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Fearless Q: What Does the Bible Say About Gender & Sexuality?

John 8

When I first knew we were doing the Fearless Q series, I asked to be able to tackle questions regarding gender and sexuality. These are questions that hit very close to home for me with regards to close friends and family. I really want them to be able to come to Chapel Hill and feel welcome. But as the time for me to actually preach has gotten closer, I have found myself more and more sad. Because I feel like we as a western church have sought and spoken truth at the expense of grace.

Consistently, I've felt drawn over these weeks to one particular story of Jesus. It wasn't until this past weekend that I realized why I was so drawn to it for this weekend's message. Jesus in this story was completely trapped—trapped in a moment that was desperate for mercy but where truth would deny it. I suddenly realized that with this question of gender and sexuality, "I feel trapped!" This question seems like a landmine. I'll bet some of you feel the same way.

Here are our options:

The positive argument—The Bible consistently affirms we have been created in the image of God, male and female, two unique genders that together display the image of God to the world and calls us to holy sexuality—either chastity or one man united to one woman. The two to become one flesh not to be divided—as it says in Genesis, Matthew, Ephesians, and throughout the New and Old Testament—without exception. This has been the case for two millenia and the continued affirmation of the global Church. This follows a biblical metanarrative that God loved us enough to die for the rift caused by the sin we are born with. Then you get to hold true to God's word, but you are labeled legalistic as well as hateful and bigoted for attacking someone's core identity.

Or, stated negatively, the Bible does not refer to the marriage situation we see today directly. Particularly, the homosexuality of the Bible is not the homosexuality we see today, and we should be a people of grace accepting all those who people want to love. This follows a Biblical metanarrative that God loves us and wouldn't make us in a way that is somehow broken, so you can find your satisfaction in whomever person or in living whichever gender, and God would love that. You'd be embraced by the secular world for being so "like Jesus" because, "Love wins." But there are two problems with this: Think about what you learned in The Story—we are all sinners, and God loves us in spite of ourselves and calls us to be changed to be like him. This is Good News! And the homosexuality of Scripture is not referring

to today's monogamous civil marriages, but it is referring to sex between a man and a man and a woman and a woman, and those definitions have not changed.

That's the trap of the question: What does the Bible say about gender and sexuality? I know you feel even more trapped as you move to respond to those who reject the traditional understanding of Scripture because I hear it in your questions. I highlighted every single one of them. They are so good. Here are some of your questions:

- Why are Christians so unaccepting of homosexuality? I can't believe Jesus would reject so many people.
- How do we respond to our gay children who say they can't go to church because the church judges them and their lifestyle?

I certainly hope that, if you're here and you're struggling with issues of gender and sexuality, you experience here among this congregation the heart that I heard in these questions—a heart of welcome, a heart of wrestling, a genuine desire to love people... but being really unsure of where Jesus stands. Could you please receive us as a group of people wanting to follow Jesus and not knowing what to do here? Would you be willing to approach Jesus and his church with your wrestling? And please consider saying, "I want to follow Jesus, so I'm not going to act on a gender reassignment or a sexual behavior until I'm sure of what Jesus says."

That might be you, but I want to acknowledge that these are the questions from within the church here and they seem to mostly be from parents and friends wrestling with how to respond to those who are not following Jesus. So allow me the space to just answer those questions now. If you have further questions, let me remind you to fill out a Write Back 'Atcha question at the Connect Center, and we'll respond with a video blog on Tuesday.

Listen for the posture of Jesus and for the words that he speaks. You'll find it in John 8. I just want to tell you the story.

Here's the story:

Jesus is going in and out of Jerusalem. Early in the morning he comes into the city of Jerusalem to teach in the synagogue. The Pharisees and Scribes are there, the official religious people. And John records their motive—they wanted to trap Jesus. So we know for sure what this is about. (It's a trap!)

So, Jesus comes in and they bring before him a woman who was caught "in the very act" of adultery. They say, "The Law of Moses (the Old Testament) says we should stone this woman. What do you say?"

