

Finding our Footing in the Midst of Change: Paradigm Shifts and Homosexuality

**Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson
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Scripture: Exodus 20 (The Ten Commandments)

Last Spring – when I went to the Jesus Seminar
where people like Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg,
Jack Sping and John Dominic Crossan gather –
I met A.J. Levine – an Orthodox Jewish woman
who is a New Testament Biblical scholar.

Somewhere amidst all the gems that A.J. shared
in her dynamic compelling style –
she named that it is really important
that we understand that the Jewish faith
is ***not*** all about laws and legalism,
in contrast to the Christian faith
that is all about love and grace.

Love and grace are woven into the Old Testament stories
of our tradition, as well as being in the stories about Jesus.

Jesus was Jewish – and in all his teachings
he was calling the people of his community
to the awareness that they had gotten so rigid
about the rules and practises that defined them –
they'd lost touch with the purpose and intentions
behind the rules and guidelines.

Jesus reminded people that all the commandments
Can be summarized by the call to Love God
With all our mind, heart, strength and soul
And to love our neighbour as ourselves –
Love God, self, others.

An interesting question for all generations to ask ourselves is:
what would we be challenged on in our thinking, in our day
by people with the same kind of passion as Jesus?
In what ways is our thinking being challenged
to evolve, to change, to broaden?

The great religious philosopher Hegel
describes how the spiritual journey is like a spiral –
we're constantly moving forward –
building on the past –
but constantly turning and looking at things
from new perspectives

as we move forward in history.

We can look at our history and see lots of shifts
in our thinking down through the centuries –
some that seem so obvious as we look back with hindsight –
but before those shifts or awakening in our thinking –
it was hard to see the need for the change
and often suited the needs of the powerful –
not to change our perspectives.

The other night we had a Buddhist Abbess here at St. Paul's,
sharing teachings from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective.
The Abbess was raised as a Roman Catholic
before becoming Buddhist –
so she had a good insight into how to share her teachings with us.

One of Khennio's insights --
referred to as the 1st turning of the wheel in Buddhism
is that if we expect that our happiness
is dependent on keeping things stable –
or keeping things the way they are –
we are doomed to experience unhappiness –
because by the very nature of nature –
things change – all the time.

People die, people get sick, we have arguments
and breakdown of communication with people we love.

If we expect that keeping things a certain way
is our path to happiness —
then we will experience a great deal of unhappiness in our lives.
If, however, we can accept that our happiness
does not depend on keeping things the same or stable –
then we can be open to the ongoing changes of life.
Once that principle of accepting change is deeply rooted in our psyche –
then the spiritual path expands and moves to the 2nd turning of the wheel –
where we learn to understand and appreciate
that our happiness is dependent on the happiness –
the well-being of everyone around us.

Khennio taught us a meditation –
that begins with us connecting to that feeling of unconditional love
that we often experience around a cute roly polly baby, or a puppy or a kitten ...
She invites us to hold that feeling of unconditional love
and then practice extending it to others –
first to those we have okay relationships with –
but then extending that unconditional love
to those we don't have okay relationships with ...
to those we might name as our enemies.
Practicing to do that –
begins to shift the way we see others –
it changes how we look at the world.

I had dinner this week with a group of about 40 people
who are part of the commissions for the new presbyteries
being formed here in Toronto Conference.

Our moderator, David Guiliano, was the guest speaker.
One of the things that David shared in response to a question
was the power and importance of a reworked serenity prayer,
as we seek to become the intercultural church
we named as our goal at GC 39,
not just cultures by nation but by age and ???

God grant me the serenity to accept
The people I cannot change ...
Change the people I can change
And to know who I can change is me.

Changing the way we look at life is not always an easy thing to do –
changing our thinking often challenges
the core principles we've built our life upon ...

Six weeks after I was ordained the U C of C passed the resolution
that sexual orientation would not be a factor
in deciding whether or not someone could be ordained.
A woman came to me – filled with anguish and anger –
wailing and sobbing –
declaring that such a change in thinking was just too much –
if she accepts that it's acceptable to be homosexual and be a minister –
the foundation of her faith would totally crumble.

