I feel like a four-pound bird trying to lay a five-pound egg. I want to thank David for letting me use his nest.

Let me start with a story. Vincent J. Donovan, a Catholic missionary to the Masai people of Kenya and Tanzania, wrote a wonderful book about his missionary experience called Christianity Rediscovered. In it he offers us the following report of his attempts to introduce the notion of universal brotherhood in Christ:

Suppose you belonged to a tribe like the Masai, for whom there was no abstract notion of brotherhood, but only a concrete, specific idea of brotherhood, arrived at by initiation and extending only to a restricted group within a clan line – an age-group brotherhood called orporor. It was by no means universal. It was limited to those initiated within a certain time span, generally a seven-year period. This orporor taught them everything they knew of love and loyalty and dedication and responsibility and sacrifice. But it was necessarily limited by that very time, that very space....

...One morning while the community was struggling with this problem, I could not help but notice a man named Keriko in obvious pain. I was certain he was ill. But my Masai catechist helper, Paul, chuckled at my concern.
“Are you worried about old man Keriko? Don’t worry. He is all right. You see, for a Masai there is not much need to think in life. Almost everything he learns, he learns by memory, by rote. It becomes automatic for him, like tying your shoes or buttoning your shirt is for you. He learns about food and clothes and houses and kraals and cattle and grasses and women by memory – even things about God and religion. When he needs an answer to a question all he has to do is reach in to his memory and come up with the correct answer. He can reach adulthood without thinking at all. What you are asking Keriko to do is to take the first thought about the Masai brotherhood of the orporor, and the second thought about the human race and the God of all the tribes and to put those two thoughts together to make a new thought. That is very difficult work. What you are witnessing in Keriko is the pain on the face of a man who is thinking for the first time in his life.”

The point of leading off with that story is to emphasize that what we’re talking about is difficult at all levels – emotional as well as intellectual. Today being 9/11 doesn’t help either! We’re all a little volatile. So treat yourselves and one another gently tonight. If you want to treat me ungently, you sure ain’t gittin’ no virgin. Help yourself if it’s helpful. I’ll hold myself accountable to reply to the substance of what you have to say and will try not to get too reactive to any emotional burden.

I hope too that you’ll find an occasion soon to return to this topic with other people so you can say all the stuff aloud that you may not get a chance to say tonight – or didn’t think of until later. The French have a phrase, “L’esprit de l’escalier,” ‘stair-case wit.’ It’s what
you realize you wish you’d said as you leave a party. Expect that to hit you hard after this session and be gentle with yourselves. Find some setting in which to develop your thoughts further.

WC Fields was visited on his deathbed by a friend who caught him reading the Bible. “Why are you reading that Bible, WC?” he asked. Fields replied, “Looking for loopholes, looking for loopholes!”

Coffee-hour discussion of the confirmation of Gene Robinson and the cluster of issues surrounding that action often assume that those in favor of the Robinson action have been looking for loopholes – or worse, that they have abandoned the authority of the Bible entirely. That makes people wonder if it’s really safe to stay in the Church with these people.

Jean and I once attended a production of Beethoven’s opera Fidelio, one of my favorites. On this occasion the smarty-pants director thought we’d all be edified if they cast the opera not in the 18th century but in the mid-20th in Cuban garb as though Castro or somebody were the jailer. I was so mad I couldn’t enjoy the music. That is the experience right now of many Christians who want us both to obey the Bible and to leave it alone.

Americans have a charming characteristic which plays into our discussions: we despise elitism. Thinking of the Bible, we resist the notion that reading and interpreting the Bible should be difficult. We want a lonely salesman in a Nebraska Marriott to be able to reach into the drawer for the Gideon Bible and download the full glory of the Sacred Trinity without clerical help. Happily, such things happen regularly.
Einstein once said, “Everything should be as simple as possible – but not simpler.” I hope to show you why that is true of Bible study. The help of experts can be welcome.

What I want to do tonight has a specific and restricted aim. I do not seek to change anyone’s mind about these issues. And there are many applicable considerations that a full treatment of this issue ought to touch on that I will not refer to tonight. My limited purpose is to demonstrate that a respectful reading of the Bible allows a good-faith case to be made for the General Convention’s action. Those of us who favor the sacramental equality of our gay fellow-parishioners in committed same-sex families are not ceding the Bible away nor neglecting its authority.

In recent weeks several clergy colleagues, knowing that my parish underwent a convulsion on this topic a decade ago, have been calling with questions about the biblical considerations in all this. That’s what I want to present tonight.

People don’t change their minds in response to presentations like this one. We only change our minds after our hearts change in response to loving someone who is gay. But I hope to engage your minds. The considerations I offer tonight have not yet been persuasively countered by those who oppose the Robinson decision. Some of them have not yet been recognized.

On the topic of biblical authority: Frank Allan once asked me and Barbara Taylor to address the clergy about biblical authority. I panicked and called Walter Brueggemann. I yelled, “Walter, meet me at Manual’s! I gotta talk about the Authority of Scripture.” Walter shot back, “Are you Episcopalians talking about sex again?” “How did you know?” I asked. “Because that’s the only
time you Episcopalians ever worry about biblical authority,” he replied; “I wish you’d worry about it when you talk about economics.”

That authority question is complicated. Every ordained person in the Episcopal Church publicly swears that we believe the “Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God containing all things necessary for salvation.” Most all of us would sign that again tonight without hesitation – certainly I would.

But there are roughly two parties of opinion when it comes to saying what that means. As I understand it, the party which opposes the Robinson decision understands that its status as the Word of God entitles the Bible to what is called a “privileged” reading: that is, the Bible is self-interpreting and not to be ranged alongside other literatures or read through interpretive lenses extrinsic to it. This party is deeply grateful to God for the Bible, finds its “plain sense” clear enough to live and teach by, and holds it in great reverence. Such people would feel that to read the Bible “critically” is impious and supercilious, the way all of us would feel if we caught the acolytes playing Tiddley Winks with the Reserve Sacrament. While this party is distinguished for the astonishingly rich interpretations it derives in preaching and teaching, I think it is vulnerable to confusing its immediate assumptions about what a passage means with the text itself. The “canonical interpretation” in other words creeps into the text and becomes the “official version.”

What’s a “canonical interpretation”? It’s a way of looking at a biblical passage that we’ve got so accustomed to that the interpretation has become indistinguishable in our minds from the text itself. Canonical interpretation of Jesus’ most moving parable in Luke 15 has stuck the title “The Prodigal Son” onto the story – blinding us to the
Father’s centrality in the narrative. Canonical interpretation means, “It’s a lot easier to see what you know than to know what you see.” We are more likely to see what we’re looking for than what we’re looking at.

