

Sermon Notes – July 2 2006
St. John's United Church of Christ, San Francisco
Rev. Kyle Lovett
Sermon Title: "What Queer Texts!"
Readings: 1 Samuel & Ruth

Opening Story

The Chapel at PSR was decorated in rainbows – rainbow streamers running from the cross to the back of the room overhead; a balloon rainbow across the aisle; rainbow clothing on the guest choir.

The two men who came up the aisle were so handsome!
And the congregation beamed so brightly!
And the scripture text that was read before the sermon was from Ruth:

*"Where you go, I will go;
And where you lodge, I will lodge.
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."*

I thought it ironic when I discovered that last week's lectionary texts included the Jonathan and David story from 1 Samuel. Pride Weekend! The one weekend we have a short worship service so congregants can go march in the Pride Parade – bearing witness to God's extravagant welcome and handing out bead necklaces to invite everyone to worship. Pride Weekend! Jonathan and David!

Where do we go for role models?

(And by "we" I mean everybody - sgl¹ folk as well as families, friends, loved ones – all who are aware of and embracing of a fairly wide range of expression of human loving and living.)

The Pride Parade?

Well, yes... but only if you stand on the sidelines and watch all four hours of it. If you rely on the pieces that get broadcast on CNN, then you're not going to see the most well-rounded picture of lavender people and their extended families. You'll see what the public media identifies and sensationalist, what will get the attention of TV viewers. No, that's not the best way to find role models.

What about in the Scriptures?

Well, yes... but – contrary to the assertions of conservative Christians in the public arena, there are many varieties of models in the Scriptures. Today's stories show two of that great variety.

But it's not all about being gay, or sgl -

It's about being Christian, and having ancient texts that inform our faith and our life journeys.

So, what do we learn from - how are we informed in our journey by - these queer texts?

And these texts **are** queer²

Strange!

Unusual, unexpected, unconventional

Non-normative

And they're Gay – both embraced by lavender folk and celebrative of the richness of relationship

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS IN THE BIBLE³

The Bible describes emotionally close relationships between two people of the same gender. They appear to have progressed well beyond a casual friendship.

The Book of Ruth

This book concerns the love between Naomi and her [widowed](#) daughter-in-law, Ruth. Naomi's [husband](#) and her two sons die and Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to return to their homes:

"At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her." (Ruth 1:14; TNIV).

Instead of leaving Naomi, Ruth pledges to stay with her (Ruth 1:16-18). This relationship has therefore long been commended as an example of self-sacrificing love and close friendship.⁴ However, more recently a number of scholars have interpreted this relationship as probably sexual in nature. For example, Horner⁵ argues: "Whether there existed a relationship of physical love between Ruth and Naomi cannot be demonstrated. *However, the right words are there.*" (*emphasis added*)

The word Horner is primarily concerned with is the word translated as *clung* in Ruth 1:14, which is the Hebrew word "dabaq". This word is also translated in Genesis 2:24 as *united* "to his wife" and in Genesis 34:3 as *drawn* "to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the young woman". The context of these passages is obviously one of sexual attraction.

However, the same word is also used in different contexts (Brown et al.). For example it is translated as *stay* in Ruth 2:8 (TNIV):

"So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me."

In this context the word obviously has no sexual connotation, while at the end of the book Ruth marries Boaz, with Naomi's encouragement (Ruth 3:1-4). Robinson (2005) therefore concludes that "Although this same-sex friendship appears to have been very close, there is no proof that it was a sexually active relationship."

