Sunday October 9, 1977

Book 7

"WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN VIEW ON HOMOSEXUALITY? I Corinthians 6:9-20

The title of today's sermon is a bit presumptuous! First because I'm not sure there is a uniquely Christian view on homosexuality, and second because the purpose of this sermon is not so much to give answers as it is to raise questions. It is an attempt to begin a discussion that will no doubt go on for many years in our culture and in the church around the world. Thus this morning I want to summarize and outline some issues which are important ingredients toward forming a Christian view on homosexuality.

I. To begin our discussion, let's look briefly at how homosexuality is dealt with in the Bible.

In the Old Testament, the prohibition against homosexuality is found primarily in the book of Leviticus. There are two texts which condemn male homosexual acts: "You shall not lie with a male as a woman; it is an abomination." (18:22) "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." (20:13)

These two sentences are included as part of a long legal code for the ancient Hebrews which takes up most of the book of Leviticus. It includes laws covering almost every aspect of behaviour. Called the "holiness code", it is an intricate system of rules calculated to establish the ritual, moral and religious purity of Israel. The code has the over-all purpose of separating the Hebrew people from the pagan cultures and religions which surrounded them.

For example, according to the holiness code, a person could not become a priest if he was blind or lame, had a mutilated face or a limb too long, or was a hunchback or dwarf, had defective sight, an itching disease or scabs. Within the code were a number of laws which prescribed the death penalty for certain offenses. Some of these offense were--child sacrifice, cursing your father or mother, adultery, male homosexual acts, being a medium or a wizard, or blaspheming the name of the Lord.

In the Christian Church today as through the years, and in much of Hebrew religion, most of these laws either forgotten, ignored, applauded or legitimized. The difficulty is in deciding which of these particular rules or parts of them

should still be followed and which should not. For example there are few among us who would demand the death penalty for adultery or homosexuality. Interestingly, the law in Leviticus was only against male homsexuality and not female homosexuality.

But these laws can still instruct us if we look beyond them to their purpose. One strong reason homosexuality was forbidden in ancient Israel, was because of the command to be "fruitful and multiply." This was the over-riding principle in ordering all human sexuality and was clearly necessary for the survival of Israel. The purpose of heterosexual relationships was primarily for producing children. On this premise homosexuality had to be outlawed. Thus the Hebrew law against homosexuality was wise and necessary for Israel.

Our laws against homosexuality may also be both wise and necessary, but for different reasons. We are not concerned so much about under-population as we are about over-population and we understand heterosexual relationships as having more value than just producing children.

We'll look at some of these later

In the New Testament of the Bible, there is very little said about homosexuality. Jesus doesn't mention it. Many of Jesus' actions, however, show that he often crossed over the boundaries of sex, national origin and status in order to minister to people. The Gospels portray Jesus as one who affirmed persons at the risk and cost of breaking existing customs. This does not mean that Jesus affirms all forms of life or that he encouraged moral anarchy or permissiveness in sexual relationships. He was merciful and forgiving to those who broke the moral code.

For example, the religious law in his time decreed the death penalty for women caught in adultery. In one instance at least, Jesus stopped the crowd from stoning such a women to death. He forgave her and told her to go her way and sin no more. We can infer that he would've treated a homosexual in the same way.

In the New Testament it is only in Paul's letters that we find some mention of homosexuality. As Paul wrote letters to help Christians find their way in an often alien pagan culture, he naturally touched upon some problems in human sexuality. We saw this in the last two sermons in this series when Paul dealt with how women are to be treated and with the problem of marriage or remaining single.

Paul mentions homosexuality three different times. In none of these three passages is it the author's purpose to define particular sins. Rather the purpose of each passage is to cite patterns of behavior and attitudes in the surrounding culture where Christians found themselves. In none of the passages is homosexuality singled out as a special kind of sin, but is included in a whole list of various sins. The list of sins is so inclusive that it includes all of us; "the immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers, covetousness, malice, envy, strife, deceit, gossips, slanderers haughty, boastful, disobedience to parents, the foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless and more."

Homosexuality is certainly included, but is not singled out as unique. Paul in these passages is using this broad list of sins as illustrations to combat the libertine view in the culture which sets no limits on irresponsible action as well as the abuse of a person's own body. Paul goes on to say that even though some things may be lawful in that society, not all things are helpful. As Christians, he was saying, we should not be enslaved by anything, be it food, sex, greed, envy, gossiping or whatever. Paul was also concered that the Corinthian Christians be different from the surrounding culture where many things were lawful but not helpful.

II. What can we infer then from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, not only in the area of sexuality- and homosexuality, but in other issues as well?

1. Note first that decisions were made and rules laid down according to what was helpful and good for the religious community as a whole. This was done in the light of the understanding that it is God's will that our lives be healthy, wholesome happy lives, and that God's creation is basically good as are our bodies.

The laws in Leviticus and the advice in the New Testament letters were primarily concerned about the specific religious community because those religious communities existed with a pagan culture. Now it could be argued that we too exist in a pagan culture, and others would argue that we live in a more Christian oriented culture. At least for us the lines are not as clear between the church and society as they were for the Christians in Corinth in the first century. The official religions of the society were quite different from the Christian religion.