The other party of Bible interpretation – to which I belong – does not “look for loopholes” as we are often accused of doing. What we rather seek is the intention of the original writers and editors to the extent that careful study can open them to us. We try hard to get past what we think we know already to find out what we’re looking at. This is called “critical” study, not in the sense of disparaging the biblical text but rather in the more restricted sense of exercising discernments.

On my office wall there’s a cartoon of a suspicious bailiff swearing in a supercilious-looking academic type, saying, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth -- and not in some sneaky, relativistic way?” The critical party really does not seek to be sneaky or relativistic. We do believe that it’s respectful of God’s gift to us to go after the writers’ intentions and meanings.

There are some assumptions I want to announce at the beginning. Some will be familiar, others less so, and one or two will be troubling enough to need a lot of coverage.

• I assume that for the great majority of gays and lesbians sexual orientation was settled and fixed long before they were aware of choosing it.
• I assume that though prayer and psychotherapy confer wonderful benefits on those who seek them, neither process results in reorientation. That is, so-called “ex-gays” report that their arousal patterns
and their fantasies remain homoerotic, calling into question what people mean by “ex.”

- I also assume a distinct difference between homosexuality and pederasty.

Each of those assumptions is readily substantiable with information available to all of us. But those are the easy ones. Here come some assumptions that are more strenuous.

Although there exist what anthropologists call “human universals” and Evangelical Christians call “absolutes” some of our best-established notions of human nature in the area of sex are not universal either across the globe or across history.

Although it’s obvious to us that there are two biological sexes, until less than 200 years ago our ancestors knew for sure that there was only one sex – male – and that women were an underdeveloped expression of it.

And if that one didn’t get you, here’s another:

Until quite recently sex was thought of in much the same way that we think of violence: that is, sex was an operation performed upon a weaker person by a stronger person for the purpose or gratifying the stronger and in order to stipulate a power relation. For contemporary examples, get arrested and spend the night in jail.

It followed from that sex-as-violence system of gender-construction that “straightness” and “queerness” were calibrated along entirely different axes than we employ today. Our axes – that we assume everyone everywhere at all times shared with us – are male/female, gay/straight. To have sex with someone of your own sex is queer among us.
In the sex-as-violence gender-construction that obtained until recent centuries, the basic axis was strong/weak, with the male regarded as strong and the female as one specimen of weakness. Class and wealth entered in to the strong/weak spectrum. What was considered queer? Not same-sex coupling per se. It was queer if a person allowed himself to be used sexually by a lesser person, male or female – the same as if he had allowed himself to be insulted or beaten.

Now take a while with that. Nobody gets those understandings on the first pass. You don’t have to believe them tonight. But I’ll try to show you how they operate in biblical interpretation. I’ll alert you to the fact that a growing number of biblical scholars, working in good faith and in the open, find those assumptions necessary for grasping what the biblical writers thought they were talking about when the topic ranged to something sexual.

So to begin: How can people say they favor Gene Robinson’s episcopate in the face of what appear to be clear, uniform, and unambiguous biblical prohibitions of same-sex intimate relations?

There are two matters to investigate. We need to look freshly at the so-called prohibitive passages. We’ll see that the standard canonical interpretation of the few passages that customarily get appealed to in our discussions do not survive close scrutiny.

When we look carefully at Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and 20, Judges 19, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, and 1 Timothy 1, we discover that they do not pertain to Gene Robinson or to any gay or lesbian churchgoer. This is hardly to dispute their truth or integrity; they maintain
both. But it is to say that their truth and integrity are different from what we’d canonically assumed.

Second, there are passages we pass over quite rapidly which leave more room for acceptance of same-sex relationships than our canonical interpretations recognize. I refer specifically to the complicated love between David and Jonathan of which Saul appeared jealous, to Matthew’s account of Jesus’ healing the Centurion’s sick servant, a man likely his catamite, and to the various positive passages favoring human intimacy. I’ll suggest that we need a fresh look at those passages, if only to break up our impression that the Bible is an anti-homosexual monolith. We need to abandon the syllogism that insists, “The Bible is anti-gay; David and Jonathan are in the Bible; therefore the story of David and Jonathan can’t be as gay as it looks.”

Preliminary to our investigation of what the Bible says about sex let’s look once more at the two differences between the ways we view sexuality and the way they viewed it back then, differences so profound they are difficult to credit – until you live with them for a while.

The first difference is that until the mid-19th century, people thought there was only one sex – two expressions of it (male and female) if you will, but only one sex. And that sex was male. Females were defective half-cooked specimens of the male sex. So pervasive was this “truth” that every anatomical rendering of the female reproductive system before, say, 1836 was drawn to resemble a male penis inside out even if the artist was looking right at an exposed uterus. What he believed tempered what he saw and offered us to see. He saw what he was looking for, not what he was looking at. So the assumption of male superiority was more deeply
embedded in the minds of our ancestors than we had previously believed. I need hardly remind you that this sensibility remains deeply rooted in our Tradition.

Second – and more difficult to swallow, unless of course you’ve been in jail – in the ancient world sex was a specimen of violence. That is, sex, like a beating or an insult, was an operation performed by a stronger person onto a weaker person with the object of stipulating a power relationship. Strength and weakness were calibrated not just in physical terms but in socio-economic terms as well. Sex was legitimate and “non queer” as long as it was initiated by a powerful person against one less powerful irrespective of what we today know as the sex of the inferior party. It was neither monstrous nor noteworthy for an upper-class male to assault a male servant or resident alien. It was noteworthy in the extreme – and monstrous – for such a male to permit himself to be used by a female, by a social peer, or by a male of lower status than himself. Social peers did not initiate sex with each other, no more than they would insult or wound each other. Genesis, Leviticus, 1&2 Samuel, and Song of Solomon will not yield their full sense to you until you get aware of that notion of sexuality. Neither will Matthew or Paul.

That means that in the biblical world there was no such thing as “homosexuality.” More startling is the realization that in such a schema of sexual understanding there was no such thing as “heterosexuality” either. In fact, we only had words for either as distinct from the other as of 1869 – and that was in German. The human race divided itself into gender-identities of “strong” and “weak,” not “gay” and “straight.”

I have read widely in the Christian literature opposing the acceptance of homosexuality as a created
given. I have yet to find a reference to these differences in any of it. Robert Gagnon, the man conservatives quote most frequently, mentioned Michel Foucault – the philosopher widely credited with starting us on this investigation -- in two lists that occur in footnotes, but he does not display enough awareness of what Foucault was about to disagree with him. You need to know when you read apparently carefully reasoned opposing theological and biblical opinions these days unless they are clearly aware of the strong/weak active/passive gender system of the ancient and biblical worlds their thinking is not current.

God knows that’s a lot to take in – and none of us gets it all at once. Resistance to that understanding makes sense. But try to keep it in mind, difficult as it may seem, when we examine specific biblical passages.