Now at this point in the story, you should know that stoning was very unpopular; no one was doing it. And adultery was super common-place. So they're bringing

Jesus an unpopular, traditional, biblical law against the sexual sin that everyone is just winking at—and they ask, “What are you going to do about it?” Jesus is caught.

If he were to say, “I’m going to be lenient,” and follow his reputation for compassion:

- Then he’s not a legitimate biblical teacher;
- Furthermore, if he stones her, he’s going against the secular law of the day.

If he affirms the law of Moses:

- What a radical legalist he is! And how barbaric a consequence!
So Darned if he does; darned if he doesn’t.

Back to the story:

This is what Jesus does—He bends down, and he’s writing in the dirt. He finally looks up and he says, “I’ll tell you what—you who is without sin—throw the first stone.” And it says, one by one, the Pharisees left, beginning with the eldest.

So they all leave, and it’s just Jesus and the woman left alone, standing there. Jesus gets up, and he says to her, “Where’d they go? Is there anyone left to condemn you?” And she says, “No one.” And so he says, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Okay, so here’s Jesus trapped—like I feel trapped, like you feel trapped—an unpopular sexual law that calls one sexual practice that everybody’s doing, “wrong,” and no one wants to say otherwise; but to say otherwise goes against God’s truth.

Watch the posture of Jesus. He doesn’t stand in authority or sit in judgment; he bends down and listens. I desire for us to be people who bend down when we are stuck. I imagine by bending down, he could hear the woman sobbing... hear her shame. Take a moment to realize the predicament she is in. See her. Writing in the dirt, keeping his opinions to himself... I think there’s a lot we can learn from the posture of Jesus.

In the Orlando shooting a couple weeks ago, I didn’t know what to do and how to respond to my gay friends in Florida. They don’t live in Orlando and weren’t likely there, but they could have been. I was convicted by a picture I saw Jen Hatmaker post that said, “Don’t say nothing,” so I gave them a call. After all, if there had been a shooting targeting moms in white, suburban Costcos, I hope they would give me a call, right? So I called. My friend told me no one in his family had reached out to him, and I was the only Christian he was talking with about this. And he poured out his pain. Just bend down and listen. Don’t write out your judgments. Don’t stand in authority. First, let’s be the people who bend down and listen when others are in pain.

Secondly, let's learn from how Jesus speaks. Who does he address first in the story? The religious people—the Pharisees and the Scribes—the ones saying, condemn her! What's your judgment against her and those like her? While again, I know our intent is different than the story—we're not maliciously trapping Jesus, we are genuinely seeking what Jesus would say about a seemingly old-fashioned sexual law—still, the principle of what Jesus says gives us our answer. So here's what he says to us:

Jesus says, "Let me tell you what the book of Leviticus says. Let me exegete this particular word in Deuteronomy for you." Is that what he says? No! He says, "I tell you what; whoever's without sin can cast the first stone." By saying that, he's saying the Old Testament law is legitimate; adultery is a bad thing, but the condemnation for it, the judgment for it, gets to be decided by the one who is without sin. Is that you? Is that you?

Are you without sin? Jesus reminds us that He is the one who is without sin. The rest of us in the crowd all stand as condemned sinners. So Jesus' first instruction when you're stuck is to examine your own heart. While we're talking about gender and sex, examine your heart in the area of sexual purity. Are you without sexual sin? That is, according to God's holy sexuality—chastity or one woman, one man, married, never sex outside of it. Within it, never sex for power or because you want something, not lusting after someone. Are you completely pure? And if you are, beware lest you be like the self-righteous Pharisee who says, "I'm so glad I'm not like one of them." Beware lest you posture be anything other than, "Woe is me, a sinner." There is One who is without sin; He's the one writing on the ground.

The principle here is that we are all born with a sin orientation. Since Adam and Eve, we have all been born with original sin; our flesh is oriented with the desire to sin. Jesus is not surprised, and neither should we be, that we are all born with desires and ways of being oriented toward others and toward God that are contrary to his desire for us. And that sin manifests itself in all kinds of internal and external orientations. We fear other races. We violently exercise power. We lustfully desire men and women. But those original sin desires are not who we are. Romans 8 tells us who we are. (vv15-17). Our desire for sin is not God-given, it is sin-given orientation.