It was years later before I understood the depths of her despair
and that her adamant attitude that homosexuality is wrong
had horrible consequences in her life
and how if we changed in our understanding –
the guilt would be too much for her to bear –
for she had unknowingly rejected a family member ...
and that family member had committed suicide
because they could not live with their homosexuality.

Her wail of anguish touched me in a deep place
as a young newly ordained minister –
awakening in me the awareness of how hard it is to shift
from deeply held beliefs that are so integrated into our perspective
that if we shift those beliefs that have informed our lives
it feels like the foundations of our lives will come crumbling down.

Gilbert Rendle speaks about these huge shifts
that are happening all around us.

He writes "We are in a time of great change.
We are facing change ... [in all aspects of our lives].
We are told that this is a time of shifting "paradigms".
The dictionary defines paradigm as a pattern --- or a model.
These paradigms are at the very heart of our understanding of life,

and times of great change like we are going through
test our very assumptions about life ...
the very assumptions on which we base our daily behaviour
are changing in often confusing ways”. (p3)

When we look back in history
at some of the significant paradigm shifts
they seem so obvious from or 21st mind set.
One such example would be around the status of women in Canada –
going back less than a century ago to a time of a huge paradigm shift.

An 1867 definition in regard to the status of women is very intriguing:

“Women are persons in matters of pains and penalties,
but are not persons in matters of rights and privileges.”

In the 1920s five Alberta women fought a legal and political battle
to have women recognized as persons under the BNA Act.

The landmark decision by the British Privy Council,
the highest level for legal appeals in Canada at the time,
was a milestone victory for the rights of women in Canada.

In 1929 women in Canada were acknowledged to be persons.

When I asked Sandra Michener,
a recently ordained minister who was from this congregation
if she'd like to share any thoughts
on this theme of Paradigm Shifts and Homosexuality,
she went back to a time in her childhood
when she realized that because of a particular paradigm –
a particular way of seeing the world,
a wonderful woman had been rejected by the community
because she was divorced.

And yet this woman is remembered by 10 year old Sandra and other classmates
in a very different way than the community labeled her.

Sandra wrote these thoughts ...

To me she was:

- The only person who talked freely about her faith and reading the bible.
 - The only teacher who hugged her students goodbye every day.
 - The person who made me feel, no I know! – that I was the smartest and the most loveable kid in my class.
 - At her funeral just a few years ago imagine my surprise to learn that all the students at her funeral (and there were quite a few) also knew they were the smartest and most loveable kid in the class.

All that from a woman who was judged by many as a sinner.
She was outside the norm for her world.
But for one 10 year old girl – she was the world.

Sandra continues:
“When I look back on my life,
I wonder how many people
I have (unknowingly) caused to feel ‘outside the group’ – isolated.

Which leads me to think of one of the most important learnings
in Suicide Prevention work.

People at high risk are usually isolated in some way.
Such isolation can result from anything that narrows a person’s number of friends,
such as mental illness, working in a field where one is seen as an expert
so they feel they cannot reach out for help, sexual orientation.”

I once heard a retired minister speak very passionately
about the paradigm shift he experienced
when he worked with different people who are homosexual.
He became aware first hand –
not only how ordinary and wonderful they were
but also the hell they often live with.
And so he evolved into a new way of thinking –
realizing how important it is for us as people of faith
to be part of the change that will provide opportunity
for lives of people who have a minority sexual orientation –
to live fully without fear.

I was at General Council the year we elected
Stan McKay as moderator – our first aboriginal moderator.
It was the early 1990s.
Stan was asked by the press how he would deal with “the issue” within the church –
around ordaining people who are homosexual.
I’ll never forget his response –
he said he simply doesn’t see it as an issue.
The paradigm he grew up with in his community
is acceptance that about 10% of the people will have a different sexual orientation
(just like it is amongst other species)
and that these people often have wonderful creative talents.