To the first concern – a summary of the exegetical work done on the verses we think of as anti-gay:

The often-cited passages that appear to prohibit same-sex unions don’t survive close scrutiny as prohibitions of what our gay sisters and brothers have a right to claim. But those passages remain fruitful when we regard what seems their original intent.

In Genesis 1:26ff we’re told:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
With our modern understanding of two sexes, each making its unique biological contribution to our offspring as we love each other, this passage has seemed an affirmation of an arrangement we love and enjoy: marriage. Jungians get very excited about this passage, imagining that it affirms Jung’s notion that every man contains a woman and every woman a man. But the Priestly writer was likely not a Jungian. Back then male and female were not equivalent or symmetrical. Using the words male and female was tantamount to saying strong and weak. In view of the notion they harbored about there being one sex distributed across a spectrum of strength to weakness, the original meaning was more likely that in creating humankind, God created the whole kit and caboodle, across the power spectrum, weak as well as strong.

Now if you want to use this passage as a proof-text that God likes heterosexual marriage, it’s a free country. I do it myself at weddings regularly if they let me preach. But in doing so we take leave of what the writer thought he was talking about.

Furthermore, this passage is a description, not a command. When we make it a demand, restricting intimate relations to a single male and female in order to constitute what we’ve come to understand as the image of God, we slam up against equally authoritative passages: e.g. “You shall make to yourself no graven image....” That is, requiring human relations to mirror this image of God is a variety of idolatry. God’s image does not require our deliberate ritual participation for its maintenance – to assume otherwise is Canaanite sympathetic magic. Given the law against idolatry, it is unlikely that the original writers, readers, and hearers thought of male/female
complementarity as a normative enactment of the divine image.

I cannot forebear to say that I’ll give $20 tonight to any heterosexual who recently addressed his or her partner saying, “Hey, Honey – God needs his image mirrored tonight, whadyasay?”

That’s a shallow reading of Genesis 1 anyway. At the heart of the imago dei passage in Genesis, the great Christological hymn in Philippians 2, and the very Doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the image of God is constituted not in sexual terms but in terms of loving, mutually submitted reciprocity. We trivialize that insight when we restrict it to a particular gender constituency. We show ourselves undiscerning.

The jailhouse bully-rape attempted outside Lot’s house at Sodom in Genesis 19 is not behavior that any Christian, gay or straight, ever approves of. It does not describe the behavior, intentions, or wishes of our gay sisters and brothers in Christ – any more than it reflects yours. The Sodomites in that passage, we now know, would not have thought of themselves as homosexual (or, for that matter, heterosexual), any more than present-day jailhouse rapists do. Traditional Jewish interpretation of that chapter grasped the principle better than we do: the Sodomites were first and foremost inhospitable: they thought it good sport to humiliate foreign guests.

A more chilling parallel story can be found in Judges 19:22ff.

While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, “Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have
intercourse with him.” And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.” But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go.

Notice that the crowd accepted the substitution *faux de mieux*. They did not thrust her back indoors, insisting that they were gay and needed a guy for satisfaction. Raping his concubine was almost equally degrading to the Levite as being raped would have been. And degradation – literally – is what this episode is about.

Sex was about power, not about biological gender in our sense.

The prohibitions found in Leviticus 18:22...

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

....and 20:13...

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.
likewise reflect a period when gender was defined in terms of activity/passivity, strength/weakness. It assigned what we regard as maleness or femaleness according to who penetrated (maleness) and who got penetrated (femaleness). Lesbian sex, because it involved lower status creatures and no penetration, did not compromise the participants’ social/sexual identities – consequently the Torah, and indeed the whole Bible, reports no problem with it.

The prohibition against what we had been seeing as homosexuality actually had no such concept in view. Instead it prohibited an act of social murder – the diminution of status one forced on another when one treated him as an appropriate target for any sort of violence, sexual, vocal, or physical.

In a couple of ambiguous verses in Job 31:30-31, the protagonist seems to insist on his own virtue in not sexually abusing male strangers.

I have not let my mouth sin
by asking for their lives with a curse—
if those of my tent ever said,
‘O that we might be sated with his flesh!’—

Whether or not we suppose that “Job” knew the letter of Leviticus 18 and 20, he was certainly complying with its intention. Again, when sex is like violence, a power maneuver, you have to have that kind of law.

For a man to permit himself to be penetrated was a form of social suicide. These murders, thefts, and suicides defiled the purity of the land by blurring categories. The ignoring of class boundaries constituted a category-confusion and was the abominable element – not the sex of the two parties. (Other instances of category confusions
included sowing two kinds of seed in one field and mixing different fibers on one loom.)

Our current understandings of sex and gender are preferable to the Levitical understanding. We know that gay men and women are just that: men and women. A man who loves a male partner does not become a woman anymore than a woman who loves a woman becomes a man. Today we know that one’s sex is not something another can steal or destroy. We distinguish maleness and femaleness anatomically and chromosomally – and even that is more ambiguous in some instances than we would wish.

Yet the principle remains valid. Do not employ sex to humiliate or demean another person or yourself; that is, never use sex aggressively. We heterosexuals do not exempt ourselves from that warning simply by keeping our sexual dealings “straight.”

William Countryman wrote a difficult and flawed book called *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*. In it, he shows that OT legislation pertaining to sex occurs in two different legal “codes” – a “property code” and a “purity code.” In the NT, they uniformly embraced the property code and often toughened it. Yet the NT never paid positive attention to the purity code in any department of life. And in the OT, the only two pieces of legislation that pertain to what we call homosexual activity fall within the purity code.

Countryman’s book is flawed by a final essay in which he gratuitously stakes out positions that in some cases even those who agree with his analysis do not share. I say gratuitous because those positions do not follow naturally from his previous analysis. Critics have excoriated that concluding chapter – thus dismissing his entire book. But in the literature I have surveyed so far
even those who speak of Countryman with contempt have yet to answer or refute his analysis.

Conventionally we read the term “abomination” as though it referred to an ethical lapse. But examination of OT passages in which the word *toyevah* is used shows that it has to do with what we’d regard as sensibility rather than what we’d regard as ethics or morality. (Keep that in mind when we come to Paul.)

R.D. Laing suggested a thought experiment that gets at this sensibility:

Swallow your saliva.
Not difficult, was it?
Now, imagine a glass of clean water in front of you and imagine taking a swallow.
Not difficult either.
Now imagine that you are spitting saliva into the glass of water.
Now imagine drinking from the glass.
Difficult, isn’t it!
That revulsion is what *toyevah* referred to.

