

Dear Jerri, #10

In my last letter I explored Romans 1:26-27, a text that is often presented as a final word whenever people of faith discuss same-sex relationships. What I tried to show is that human sexuality is actually a middle word in Romans chapter one, the point of which is that the originating sin of idolatry affects the human mind, desires, and community. This message was especially pertinent to people living in Rome, where not only were many of the graven images like the golden eagle symbols of Roman deities, many of them were also explicit phallic symbols, making sexuality part of the whole Roman ideology of domination.

To reduce the first chapter of Romans to a final word of judgment about loving same-sex relationships violates not only the spirit of the chapter; it violates the overall flow of the letter in general. The second chapter of Romans begins with these words: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." In fact, the first subsection of Paul's letter to the Romans concludes with the third chapter, in which we find phrases like: "There is none righteous, not even one," and "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It is a bit of mockery to use a few verses from the first chapter of Romans to condemn others when the flow of the letter is that we all are sinful and, therefore, have no right to assume the position of righteous judges.

However, the purpose of Paul's letter is not to leave us all with a word of condemnation, but with redemption. Paul's topic is the gospel, which literally means "good news." That is why, in chapters four and five, Paul repeatedly uses the curious redundant phrase, "much more surely." Paul Ricoeur refers to this over-the-top language as the "logic of superabundance" to show that however present sin might be in the human story, grace is much more surely present.¹ Romans 5:15 sums up this thought nicely, referring to the effects of Adam's sin in Genesis 3 and the grace that comes through Jesus Christ: "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many." Whereas Reinhold Niebuhr once famously observed that "sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine" of Christianity, Paul would answer, "Nonetheless, grace is much more surely abundant.

My point is that it seems disingenuous to quote two verses out of the beginning of this letter as if its purpose is to condemn any and all same-sex relationships. In truth, the purpose of the letter is to declare us all alike as sinners, in order to declare much more surely that we all alike share in the free gift of redemption through Jesus Christ. That flow continues throughout the first major section of this letter, concluding with a doxology at the end of chapter eight:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (ed. Mark I. Wallace; trans. David Pellauer; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp.281ff.

all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

'For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I've used words like "mockery" and "disingenuous" in this letter. I don't mean to be caustic. I know that folks who latch onto two verses out of the first chapter of Romans are trying to be faithful, even if I believe they are doing so in a very wrongheaded manner. Still, I honestly believe that if we are attempting to be faithful to the Scriptures, we need to quit quoting Romans 1:26-27 at one another and joyfully share this concluding doxology. It is Paul's point. It is *the* point whenever we speak of God's view of the human condition.

Next week, we'll look at I Corinthians 6, another text that is often used in this conversation. Until then, Blessings on your journey.

~ The Rev. Dr. D. Mark Davis