

April 30, 2009
Marble Collegiate Church
1 West 29th Street, New York, NY
Sr. Carol Perry, *SU*
What the Bible Says (and Doesn't Say) on Homosexuality

“And the Lord God looked at everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good”, and that includes everyone in this room. Take that to heart, please.

And could I just make very clear what we are about tonight. I am not here as the representative of any religious denomination, nor am I interested in your conversion to any set of beliefs. I have absolutely no political agenda, I am not part of the legislative process of any of our state legislatures, and I am definitely not interested in amending the Constitution of the United States. I am here for one purpose only: solely to speak of the Bible, of what it is and of what it says; not of what some churches and religious leaders say that it says.

Over the centuries the Bible has been turned into a multi-purpose proof text for almost anything that somebody wants to prove. The Bible has been used to prove that somehow God was behind the institution of slavery, that it is God's desire that women forever remain second class citizens and certainly the establishment of patriarchal societies comes directly because that is exactly what God wants. We do know that God supports and encourages warfare according to those who quote the Bible for their own purposes. Very often someone says, “But the Bible says..”, and that is supposed to end the discussion. I would like to begin therefore by asking of you, and we are asked this of ourselves, what is the Bible. How can we best appreciate it? What does it really say about the topic that we have under discussion this evening? I wrote that statement very carefully just to make certain that we are all on exactly the same page.

I want to begin therefore with the Bible, because that is our main subject for this evening. Many of you who have been with me for some part of the 29 years know what I'm going to say for the next few minutes, so you may digest your dinner at this point and tune me out. You can come back in in a few minutes. But what I'm holding in my hand is a library, and I wish it were not all bound between one set of covers because it doesn't look like a library; but it is. It is the collection of separate books that span the centuries. It had a very long oral tradition before anything was written down. It was in the beginning a set of campfire stories that were told by our ancestors, the Israelites, and then eventually it came to written form.

It is a story that begins in the middle Bronze Age, when no one in this room was born. The middle Bronze Age is roughly the 19th century before Christ. It began among a tribal people who were agrarian, they were farmers and herders. They had absolutely no use for cities, that's where the bad people lived, and the good guys were out in the

fields. They were a polygamist society. They believed that every child was a gift of God and one should have many of them. They were monotheists; strangely Israel was one of the few monotheistic societies in the ancient world, one God. They had a very short life expectancy; the average person who appears in the early pages of the Bible probably lived a far shorter life than most of you in this room. They were dead in their early 30s. Some long life people made it to 40. Those wonderful numbers in the Bible that somebody lived to be 972 are all marvelous, wishful thinking stories. No one ever lived that long. They had no clear belief in any life after death. When you died, you were put into the ground, you went down into a dark hole called Sheol, and if you had any existence there it was worth absolutely nothing.

This library began then with these rural agricultural polygamist tribal people, and the story ends somewhere near the end of the first century of our era, one or two of the letters possibly from the second century. But if you look at the expanse of time we are talking about 2,000 years before Christ was born and 2,000 years afterward. So we are 4,000 years culturally separated from what the Bible has to say. To make the story even more complicated, (I'm a lover of mystery stories so I love to make stories complicated;) the Bible was written in two languages that none of us speaks any longer. Most of the Old Testament is in the ancient form of Hebrew, with a few Aramaic passages, their first cousin languages, and almost all of the New Testament is in a form of Greek, which is no longer the Greek that is spoken anywhere in the world. To make life maybe even more complicated, therefore, we are looking at a book in translation. This probably will be news to some of you, but God did not speak English. Not even King James' English, for those of you who are so devoted.

So I think we are most honest if we come to the Bible and ask very truthful questions of it. What are the enduring truths we are to learn from these ancestors in belief? The Bible is not a book of data that fits any kind of standard by which we might live today. This is the book that comes from a non-scientific people. I have become vastly amused and then I always weep when I see fundamentalists attempting to prove scientifically when the world was created. All you need to do is pick up any reputable scientific journal, and you realize how little we know about the origins of life, how many millions and millions of years this spinning planet has been in its process of evolution. The Bible knew nothing of any of that. These were simplistic people, and their only scientific information came from what their eyes could see. If all of your science came from what your eyes could see, you, too, would be limited. So do not go there for scientific information, and do not go there for data about which the Bible has no interest and therefore offers nothing. I think what we can best do is three little steps that Diane Burgant, current Bible scholar said, "When we go to the Bible, we should say, 'what did it mean then?', and if we can find that out, that's one thing. What does that phrase, that set of ideas mean now, and then what are we to do with it?" That's a pretty easy rule of

thumb; what did it mean then, what does it mean now and what are we to do with it? Or maybe perhaps, what is it to do with us? Think about that.