Projecting their own xenophobic purity-based sensibilities onto God, the people of the Second Temple Period required Jewish men to divorce their pagan wives; it took Malachi to shout on God’s behalf, “I hate divorce.” They prohibited “Moabites” from entering the Assembly of Israel – until the Book of Ruth pointed out that they’d just written off King David. The Bible is not univocal on the matter of Purity Code. As Countryman points out, neither Jesus nor Paul had any patience with it.

For current Christians to brandish the Purity Code at homosexuals is deeply, if unintentionally, disrespectful of the Bible itself. And it ignores Paul’s manifold
observations in Romans and Galatians that Christians do not live under Torah.

In the NT, the passage most damning of current homosexuals and their unions appears to be Romans 1:18-32.

**Rom. 1:18** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

**Rom. 1:18** Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπὸ οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἁσβείαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων.

**Rom. 1:19** For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

**Rom. 1:19** διότι τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φανερὸν ἐστὶν ἐν αὐτοῖς· ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανέρωσεν.

**Rom. 1:20** Ever 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;

**Rom. 1:20** τὰ γὰρ ἀκόρατα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοοῦμενα καθορᾶται, ἢ τε ἀδίδους αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θειότης, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογητοὺς.

**Rom. 1:21** for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.

**Rom. 1:21** διότι γνόντες τὸν θεὸν οὐχ ὥσθεν ἔδόξασαν ἢ ηὐχαρίστησαν, ἀλλὰ ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδία.

**Rom. 1:22** Claiming to be wise, they became fools;
Rom. 1:22 φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφοὶ ἐμωράνθησαν

Rom. 1:23 and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Rom. 1:23 καὶ ἠλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθαρτοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ὑμοίωματι εἰκόνος φθαρτοῦ ἄνθρωπος καὶ πετεινῶν καὶ τετραπόδων καὶ ἔρπετῶν.

Rom. 1:24 ¶ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves,

Rom. 1:24 Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἁτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς:

Rom. 1:25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!

Rom. 1:25 οἵτινες μετῆλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλατρεύσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα, ὃς ἐστιν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.

Rom. 1:26 ¶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,

Rom. 1:26 Διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς πάθη ἁτιμίας, αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετῆλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρήσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν.

Rom. 1:27 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.

Rom. 1:27 ὠμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἀρσενεῖς ἀφέντες τὴν φυσικὴν χρήσιν τῆς θηλείας ἔξεκαυθήσαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἄλληλους, ἀρσενεῖς εἰς ἀρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατηργαζόμενοι καὶ τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἢν ἐδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες.

Rom. 1:28 ¶ 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.

Rom. 1:28 Καὶ καθὼς οὐκ ἐδοκίμασαν τὸν θεὸν ἔχειν ἐν ἐπιγνώσει, παρέδωκεν αὐτούς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ἀδόκιμον νοῦν, ποιεῖν τὰ μὴ καθήκοντα.

Rom. 1:29 They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips,

Rom. 1:29 πεπληρωμένους πάση ἄδικια πονηρία πλεονεξία κακία, μεστοὺς φθόνου φόνου ἔριδος δόλου κακοπθέειας, ψιθυριστάς

Rom. 1:30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents,

Rom. 1:30 καταλάλους θεοστυγείς ύβριστὰς ύπερηφάνους ἀλαζόνας, ἐφευρετάς κακῶν, γονεύσιν ἀπειθεῖς.

Rom. 1:31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Rom. 1:31 ἀσυνέτους ἀσυνθέτους ἀστόργους ἀνελεήμονας.

Rom. 1:32 They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Rom. 1:32 οἵτινες τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπιγνόντες ὃτι οἱ τὰ τοιαύτα πράσσοντες ἁξίοι θενάτου εἰσίν, οὐ μόνον αὐτὰ ποιοῦσιν ἄλλα καὶ συνειδοκούσιν τοῖς πράσσουσιν.
Yet a close – that is, respectful – reading shows another picture. Current applications of this passage against our gay sisters and brothers ignore several major considerations: the rhetorical context of the passage (that is, what Paul’s overall goal was in that section of the letter and in the letter itself), the particular sin Paul was analyzing, and the vocabulary – as well as its sources -- he selected for the purpose.

First, the context. The Epistle to the Romans was written from Corinth in advance of Paul’s first visit to a church in which Jewish Christians and gentile Christians were not getting along. Rather than side with one party against the other, Paul used this letter to develop an overarching approach to the Gospel that both challenged and finally embraced both, setting them up for the community life he begins describing in chapter 12.

The passage we’re considering was his opening volley written to get the unsuspecting and approving attention of his Jewish Christian readers. He began with an actual sin – ingratitude to God – that he then shortly surprised them by applying to their party. From that first mention of a sin, he deftly spun a description of behavior Jews associated with Gentiles to their disgust. Modern interpreters have been assuming that disgusting behavior was what we call homosexuality. We’ll see.

But why did Paul start with that? Nothing subsequently in this letter indicates that same-sex couplings were a major concern of his. If you proceed directly to chapter 2, you will discover that Paul had enticed his Jewish Christian readers in a state of moralistic disapproval in order to slam them with a comparable indictment:
Rom. 2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

On the face of it, that is a very strange sequel to a passage we assume condemns homosexuality, is it not? Are we to assume that Paul was turning on his gay-bashing reader and saying, “You guys are as queer as they are!”? That’s unlikely – he did not go on to supply instances of his critical readers’ sexual immorality. That is another evidence that whatever Paul was disapproving in 1:18-32 it was not homosexuality; whatever it was also applied to his critical reader. As I shall suggest, it was likely some similar form of intemperance symptomatic of ingratitude and idolatry.

Paul’s disapproving mention of some as yet unclear sexual symptoms of ingratitude to God leading to idolatry was the first term of a rhetorical bait-and-switch; the second term (the switcheroo) occurred at chapter 2 in the passage I just read you. He got the attention of his Jewish Christian readers by citing something he knew they along with other educated Romans regarded as loathsome in order to confront them in the next chapter with their own lapses. But unlike the lapses in chapter 1 which Paul merely stigmatized as dishonorable or shameful – in their latter case Paul described moral lapses that were palpably unethical. As I shall suggest in a moment, it is by no means clear that what Paul expected them to loath had anything whatever to do with what we know as homosexuality, male or female.

Romans 1 was not legislation. Romans 1:18-32 contained no advice for the Roman Church or any other.
If we use Romans 1 as legislation – which it clearly is not – we fall into the trap Paul set for his critical Jewish Christian readers. If Paul could have known we’d make law of his rhetorical device, he’d have insisted his lawyer be present when we read him.

