

THE GOOD BOOK

PART IV: INVINCIBLE IGNORANCE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 11, 2018

Lectionary Reading: John 13: 34-35.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Snails with Snorkels Will

Clean Your Tank, but Look Out for Hermaphrodites

In the same way that we are now in the middle of the season of Lent, so also I am just past the middle of this series of sermons. First, we looked at an overview of Bible 101 in “Part I: Enlightening the Eyes” on the first Sunday of Lent. Next, we examined the Use and Abuse of the Bible in “Part II: A Hard Conversation.” Last Sunday was the Bible and Women in “Part III: Pink Smoke.” Today is the Bible and Homosexuality in “Part IV: Invincible Ignorance.” Next Sunday is “Part V: The Bible and Money.” I’m having a blast with this series; it’s been a lot of fun, even though the subjects have been rather serious.

Let me start off with “Part IV: Invincible Ignorance,” otherwise known as the Bible and Homosexuality. Back in the days when I was entering adolescence, junior high go-

ing toward high school, I had thirteen fish tanks that I took care of in a mini business. I raised all sorts of different kinds of fish and then sold them to local pet stores. They wouldn’t give me any money, but they would give me lots of fish food for my enterprise.

One of the ways to keep fish tanks clean is with snails that eat the algae. There are lots of different versions of aquatic snails, but my favorite is one that’s called an apple snail. It’s a bit of a misnomer because they’re not that big. They are more the size of a walnut, and they come in either dark brown or albino. They are air-breathers, even though they live their lives underwater. From time to time, they make it toward the surface with their long two-inch snorkel. Hovering below the surface of the water, they send up their snorkel, breathe air for a while, and then tuck it in and go back down for more algae.

The apple snails are very prolific. They lay lots of eggs with hard little shells like an egg shell, but they’re more the size of a mustard seed. They lay 50 to 70 of them very often,

so pretty soon the tank is crawling with all these little guys running around.

I subscribed to *Aquarium Magazine*, and sure enough there's an article about these snails, with advice for people who want to breed them. The article said just buy two. Don't worry about whether they're two boys or two girls. Being preadolescent, I perked up at this. It turns out as I read further that, if you have two males, one of them switches. I don't know how they make that decision, but if you have two females, one of them will switch. The article used a new word for me — hermaphrodites, meaning that they have the ability to be both, and they somehow make that decision. Well, I was intrigued by that. I didn't know that could happen in some species.

High-school biology rolls around, and we learn about rabbits. They too have the ability to solve that problem. If you have just female rabbits, they can fertilize an egg with a blood cell. It's called parthenogenesis, another new word for my growing vocabulary. If you have a bunch of girl rabbits and no males, all is not lost. The next thing you know, you still have baby rabbits coming around. Later on in seminary, I read in the Greek text that a parthenos shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. Parthenos is a virgin in Greek, and so parthenogenesis is when you are able to have babies and still be a virgin.

Open and Affirming Is

a High and Holy Goal; Look Out for Halfheartedness

Once again, as the hormones began to flow, I was intrigued by these different options that are available in the animal kingdom. So now, a sermon on the Bible and Homosexuality.

In 2009, our congregation, First Congregational Church, became “Open and Affirming.” Almost nine years ago, we adopted this pledge unanimously, and it's framed and out there in the hallway. Almost nobody looks at it anymore, so I'm going to remind you of what we agreed upon:

“First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
An Open and Affirming Congregation
“Every human being, without exception, is made in the image and likeness of God.

“Jesus taught that: We are all children of God, the essence of the Law and Prophets lies in love, we should not Judge, and we should practice the Golden Rule.

“Jesus prayed “that they all may be one.”

“Jesus demonstrated these principles and calls us to follow in that way which leads to life, love, peace, and justice.

“Therefore, in response to this call, informed by our understanding of the will of God, we, the members of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, of Binghamton, New York, declare ourselves to be Open and Affirming of all persons, regardless of any distinction that has been or could be made between persons.

“Historically such distinctions include race or cultural identity and background, educational and socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender and its expression, marital status, age, and mental and physical health and ability.

“This radical inclusivity is a high and holy goal, but humanity has a long history of prejudice, inhumanity, intolerance, and injustice.

“Therefore, confessing our times of halfheartedness, shortcomings, and outright failings, we pledge ourselves to make real and plain the truth that ‘No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.’

“Soli Deo Gloria

Adopted unanimously by the congregation
on this seventh day of June in the year of our
Lord two thousand nine”

The Last Prejudice Is

Homophobia; the Big Three Are Rooted in the Bible

However, the prejudice against homosexuality is pervasive. It has been called “The Last Prejudice,” which, of course, nobody believes, but it is the third of “The Big Three,” racism, sexism, and homophobia. Like racism and sexism, homophobia has its roots in the Bible. It’s easy to find, and there are five specific places. Before your eyes blink over, I’m not going to deal with all five. However, I do want to list them so you know what they are:

- **Genesis 1 and 2.** The creation stories, where you have the creation of Adam and Eve.
- **Genesis 19: 1-9.** The story of Lot and his wife and his daughters, and the two towns of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- **Leviticus 18 and 20:** This one is called “The Holiness Code.” The way to live life for the Hebrews as they emerged out of the Exodus into their own nation. It’s the one that had a lot of weird rules, like don’t wear clothing that’s of mixed fabric.
- **Romans 1: 26-27:** This is Paul’s view about homosexuality.
- **I Corinthians 6 and I Timothy 1:** These are Paul’s lists of vices.

Things that are bad; things that you should not do.