Then let's stir in one more problem, because I love problems. Let's stir in the problem of inspiration. I spent some last minute time this afternoon doing my last little research to see if I could have a better understanding of what inspiration is. I found a major biblical scholar of the day who said just this, "We have need of a broader and more measured theory than any theory that has been formulated to date". Got that? Which is a way of saying, we don't know exactly, exactly. All right? But know one thing that inspiration is not. Inspiration is not automatic writing. Moses didn't say every morning, "pardon me, it's my inspiration time now" and go in and sit at his desk and his hand just wrote things. That's not what we mean by inspiration. All you need to do is read a little of any book of the Bible, and you realize a little bit here and a little bit there, and you realize that these are different styles. Read something as blunt as the Prophet Amos, who tells the women of the northern kingdom; you are fat cows of Bashan. Well now that's one way to win friends and influence people! Then when something is as beautiful as the poetry in the book of Isaiah, and you realize that a number of human hands were at work. The authors of the Bible were human; they were like you and me. Some of them were educated, and others had almost nothing except the power and the conviction of a truth that they preached. So the humanity of the author comes through. So what do we mean by inspiration? I think the best thing we can offer there is that God inspired these people, He guided their thinking. He helped them develop religious ideas, but the human person will always appear there, and we cannot take away that humanity. What they offer us through the inspired work of God is God's enduring truths that are in the Bible. But I also want to say to you, and I mean this very truthfully, God also made each of us in this room. God made us as thinking people, and God intended us as intelligent people to take the words He inspired another era to write, and he wants us to read them and to read them intelligently.

Let's make another problem. We are reading in translation, as I said. We have no original copies of any book of the Bible. Probably the oldest copies we have date from second or third century before Christ. I think we all know what happens when you make copies, mistakes. Right? You doze off. Did you ever start to write something down and never finish it? So there are difficulties; there were difficulties in translation. The translators, the scholars, liked to talk about "singletons." There are words that appear once in the Bible and nowhere else, and nobody knows what they mean. So we have to take all of that into consideration. So we come, we here in the 21st century, with all of these problems, and we say to ourselves, "and what does the Bible say about homosexuality"? If you got out your concordances and looked up the Bible and homosexuality, you would have found nothing. And so what does the Bible say and the

answer is nothing. So you may all go home now. No, I better offer a few more thoughts here.

But just so you understand this, all of us heterosexuals and homosexuals, the word homosexual is the 19th century invention. Therefore, don't try to find it in your concordance, it isn't there. What we do have to talk about is that we are all sexual beings and our identity is tied up with our sexuality. Our Biblical ancestors were no different from any of us. They had a slightly different view of sexuality from those of us in the 21st century, and it was because they were people of their time. Human fecundity was extremely important. It was important to replicate the race. It was important because people didn't live long enough, and therefore there had to be more and more of them. As the believing Israelite community developed, human fertility was extremely important to bring the Messiah into the world. He was to be born, they hoped, from one of them. If you were taking a course in Biblical biology, you would be finished in less than ten minutes because they understood so little. The human being was created because of male sperm; the woman had nothing to do with it. She was only the walking incubator. He deposited his gift, but notice please how many women in the Bible are referred to as barren because if his gift did not take, it was always her fault. Little thought there, you might want to carry away with you. But in an agrarian society, children were a prime talent, they were of use, even the littlest ones could be helpful. Infant mortality was very high. As late as the first century of our era we know that of all the children born, 1/3 died by the age of two. Nobody was worried about over population, there was nobody doing statistics on that. Women received their value from the number of children they produced and brought into this world.

But in thinking with this Israelite concept of a God who loved them, who thought they were special, that they were different, they were very careful about the outsiders and about the blurring of the lines between the uses and the them. Every world has its uses and its them, and the Biblical world was careful to set boundaries. Therefore, they want to make very sure that those outside races did not get mixed in with the Israelites. That was part of boundary setting. Those people out there did things, thought things that no Israelite would. The things they did and the things they thought were referred to biblically as "abominations." That's a term which in English is a very strong term. Think about it for a minute. We think of it in terms of heinous sin or something. But biblically an abomination is something those non-Jews do, but we Jews don't. It puts that all in another category. The clean and the unclean is a rather similar category. The world biblically has nothing whatever to do with using Purel so you don't get the flu that's going around, the swine flu. Clean and unclean meant were you separate from those other people. Now if you put those two things in your head, I think it might help just a little bit as we move to look at those texts on the yellow papers, which I have put before you because these are texts which are most often quoted. If

you ever, you know, need stimulus because your blood pressure is low, all you have to do turn on the TV and listen to some of the commentators who rant and rave about what the Bible says.