Books of Samuel: David and Jonathan

It has been widely and traditionally interpreted by Biblical scholars as a very close but not sexual relationship (cf. *Issues in human sexuality*, para. 2.17). However, a growing minority of scholars have argued that this was a sexual relationship (cf. Vasey 1995, Greenberg 1988), whilst acknowledging that "in neither case does the text mention a sexual aspect to the relationship" (Greenberg 1988, p.113). **The possible euphemisms within the text and events** such as Jonathan disrobing (1 Samuel 18:4: "stripped himself of the robe that was upon him" [KJV](#)) in front of David (highly unusual for it to occur between men at the time outside of bathing) and also holding each other extremely closely and kissing have led some scholars to argue "If modern readers do not see "sexual relationship" in this story, it is because they cannot accept the plain implications of the story itself" (Johns 2004; cf. Crompton 2002). However, as a sexual relationship is not made explicit, many continue to interpret the relationship as a "classical Biblical example" (Hilborn 2002, p.2) of brotherly and sisterly love.

David and Jonathan

Passages in 1 Samuel & 2 Samuel describe, among other events, a extremely close bond between David and Jonathan. Jonathan was the son of King Saul, and next in line for the throne. But Samuel anointed David to be the next king. This produced a strong conflict in the mind of Saul.

Interpretation:

Some important verses which describe their relationship are:

● 1 Samuel 18:1

"...Jonathan became one in spirit with David and he loved him as himself." (NIV)

"...the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (KJV)

Most translations use the term "soul" rather than "spirit" to describe the bond. They speak of an "immediate bond of love", their souls being "in unison," their souls being "knit", etc. Genesis 2:7, as written in the original Hebrew, describes how God blew the spirit into the body of Adam that God had formed from earth, so that Adam became a living soul. This means that "soul", in the ancient Israelite times, represents a combination of body and spirit. Thus the two men appear to have loved each other both physically and emotionally.

● 1 Samuel 18:2

"From that day, Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house." (NIV)

David left his parent's home and moved to Saul's where he would be with Jonathan. This is a strong indication that the relationship was extremely close. It echoes the passage marriage passage in Genesis 2:24: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

● 1 Samuel 18:3-4

"And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt." (NIV)

Since people in those days did not wear underwear, Jonathan stripped himself naked in front of David. That would be considered extremely unusual behavior (then and now) unless their relationship was physical.

I commend also to you these passages and the entry at wikipedia.com unpacking them:

● 1 Samuel 18:20-21

● 1 Samuel 20:41

And finally,

● 2 Samuel 1:26

"I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women."

In the society of ancient Israel, it was not considered proper for a man and woman to have a platonic relationship. Men and women rarely spoke to each other in public. Since David's only relationships with women would have been sexual in nature, then he must be referring to sexual love here. It would not make sense in this verse to compare platonic love for a man with sexual love for a woman; they are two completely different phenomenon. It would appear that David is referring to his sexual love for Jonathan.

So where do we go for our role models?

We *can* go to the scriptures!

As the Trinity Store website notes, the place that has the icon on the front cover of the bulletin: (*emphasis mine*)

Times have changed since the events [of 1 and 2 Samuel] were recorded, and such intense love between two men makes many uncomfortable in our day. For gay men who struggle to remain within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, however, the love between Jonathan and David ***is an inspiration and strength.***⁶

What we need to be careful of is blending or confusing ancient understandings of human sexuality and behavior and our modern understandings!

The Points:

There's no definitive answer to the relationships we see portrayed in the Scriptures – these queer ones could go either way (so to speak).

Relationship models abound in Scripture.

There is yet more truth and light to break forth from God's Holy Word.

Other Resources:

Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times (Paperback) by [Thomas Marland Horner](#) (Amazon)

http://www.glbtc.com/arts/subjects_david_jonathan,3.html

¹ Same-gender-loving

² Over the past two decades, an important change has occurred in the use of queer in sense 2d. The older, strongly pejorative use has certainly not vanished, but a use by some gay people and some academics as a neutral or even positive term has established itself. This development is most noticeable in the adjective but is reflected in the corresponding noun as well. The newer use is sometimes taken to be offensive, especially by older gay men who fostered the acceptance of gay in these uses and still have a strong preference for it. www.m-w.com entry for "queer"

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bible_and_homosexuality

⁴ eg. Issues in Human Sexuality para. 2.7

⁵ 1978, p.20

⁶ <http://www.trinitystores.com/?detail=609&artist=17>