

“The Gospel according to Matthew Shepard”
Lev. 20:13, Rom. 1:26-27, Matt. 25-31-46

Paul E. Capetz
Macalester Plymouth United Church
June 25, 2006

It is not every Christian congregation that places Gay Pride Sunday on its annual church calendar. Those of us who are gay and lesbian have reason to be grateful for this congregation that cares about our lives and the hurdles we face as we seek to live our lives with integrity and with a measure of happiness. As an individual I have special reason to be grateful to our ministers, Heidi and Tom, for extending an invitation to deliver the sermon on this particular Sunday. They have asked me to explain why I am no longer a Presbyterian minister. Most Christian congregations would not extend such an invitation to a person like me. In the six years since I set aside my ordination, there has been only one other such invitation to preach on this topic in a church, Presbyterian or otherwise. For the most part, there has been nothing but a polite silence from the church in response to my departure. As a result, I've become so accustomed to being an outsider that the memory of once having been an insider has grown dim and vague.

In the spring of 2000 I asked to be released from my responsibilities as a minister after the Presbyterians amended the church's constitution so that gay persons would be explicitly forbidden to serve in an ordained capacity unless they committed themselves to a life of celibacy. When I was first ordained in 1991, there was no such provision in the church's polity and so I was able to accept the vows of ordination in good conscience. But when the church decided to respond to the pleas of homosexual Christians for full equality by denying it to us, I realized that it was no longer possible for me to represent the Presbyterian Church with integrity and conviction. Since that time, however, I have

struggled to remain a faithful member of the church as I work with others for a change of heart and mind within the church. Although I no longer speak for the church, I continue to speak to the church. For this reason, my sermon this morning may not actually be a sermon in the usual sense of the world, since it does not presume to proclaim the church's message to the world; if anything, it's more a message from the world (or, at least, from a part of the world) to the Christian church. Although our text is from the Gospel according to Matthew, my topic is the gospel according to Matthew Shepard. As we all know, the word *gospel* means "good news" but the gospel according to Matthew Shepard is anything but good news.

I suppose that most of you have heard of Matthew Shepard. Matthew's life is significant primarily because of his death, his manner of death, and the reasons for his death. Before the evening of October 7, 1998 when he was kidnapped by two men, tied to a fence, brutally beaten, and left to freeze in the cold night air of Wyoming, he was just an ordinary young man attending college who happened to be gay. After he died in the hospital five days later, he became a symbol of the plight of gay people in this country and even around the globe. Some commentators have likened his death to a "lynching" of the kind black people experienced repeatedly at the hands of white racists. Others have called it a "crucifixion." I think these are apt comparisons. Both lynchings and crucifixions were designed to keep oppressed people in their place. Matthew's murder was intended to send a powerful message to faggots that this is a straight man's world.

Matthew's death is not an isolated event that can be understood apart from the context of historic Christian teaching about homosexuality. From biblical times forward a man engaging in homosexual activity was considered an abomination and merited the

penalty of death, as we read in the Book of Leviticus. In the New Testament as well, homosexual activity is described as “unnatural,” a term borrowed from the Greek philosophers, and it is cited as an example of the immorality that follows upon idolatry. Not only does the Bible teach these things but the death penalty has been carried out on homosexuals throughout Western history. In the 6th century the Christian emperor Justinian made homosexuality a crime to be punished by death,¹ and more recently in the 20th century homosexuals were targeted by Hitler for genocide, placed in the concentration camps and forced to wear the pink triangle.² Was it merely a coincidence when just a few years after the end of World War II Protestantism’s most prominent theologian at the time, Karl Barth, characterized homosexuality as an expression of “inhumanity” and declared that it “can have no place in the Christian life”?³ Barth was no Nazi and, indeed, he was a vigorous opponent of them. But there is a chilling similarity between his view of homosexuality and that of Hitler who viewed it as a form of degeneracy, as well as a remarkable parallel between Barth’s view of a church that has no place for gay people and Hitler’s vision of a Germany purged of all “undesirables.” The gospel according to Matthew Shepard isn’t “good news” at all; it’s the bad news of hatred, discrimination, and gay bashing, most if not all of it done in the name of God!