I'm going to begin with what I suppose is the prime story, and it is the famous Sodom and Gomorrah story. Before we get to this passage, which is so often quoted, would you like to just back up mentally for one moment and realize that chapter 19 in the book of Genesis, that quotation, that long one that you have before you, is all about is that before this ever happened, those two visitors, those angels, those messengers from God, whatever that word means, they had already come to Abraham with the understanding that Sodom and Gomorrah were to be destroyed. So Sodom and Gomorrah were going to be destroyed before anything happened in chapter 19. Ah! And then maybe sometime when you have nothing to do, if you back up to chapter 13, you will have where the story really began.

The story began with Lot, Abraham's nephew. They had come together on this great wandering journey from what we would say today is Iraq. He and Abraham had so prospered that their flocks could no longer be supported on the same land. So one bright day Abraham said to him, "We've got to separate here. You take your choice. You go to the east, I'll go to the west. You go to the west, I'll go the east" and Lot was a very astute chap. He looked around, and he saw these lovely fertile plains around the Jordan River, and he chose to go there. But when he comes into that part of the world, he is an outsider. He is a Semite, part of a group of wandering tribes, and he moves in among the people of Sodom who never accept him because he is an outsider. Keep that in mind.

The sins of Sodom are great, whatever they might be, but they all precede chapter 19. In chapter 19 these two visitors from God come and knock upon the door of Lot. Rather Lot sees them I think in the town square and invites them in. Here we have something, a concept so removed from us in the 21st century that I have to explain it just a little bit. There were no motels in the ancient world. If you were visiting some place, you were totally dependent on whether or not someone would take you in. Go back some time and re-read the Odysseys. As Odysseys attempts to make his way home from the Trojan War, he is knocking on every third palace door, and they take him in. They always give him a bath, clean clothing, a little meal, like on a little TV table, and then they say, "Why have you come and what can we do for you?". When they find out he is somebody who is not an enemy, they will then permit him to come for the next meal to the table of the household. The whole ancient world so valued hospitality, taking someone in. Now today, we don't have that value, so we don't understand totally what lies behind this.

But Lot takes these two strangers in and it is one further thing which antagonizes the people of Sodom. He is doing things they would not do. But once you took someone into your house, they then belonged to your household and you had the obligation to protect them with your life. By our standards what Lot does makes no sense, and it doesn't 21st century-wise. It makes perfect sense in the 18th century before Christ. He took those people in and therefore they were his responsibility. So when his neighbors come knocking at the door and they say, "Hand those men out, we would know them", they want to see who they are. Is this really a case of gang rape? The answer is I can't tell you because nobody can. That's all they say, but all Lot knows is he cannot hand them out. Therefore, before he gives up these strangers, he has to give up his own daughters, if need be. That's horrifying to us. We don't live in this world, we aren't middle Bronze period people. He offers them his daughters and they don't want the daughters, but they do say this of him. Down there in verse 10, "this fellow came here as an alien". They have a grudge against Lot, he is a foreigner, and he would play the judge. It's the two strangers who pull Lot back into his own house and save him. Whatever the townspeople are about, they are suddenly blinded and unable to knock down Lot's door.

You can make out of that what you want to. I would say the vast majority of the conservative evangelical world wants to make this a case of Sodom's sin was homosexuality, and this is a further indication of it. May I offer two possible clarifications of the sin of Sodom? One I came upon very recently. But it is in the Prophet Ezekiel, Ezekiel 16:48 to 50. I found it too late to put it on those pieces of paper but listen as I read this to you. "And as I live says the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. This was the guilt of your sister Sodom. She and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy. They were haughty and they did abominable things before me. Therefore, I removed them when I saw it." End of verse 50. Did anybody see anything about homosexuality in there? I didn't. Their sin is that they failed to see their neighbors, they were proud, had excessive food, did not aid the poor and needy. On the sheet in front of you just skip over to what Jesus says, the only comment, the only Old Testament passage Jesus ever commented on specifically, and it is in the Gospel of Matthew there in chapter 10 where Jesus has sent the disciples out on a mission. The 12 have gone off and he tells them that they are to go from town to town, accepting the hospitality of the people in the towns, bringing peace. If the town is unworthy, he says, "if they will not accept you, then you are to shake the dust of that town off your feet as you leave", and Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town". A violation of hospitality, says Jesus, will earn the punishment of Sodom, the destruction of the city.

I would find it very difficult therefore to make this a passage that has something powerful to say about homosexuality. I think the people of Sodom were guilty of many sins, so let's roll them all up there and leave them there.