Within this church community of St. Paul’s –
people have been very clear and very open
about wanting to be welcoming of all people.
Which means we are sometimes faced with the long history
of a negative paradigm toward homosexuality that can sometimes catch us –
if we’re not intentional in our awareness.

For example:
Until 1969 – here in Canada homosexuality was punishable by up to 14 years in prison,
➤ It wasn’t until 1996 that the majority of provinces in Canada had legislated against
discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Three centuries ago in the history of Western Christendom
allegations of homosexuality were enough
to condemn the accused to torture and death by fire –

the last burning was recorded in 1730.

There are still many today who use the Bible
to declare homosexuality as a sin –
even though biblical scholarship is clear that such a reading of Scripture
is rampant with inconsistencies and inaccuracies.
Scriptural texts taken out of context or looked at
through a particular lens or paradigm
can be used to uphold the status quo –
which we've seen happen again and again in history,
with one example being slavery –
the Bible can be used to support slavery.

The same has happened around the role of women
and superiority of some races and homosexuality.
For example through a careful reading
of the text in Genesis of Sodom & Gomorrah –
we discover that the sin of the men in Sodom & Gomorrah
who came pounding on Lot's door –
demanding that his guests be sent out to them –
was about their dishonouring the fundamental principle of hospitality.
Lot says nothing about homosexuality in response to their demand –
what he says is "Do nothing to these men – because they are under my roof".
The sin is violating the protection of a guest.
The sin of Sodom & Gomorrah is referred to in Ezekiel 16 –
where it says "Behold, this is the guilt of your sister Sodom
(who had so much) yet (they) did not aid the poor and needy."

When people declare that something is so
"because that is what the Bible says" –
in our interpretation in the United Church –
we are clear that if that something that people quote from scripture
means that there are people who are oppressed as a result –
or seen as less worthy –
then we need to relook at that interpretation.
A.J. Levine is clear that the themes of grace and God as love
have been there right from the beginning of the stories of the Bible –
though often lost sight of.

While there are those who say they believe that the Bible must be taken literally –
the reality is that no one takes the Bible completely literally.
John Dominic Crossan gives a simple example
noting that no one who hears Jesus described as the Lamb of God
interprets that to mean that Mary had a little lamb.

In a letter to radio show host Dr. Laura, a writer points out
just how much we don't take everything the Bible says literally.

So if in Leviticus homosexuality is an abomination as 18:22 clearly states ...

Then I'd like to know what a fair price would be to sell my daughter into slavery,
as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7.
Or which country I should buy my slaves from,
since Lev. 25:44 states that I may possess slaves,
provided they are purchased from neighbouring nations?
Or what we should be about my neighbour
who insists on working on the Sabbath,
for according to Exodus 35:2, he should be put to death.
Or what to do about my uncle who curses and blasphemes a lot.
Do we have to get the whole town together to stone them as Lev. 24:10-16 says,
or can we just burn them to death at a private family affair,
like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws according to Lev. 20:14?

Shifting the way we see things can often be helped
by experiencing the blessing of a new paradigm
which many families in our church have done
as they celebrate their sisters or brothers,
sons or daughters or themselves as homosexual.

Fred has an experience of the wondrous gift
that can happen when a community is a safe place
for people to be fully who they are:

As Abbess Khennio noted the other night
and our moderator echoed using different images:
we are called to expand our capacity for compassion –
allowing the Buddha –
or for us – the Christ – to awaken within us
which moves us beyond our paradigms of judgement of one another –
toward seeing with new eyes.

In the training that Blair, Jody, Judith and I did last weekend
in preparation for leading the mission encounter trip to Guatemala –
some of the most significant learnings
were around being open to seeing differently ...
to choosing to let go of the lens
through which we look at the world and critique and judge it –
even for a short time –
so that we are freed to grow and learn and be changed
as we see with new eyes that will awaken us to compassion
for all we journey with in this world.

Today we will celebrate World Wide Communion.
We will gather at the table
with sisters and brothers of many races,
of different sexual orientations,
of different cultural perspectives
and we will all be welcome to feast together ...
to be nourished by the compassion that sees us all as beloved.

Thanks be to God. Amen