In Romans 1 Paul mentions male and female sexual behavior of which he expects his reader to disapprove. But read the whole passage and track it back. The behavior was said to occur in the course of pseudo-religious orgies in the service of idols. The idolatrous orgies in turn resulted from the previous sin of ingratitude. He is describing behavior no one in this room, gay or straight is drawn to, expressing a sin (ingratitude) to which gay men and women are not more prone to than the rest of us. I wish we were hearing as many ringing condemnations of ingratitude today as we are condemnations of homosexuality. Once again: what “sin” was Paul ranting about? The sin of ingratitude. And notice that the one word for bad behavior that Paul neglects to use is the word “sin.”

Now pay attention to the vocabulary Paul selected. 1:18-32 is typical in vocabulary and in thrust to extra-Christian Romans discussions of virtue and shame. Paul borrowed that material perhaps word-for-word from secular writers, apparently perhaps Stoics like Seneca or the later Epictetus, material cultured Jews in Rome would have recognized. The vocabulary he used exactly matches the descriptions of lust found in contemporary writings of philosophers and physicians, making it unquestionably clear that Paul had mastered those secular discussions and understood them quite well. As an educated Roman citizen, one who quoted classical Greek poetry to Athenians in Acts, Paul had a technical psychological vocabulary available to him. He lifted language from the
Stoics (and others) for this passage with a clear grasp of its meaning to Romans of his day.

Let’s pause for a moment to take this in. If you read the later writing of the theologian Paul Tillich, you will find terms like ego, super-ego, neurosis, repression, etc. If you restrict your reading simply to other theologians you will miss the fact that Tillich was lodging his discussion in the broader context of an on-going public discourse about Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories. You can understand Tillich without reading Freud. But you cannot fully grasp what Tillich thought he was talking about without learning something about Freud.

If you read the theology of Rudolph Bultmann, you will find much of it clear and self-contained. But you would come closer to Bultmann’s own understanding if you trouble to learn something about Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre whose vocabulary and concepts he built upon.

You should know that the great majority of commentators on Romans 1:18-32 pay no attention to the broader extra-Christian discussion of virtuous living that Paul’s thoughts take part in. Most of them neglect that connection out of simple ignorance. After all, it’s not fair to expect someone who went to such trouble to read the NT should also be expected to know first century Latin and Greek literature. Except for the fact that Paul did know it and took it seriously.

Some pass over the wider Roman discussions on dogmatic grounds. The Bible is God’s self-sufficient Word, self-interpreting, requiring no external knowledge for a correct understanding. Okay, have it your way. Again, it’s a free country. But by refusing available knowledge, such commentators forfeit the privilege of grasping what Paul thought he was talking about.
First, Paul used an interesting word in vs. 26 and 27 – χρήσις – which did not mean ‘intercourse’ or ‘relation’ as it is sometimes translated. There was not a trace of mutuality in the word. It meant usage pure and simple – and was primarily used of food and sex. Whatever pleasure it suggested was enjoyed only by the perpetrator.

Notice that Paul first applied the word to “normal” sex between male and female. That in itself should alert us to the fact that Paul was describing a sexual frame of reference with which he was not in personal sympathy even in its male-to-female expression! Compare that notion of usage with Paul’s astonishing account of marital mutuality in 1 Corinthians 7 and you will readily see that in Romans 1 Paul was momentarily presenting a common contemporary approach to sex one element of which -- χρήσις -- he himself opposed. Paul never elsewhere used that word to describe intimate relations. In effect Romans 1:18ff. was rhetorical, not legislative.

Many of the elements in 1:18-32 are common to Stoic ethical writings of the period. A preoccupation with sex-relations that are “according to nature” crops up again and again. Interestingly those extra-biblical discussions were not concerned at all about the gender – or sometimes the age – of the sexual object. (It would not be descriptive to talk of sex “partners” in those discussions.) Those discussions were intent on sex that was cooled-headed and rational – not over-heated or fervid.

A moment ago I neglected to state that Paul described female homosexual behavior in vs. 26. The neglect was quite deliberate. Did you know that the notion that Paul was describing lesbianism is rather modern? In the time of Paul and for several centuries after, to say a woman practiced sexual usages contrary to expectation meant that
she took the aggressive role in sex with a man, perhaps insisting on the topmost position. Sex was about strength and weakness, remember. If not for the weight of recent habit the burden of proof rests with those who want to find in vs. 26 a treatment at all – let alone a prohibition – of lesbianism.

Interestingly, Paul did not stigmatize male same-sex behavior in that passage as morally reprehensible, as sinful, or as unethical – simply as disgusting to people whose virtues included moderation and self-control. He shared that focus with the Stoic ethicists of the time.

Paul shared several terms with those discussions. These include:

- ἐπιθυμία desire (1:24)
- Παθος passion (1:26)
- ἐκκαιω inflame (1:27)
- ὀρέξις appetite (1:27)
- πλάνη error (1:27)

Those words occur in that very order in other discussions, notably those of Epictetus a later writer who relied on writers and thinkers of Paul’s own day. Paul’s discussion in Romans 1, in other words, needs to be seen as part of a broader years long conversation that most of us have never heard of. In those discussions, so preoccupied with what was natural and unnatural, the emphasis was always on a temperate rather than an impetuous approach to eros. It did not occur to them to question that the desired person might be the same sex. Admittedly there was much objection in Roman discussion to pederasty as there had been previously in Greece – but the objection was never that it should have been girls; rather they objected to upper-class boys being subjected to that humiliation. It cannot be repeated too many times:
homosexuality is a modern construct that did not occur to the ancients to worry about.

Now look at some other words Paul used: futile, senseless, fools, impurity, degrading, shameless, debased. Those are the words Paul used to describe the behavior he excoriated. Those are not ethical or moral categories – Paul was quite careful about that. He was using language to make his readers revolted in a self-approving way – but none of what he described was actionable. He did not employ the language of ethics and morals until vs. 29ff. – a wad of non-specific first century boilerplate not unique to “homosexuals.”

How about his description of male-to-male coupling as “unnatural”? Research into Paul’s likely understanding of what is or is not “natural” does not support our attempts to stigmatize gay sex as “unnatural.” Paul did not possess a theory of “Nature” according to which this behavior is either species- or gender-inappropriate. What he meant by “natural” was what other writers of his day meant by it: it simply meant, “what one expects.” The phrase παρὰ φύσιν used to describe such unions Paul also applied to God’s action in 11:24, engrafting us gentiles onto the Jewish olive tree – as an appreciation! (So if homosexuality is, in Paul’s terms, “unnatural,” so is your salvation! If homosexuals are perverse according to this phrase, so is God.)