The other text which people love to somehow quote is from the book of Leviticus. If you ever have insomnia, do read the book of Leviticus. It is this marvelously, wonderful potpourri of prohibitions, commandments, recommendations, all kinds of things that bore most of us almost to tears. Remembering that originally the Bible had no chapters and verses, all they can do is collect things by categories, and there are these whole series of categories in Leviticus, in chapters 17, 18, 19, about how one should or should not live. There is the passage in Leviticus chapter 18:22, which says, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination." But now we know what an abomination is, don't we? Just above that, in verse 18, it says, "and you shall not take a woman as a rival to her sister, that is as a second wife, while her sister is still alive". In other words a polygamist man should not marry two sisters. And I know I can see in some of your faces immediately leaping to your mind, you know a patriarchal father who married two sisters don't you? Jacob, he married both Leah and her sister, Rachel. So that prohibition was certainly violated by one of the great patriarchs of Israel, and I didn't see him get sizzled by God and go up in smoke, did you? Of course, a man shall not lie with a man. Biblically, could they produce a child? No, and what was the only purpose of sexual intercourse? To produce children. The whole concept we have of human enrichment never even enters into this. Could I say as you read through this section, there is probably not a person in this room who is not violating one of the prohibitions that follow after this. I imagine, and I stand before you as guilty, you may not wear a garment made of two different kinds of material. Anybody in here guilty? Anybody, you are. "A man shall not trim the edges of his hair nor his beard." Anybody guilty? I see a bunch of guilty people. "You shall not practice augury." Has anyone read his or her stars recently? "You shall not put any tattoo marks upon you."

To begin to see what Leviticus is, it's this wonderful combination of things and of course, I love the fact that a little bit farther on in Leviticus rebellious children shall be put to death. Some of us would not have made it up to this point. I also think it is extremely important that we have to say to ourselves, do every one of these biblical prohibitions have for us today exactly the same value that they had back in the days when they were being offered? No! The two kinds of material in your clothing. Of course there were to be no mixtures; that was an abomination. Tattoos usually were a sign of some kind of worship of a pagan deity or something; away with that. Why they were not trimming their hair I have no very clear idea, but they were certainly all about it.

So prohibitions, rules, regulations that come from an era which is not ours, we have to look at so carefully and say, "Really, does this apply to us today? What was the reasoning behind it?" If the reasoning behind it is not something which makes very

good sense for our living, then I think we need to move right on. We are not living back there. It is interesting to see that's how they lived, but we don't live that way.

Then we come to the New Testament and Jesus. I firmly believe that most of us are of Christian origin of here, and he is in the important person in our lives. Jesus had absolutely nothing to say on the topic. Amen! If you hear Christian preachers more intent on quoting Leviticus from the 12th century BC rather than Jesus Christ from the 1st century AD, then I wonder about the sources of their theology.

Jesus' whole ministry, as far as I can see, had to do with making certain that the outsiders became insiders. It was the prostitutes who were made welcome. It was the lepers who were healed and brought to the table. It was the sinner who was welcomed home. Jesus was not about putting up more barriers. Jesus didn't give a whole long list of thou shalt nots. Rather Jesus gave us a whole list of thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Keep that firmly in mind as we move to Paul, who, unfortunately, for poor Paul is so often quoted and re-quoted on this topic.

We need to remind ourselves about Paul. Remember, all of Paul's letters were written before any gospel was written. Paul never saw Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Paul was living in the world of the gospel oral tradition. All he knew was what people said. That's number one. Number two, and I think it is extremely important, Paul never wrote a letter to anyone in this room. When we are reading Paul's letters, we are reading somebody else's mail. You can get into trouble that way, as you well know. The letters were addressed to his church communities, who had very specific problems that he was working on with them. Sometimes he was scolding them from afar before he got there so that he wouldn't have to scold them in person. Sometimes he was responding to their questions, and the problem is we don't have the questions. All we have is Paul's answer. The other thing is that Paul is this incredible man, and I say none of this to take away from him. I'm just trying to set him into his position in religious history.

Paul was this incredible, in a hurry, dashing across a world which was in a moment of transformation. Paul was trained as a Jewish rabbi, and his mission, he suddenly realized was to make welcome those outsiders. Now you do realize that by the laws of the Old Testament, when the early Christian community welcomed the non-Jew into the community, they were violating the abomination law, weren't they? Have you ever thought about that? When that first pagan, Cornelius, knocked on the door of Peter's house and said, "Will you please come and baptize me and Mrs. Cornelius and the little Corneli, we all want to become Christians", it was an incredible moment. The heavens shook because everything in the Old Testament was about being separate. The very named Pharisees, they were the religious leaders, Paul was a Pharisee and his name meant separate. What does Paul find himself doing; he becomes the apostle to the

gentiles, to the non-Jew. That is what a gentile is, any non-Jew. The Christian community therefore was to welcome in these people from beyond the borders.

Now Jesus never said now go knock down all the barriers, but he knew what would happen, and he trusted their judgment to make right religious decisions to move the community forward. In that moving forward, so many of these precepts of the old law would have to go. So Paul is like a neophyte doing something that never been done before. He is an incredible human being. I can't wait until I meet him in heaven; we have so much to talk about.