Surely, this isn’t genuine Christianity, as many well-meaning friends and colleagues have tried to assure me. Christianity is the religion of love *par excellence*! Yet did not Jesus himself say: “You shall know them by their fruits” (Matt. 6:17)? Just consider the historical record: Christianity has obviously been the most influential factor in our culture’s disdain of gay people. This has become the critical existential issue in

¹ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 171.

² Heinz Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle*; also, Martin Sherman’s powerful play, *Bent*.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3.4, p. 166.

my own life. How can I continue to call myself a “Christian” when the church treats people like me in this way? As a child, I was deeply imbued with the ethos and values of Christian faith and as a teenager I felt a calling to the ministry. Not only do I remember learning the song, “They will know we are Christians by our love,” but I remember actually believing the words of that song! At that time, however, I did not yet understand that I would grow up to be a gay man, and during my adolescence in the 1970s there was not even mention of this topic in the wider culture as there is today. I did not yet realize that I would grow up to be someone my church would treat as the equivalent of a leper in Jesus’ day. I went through the teenage years and came into adulthood in a vacuum of naiveté, ignorance and, most of all, deafening silence. When I “came out” to myself, I had to ask: where did these two worlds meet? How was a homosexual person to live a Christian life? Or was a choice called for, a choice between being a Christian and being gay? In retrospect, I realize that as I was growing up, I was really two different persons who had nothing to do with one another. There was the external person and the internal person, the person I shared with others and the person I dared not share. There was the person who looked forward to going to seminary and becoming a minister and the person who had thoughts of suicide on account of the unrelenting loneliness and despair caused by the awakening of sexuality.

My experience in this respect has been well captured by the noted Roman Catholic writer Andrew Sullivan who said of his own experience growing up gay in the church:

With regard to homosexuality, I inherited no moral and religious teaching that could guide me to success or failure. In my adolescence and young adulthood, the

teaching of the Church was merely a silence, an increasingly hollow denial even of the existence of homosexuals, let alone a credible ethical guide to how they should lead their lives. It is still true that in over thirty years of weekly churchgoing, I have never heard a homily that attempted to explain how a gay man should live, or how his sexuality should be expressed. I have heard nothing but a vast and endless and embarrassed silence, an awkward, unexpressed desire for the simple nonexistence of such people, for their absence from the moral and physical universe, for a word or phrase, like “objective disorder,” that could simply abolish the problem they represented and the diverse humanity they symbolized. The teaching I inherited was a teaching that, in the best of all possible worlds, I simply would not exist.⁴

Sullivan goes on to pose these questions:

What incentives were offered for you to choose one way of life over another, when all possible expressions of your identity, from love and fidelity, to promiscuity and prostitution, were regarded as morally indistinguishable...? How can a human being navigate an ethical life in the midst of such moral nihilism?

The answer is an obvious one, made explicable by the thought that, in the minds of such theologians, homosexuals aren't fully human beings at all.⁵

The point Sullivan is making here is that gay people cannot really be good Christians since, in the eyes of the church, there is no way for persons like us to be moral. Sullivan, who nonetheless remains a devout Catholic, goes on to render this verdict upon his own church, one which applies equally as well to the Protestant churches:

⁴ Andrew Sullivan, Love Undetectable, p. 42.

⁵ Love Undetectable, p. 46.

A doctrine that seeks to extinguish love from the hearts of a whole segment of humanity, is so onerous and anomalous that silence is its only decent expression. But it is and was this silence that defined for me, and still defines for millions, the ethic of a homosexual life in America and around the world. Which is to say, it is an unethic, a statement that some people are effectively beneath even the project of an ethical teaching.⁶

So when I hear that Christianity is a religion of love, I have to ask what this statement even means when the church refuses to support the efforts of gay people to love one another in morally responsible ways. In the 25 years since AIDS first reared its ugly head, the churches have not offered any constructive ethical guidelines as to how gay men should express their sexuality. This, in my view, is the real immorality, not what the churches themselves point to as our “unnatural” sexual practices. When a theologian of Barth’s stature insists that homosexuality can have no place in the Christian life, it is no puzzle to me that a gay man like Sullivan feels that he is less than fully human in his own church. Christians may delude themselves into believing that theirs is a religion of love, but the church’s message to gay people belies that assurance.