So if male-on-male sex was in the case of ungrateful idolaters παρὰ φύσιν, what was unexpected about it? Parallel discussions to Paul’s that used the same critical terms as he used those terms to criticize immoderation, the lack of self-control that ancient literature so relentlessly regretted. Paul says some men gave up ‘natural’ sexual usage with women to burn with lust for each other. What would a reader in Rome in Paul’s day
assume he meant? Those familiar with first century Roman moral philosophy assume Paul was talking about immoderate passion – immoderate not in its object choice but in its intensity. Men were supposed to keep their heads clear even when sexually aroused. To get swept away by passion was shameful and ‘unnatural’ because unexpected. ‘Men’ were to be strong, not weak.

As we have seen, for women to initiate sexual usage ‘apart from nature’ meant simply something unexpected – almost certainly dominant sexual behavior vis à vis some man. We are not told that the women in question took any sexual actions toward each other.

Paul concluded this section with a paragraph of standard moral boilerplate, some of which is sinful in Jewish terms or criminal in Roman terms. Look at the list:

Rom. 1:29-32 They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them....

Those who insist that our gay sisters and brothers in the Church are conspicuously ungrateful to God, foolish, futile, impure, debased, etc. or that they are uniquely prone to the actual sins that Paul just described have simply not bothered to get to know their fellow Christians. That’s lazy on two counts: exegetical and communal.
After entrapping his readers into criticizing pagans who go to orgies, Paul slammed them at the beginning of chapter 2:

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, “We know that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.” Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance.

Snap goes the mousetrap. Their disgust at the immoderation of orgies was the cheese. From this point on, Paul made no further reference to homoerotic behavior in Romans. The motif had served its only purpose.

But what was the “same thing” that Paul charged these critics with performing? Not orgies, certainly, and not “homosexuality”. What most fits the bill is not anything sexual. What fits best is a combination of insufficient gratitude to God combined with intemperate passions in other departments of life – evidently material greed from the sparse examples Paul supplies.

It is time we stopped abusing the Epistle to the Romans – or abusing others with it.

Paul used two words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 which the old RSV translated “homosexual.”
1Cor. 6:9-10 Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

Few fluent readers of Koiné Greek are comfortable with those translations. The first (malakos) means literally soft, over-ripe or squishy. It’s a word you’d use on a black banana. If it refers to male sexual behavior at all – and scholars are by no means sure that it does – the reference was most likely to one who was “soft” on self-control. That translation brings Paul’s discussion into line with almost identically worded contemporary essays. Self-control is not under patent to heterosexuals.

The other term (arsenokoites) occurred only twice in the NT and did not occur outside it, so its meaning is up in the air.

Here is its only other occurrence:

1Tim. 1:9-11 This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Conservatives suggest that Paul coined the term arsenokoites to represent Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Those scholars do not tell us why Paul was suddenly so supportive of the Torah for Christian churches.
Robin Scroggs suggested in *The NT and Homosexuality* that the term might describe a young man who inveigles himself into the erotic affections of an elderly man in order to get included in his will and abscond with his estate. The contemporary satirist Juvenal condemned such practices. I bet nobody in this room has any plans to do that.

Since Paul’s use of the term is the first we have, we have to look to writers after Paul for a definition, not a terribly certain measure of what may have meant. Hippolytus suggested that it refers to a man who sleeps with boys. Contemporary discussions reprehended that activity – but as previously noted for the disgrace it piled on the boy as he approached manhood. Again, that meaning of the word contains no hint of mutuality or love. It was simple exploitation. Your gay fellow parishioners do not behave that way any more than you do.

In the epistles that we confidently assign to Paul himself, there are several boilerplate sin lists, all of which borrow their vocabulary from the Stoics and others. We saw one at the end of Romans 1. Only 1 Corinthians 6:9f has ever been thought to contain any reference to what we call homosexuality. That makes it difficult to conclude that what we know as homosexuality was a preoccupation of Paul’s. If indeed we want to worry about what Paul chose to worry about, we ought to be discussing the sin of *greed* as energetically as we’re discussing sex, since that’s the sin Paul unfailingly lists everywhere.

There is another question that those who wield the Bible against same-sex unions would help the rest of us by answering. Walter Wink has listed all the areas of sexual behavior in the Purity Code upon which the Bible comments. These include prohibitions of incest, rape,
adultery, necrophilia, and bestiality – which we still condemn. They also prohibit sex during menstruation, celibacy, exogamy, naming sexual organs, nudity, masturbation, and birth control. They regard semen and menstrual blood unclean. Wink lists nineteen of them. Notice that we blandly ignore most of them – Wink counts about fourteen we disregard. Why do some of us then privilege the apparent anti-gay passages if not simply on the basis of personal sensibilities? Some candor about hermeneutics would help both sides, I think – and at the moment at least it appears that liberals are more forthcoming on this question than conservatives.

To put the same question another way: the Bible has much more to say prohibiting lending money at interest than about same sex couplings. Ezekiel even calls bankers “toyevah” – abominable. If we paid as much heed to those passage as we do to anti-gay restrictions, our whole economy would collapse. Where is our worry about biblical authority when we discuss economics? This is another evidence that we need hermeneutic candor from the Right before the rest of us cede the Bible to them.

That economic question in fact is answerable from a “liberal” perspective: it’s an instance of the principle in which we have to abandon the letter of a passage if we are to apply its underlying principle in present-day reality. In contrast what we hear from conservatives when they address this matter is a mistranslation of the term “usury” to exaggerate its likely extent.

A woman who wears male garb commits a biblical abomination. Who wrote in your Bible authorizing women to wear slacks?

The Torah prescribes the death penalty for cursing one’s parents. How is that authoritative today? The principle endures – that is, don’t curse your parents – but
what shall we do with the letter? How can the polarities in our Church get together over the hermeneutic principles that govern this instance?

In effect, when we read all those passages, sexual and non-sexual, with an understanding of the writers’ original intention gay Christians agree with them right along with the rest of us.

Finally, in answer to same-sex unions’ opponents’ appeal to the biblical passages I mentioned: The Scriptures nowhere specifically prohibit what we are discussing: the sacramentalizing of same-sex unions. That is more than an argument from silence. It demonstrates than committed same-sex unions were not being imagined by the biblical writers when they described matters that they or their expected readers disfavored. Do keep in mind that under the sex-as-violence sensibility there was neither homo- nor heterosexuality. Do today’s Episcopalians know enough about the history of marriage to know that little in the Bible pertains to marriage as we currently embrace it? If the Bible does not speak helpfully to our present marriages, what sense does it make to insist that the Bible condemns same-sex unions by its silence?

Now let’s move to neutral and positive biblical considerations concerning recognizing same-sex unions as sacramental marriage.

2 Samuel 1:26 I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.
If we saw this passage in any ancient literature other than the Bible we would not hesitate to see it as homoerotic. Most Christians reject that view of this passage not on linguistic grounds but on the grounds of our canonical pictures of David and our aversive sensibilities to homoeroticism. Unhappily for them, it gets even worse. In declaring that Jonathan’s love was superior to that of women, David – ever the politician – announces that even though he had been Jonathan’s social inferior he had nevertheless been the superior partner! If that boast strikes you as unthinkable, examine David’s loyalties in other relationships.