But he moves into the Greek world, and this is not his own world. He was more comfortable in Asia Minor. But he comes into the Greek world, and he is faced with some extraordinary situations. The simplest of them I think you remember from high school. It is the whole question of the Greek pantheon and the Greek gods. The Greeks had an enormous admiration for the human person, the human physiognomy. All their gods were made in the likeness of man. They were just larger than life human beings. Paul was a Jew and he came from a biblical world where his God created human beings in the likeness of God. It is exactly the opposite. But what a powerful force he was bringing into a very carnal, very hedonistic society. He had to make decisions as he preached in these Greek cities and where his audience largely consisted of Greek men. He was preaching to men who came out of a sexual world so different from anything he had known. The average Greek man had both homosexual and heterosexual encounters. It was a part of his growing up. The phrase "catamite" comes from the Greek world. The average Greek male kept a young slave, a young male slave as a sexual partner for his homosexual encounters. He also had a legitimate wife and he had concubines, and he had access to the public prostitutes. He had a very rich sexual life. When he wanted to become a Christian, Paul's got to pull him in and bring him away from all of that to another way of looking at Jesus Christ, who took on flesh and, if you will, sanctified it.

You know, we can never look at each other in the same way again, because Jesus walked among us in the human body. So with that heads up, we have to as we look as those Pauline passages, follow the advice of a great, great biblical scholar, Raymond Brown, who said this. He said, "Always ask yourself what was Paul condemning and how binding is that condemnation for a Christian of today?". So we come and realize from all of Paul's letters, and they are numerous, we come up with three little passages that in any way can touch upon the topic of this evening. The passage from the letter to the Romans, the one from Corinthians and the one from Timothy. Just to say a word there, please.

That particular little passage is part of the first three chapters of Romans, which you need to read in their entirety. That by the way is an extremely long and complex letter.

Paul is writing to probably the community in Rome, which he has not yet visited, but he has heard all kinds of things. This was Rome where Nero was in power, where the degradation of the human person in the Coliseum was part of the entertainment. With all of that, Paul condemns the Roman outlook on the world, on their sexual excitements, on their use and abuse of each other. I think we just need to pause for one moment and ask ourselves is there any difference between our looking at human beings in committed caring relationships and looking at human beings who are using and abusing other human beings. I think whether abuse is heterosexual or homosexual, it's always wrong, however you want to define it. Paul was deeply concerned about what he was going to find in Rome, and so he speaks about the shameless, he speaks about natural and unnatural intercourse. They are vague terms, we don't fully know what he is talking about, and he never defines them. He hopes the Romans will take all of this to heart, look upon the paganism that was rampant around them and go on their way.

The letter to the Corinthians is much more pointed in one sense. Corinth was an incredible city, the whole world passed through Corinth. (Before they fixed up 42nd street I always said Corinth was the 42nd street of the ancient world. Then they went and cleaned it up, and I don't have any point of comparison anymore. Sorry.) But the Corinthians did everything, and I was so struck when we were there last spring with some of you on that trip through Greece. The city of Corinth lies down here on the plain and high above it rears the Acro Corinth, the height of Corinth, with the temple on the top for the goddess of love, who was served by pseudo acts of love, by her temple prostitutes. So often in the Greek world, the prostitution of love was the way the deities were served. I remember that guide saying that the prostitutes in Corinth walked the streets of the city, where the sailors, the trades people, the businessmen were. As they passed you could read on the soles of their sandals "follow me". The prostitutes would lead you straight up to the temple where your prostitution, your unnatural intercourse, would therefore be an act of love to the goddess of love.

Paul talks about wrong doing here. He says, "Do you not know that wrong doers will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers; none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God." Two of the words under discussion are to be found there. We are using the New Revised Standard translation and we have the word male prostitute. The Greek word for that is *malakos*, which is sometimes translated as soft, sometimes as effeminate, sometimes as male slave. No one is quite certain how it should be translated, I will tell you that, but it is obviously someone who is being used by another person. The other term is the one that so many of the translations seem to call sodomites, except for the New International Version; they say the homosexual offenders. The King James says those who abuse themselves with mankind. Got that? I read that four times. Those who abuse themselves with mankind, and I still couldn't

figure out what King James wanted me to do with that. But the word is a Greek word, *arsenokoites*, and nobody but nobody offers a translation which makes any sense. I looked up Yardsman, probably the greatest dictionary of the Bible that has been put together, and this is what the scholars there have to say. "The key Greek term involved here, *arsenokoites*, is rare and of uncertain origin." Got that? It is rare and of uncertain origin, so uncertain as it is, I leave you with the uncertain passage there, whatever it is, don't do it. That's all I can say.

The same words crop up in the first letter to Timothy, which I think we all know, but I'll just say it to make sure we all do, is not a letter of Paul. It was a letter written in honor of Paul, probably by some of his disciples who put together some bits and pieces of Pauline teaching and then added some things on their own.