And what about Matthew Shepard’s killers? What message about gay people did they pick up from Christian teaching about homosexuality? Does the church bear any responsibility for the violence directed at Matthew Shepard and others like him? I don’t think it’s possible to take the church off the hook here. The church has condemned people like us as violating the natural order of creation through our sexual expressions of love, it has preached that we are going to hell, and it continues to work on the side of our political opponents who want to deny us full equality in this society with respect to

⁶ Love Undetectable, p. 45.

marriage and service in the military. Even those of us who have not been physically abused the way Matthew Shepard was carry within us the wounds inflicted upon us by the church and our Christian families. How many of us have been turned away by parents and siblings when we came out to them? How many career opportunities have been denied (unofficially, of course!) to persons who are in every relevant respect fully qualified for the position?

As I've searched for analogies to the plight of gay people in other chapters of church history, it has occurred to me that there is much to learn from the experience of black people in this country. Here is a group of people held in slavery for centuries by white Christians who weren't even sure at first whether to preach the gospel to their slaves since the blacks were considered an inferior race, not fully human in the same category with white people. Some whites weren't even sure whether black people had souls created in God's image. But eventually the decision to preach the gospel to the slaves was made, since it was believed that the passages in the Bible instructing slaves to be obey their masters would make them better and more obedient slaves. But slaves had to sit in their own pews in the back of the church or in the balcony. Moreover, slaves were not allowed to marry. But we know that they had sexual and romantic relationships with one another and yet they were forced to conduct these relationships outside the framework of Christian marriage. After emancipation, they were still not treated as equals by whites who resented their aspirations to legal and political equality. So blacks formed their own churches, which became for the black community a powerful bulwark against the racist world outside.

Today many gay persons have left the churches in which they were raised, and some of these have formed their own congregations such as the Metropolitan Community Church. But too many gay people today are either indifferent or hostile to the church since they perceive the church as the enemy, and not without good reason. Still, those who have decided to remain Christians, either working to change the denominations in which they were nurtured or by joining a gay church, have done so because, in the story of Jesus, they have heard something that can truly be called “good news” in spite of all the bad news they have also received from their churches. Although the black Christians received the gospel from those who considered them inferior and had enslaved them, these oppressed persons could not but hear certain stories in the Bible as speaking to their own sense of human worth and dignity, such as God’s liberation of the slaves from Egypt. And eventually Martin Luther King, Jr., who was a Baptist minister, appealed to the consciences of the white people of this nation by invoking not only America’s democratic traditions but also by evoking biblical themes and images, the power of which moved many white Christians to work for an end to segregation in the name of justice and equality. Similarly, today there are many straight persons in this nation and in the churches whose hearts and minds have been converted to rectifying the injustice under which gay people labor. What we can learn from the history of black Christians in this country is that sometimes it is possible to discern a critical strand in the church’s teaching that calls into question many of the other strands in the tradition that do not easily harmonize with it. If there is good news in the Christian church for gay people, then we too will have to engage in a theological and ethical task similar to that of sifting the message of God’s unconditional love for all people from the message of white racism.

The gospel of Matthew Shepard is a sad story, indeed, and it is, unfortunately, not yet over. What makes it even sadder is that it has for too long been confused with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which the evangelist Matthew captured in his story of the Last Judgment. In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus pronounces this verdict: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.... Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.” Jesus is here identifying himself with the sufferings of Matthew Shepard and reminding his followers that whatever we do to one another, we do to him. So too, when we refuse to come to the aid of one in need, we have refused Jesus. The other day I saw a bumper sticker on the back of a car which read: “Jesus wants his religion back.” There can be no doubt that this bumper sticker captures a telling criticism of contemporary Christianity. In this critical spirit, then, let us pray for the day when there will no longer be the need to preach upon the gospel according to Matthew Shepard, because there will only be one gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.