

The Same Old Bible

A sermon delivered at the Duke Wesley Fellowship on January 13, 2019

by Rev. David J. Allen

Ephesians 2:11-20

Let me tell you about the time when Duke Wesley decided not to be a reconciling ministry.

It was 2001. Wesley had a Coordinating Council, a decision-making body of 8 or 10 people. Someone brought an invitation that was going around to campus organizations. They were encouraging anyone with a campus space to display what was called a SAFE sticker. I can't remember the acronym anymore, but it was a rainbow triangle, and it was meant to help students know that the professor's office or organizational space they were entering was prepared to respect and affirm them as they were.

This was far from guaranteed in 2001. In fact, around that same time, a University committee was appointed to make a recommendation to the trustees about whether the Chapel could be used for same-gender commitment ceremonies, even though there wouldn't be a legal recognition of those unions in North Carolina for more than a decade. It's hard to overstate how different things were back then.

So, we began to discuss the SAFE sticker, and it seemed like everyone was on board. Of course, we saw ourselves as a welcoming community. I assumed we'd make quick work of this decision and hang the sticker. Then one of my friends spoke up. He suggested we press the brakes on this kind of statement. And his reason was this: We are part of a denomination that is not "safe" for LGBT people. And if we have an issue with that, then there is a mechanism open to us to align ourselves. It's not some sticker on the door. It's the Reconciling Ministries Network within the United Methodist Church. If we really feel that the church should be a place of welcome for all people, then we ought to take that significant step. It would be inappropriate for us to adopt the SAFE sticker, but not to take the corresponding step within our denomination.

He was persuasive, and the group decided that we were perhaps rushing into a commitment that we weren't prepared to honor. Of course, we were also jumping tracks from a relatively simple decision to a much more complicated one: not just to hang a sticker on the door, but to affiliate ourselves publicly. And that would mean educating ourselves. That would mean more long meetings. In the end, we never did anything formal. In my memory, we never discussed it again. And that was a missed opportunity, something I regret.

I regret our inaction back in 2001, but I still feel one hundred percent convinced of the wisdom in pressing the brakes that night. There was deep wisdom in the person (a freshman, as I remember it), who said, "No matter how each person understands the Bible and human sexuality, if we are going to take a stand, we should do it not as a Duke student organization, but as Christians."

Today, I know I want the church to change its understanding of human sexuality, but it's not because I want to be nice, or because I think the Bible is old and stale and not to be taken seriously. It's not because I feel anxious about the word "sin," or because I want to get with the times. It's because I know Jesus as he is revealed in Scripture and in my own life, and because I'm trying my best to follow him.

Duke Wesley celebrates all people and all identities, not as some compromise of our Christian witness or in spite of our Christian faith, but as the fullest expression of our Christian faith.

Part of the reason it's been so hard to develop a positive, biblical theology of sexual and gender diversity is because of society's slowly evolving understanding of that diversity. Here's what I mean by that. Even in 2001, it was a pretty lively question as to whether homosexuality was a choice or a natural state — and, therefore, whether it belonged to the category of behavior or identity. In fact, most of the prohibitive language in the UMC Book of Discipline refers to homosexual *activity*. This is in keeping with the way Paul, in Romans 1, decries same-sex love as an unnatural rebellion against God's natural, good order.

But it's not in keeping with the way we now understand human nature. There is now much more of a consensus that sexual orientation and gender identity are just that: matters of identity, not choice. Therefore it is a category error to speak of them in terms of sin, which is a disorder of the will. And this opens up some wonderful new possibilities. This means that the relevant scriptures are not only the ones that talk about sexual sin, but also the ones that talk about identity, about created goodness, about the purpose of love.

Take, for example, Ephesians 2:11-20. "Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" between Jew and Gentile, and in place of two bodies, he has fashioned one body: his body. You can probably look at this passage, and easily connect it to a theology of race. You know intuitively that Christ has not abolished difference altogether, but that he somehow draws us into a unity and an equality that makes racial hostility unacceptable for the Christian. This line has always been in the Bible, but it has not always been understood in this way. Two hundred years ago, most white Christians would not have thought this verse had to do with race at all. They would have agreed that this verse had to do with Christian unity, but would not have imagined that that unity extended beyond people who looked like them. They'd have said that if you wanted to talk about slavery, you just had to look at the passages about slaves and masters. It took a massive societal upheaval, and the testimony of people who were suffering the consequences of bad biblical interpretation, and the courage of people who could see beyond the moment they lived in, to help the rest of the church see the same old Bible in a new light. But it turns out it was there all along: a clear affirmation that Christ invites to his table all who love him.

I couldn't have made this connection in 2001, but in 2019 it couldn't be clearer to me that the same passages that help us shed our racial prejudice can also help draw us out of our prejudices around sexual orientation and gender identity.

Here's another example: in the Bible, there are very few mentions of women who lead. They're there, but they are few. That fact, coupled with the couple of New Testament passages that call on wives to submit to their husbands, and to be quiet in the assembly, and not to teach or hold authority over men, was more than enough to convince the Christian Church that ordained church leadership is only for men.

Although much of the Christian world still carries on in traditions that don't ordain women, the Methodist Church somehow found its way forward on this question in the mid 1950s, in spite of the apparent biblical prohibitions. As the Holy Spirit raised up women who were gifted preachers, and as society began to allow those gifts to develop through education and opportunity, the Scriptures began to look less clear about the question of women's leadership. In a large part of American Protestantism, we have come to a consensus now that "there is no longer male or female, for you are all one in Christ

Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) is nearer to the core of the Gospel, as evidenced by Jesus' life and by our lived experience, than are a few verses that endorse the gender norms of antiquity.

I don't say any of this lightly. It *is* a dangerous interpretive move to disregard what the Bible plainly says. There is a slippery slope here, and we might become tempted to explain away all kinds of unpleasant biblical teachings, just because we can. I don't want to end up picking and choosing on a whim, just to make the Bible more palatable. But in our tradition, we've always had the space to allow experience to illuminate how we understand the Bible. Specifically, our evolving scientific and cultural understandings of human identity have, with time, allowed us to flip traditional biblical teaching about race, about gender, and now, for some people, about sexual orientation.

I couldn't have preached this sermon in 2001. In the same way that changing light can alter how you see a painting, the changing times have shown me something new about the same old Bible. The Bible turns out not to be of one voice when it comes to love and sex. It took a massive societal change for me to be able to see it. But here we are, and I'm glad we are here.

The God I encounter in Scripture, the God revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, is a God who has steadily been reaching out and calling towards an ever-widening circle of people. First Abraham's family; then the chosen people, Israel; then the Jews and Gentiles who encountered Jesus; then, finally, the people of Judea, Samaria, and all the way to the ends of the Earth. The Book of Acts shows that God's calling extended far beyond what even the Apostles expected: "*they* have received the Holy Spirit, all the way over *there*?" What a marvel. What a mystery! We may have to rethink a few things. And, at significant moments in the church's history, we *have* been willing to rethink things. Maybe this is what that feels like.

During the coming months, there will be a lot of competing claims about "What United Methodists believe." If you feel unclear or uncertain, or if you don't understand how progressives could possibly argue that the church ought to change, I hope this is helpful to your thinking. And, on the other hand, if you feel like you want to see the full participation of LGBTQ individuals in the Church, but aren't sure why you feel that way, I especially urge you to think on these things. Search the scriptures deeply. Don't make your stand in spite of your Christian identity: stand firmly on the ground of your Christian formation, of who you know Jesus to be, and live out your faith in a way that shows others what an embracing God we serve.