Now I didn't offer you very much by way of biblical condemnation, did I? So what I think we come to as we look at this today is this: many of us, and I will start with myself right here. I grew up in a world where if you had spoken to me when I was in my 20s, I would have assured you I had never met a homosexual person in my life. Because I lived in a world where anyone who was homosexual or lesbian was very carefully locked in a closet somewhere. There were no overt admitters, if you will, of sexual orientation. It was only after I had come to live and work in New York, and after I had begun to realize that among people who were now my friends, at whose table I had broken bread, with whom I had gone to the theater, with whom I had traveled, I realized I knew some of the finest Christians I had ever met, and they were homosexual by definition. So should I allow the definition to take away what I knew of them as human beings.

What I'm attempting to say I think is that for some people they are afraid and they condemn a category, but have they ever met a person? I think we need to admit our prejudices. Some of you might be prejudiced against Hispanics or blacks or blue-eyed Caucasians, or left handed people. Prejudices are not rational. There has never been a rational prejudice on the face of the earth. Most of the time they come from fear. If perhaps we would be honest and lay out there the fact that our prejudices come from our fears, then perhaps we could begin to look at this issue which is roiling our society in a totally new way.

I would like to say in conclusion here that we are very hard pressed to find a biblical text that deals with a homosexual orientation. I have had many conversations with members of the gay and lesbian community. I have yet to find one who said to me, "I chose this". I have had many say to me, "I didn't choose this. It is who I am", and I cannot take your sexual identity away from you. I began by saying God looked at his creation and God said that it was good. I say to you of the gay and lesbian community, you are good. And I say to those of us of the heterosexual community, we better

recognize this. We have to stop categorizing people. We have to do as Jesus did, everything he did was inclusive. We have to look at what Paul was actually condemning, pagan sexual practices, homosexual and heterosexual, which demean the human being and turned one partner into a kind of slave. There were heterosexual marriages in Greece where the women were slaves of their husbands. Every religious group has a right to make its own rules and laws according to their beliefs, and if they decide not to welcome, not to accept, not to honor the humanity and spiritual desires of those knocking on their doors, we cannot change them. But I say by the same token, do not then say to those people you are refusing admission to that you are sinners and when you repent you may come in here. We cannot repent of how God made us. Keep that very firmly in mind. Do not let people erroneously quote scripture to you. That is my plea tonight and that is how I stand before you as a scripture scholar. There is nothing more degrading to our own humanity than to misuse the word of God.

Our biblical ancestors had no psychological insights. We do, and would that we could grow from it. I think it is at our peril that we pull individual words or phrases out of the Bible and this is what they mean because I say this is what they mean. We pull them out with English words today that did not mean what we think they might have meant in another context. Be very careful.

For those of us in the heterosexual community, I say to you, please remember, homosexuality is not catching. There are some people who seem to think it is a little bit like a contagious disease. Heterosexual parents have produced homosexual children, and I know homosexual couples who are raising heterosexual children. You can't give it to somebody else. I'm sorry, you can't do it. Therefore, don't worry if they sit next to you in church, you won't catch it. I promise. Nor can you get an injection against it, it's not possible. The greatest gift we can each give ourselves, please, is the affirmation of our own goodness. For those of you who have been rejected by churches because of something you did not choose, will you please reaffirm the fact that you are God's loved child? And for those of us who surround you, may we reaffirm the fact that you are welcome in our midst because you are God's people? Unless we learn to move forward as God's people, what kind of a witness can we give to an atheistic world that would like nothing more than to look at us and to laugh at those stupid religious people who are condemning something which is not condemnatory.

I have nothing more to say.

What a blessing Sister Carol has been in this community for each one of the 29 years. We are so thankful for your witness on this night and your scholarship with us. You all have in your hands index cards. If you don't, just raise your hand and they will bring you an index card. There is time for questions so if you could write down your questions on the index cards, our thought is that we will probably get a lot of the same ones so instead of having it asked over and over again, we will group it and put it on the card and ask the question. We hope that you will write that down. If you need a pen, there are also pens, so just raise your hand and the team will bring you a pen. It is good to ask questions and remember there is no such thing as a dumb question or a question that is not well informed enough. The only dumb question is one you don't ask. So we can open that up.

Once again I thank all of you for being here. It is a wonderful crowd. Those of you who are Marble members and those of you who are visiting us tonight. So once you are done with your question, Elise has a basket so, Elise, you want to collect them in your basket? Do use your good penmanship. That will help your question flow more smoothly.

While the rest of you are getting your boundless questions together, I will just start with the few easy ones here. I like the person who wants to know when I'm going to go on Oprah with all of this and the answer is never!

Q: The next question is one which is not as obvious as it sounds, you know. Does Sodom and sodomy come from the word Sodom.

