

In the following letter I explain how my faith has shaped my understanding of homosexuality. It was written in response to an email sent by a relative of a congregation member who was concerned about Wall Street United Church's inclusive marriage policy. Feel free to share this letter. Pastor Kim

January 25th, 2011

Dear Jeremy,

Thank you for your letter. Sorry it has taken me so long to get back to you. What can I say, but life is busy and 'urgent' matters seem to fill the space and leave other important matters to the side.

I am thankful for your email that came wrapped in the love of God. Your genuine desire to understand our process is clear and I appreciate and respect that. I have no illusion that I will convince you that the decision we have made in our church is the right one. I believe that God changes our understanding more through the Holy Spirit via our heart than through our head. In my experience our head (and rationalizing) follows what the heart understands and believes to be true. It is exceedingly rare for an atheist to become a Christian following a rational debate and far more likely that someone would come to Christ because of experiencing God's incredible love. I wish we could have this conversation in person, but it's kind of cool we can have this e-conversation.

The first thing that is important for you to understand is that while this is in some ways a new development for Wall Street United Church it is not new for our denomination. The United Church has been ordaining practicing homosexuals since 1988. In 1988, (23 years ago, I was 17 at the time!) our denomination voted that homosexuals were eligible to become full members within the United Church of Canada and all full members are eligible to be considered for ordination. As you can imagine the discussion began many years before that vote came and was passed on the floor of General Council. Although I could not find a date, I know that the United Church of Canada has been blessing same-sex unions since the mid 90's and the United Church was active in encouraging the government to pass legislation to allow same-sex marriage (Feb 1st, 2005 same-sex marriage was made legal across Canada). So as you can imagine it is difficult to summarize a process and a dialogue that is really about 30 years old, and arguably much older if you consider the evolution of the United Church's theology and its understanding of the authority of scripture.

Though our denomination has had this stance for a long time, in our tradition it is the congregation who makes up its own marriage and membership policies. Wall Street has been part of the national dialogue for many, many years. At the same time we have encouraged and facilitated discussions within our own congregation about our local Church policies.

In recent years we hosted a course entitled "What the Bible Says about Homosexuality". Over 4 evenings the course dealt with topics like "the Authority of Scripture", "What the Bible Actually Says" (dealing with those small number of verses in the Bible). We also viewed a movie entitled For the Bible Tell me So, heard some personal testimony from a couple of homosexual Christians and had plenty of time for dialogue and discussion. This past November we held another course where we watched a movie called Prayers for Bobby – a very poignant film about the suicide of a deeply Christian teenage boy and how his very Christian family came to terms with his orientation and his suicide. I highly recommend it, if you can get your hands on it. We also had more discussion around the marriage issue as well as testimonies from two homosexual couples who are married. Around the same time the Outreach and Social Action committee

approved and recommended to the Executive of the Board a motion THAT our church proceed with establishing an inclusive marriage policy so that all people who are eligible for a marriage license in the Province of Ontario would be permitted to marry at Wall Street United Church at the discretion of the ministers. At the Executive level it was debated and carried unanimously and referred to the Board. Members of the congregation were invited to a board meeting where this motion came up and invited to speak to the motion if they chose. At that meeting there was only one person who expressed concern about the motion. The vote was taken by secret ballot and carried by a 92% majority. You might be surprised to learn that while there are a few who are unhappy there has been very little 'fall out' since the vote. I have had a number of older members tell me that they have a gay son or daughter and they are grateful for our inclusive stand. I expect where we will see greater fall out will be with our local Ministerial Association. We enjoy a wonderful relationship with other clergy and churches in town and I am praying that that will continue. I am convinced that while this issue is worthy of discussion and debate it should not divide us as it has. It is sad to see how it has affected and divided just about every major denomination in North America.

But I think in a way you are asking more about how I arrived at this understanding more than the process that our church used.

I take the Bible deeply seriously and I read it daily. I hear God's voice speaking to me through it. For me the Bible is a living text. I can read the same text over and over and the Holy Spirit will reveal something new I had never noticed before. I take the Bible very seriously but cannot subscribe to the belief that every verse is equally inspired. I realize that I can be criticized as picking and choosing with the scriptures. But it seems to me that we all do this. Even the most devoutly conservative Christians do not, indeed cannot, follow the scriptures word for word. There are just too many verses that contradict each other or that don't make sense in our culture today. Deuteronomy 22: 18-21 calls us to stone to death a stubborn and rebellious son – yet no Christians do this. In your email you mentioned the fact that usury (the practice of charging interest on a loan) is forbidden in the Bible but that it is unrealistic to follow this bible teaching in modern economic times. I find it interesting to note that conservative Muslims here in North America (also Old Testament believers) do refuse to practice usury even though it is very difficult for them. However my hunch is that virtually all Christians (including conservative evangelicals) no longer see usury as a sin – even though the bible says that anyone who practices it will never go to heaven. If we really believe that every verse in the bible is equally inspired why are evangelical Christians not demanding changes to our economic system? And why is this issue not creating a huge division in the church? How did this change, this acceptance of usury, come about? I am not trying to suggest that because one rule in the Bible is no longer practiced others should be ignored too, but it does makes me wonder why some bible teaching are steadfastly held onto, while others are quietly ignored.