In all seriousness, let me say three things definitively:

1. The first is this: For all five of those, without exception, the plain reading of the English text makes it perfectly clear that homosexuality is bad. It is sinful, and should not be tolerated.
2. Next, for all five, without exception, the nuanced and scholarly reading, taking into account context, history, and original languages. Reading either negates that view or ends up saying almost nothing.
3. Finally for all five, without exception, there is a logical or an interpretive cause at issue.

I won't look at all five, but let me look at two of them. I'm going to choose the easiest one and the hardest one.

The easiest one is Genesis 1 and 2. "So God created [and then in the Hebrew it's hah adam, the man in some versions of the Bible, the human being in other versions of the Bible, but it's the adam.] So God created hah adam in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The argument goes like this: It's pretty lame. It's the argument from silence. It's the argument from omission or absence. The argument is basically Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. Pretty persuasive, and that's about the extent of it.

So let's dispense with that one and go to the hard one, which is Romans 1: 26-27, Paul's view of homosexuality.

"For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and 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."

My Question to You Is

Philosophical; What Is Natural and What Is Not

That verse alone has been responsible for untold amounts of pain. There are several issues in that passage, but I'm going to hone in on one of them. First, I'd like to ask a question, and in a sense it's a bit of a philosophical question. That is: "What is natural, and what is unnatural?" We have a tendency to think that if it's something *I* do, it must be natural, but if *you* do something different, that's unnatural. And it's a bit of a philosophical problem. Actually, it turns out it goes back to Plato. There's this concept 600 years before Paul was ever writing, a concept called *kata phusin* — according to nature.

What Plato was trying to articulate on this subject was that you have the Gods — so

you've got Zeus and Apollo and Hera and Athena, you've got that bunch up there — and you've got earth. The time frame is long before there was a notion that heaven is good and earth is bad, or that spirit is good and flesh is bad. Instead, Plato was saying that the way to being a good person, to be a proper person, good in the philosophic sense of it, is to be linked to both. To be naturally inclined toward the spiritual, in touch with the Gods, and as well, naturally inclined toward the earth with your physicality, your materiality. The good, complete, whole person had a spiritual nature and an earthly nature, and was in harmony between those areas of endeavor. Our physicality didn't get in the way of our spirituality and vice versa.

Kata Phusin: According to

Nature; The Law of Life Is to Do What Nature Demands

Did Paul know about that? Of course, we don't know, but I would think he did. He was an extremely educated man. If you look it up, "natural" is defined as existing in or caused by nature, not made or caused by humankind. But here's what Paul could not have known: Principally, there are just under 500 species of mammals, between 450 and 500 species, virtually all of whom that have been studied closely, exhibit regular homosexual behavior in their sex lives, including all of the hominids.

And there are over a thousand other species: among them insects, mollusks, birds, rep-

tiles, more than a thousand other species studied that also have this wide range of behavior in their sexuality. This occurs to the point that every variation on the theme you can imagine, and some I'll bet you can't imagine, are found in nature, well beyond snails and rabbits.

Penguins and albatrosses clock in somewhere between 10 and 30 percent homosexual on a regular basis. Being the kind of birds they are, they typically raise one chick per year. And so you have two guys or you have two girls, and they get hold of an egg. They will sometimes go and fertilize a female and then take the egg and bring it back and two guys will raise that egg, either the albatrosses or the penguins.

Regular ordinary domestic sheep come in at 8 percent homosexual. If you take out all the girl sheep, the percentage goes up, but as long as there are female sheep around, the percentage of homosexuals never goes below 8 percent. Killer whales and dolphins regularly exhibit homosexuality. Guppies pretty much do nothing other than eat and have sex. They come in at being quite homosexual. Dragonflies clock in at 17 percent homosexual.

Lions, the king of beasts, sometimes share their thrones. Swans are closest to human behavior that I've seen, where you have two guy swans, and they mate for life. However, if they want to raise a family, one of them impregnates a female swan, and after she has her eggs, basically, the two males just chase her off, and they raise the brood. To tell the truth, haven't we all known some people like that?

These statistics come from two books: In 1999, Bruce Bagemihl published a book called *Biological Exuberance*, a great title. He's the one who came up with the notion of between 450 and 500 species, and then also the thousand additional species. In 2002, there was *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice for All Creation*. This is a book that we actually had in our bathroom for a number of years. It was written by Olivia Judson. She was an undergraduate at Stanford and then a graduate in Evolutionary Biology at Oxford. She wrote the book in the format of *Dr. Ruth, Sex Advice for All of Creation*, and I highly recommend that one. It expands our thinking.

Elevate the Discussion:

It Is not True Out There; Let's Make It True Here

Once again, that question: Is homosexuality unnatural?

People are going to believe what they want to believe, and that, of course, is for each individual to decide. What I'm trying to do is to elevate the discussion out of the locker room. Remember the core of our pledge:

“Historically such distinctions include race or cultural identity and background, educational and socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender and its expression, marital status, age, and mental and physical health and ability.

“This radical inclusivity is a high and holy goal, but humanity has a long history of prejudice, inhumanity, intolerance, and injustice.

“Therefore, confessing our times of halfheartedness, shortcomings, and outright failings, we pledge ourselves to make real and plain the truth that ‘No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.’”

Human beings have a strong tendency to make distinctions between ourselves, and the list bears witness to that, a very strong tendency. Therefore, it is a high and holy goal to recognize every single person just simply as being a child of God, a temple of the spirit made in the image and likeness of God, and not to see all the other distinctions. It is a *high and holy goal*.

It is not true out there.

Let us make it true in here!

Amen.