2. Note secondly, both the Hebrews and Christians in making their decisions took into account all the wisdom and knowledge available to them and then worked out their values and life-styles with the faith that God was with them in making responsible decisions and rules. In the New Testament the fundamental ethical principle is the love of neighbor and neighbor means everyone. Paul, echoing the teaching of Jesus himself said, "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

In other words, after obtaining as much knowledge as possible, there was always the consideration: will this kind of behavior and practice be helpful to persons, to society as a whole, or harmful? Will it increase among people the love of God and neighbor?

So the Bible helps us very much in demonstrating how the Hebrew and Christian communities made their ethical and moral decisions. The method of making decisions can be as helpful to us as the decision itself.

III. What then does this mean for us in our time in regard to beginning to build a Christian view on homosexuality?

1. First, we need to take the Bible seriously as we have been doing in an attempt to discover how and why the people of faith made the decisions they did. We noted for example that decisions were made and rules laid down according to what was helpful and good for the religious community as a whole.

2. Secondly, as much knowledge and wisdom as possible needs to go into the decision making process. For us in our time this means we need much more knowledge and understanding about homosexuality. At present there is more that we don't know than what we do know about homsexuality and its consequences for individuals and society.

For example, after years of research, the question of why and how a homosexual pattern of life originates is unanswered. At most there are lots of theories, but little agreement. Some suggest there are chromosomal and/or hormonal differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals, yet recent studies show no basic proof of genetic or hormonal differences.

Other authorities believe that homo-sexual orientation is learned, although diverse opinions exist as to how and why.

For some years the medical profession and particularly psychiatry saw homosexuality as an illness and some still see it this way. Other psychiatrists now take a more neutral position believing that homosexuality is simply a variation in sexual orientation. They recognize that some homosexuals may be sick, but their homosexuality is not the cause.

The stereotypes of homosexuality also prove to be false. The idea that the homosexual male is an effeminate person with limp wrists and a high-pitched voice, usually rather "arty" in character, or that the homo-sexual woman is exaggeratedly masculine and loud and noisy is not nearly always the case. Homosexuals are drawn from every section of the population. They may be well-educated and cultured or they may be uneducated and without cultural interests.

The point is that it is difficult to make broad generalizations about homosexuality and at present the question of causes and evaluation of homosecuality are left unresolved until more substantive research can be done.

3. As we gain more knowledge in the field, we need to do as did the Hebrews and Christians in the Old and New Testaments--we need to take seriously the question concerning what society stands to gain or lose if it gives sanction to homosexual life-styles. Ancient Israel was convinced that to sanction homosexuality in its time would be destructive of society because sexuality was primarily for procreation. Paul was convinced that homosexuality was wrong because it was a wide-spread practice in Greek society. For the Greeks, body and spirit were separate and one could do almost anything with the body--all things were lawful. For Christians body and spirit are closely related and both are good. Paul did not want the Corinthian Christians picking up any of the Greek ideas which conflicted with Christian understanding ofbody and spirit.

In our time, many people are worried because they see the family ties in our society have weakened. This has come about largely because of the nature of a mobile, technocratic society. But because sexual permissiveness is more apparent and easier to identify than other forces, many people are convinced that changing sexual mores are the

primary cause in hurting family life and weakening its structure.

At the same time on a personal level, there are many who are grateful that their own guilt feelings have diminished as a result of more frank and open discussion of sexual matters, but at the same time others are just as sure that this kind of sexual liberation has shaken the foundations of our society.

People want to be liberated persons, tolerant persons, but the very atmosphere of liberation and tolerance appears to many to be eroding necessary social values.

Thus when we Christians contribute to the formulation of public policy we always need to ask: What does society stand to lose or gain by this decision? In our time those opposed to homosexuality may be correct or incorrect, but they are convinced that society will lose more than it will gain should it choose to sanction homosexual life-styles.

A second and related question is: If we do openly acknowledge and socially sanction homosexual relationships, do we wish to express a view that homosexual and heterosexual relationships are equally desirable and equally to be encouraged? These are not nearly all the questions, but these are some which we as Christians have to face as we attempt to come to a Christian view of homosexuality.

At the same time, those who favor the acceptance of homosexual life styles are convinced that society will gain more than it will lose. The gains they see are a kind of institutionalized tolerance of those who are sexually different and a more just treatment of individuals who are homosexuals. Those who are opposed to sanctioning homosexual behavior believe society will lose more than it will gain because they see an erosion of the structures of the social systems we have known and an erosion of the sexual values and behavior of the impressionable young. These questions have to be dealt with responsibly.

In the meantime for us as Christians, no matter what side we might be on, we need to see homosexuals as persons, human beings in God's creation, and as much loved by God as the rest of us. The Bible reminds us that all of us sin and fall short of the glory of God.

This means that poking fun, making off-color jokes, or otherwise using homosexual terms for name-calling is not Christian behavior. God help us all to be above that. Amen.