The Bible does not talk very much about homosexuality at all. There are in total six verses that deal with same-sex issues: Genesis 19:1-11, Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1Corinthians 6:9-10 & 1Timothy 1:9-11. As I am sure you are aware, it is not mentioned in the gospels at all. Jesus says nothing about it. My hunch is that he knew about such practices but it was just not on his top 10 list of 'sins' to deal with. When it came to sin, Jesus was far more concerned about the legalistic and judgemental nature of the religious people than he was about issues of sex.

As I read the Bible and as other scholars have pointed out, the Bible does not really talk about homosexuality. The Bible talks about sexual acts between same-sex persons. It is pretty clear that

they did not understand sexual orientation. Those are two very different things. Even today men who are heterosexual in orientation sometimes engage in rape or sexual acts with other men. Rape, no matter whether it is a man raping a woman or a man raping another man or child is an act of violence and domination and an abominable sin. I don't think that anyone would argue with that. It is also clear that when there are no woman around (army and prison for example) that men sometimes turn to other men, but as soon as women are available they choose women. These are not homosexuals, they are desperate men (And don't ask me to understand men!.. it's not a phenomenon that seems to exist with women).

Sexual orientation is different. I am absolutely convinced that people do not choose their sexual orientation. When I was in grade one, I fell in love with Luc. Nobody told me that I should be interested in boys. I didn't choose to be attracted to boys, I just was. I have never been attracted to a woman the way that I am attracted to men. No one really knows how sexual orientation happens. Some argue it is genetics, some hormones, some something that happens in utero. We don't know why a small percentage (somewhere around 3-4% of the population) have a homosexual orientation. It is very clear that it is not bad parenting or the influence of other gay people or the media that causes some to have a homosexual orientation. Further it is very clear that the orientations cannot be changed or "cured" through psychotherapy or counselling. Yes a homosexual can learn to live the lifestyle of a heterosexual much the same way that a left-handed person can be made to write and function in a right-handed way, but you have not changed their dominant handedness only taught them to function against their nature.

When I was in university, I became good friends with a gay man. I didn't know he was gay for quite a while. His name was Simon. I can still remember a conversation I had with Simon and hear him saying to me "Kimberly why would I choose this?!!!" At that point Simon had not told his parents. He was very afraid of telling his parents and was not sure if they would accept him if he came out to them. He wished he was straight. He hated the seedy gay bar scene and just wanted to be 'normal'. But no matter how much he wished to be straight, he was and had always been gay. When he was young he told me, he didn't know he was "gay," but for as long as he could remember he was aware that he was different. I believe that just as God created me with red hair and that God created my father with deformed arm, that God created Simon to have a homosexual orientation. Simon and so many like him have been teased, harassed, oppressed, and sadly many beaten up, and killed. The very high suicide rate among homosexuals is an indication of the degree of rejection and deep hurt. This is not a life that any would choose. Ninety percent of homosexual teenagers report being teased, harassed and oppressed. Belonging is such a fundamental need for humanity. Almost more than food, water and air we need to know we belong. We need to know we belong to a human family. If our natural human family rejects us, the pain though great, can be lessened through the relationship of a family of friends. Even more I believe we need to know that we belong to God.

Sadly homosexuals have been told that they don't belong. Over and over they have been told that they are an abomination and that they are going to hell because of the verses in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. That word "abomination" is given great weight in some evangelical circles and is cited against homosexuals with venom. As you know and have pointed out a great number of other things are an "abomination" to the Lord including a false balance scale (Prov. 11:1) and those with an arrogant heart (Prov 16:5). I am merely pointing out how these texts are given too much weight and are used to justify tremendous hatred and acts of oppression and violence against those who through no fault of their own were born with a homosexual orientation. (I am aware that we both agree this is not God's will and is a sin which is greater than the first

perceived sin.) I am not arguing in favour of promiscuous lifestyles. I have been to a gay bar in Montreal and I was disturbed by what a “meat market” it was. I have also been to regular bars where I was seen as an object for sex. Promiscuity and adultery, whether for the hetero or the homosexual is far from how God created us to live. Yet when pushed to the margins of society (which heterosexuals are to blame for) where else can homosexuals meet? – certainly not at church! Homosexuals have been cut off from the church and therefore from a relationship with God. This is a great, great sin. We are called to remove the barriers to God, not create them. “Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people’s way” (Is 58:14). I can still hear the pain in my friend’s voice as he talked about wishing this was not his lot in life. I’ve lost track of Simon, but I pray that he has found someone to love and who loves him in turn, for “it is not good that man should be alone”.