A: The answer is yes and it comes because somebody decided that sodomy had to be homosexual intercourse and therefore that's what they applied to it. It a total manufactured word. Nobody knows what the sodomites were about beyond the fact that the origin people of Sodom abused hospitality.

Q: Is it a sin to be gay.

A: I guess maybe an easier question would be is it a sin to be human? No, it is not a sin to be the person God made you. I think the sin comes in when you don't recognize the God who made you and thank him for having made you as you are. That is such a profound acceptance of yourself, and it is not an easy thing to do. We all suffer from this. We don't like parts of ourselves and therefore we reject ourselves. I had a student one time, I always thought he probably was gay. He never raised the issue, and I never did either. He was a bright, capable, fun guy and I liked him. About two years after high school was over he came back to see me one day, and he wept. I said what is your problem, I thought he had something awful the matter and he said, "I have come to tell you I'm gay". I said, "I always knew that so what else." He looked up at me, and he said, "But you always treated me like a human being". I said to him, "Why wouldn't I?"

But I ask all of us: do we treat ourselves as human beings and you cannot give what you do not have.

Q: There is a question about fornication, not being of God.

A: Fornication if you look it up in the dictionary is sexual intercourse between two people who are not married. That's it. Okay? And so if two people not married are engaged in sexual intercourse, theoretically that is fornication, and then I think you have to say "why are they not married, how do they see their sexual intercourse, is it part of their use, abuse of each other?" There are many profound questions behind that, but I just wanted to define fornication for you.

Q: I don't know, this question has to do with either Leviticus or Genesis.

A: I will put it this way are Leviticus and Genesis part of the Talmud. I think the questioner means are they part of the Torah, and the answer is absolutely yes, they are good Jewish books. Are they used by the Orthodox Jews to reject homosexuality. I would assume they are. But please remember, for many of the orthodox they are still waiting for the messiah to come, so that whole teaching about the creation of the messiah becomes important for them, that sexuality should always result in a child.

Q: This is somebody who is bringing me slightly to task for not having worked well enough with the Timothy passage.

A: When I say it was not written by Paul, I was making reference to something I have taught in some of my classes, therefore I ask your pardon for assuming you all knew the same things. Authorship in the ancient world was so different from authorship today. If you went into a bookstore today and saw your name on a book and you were not getting due rights from it you would be incensed. In the ancient world it was an honor to write a book and put somebody else's name on it, and they were being honored by your work. Now that's hard for us to conceive of. So what happened with the last letters of Paul and the two to Timothy fit in that category, Paul has left this earth. He probably left some bits and pieces behind. There probably were some poor secretaries who never got all the stuff written down, and so to honor him, his disciples put together some of what he had written and then they added some pieces about their life today. It is the letters to Timothy where they talk about bishops, a highly structured church which never existed in Paul's world. He was dead by the sixth decade of our era so he never knew anything about bishops. But they did all of that, and it was their way of saying, and the first century world understood this, it was their way of saying if Paul were alive today, this is the way he would be running the church. I'm always a little careful when I'm quoting those last letters of Paul because they are considered by almost all scholars to be non-canonical, that is Paul didn't write them, they are not Pauline. We keep them because they contain Pauline ideas. I hope that helps that little piece.

Q: One says, you say that Jesus was all inclusive, but didn't Jesus tell the adulterers to go and sin no more? So doesn't that validate the churches that say they do not hate the homosexual just the act, that if we do not act on our own sexuality, then we are able to be included?

A: What you do with your sexuality is beyond what I want to talk about this evening to be honest with you, because I think it is possible to abuse either heterosexual or homosexual behavior. I think there is a very profound issue here of first of all looking at the orientation and then moving beyond that to find out how the person, he or she, most fully finds out who he or she needs to be in the eyes of the world and the church. Churches perhaps I should say. I think it is an interesting issue because it is on the political agendas right now also. A clergy person once said in my hearing and I have never forgotten it, speaking of commitment ceremonies of gay couples, and he said in a world where there is so little fidelity, should we not celebrate fidelity where we find it? That has lingered in my mind and I offer it to you. Make of it what you will.

Q: I'm actually going to keep with that topic to a certain extent to say, is gay marriage blessed by God, isn't it better to enter into union with your partner than to live together without seeking God's acceptance.

