

**“PEOPLE FIRST”**

[1 John 4:7-12](#)

**- Douglas Norris**

It is a joy to be here this morning to give Pastor Kathi an opportunity for a well-deserved vacation. And, it is a joy to share leadership with the youth, including my granddaughter! How inspiring were your reflections! Thank you, youths, for serving, for doing manual labor, for caring about families who need your help and your witness. And, thank you, congregation, for providing life-changing experiences for your youth.

Ellie and I were privileged to observe some of the proceedings of the Western Jurisdiction when they elected Karen Oliveto as the first openly lesbian bishop. And we rejoiced at the inspiring, moving and enthusiastic Consecration Service which was held in the church where we regularly worship, Paradise Valley Church in Arizona.

Gigantic ripples spread across the denomination. Who knows where it will end—schism or a new United Methodist Church. Homosexuality is a controversy that is dividing and may split into the “Untied” Methodist Church. I congratulate Campbell United Methodist Church which has long been a Reconciling Congregation, where you formally and intentionally make a commitment to be in loving Christian ministry with all people without prejudice, in defiance of the official policy of The United Methodist Church which is exclusive.

Many ask, “What about the Bible’s condemnation of homosexual acts?” I personally join with those United Methodists who subscribe to the historic, Wesleyan traditional belief in the authority of the Bible. 2 Timothy 2:16, *“All scripture is inspired by God.”*

However, because the Bible has authority over us, what about troublesome passages like:

Leviticus 11:2-8 forbids the eating of rabbits and pigs.

Leviticus 12 forbids a woman who has given birth to a son from going to church for 33 days, because she is impure. If she gives birth to a girl, she is impure for 66 days!

Leviticus 20:13, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death.”

A friend in our Paradise Valley Church, when confronted by literalists, tells them to turn the page to Leviticus 25.44, “you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you.” So, she’s saving her money to buy a slave from Canada!

Deuteronomy 12:18, 21, *“If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother...Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death.”*

Leviticus 20:10, *“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.”*

1 Corinthians 11:5, *“Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head.”* Any hats here today?

Psalm 15:1,5, *“O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?... Those who do not lend money at interest.”* Where would America’s economy be if we took that seriously?

Do you know anyone who obeys all these passages? It is obvious that all Christians use some method by which we decide what passages have more authority than others. Let’s look at some methods of biblical interpretation.

1) **“Pick and Choose”** is the most popular form of biblical interpretation. Pick out the passages with which we agree and discard the rest. This method assumes the Bible has no inherent authority. Whatever agrees with our biases, prejudices, and what we want to do, is chosen, the rest discarded. Whatever one agrees with has more authority than the Bible. Those of us who believe in the authority of the Bible must reject the Pick and Choose method.

2) The **“All or Nothing”** method assumes that every word is literally written by God and every word is authoritative. If some passages are questioned, then the entire Bible is in question. Such believers, however, are rarely consistent. Do the women wear hats? Do they throw stones at their misbehaving children? Do they lend money at interest? We reject the All or Nothing method as unworkable, and not even followed by its own adherents.

3) The **“Filter”** or historical method. God did not write the words of the Bible. God inspired human beings to write down what God inspired them to write, but God did not suspend the humanness of each author. The Bible is the Word of God communicated through the experience, language and culture of humans. In other words, what they wrote comes through the filter of the cultural and religious customs of their day. In order to understand the author’s filter, we ask questions of each passage: When was it written? Who wrote it? What was going on at the time? Why was it written? To what situation and to whom was it written?

The Bible covers a period of about 2,000 years--from Abraham through the early church. There are different cultures reflected in the Bible, from the nomadic Hebrews to the sophisticated Greek culture of the Roman Empire. There are many filters to work through. Many of the troublesome passages apply only to the time in which they were written. For example, the condemnation of men lying with men was in reference to male prostitution as an act of worshiping Baal, a fertility god, and is therefore a condemnation in that time that does not have authority over us today.