Before we turn to see what Jesus, the sinless one, says to the sinner, I want us to hear the story of a man who has been on both sides of this conversation. Sam Ellberry is a pastor in England who shares his struggle with same sex attraction publicly and dies to himself by living a life of celibacy in Christ. Here's his story on video [2:24min].

We see in Jesus the posture of humility; He calls us to examine our own sin orientation. And then, Jesus addresses the woman caught in adultery. His first words are mercy. He's just with her one-on-one—not in front of a crowd, not a

dinner table, not on Facebook, just one-on-one, face-to-face. And Jesus says to her, "Neither do I condemn you."

I hope you know this about Jesus, that he doesn't condemn you. Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." I'm so glad Jesus speaks, "Neither do I condemn you." And you, as followers of Jesus, can speak mercy to your friends and family. I wonder how healing it might be for those who feel excluded to hear from a church "insider," neither do I condemn you. The gift of life is spoken in mercy by Jesus to an unrepentant woman.

For those of us who feel trapped, I think it'd be a lot easier if that was the end of what Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you." We are all sinners, and we all have to walk away. By virtue of the sinless One declaring no condemnation, we all get to go back to our life and do what the desires we were born with tell us to do. But that's not the end. That mercy statement is just the pause that gives this woman and gives us the opportunity to repent. Then Jesus says, "Go and sin no more." It's a double negative, very emphatic. It's like, "Go and don't sin ever again."

Toward those who are walking out of alignment with the Way that is Jesus, we are to bend down and extend in words both mercy and an invitation to Jesus.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And no one comes to the Father except through Him. You don't have to have all the answers. You just need Jesus. The mercy of the Lord speaks, "Neither do I condemn you." And the righteousness of Jesus calls us to, "Go and sin no more." We have a major sin-orientation problem that Jesus won't sweep under the rug.

I know the word "sin" is unpopular. I know the homosexual community has rejected considering sexual orientation, "sin." But we've asked, "What does the Bible say about gender and sexuality?" And I strongly believe that our loving, sacrificial God affirms the traditional, Biblical understanding of holy sexuality and called anything outside of it sin. We have lost our theological understanding of original sin and we have lost God's story line that he came because he loves sinners and wants to be with us forever.

So I feel your personal struggle about how to talk about this with friends and family members and how to affirm that God's Good News is good news for everyone. Jesus said in John 10:10 that he came that we might have life and life abundantly. Here's the problem: I don't think we've embraced that the abundant life Christ has for us is rich both in mercy and in righteousness. The abundant life in Christ is not go to college, have a good career, get married (to someone of the opposite sex, both virgins), buy a house, have a baby, maybe get a boat at some point, go to heaven. That's so uncreative! The Good News of God is so much more rich than that.

Just as one for instance: Did you know that the Bible calls singleness a gift, a charisma, both to you and to the Church? Dig into that Word! Invite single people

into your LifeGroup, your family birthday parties, and into your home. They are intended to be God's charisma, gift to you! And you, single folks, are intended to be God's gift to others and the Church!

You'll be able to speak that abundant life to others if you, yourself, have acknowledged your own sin-orientation before God, repented, and know the freedom that is yours in Christ.

Your story might sound like mine. I know a man who came not to condemn me, but to save me. And I want you to introduce you to him. I've been set free from impulses and desires I have struggled with since birth—issues with control, exaggeration, and self-deprecation. I want you to know that I still struggle, so neither do I condemn you in the places you struggle. But let me extend to you the invitation that someone extended to me—meet Jesus. Would you read his stories with me? Would you come into my church with me? That's what it looks like to bend down and offer mercy. Allow the Holy Spirit the space to bring conviction and real life in Christ.

So here's a summary of our answer to your questions:

- God created gender, male and female, and designed the two genders together for holy sexuality.
- Anything other than holy sexuality is an expression of our sin-orientation.
- Jesus would have us respond to sexual sin just as with all sin: humility, mercy and an invitation to meet Jesus.

Love will indeed win—the love of a holy God for an unholy people who died for us that we might not perish but have everlasting life.