

## The Love of Law or the Law of Love

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“Time makes ancient good uncouth” - The poet James Lowell wrote that line back in 1845. What was he saying there? I think Lowell understood that what is considered absolute truth and a good thing may not look so absolutely good and true as time passes. An experience may remain the same over time, but how that experience is interpreted is subject to constant change from one generation to the next -

For instance, it was once thought that the earth was the absolute center of a three-tiered universe - heaven above, the earth, hell below and the sun revolved around the earth. When that truth was called into question by the likes of Copernicus and Galileo, the Christian church went to great lengths to discredit their ideas - but now we have the Hubble telescope. Same physical universe - that hasn't changed - but the way we see it certainly has!

Look at the medical ailment we now call epilepsy. In Christ's time, it was thought to be caused by demon possession and Jesus was called to exorcise those demons. That same disease is now explained as an

electrical malfunction in the brain and is treated with drugs. Same phenomena - different interpretation.

The explosion of knowledge over the last few centuries has rendered many such biblical presuppositions unbelievable. They come from a world that no longer exists. Yet so many churches continue to view the Bible, not in the context of the culture in which it was written, but as the literal and inerrant word of God - this becomes especially true when it suits an agenda.

For instance, up until recently, the Bible was used to justify slavery - lots of people throughout biblical history had slaves - it wasn't condemned by the O.T. prophets or Christ for that matter - so it must still be OK to continue an ancient cultural dehumanizing practice. It suited a business agenda..

St. Paul's words continue to be used in some churches to deprive women of equal status in congregations. His statement in First Corinthians that women should remain silent in church and must be in submission still deprives women in many denominations from preaching and assuming leadership roles. Those texts should be taken in their historical patriarchal context and not generalized 19 centuries later to devalue women.

And still today we deal with the infamous "texts of terror"- those verses many churches still use to "prove that homosexuality is a sin". There is the

Sodom and Gomorrah story - no one's favorite. The fact that the men of Sodom threaten to gang rape Lot's male visitors and later God destroys the town is supposed to prove that God disapproves of homosexuality? - the part never mentioned is that Lot offered up his two virgin daughters to be raped instead - could God not be mad about that too?

Then there is Leviticus with its long list of laws and mores for the time.

While it is true that Leviticus forbids sex between men, it also forbids eating or touching rabbit, pork, and shellfish, wearing blended fibers or having a tattoo. So having a shrimp salad or playing football can be dismissed as an ancient law no longer applicable but not homosexuality? The old law stems from the need for the tribe to procreate and not "spill seed" - not from any moral issue.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, what Paul seems to be condemning in his often quoted verses is the lust and debauchery of pagan orgies and sexual exploitation rampant in Roman culture - having no more to do with homosexual relationships than heterosexual relations.

And so we see how over and over, people continue to try to fit old laws (old wine) into Christ's expansive way of love (the new wineskin). In Jesus' day, people used animal skins to store liquids. Fermented drinks like wine expand, and since an old wineskin would be already stretched to its limit,

the new wine would tear the seams. In today's gospel, Jesus was telling John he was here to do something completely NEW - not to look at him through the lens of old expectations and rules. The new expansive law of Love would never be held by the ancient Jewish laws. Christ wants us to focus, not on old rules or ritual, but rather on the fruits we bear. I think there is a reason there is no mention of sexual orientation in Christ's teachings - he simply didn't care!

A person's race, social status, religion, or sexual orientation mattered not a bit to Jesus - what did, and still does matter, is the fruit we bear - what we do with the lives we are given.

Society has made some real progress in the validation of the LGBTQ community. But most of the progress has been on the civil front - so many Christian churches lag behind, still clinging to the old wineskins. Recently, Pope Francis dashed the hopes of gay Catholics by making the conflicting statements that while he fully supports same-sex civil unions ("who am I to judge?") - that those unions are "illicit" because "God cannot bless sin". Seems like he really was doing some judging after all. He speaks in welcoming and affirming terms, but his hospitality has some heartbreaking limits.

My family has been hurt by a similar hypocritical stance by the United Methodist Church. For years my daughter struggled in private with her sexual identity. My husband and I had no clue what she was going through. She dated guys but never for very long - we thought she was just fussy. But then she met Irene, and she fell in love - and she knew she had to follow her heart and who she was.

Ron and I fully and instantly supported her - we were thrilled that she finally found happiness - sadly, it was quite the opposite with Irene's family. It was two hellish years before they accepted the relationship - by then gay marriage was made legal and Tanya and Irene were anxious to make the commitment. Tanya had been raised and was active in the UMC - so you can imagine her heartbreak when our minister denied her the right to marry in what she thought was her church. Like Pope Francis - he said how happy he was for her and how welcome she and Irene would be at the church after they were married - BUT Tanya did not feel welcome at all. She felt rejected and betrayed. Needless to say, we left the congregation and found our way to the UU church.

This is the absurdity that happens when the law of of love gets usurped by the love of law - when the new wine of Christ's expansive teaching gets

placed in the restrictive old wineskins of the past. The seams break - and so do peoples' hearts.

What I love about the UCC is their logo - that God is Still Speaking. The God we know is free to lead us in new directions - shows us new ways to interpret the Word for our current times - God is not a static being but a fluid, dynamic and creative Force for all time.

In the gospel of John, Jesus told his disciples that there was much he could teach them but the time was not yet right - that they were not ready to understand. But that he would send the Holy Spirit to guide them into the truth. To me that means we need to remain open and discerning and allow the law of love to guide us into the future. Maybe God is not as obsessed with sexual matters as we humans are - maybe God cares more about mutual love and commitment. Maybe God is trying to do a new thing.