I believe that while God does not change, our understanding of God does. One of the biggest reasons for the incarnation, for God to send His son Jesus, was not because God had changed and wanted to inform us of the changes, but because the people weren’t “getting it”. He came to help us to understand better the incredible love of God. Jesus changed our understanding of God, and the Holy Spirit continues to change our hearts and the hearts of the Christian Church as well. From our side of the debate it doesn’t seem like that big deal that it is OK to eat pork and lobster and that uncircumcised Gentiles should be included in the communion of Christians. But these were massive and extremely divisive issues in the early church. It was the Holy Spirit that led them to change their heart on the subject. You referenced Peter’s vision in Acts 10 of the sheet filled with unclean foods and the voice saying “Rise Peter, kill and eat” and “what God has made clean do not call common.” As we know this was about food, which for the Jews was not minor but massive – but even more it was about people. Always in the scriptures there were the chosen people and the foreigners. But the Holy Spirit changed Peter’s heart. He says to Cornelius “but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean”(Acts 10:28 italics added). I am sure that it was not easy for Peter to change his heart on a matter about which the scriptures had spoken, but the prompting of the Holy Spirit and the encounter with Cornelius made all the difference so that he was able to proclaim “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-45).

If it was not for the Holy Spirit I would not be ordained and preaching to a congregation that includes men. For the scriptures are clear, as in 1 Timothy 2:11&12, that I should be silent and should not teach or have authority over men. I have read that and have had to wrestle with it, but the Holy Spirit has filled me with a calling to preach that I cannot ignore. I believe that I am called and anointed by God to preach and to lead people into a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. This calling burns within me by the power of the Holy Spirit. So again I believe that God does not change but our understanding of God does.

The move to allow homosexuals to marry in our church is not one that we have made because “everybody’s doing it”. In fact my temptation has always been to go with the crowd and many in the crowd that I “go with” are very much opposed to this. If I were to bow to social pressure I would resist this move which brings some division and conflict. However through time in prayer, through reading the scripture and through time spent with Christians I admire, I am convinced that it is Christ who is leading us to remove the barriers that have been placed in front of homosexuals on their path to God. Tony Campolo (American Pastor, Author and Sociologist) and his wife Peggy have influenced my understanding on this topic. While Tony takes a conservative view of the Bible and believes that homosexual acts (not the orientation) are a sin,

his wife does not believe the Bible condemns loving, monogamous homosexual relationships and would like to see churches embrace same-sex marriage for homosexuals. They stand on different sides of the issue but as they point out “they still sleep in the same bed” (i.e. they continue to respect each other’s faith and don’t see the need to divorce over the issue—as some churches have). There is a wonderful discussion on the subject between the two of them that can be found at: <http://www.gaychristian.net/campolos.php> . It is well worth a listen.

With regards to homosexual marriage, in an age where committed faithful relationships are so few and far between I cannot understand why we would deny those who want to make a lifetime commitment before God and before their friends to be faithful and to support each other in good times and in bad.

I am solidly behind the decision of my congregation and my denomination because of the teachings of Jesus, because of my faith, because of what I read in the Bible and because of the conviction of the Holy Spirit in my life. I am convinced that there is no community in greater need of knowing the love of God and receiving healing (not from their orientation but from the effects of rejection and oppression) than the homosexual community. The church has not just failed miserably in reaching out, we have been complicit in the oppression. As I reach out and get to know homosexuals I cannot help but fall in love with them. That love can’t just stop with words: it must extend to justice. Justice, to borrow a line from Tony Campolo, is “love turned into social policy”. It would be far easier not to act. My temptation is to be lukewarm like the church of Laodicea in Revelations chapter 3. I have surrendered my life to Jesus and I am learning to trust, obey and act. My faith and my understanding is far from perfect. Albert Camus said that sometimes life calls us to make a 100% commitment to something about which we are 51% sure. I am way more than 51% sure, but I look forward to the day when I will see and know God “face to face” rather than through ‘the glass darkly’. On this side of perfect I am convinced that the only fail-safe path is the path of love and justice that permeates the Bible.

I pray that this helps you to understand where I am coming from. I pray that even if you don’t agree with me or my rationale that you will believe me that I come to this point from a position of faith and a calling that the Lord Jesus has laid on my life. My prayer is that this issue will not divide us but will help us to grow in our mutual understanding of our Lord and God.

Thanks for writing and giving me the opportunity to respond. I felt called to respond. I have never put my thoughts and feelings on this subject so completely on paper before.

God bless you in your faith and discipleship! Love, your sister in Christ,

Kim

Rev. Kimberly Heath