriage?
-How do affirming believers that do not believe same sex marriage is a sin respond?

God's Word, representing the love character of God and Christ

-How would God want us to represent God and God's love so that we are not susceptible to be adrift with the changing times?

-How important is it to see our identity as a follower of Christ, much more than any sexual identity?

The Challenge when sexuality issues become personal

-Why do we recognize and engage more with issues of divergent sexuality when they become personal?

Jesus models for us friendship and fellowship with even the despised and marginalized

-What did you hear? What came to your mind? What is stirring? What does being a safe church for all people mean to you? What does it mean to you that we might "see the other as wrong" but still see them "as human"? Why is embracing with love critical before we talk about Jesus? What is stirring most as you ponder what God may be saying to us today?