4) The **“People First”** method. When deciding what in the Bible is authoritative and what is not, what criteria do we use? I believe I have come to a conclusion, which I hope will be helpful for the church. As Christians who follow Jesus as Lord, who recognize Jesus

Christ as the cornerstone of our faith, we look through Jesus' filter. Jesus is our ultimate authority, and Jesus put PEOPLE FIRST.

Jesus reinterpreted Scripture, and even changed Scripture. He was not bound by the traditional interpretations. Matthew 5:38, Jesus said, "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'*" (Jesus is quoting Exodus 21:24 and Leviticus 24:20) *But I say to you, "Do not resist an evildoer."* There are those in our day who still believe in an eye for an eye, and ignore how Jesus changed the old law. Do they blatantly disregard Jesus' teaching and still call themselves Christians?

Also, Jesus defied the legalists and their literal, strict interpretations of Scripture. Jesus flagrantly disobeyed laws and violated tradition, much to the consternation of the legalistic Pharisees. The criterion Jesus used was that he put people first. The needs, hurts and pain of people were more important than laws. When his disciples were hungry and picked grain on the Sabbath, violating strict Sabbath laws, the Pharisees were livid. Jesus replied, "*The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:26) Do you hear the principle, how Jesus interpreted Scripture? Jesus put people first.

When Jesus healed the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, the Pharisees were again livid and immediately conspired against Jesus. Jesus said to them, "*Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?*" (Mark 3:4) People first! Saving life is more important than observing the Sabbath.

When the Pharisees questioned him about divorce, Jesus changed Scripture. He overruled Moses! The Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 24:1) allowed a husband to divorce his wife simply by giving her a certificate saying they were divorced. Jesus opposed this easy divorce law (of course, the wife was not allowed to give her husband a certificate)! Jesus declared, "*What God has joined together, let no one separate.*" (Mark 10:9)

In the current controversy over homosexuality, there are many United Methodists who are quite passionate about our denomination's position. The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church accepts homosexuals as "individuals of sacred worth" but condemns "the practice of homosexuality." I don't understand the distinction. It's as if we accept tennis players, but they are forbidden from playing tennis. Or, we accept swimmers, but they are not allowed to swim. We accept homosexuals, but they can't act like one!

Also, the official position of The Social Principles--"fidelity in marriage, and celibacy in singleness"-- is cruel. No sex outside marriage sounds right, but our denomination does not allow same-sex marriages so gays are forever single by definition, and therefore are commanded to be celibate. It's easy for married heterosexuals to condemn gays to celibacy. Easy and cruel.

In light of the Orlando tragedy, sadly with that attitude, The United Methodist Church contributes to the cultural climate where LGBT persons are vilified, attacked and massacred.

United Methodist legalists are quite passionate about their beliefs, but are either ignorant of or do not care how their beliefs affect people, how homosexuals are hurt by the church laws. The United Methodist Church is not putting people first. And our denomination has the audacity to advertise “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors!” Talk about hypocrisy! And you know what Jesus thought of hypocrites!

Jesus was impatient with the legalists of his day.

- Jesus cared more about the man with the withered hand, and healed him, than he cared about the Sabbath laws.
- Jesus cared more about the need of his disciples to eat than he cared about the Sabbath law.
- Jesus cared more about the rights of women who could be divorced easily, than he cared about the sanctity of the holy Mosaic scriptural law!
- There is no record that Jesus ever said anything about homosexuality.

But, I believe, Jesus cares more about gays than he cares about the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church!

We’re not just talking about laws, principles, and Biblical interpretation, we’re talking about people—real, live human beings who were born the way they are, who struggle to be accepted, to be loved, to be respected.

We’re not just talking about gays in the news or demonstrating on the street, we’re talking about people we know, people in our families (most families have a gay person somewhere). We’re talking about people who have been raised in this church. People, I believe, Jesus puts first.