A: I think that comes from the same kind of thing. A couple of us today were having a discussion about the whole marriage issue, and it is a very confused issue. Could I just say this, it is our society that has confused it for both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Marriage today, if you get married as a heterosexual and you come to a church and you are married by a minister, a priest, a rabbi in the synagogue, two things happen and we forget this. A civil union is formed, you have to get a license, it has civil obligations and therefore you enter into a civil union. If there is a religious aspect to it, you enter into a covenantal relationship. We have so blurred those two that they come together in sort of a swoosh. Our clergy people are actually performing a civil duty, for which they are not being paid, and when you think about it, I have this lovely fantasy that it would be wonderful if we re-separated them. In most of Europe they are separate. If you are going to be married in France, Italy or Spain, you would first go to the Justice of the Peace or some civic functionary who would give you the civil ceremony with the rights, and then you would go to your clergy person and have that ceremony blessed. Before we get into making any more laws, I would love to see us relook at marriage and understand both of those because I think that questioner is coming from the point of commitment, which has its value, and I think we need to learn how to honor it, but I don't think we know how because we have it all mixed up with civil obligations. It is a big issue, so before we amend the constitution, we need to have the other discussion. Maybe just a couple more, okay?

Q: Here is a really quick one. Where is Gomorrah, and is it a part of Sodom?

A: Gomorrah was the next town. The two of them, Sodom and Gomorrah, supposedly are underneath the Dead Sea today, that's the reason the Dead Sea is so dead because they are down there. We have not yet discovered much of their foundations but the two of them belong down there some place.

Q: Here are the last two, and I'm combining questions here. Let's see, why do we call the Bible the word of God when it has been handed down by man and his erroneous way of mishandling the Bible. I missed some words there. Then the other part of that says the Bible says that we should not add or take away from his word, we should not choose to live by part of his word but by all of his word. We cannot change God's word, it is what it is.

A: I quite agree. We shouldn't change the word of God, but we have to always apply the word of God. If God gave us a brain, God would like us to apply it. We have all lived long enough. I taught English for several thousand years and I have lived long enough to know that you can't take anything literally. Some of our most descriptive language has got to be interpreted and understood. You know the youngster who says my father blew his stack when I brought my report card home. Well, did his father really? So the Bible has descriptive language like that. Plus we are not reading it in the Hebrew original. I defy one of you to find me a Hebrew original and come with it and understand it. So when I'm asking that we interpret it, we have to put it in its context and say what did it mean, what were they trying to say? Another of the problems that I didn't even get into was the fact that Hebrew is a very poor language. It has very few vocabulary words, compared with English which is rich, living and growing. Therefore, we are not always certain that our translation is correct. So before you decide to formulate your way of life according to these exact words of the Bible, are they correctly translated, and that is the whole reason we have scholarship, to keep working and working, finding ancient documents with maybe comparable words in them. Could it mean this? This is not adding to or subtracting from the word of God. The first part of that about it being the word of God, I firmly believe God was behind it. Otherwise, why would I have given my life to the study of it, to the explanation of it, to the urging of so many of you to try to understand and follow it, if I thought it was only human beings. But you know, we human beings have our little fingers in things and we made a couple little messes. A poet said "all this earth wears man's smudge." So a few little smudges in the Bible, but it doesn't take away from the fact this is an incredible gift God gave us. I hope I have not in any way said anything tonight that would not emphasize that. Our Hebrew ancestors had something nobody else had, a God who loved them and cared enough about them to bring his word first verbally among them and then when Jesus came, what could he say, I am the word of God. That's powerful.

Q: Here is one, Carol, where you get to represent the entire Catholic Church. Putting two together. The Episcopal community is open to homosexual members. Do you think

there is hope for change in the Roman Catholic community, and how have you reconciled the Roman Catholic Church's view on homosexuality, women in the church and other progressive issues with your involvement with the church?

A: Number one, I would say hope springs eternal in the human breast. Number two, perhaps I could go back to a cocktail party I was at one night with a woman many years ago who had been a Roman Catholic, but had left the church. She was walking around with a large goddess of some kind, bouncing on her chest, and we got into a conversation about women's issues and church issues and found that we agreed on many things. She said to me, "I can't understand why you are still in the Catholic Church. I left over those issues." I said to her, "and that's just it. You left and all you can now do is stand outside and throw rocks. I have stayed and I am still within it, and I'm going to keep on boring until someday there is daylight. If not, I will have made a hole where somebody else can go on boring without starting at point A." So that's how I reconcile it.

Q. Absolutely last question, I promise. What is meant when a religious family member says, "I love you, but I can't accept you".

A: If anybody ever says to you, I love you but I cannot accept you, they do not love you. I'm sorry, they don't. You know, we love each other, not despite our flaws but along with our flaws. We have to. So those family members are justifying their own attitudes of hate toward you by saying I can't accept you, but I do love you. The next time they say that to you, I would like you to say, "And what does that mean, how do you love me, let me count the ways" and let's see what happens. So please just take one thought from all of this tonight. God made you and God loves you, and go with that courage. Look at each other, do not leave here tonight without looking at somebody and saying to that person next to you, behind you, somewhere around you, "I love you". That's what Christianity is all about, and if we do not love each other, we have nothing to give the world. Thank you.