You deserve to know that the only conservative objection to that reading that I’ve so far been able to unearth has been to stress that it’s an untraditional interpretation. More about Tradition later.

The logic is quite circular: the Bible prohibits homosexuality categorically; this passage is in the Bible and it’s about somebody the Bible likes; therefore this passage isn’t homosexual.

This is far from a ringing endorsement of same-sex unions. But it does reflect that the social environment in Israel prior to the Second Temple was not as purity-preoccupied as the Torah recalled.

Now let’s turn to a visibly favorable response of Jesus to a relationship Matthew thinks was homoerotic.

Matt. 8:5-13 When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.”
The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.”

When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.

It’s easy to scoff at the suggestion that in this healing Jesus is uncritically endorsing a relationship he surmised to be homoerotic. In fact a scoff is the most specific reaction I have ever heard anyone from the conservative end of our argument offer this reading. Let me remind you that a scoff is not always a persuasive counterargument. It won’t work forever. And three serious considerations tell in favor of such a reading.

First, such relationships were common in Roman society and not considered “queer” – so long as the two men were not of the same class. That is the case here. If that’s a new thought to you, go back and study the Roman poets and political rhetoric.

Second, Jesus’ reference to foreigners coming into the Kingdom in advance of and to the surprise of the
Kingdom’s proper Jewish heirs appears to be a favorable acknowledgement of the Centurion’s unconventional status in strict Jewish eyes. That punch line is missing from Luke’s blander version. I think that adds force to the argument from Jesus’ silence on the topic of homosexuality. Living as Jesus did not in Jewish Judea but in pagan Galilee he would surely have been aware of pagan Roman tolerance for homoerotic behavior across class lines.

Third, this story differs considerably from Luke’s account in 7:1-10. Luke had called the servant a δοῦλος – the standard Koiné Greek term for servant or slave. Jerome later translated this term into Latin as servus – again a standard neutral term. But Matthew calls the servant a παις, street slang for a servant used as a catamite. And Jerome grasps this well when he translates the term not as servus as in Luke but as puer – a word that had exactly the same sexual overtone in third century Latin.

I think the blanket assertion that the Bible univocally opposes homosexual relations in any form does not survive respectful investigation.

Now I want to move to where my heart is. That is, I think a respectful reading of the Bible encourages us to exercise the Spirit’s Charism of Discernment over the same-sex couples among us. Where those relationships are discerned gracious, we can claim the authority Jesus gave the Church to “bind and release” in Matthew 16:19:

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”
You reckon Jesus meant that?

Recently the Pope said the Catholic Church is not at liberty to discuss or change its mind about women in holy orders because Jesus had selected only males. I wish the Archbishop of Canterbury had suggested that in that case, the Pope return the Keys to the Kingdom that clink unused so loudly at his belt.

The Episcopal Church, in conforming Gene Robinson’s episcopate, has finally taken the sort of risk with that authority for which Jesus entrusted it to us.

What other Bible readings favor such policy?

First, let me remind you that Genesis 2:18 does not say, “It is not good for man to alone.” It is better translated, “It is not good for human beings to be alone.” Do you think that’s true? And if it’s true, is it only true for heterosexuals? We hear it said that “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” May I ask then who you think created Adam and Steve? We are created so as to achieve our highest maturity and fulfillment in intimate community with a life partner. There are exceptions to that norm, e.g. monks and nuns, the celibate, etc. But they no more flout the norm than do lefties flout the norm that most of us are right-handed. And this norm embraces homosexual men and women.

1Cor. 7:8-9 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

Does that only apply to heterosexuals? Much of the Christian objection to what we call the “homosexual life-
style” rests on our sensible objection to promiscuity. But if marriage were something from which we heterosexuals were restricted, what do you imagine our “lifestyle” would look like?

Indeed, this whole marvelous discussion of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 – the most pertinent in the whole Bible - - applies to gay people as gracefully as to straight. Though Paul was not a systematician, we can readily extrapolate four values that Paul thought constitute marriage. They were fidelity, mutuality, truthfulness, and permanence. (Nowhere in the primary or deuteropauline canon do we find child-production as the rationale for marriage – that is a Roman Catholic canard.) Now look at those values. Is any of them unattainable by gay couples?

In Ephesians 5:32 we read:

This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

Why is the mutual submission and trust contained in that high mystery not accessible by gay couples?

The Roman Communion, to its unacknowledged shame, by restricting the purpose of marriage and conjugal relations to child production has reduced marriage and marital sex to the level of the animals, removing the spiritual dimension from consideration. Calvin wittily ridiculed the Roman Church for talking out of both sides of its mouth when it came to marital sex. We might join him and notice that though Rome keeps insisting that marriage is in some sense a means of grace, Rome has never yet canonized anyone who achieved sanctity simply through matrimonial grace. They don’t really believe it. And we won’t believe they believe it until
they put some other marital value ahead of parenthood – as the Lambeth Conference of 1949 did.

You and I have been in the same danger. If we misuse the Bible to insist that marriage is primarily defined by its sexual constituency we inadvertently confess that we think the relational constituency is of secondary importance. The shell is more important to us than the peanut.

Suppose we were to decide that the essence of marriage is relational – as I think the Pauline discussions in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians are moving toward – then we would be hard put to explain why committed same-sex couples do not ever fall within that description. Suppose we said marriage is the intersection of the grace of God and human intention to form a life-long union of two people who seek to live together truthfully, faithfully, mutually submitted, permanently? By what rationale would we exclude any number of gay couples we all know whose lives manifest those graces? To oppose that recognition seems tantamount to a refusal to exercise the charism of spiritual discernment – fearing lest we detect God’s grace in such unions.

Does the Bible offer us no reliable counsel about sex? On the face of it perhaps less that we’d assumed. We continue to oppose incest – but for altogether different reasons than the Bible’s reasons; and unlike the Bible, we forbid incest between father and daughters. We continue to forbid adultery – but again our reasons for so doing are different and perhaps preferable to those of the Bible. In the few places where the Bible discourages – it never prohibits – prostitution, the apparent reasoning is morally less sensitive than ours.

I hope to have made at least a case for understanding that the Bible not only does not oppose what we know as
homosexuality but does not even recognize its existence. Why? Again because in a sex-as-power gender construction there is no such thing as homosexuality or heterosexuality per se.

And yet the Bible offers us a sexual counsel so revolutionary that most Churches have not yet even dared unpack it. That is, in his teaching, in his exemplary personal dealings, and in his death, our Lord rejected dominance, either his own or other peoples’. He neither dominated others nor paid any attention to their attempts to dominate him. Look for that pattern all through the Gospels. It will take your breath away. With Jesus’ rejection of dominance the sex-as-violence schema first begins to crumble.

Some of Paul’s most radical teachings insist on mutuality in marriage. 1 Corinthians 7 would terrify most of the human race if we’d take it seriously.

1Cor. 7:3-4 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

So would Ephesians 5:

Eph. 5:33 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject
to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

We are so accustomed to assuming that passage commands obedience – which it clearly does not – that we miss its stunning mutuality.

The fact that our Tradition does not embody this core biblical teaching about non-dominance is one good reason to regard what we call Tradition with some caution.

A biblical clincher for me is the record of the first time the Church faced into a struggle like this present one, a struggle to be repeated several times down the centuries, a struggle which always heretofore allowed the Body of Christ to survive as a church, not just as a sect. I refer to Peter’s experience in the household of Cornelius the
Gentile and Peter’s subsequent success in persuading the Jerusalem Church that his action was motivated by Jesus.

You know the story. It begins with Peter’s hunger-driven vision, repeated three times, in which a spiritual voice drew Peter past his reflex adherence to Jewish purity laws respecting food. He then responded to an invitation to intimate fellowship with an impure Gentile’s household -- whom he baptized once he saw evidence that the Spirit was at work among them as among the original Jewish disciples.

He now had the problem of selling his action to his colleagues in Jerusalem. The deck was stacked against him. Scripture as he understands it opposed his action: Deuteronomy did not permit the People of God to mix with foreigners. Tradition was against him: the Maccabbean Wars against foreign influences were in his people’s recent history. Only reason – in this instance comprising personal experience – seemed to support him: the work of Jesus was unmistakable to those who knew Jesus personally. To their great credit, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem knew Jesus well enough to discern that God was doing a new thing. To cooperate with God, they would have to repress their nausea around Gentiles. But the Spirit helped with that task.

The Church was to face this issue several centuries later just as she became legal in Rome and had to determine what to do about former Christians who had lapsed from the faith during various persecutions and now wanted to return. By the Spirit’s guidance the Church was eventually able – after longer struggles than we’ve had so far over sexuality – to discern that the Spirit was asking them to abandon purity as an unaffordable luxury if they want to enjoy God’s grace as a normal condition. To their credit, they permitted the Spirit to do that work among
them. They knew our Lord the Holy Spirit and God the Son of God whom the Spirit reveals well enough to make the shift.

The challenge before the Church today is to see if we know our Lord the Holy Spirit and the Incarnate Son of God well enough to recognize God’s Presence in the ranks of gay Christians.

Do we know God that well?

We’ll see.

Now a brief word about Tradition.

When we hear people invoke the Church’s Tradition against our gay fellow parishioners, I want to paraphrase Paul: “You who plead the Tradition – do you actually know the Tradition?”

Few human institutions claim to be as traditional as marriage. Yet even fewer have undergone more metamorphoses. If you won’t take my word that most periods of our marital “tradition” would horrify you to occupy then make your own study of the matter and get back to me.

Many of our traditions have been quite toxic. From the Gospel of John to Dietrich Bonhoeffer with scandalously few exceptions Christian theologians have treasured the tradition we now call Supercessionism: the notion that the Church has displaced Israel in the heart and purposes of God. If you feel like coughing when we sing “Holy Zion’s help forever and her confidence alone,” it may be the smoke of Auschwitz in your throat. Some expressions of Christianity quite close to us have not dropped or renounced that tradition yet.

The Tradition has for centuries enshrined the female-suppressing sensibility we’ve lived with since the dawn of agriculture.
Now many would want to say something like, “That’s not really what we mean by Tradition; we only mean the good stuff.” Sure, have it your way. Just include our sisters and brothers as ‘good.’ The problem of our uncritical appeals to Tradition awaits someone else’s treatment. I would just want to advise this gathering that you learn everything you can about what people call Tradition – so you can protect yourself in the face of such claims.

It cuts no ice that the Church “traditionally” has not interpreted the love between Jonathan and David or between the Centurion and his catamite as erotic. Christian scholars have only been reading the Bible with scientific critical reason since around 1805. The hermeneutic Tradition of the Church has been to go with canonical interpretations. For 1800 years nobody cared much what the original writers thought they were saying. Appealing to those 18 centuries as authoritative Tradition is intellectually corrupt.

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I can’t quit without lodging a final plea in connection with the Bible. If we love the Bible and read it faithfully and respectfully, we should consider taking an interest in the matters that interested the biblical writers. For many centuries the Church and the World have asked of the Bible questions in which it takes little apparent interest. There are any number of lesser examples of that which any of us could readily supply. Most of us would think of the attempt by Fundamentalists to extract cosmological and geological data from Genesis as comically futile – if it did not infiltrate our school curricula.

But that’s minor compared to the really big wrong turn the Church took with the Bible in the period
beginning with Constantine and peaking in the Reformation. The Church turned away from the topics the Bible treats so passionately in order to press the Bible into service answering a question nobody in the Bible apparently ever thought of. That new, non-biblical question is, “How shall a soul hopelessly mired in sin dare to stand before a righteously angry God?” And the standard reply, strung together from verses originally devoted to other subjects, has been, “Christ shed his Blood for me.”

Interest in that question has diverted our attention from two related topics about which the Old and New Testaments are centrally concerned. The first and deepest is nothing less than the utter transformation of persons, communities, and whole societies here and now. And the related interest, reaching its peak expression in the career and teaching of our Lord and the writings of St. Paul, is the categorical rejection of dominance, endured or exercised, in any human transaction whatever.

What the Bible covets for each and all of us is the breathtaking inrush of the sense of God’s very Presence when we find ourselves in a new unity with persons we had previously feared or resented. But when the Holy Spirit empowers us to embrace our Lord’s council about not pushing others around or paying any attention to their attempts to push us around, we experience remarkable transformation. From time to time we find ourselves with tear-filled eyes surveying a roomful of people we realize we want to live to serve and whom we’d gladly die to preserve. That was the exhilaration of the Selma Bridge for all its danger and the Lincoln Memorial for all its crowding. Even Gandhi the pacifist recognized that as the enviable grace available to soldiers in arms. It is the impact Jesus had on thousands on grassy hillsides.
It is the quality of community life that Paul talks about so much more than he mentioned justification by grace through faith.

This present moment in our Church’s life offers us the opportunity to get back onto the real biblical trajectory through history, back into the mainstream of the Church’s deepest and most serious Tradition: the breaking down of the middle walls that divide people – which will catalyze the renewal of the Earth as the Sons and Daughters of God are manifested to the groaning Creation.

Thanks you.