

Topeka Center for Peace and Justice

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COOPERATION TIMES

January–February 2004

Wrestling with the Texts: **An Introduction**

by Rev. Susan Candea

When I was growing up in the church, I don't remember anyone saying the word "homosexuality" out loud. I had vague notions that the Bible said something about "it," but "it" was not a topic of study or conversation. Today, things are quite different. Every mainline Christian denomination, as well as many other faith communities, is studying the issue of homosexuality. People are much more open about acknowledging their own sexual orientation as well as the reality that they know gay and lesbian persons as neighbors, friends, relatives, fellow members of faith communities. Many cities, including our Topeka, are being challenged from a justice stance to include gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons as a protected class against discrimination. The issue of same gender marriages is making national news.

Because the issue of homosexuality is seen not only as a justice issue, but also as a morality issue, faith communities have entered the conversation to try and give direction and guidance to the larger society. The difficulty encountered by many is that rather than having conversations, people of faith seem to have "shouting matches" in which each side tries to outdo the other in proving they are right. Is there a way that we can talk passionately about things that are important to all of us—our sexuality—and still be respectful of those who hold differing opinions? Especially when we begin quoting Scripture to one another?

Several clergy from the Topeka community gathered to ask precisely that question. They wanted to model how it was possible to talk about tough topics and Scripture texts that were interpreted in different ways. Last spring several clergy came together to formulate an open statement on faith that was presented to the public with over 40 signers. We were attempting to see what, if any, views we held in common concerning the issues of sexuality and human rights. Because it was such a positive experience to have these

kinds of conversations, the decision was made to take the discussion out into the public arena and invite the community into the same kind of conversation.

And so, with the help of the Topeka Center for Peace and Justice and the gracious hosting of Central Congregational Church, we invited the community to come and hear a panel of clergy "wrestle with the texts" in a public forum. *Wrestling With the Texts: An Open Conversation on Faith and Sexuality* took place on October 15. Three clergy were invited to "think out loud" regarding their own wrestling with texts from their faith traditions related to homosexuality. The Rev. Kathryn Timpany, Central Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, the Rev. Fritz Mutti, Bishop of the Kansas East Conference of the United Methodist Church, and the Rev. Lisa Schwartz, Unitarian Universality Fellowship of Topeka each presented their views and interpretation of Scripture. Their remarks are summarized in the articles in this newsletter. Following the three presentations, questions were taken from the audience, to which the different panel members responded. It was a wonderful evening of dialog, discussion, and questions as together we "wrestled with the texts" and modeled how it is possible to talk civilly and respectfully with one another, even with differing view points.

In the next issue of *COOPERATION TIMES* differing views from those expressed by the three panel members, will be published as we seek to keep the dialog and conversation ongoing in Topeka. My hope is that we can move forward as a community to talk with one another, respect one another, and ensure that we work for justice for all people. The word "homosexuality" is now a word used much more in my vocabulary that when I was a child growing up in the church. And I am glad for that. Instead of settling for "pat" answers about what is right and wrong, I am challenged to wrestle, myself, with the texts. I hope you will do the same.

(Rev. Susan Candea, Pastor of Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Topeka, is the Board Chair of the Topeka Center for Peace and Justice.)

Whose Dream Is It?

Monday • January 19

and

Singing the Dream

Sunday • January 18

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Wrestling With the Texts Part I: **Scripture Calls Us to Love God and Love Our Neighbor**

by Rev. Kathryn Timpany

Let me begin. I am a Christian, and the Bible is authoritative for my life in the faith, but it is not authoritative for me the way it is for some others. It functions for me as a kind of family scrapbook, being a collection of many books by many authors on many topics written in many styles addressing many different concerns over many hundreds of years.

It is, as such, only a partial record of the life of God with the people of God. It is neither complete nor inclusive. It reveals something, but not all things, of God's will for God's people. I concur with my ancestor in the faith, John Robinson of early American Puritan stock, who declared that "there is still more light and truth to break forth from God's word."

I accept what it reports Jesus as having said, that it will be the Holy Spirit that will lead us finally into full truth, and that includes the way the Bible can be helpful to our life in the faith. The more I study the Bible, the more informed I become about its contexts and languages and constructs. The more I learn about these things, the more liberating and life-giving it becomes.

When it comes to issues of human sexuality, the Bible is a thin field of study indeed. There are the Levitical purity codes in the Hebrew Bible which proscribe in great detail the behavior of the covenant community regarding issues not only of human sexuality but also of diet, liturgical practice, acceptable clothing and much more. Their original intent was to help keep the behavior and appearance of the Hebrew community distinct and different from that of others' and to keep the bloodlines pure.

There are a handful of context-specific bits of advice by some early Christian writers that address particular areas of confusion in the fledgling church. Most of these assume an ethic that is no longer normative for us, the generally accepted custom, for instance, that Roman military leaders might enjoy same-sex companionship with younger men or boys during their terms of service, or the patriarchal hierarchy of the family that included the command that a man must marry his brother's widow, or the ideal that men and women live together as a betrothed couple before marriage, and that if a woman was unable to conceive a child during that time, the marriage could be prevented, or that slavery was

an assumption that didn't need to be challenged at all. We have come to understand as science has helped shed new light on assumed truth that these are not normative for human beings for all time, and today reject them out of hand. We have a little more trouble coming to that same conclusion about homosexual behavior.

Then we have the teachings of Jesus, whom many if not most, Christians, hold up as the ultimate authority in matters of faith and life. He said absolutely nothing about human sexuality. Nothing at all. And he didn't even flinch when a Centurion asked him to heal his "beloved" (pais), translated in some Bibles as his servant, in others as his son, but in all, as male. You have to wonder, then, if all that just didn't matter very much to him.

The point I want to make is this: The Biblical texts are often confusing and vague and incomplete when it comes to matters of modern human sexuality. Plus, we are working from translation and figuring out what words really meant when they were used. What word we should choose to convey a particular meaning is very tough work indeed, and more often than not, inaccurate to some degree at least.

But given that, there are some themes that reappear again and again throughout the whole of the Bible. These themes, more than the smaller inconsistencies, are what remain as foundational for the faith for me. Forgiveness, covenant faithfulness, grace, mercy, the welcoming of strangers, the care of the poor, God's favoritism for the socially unacceptable, the radical reordering of power under God's reign—these are what are given us as guidelines for dealing with tough moral dilemmas, including those that affect human sexuality. And there is the example of Jesus himself, who, when asked which were the most important of all the laws in the Levitical purity code, responded by quoting these two: you shall love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. All other laws and the writings of the prophets were to be understood through the lens of these two, he taught.

If that is how Jesus thought of the Bible, it's good enough for me. Being a disciple of Jesus, then, I am intent on acting as he did, "challenging and seeking to transform those aspects of religion, culture and conventional wisdom that marginalize some people based on the presumed privilege or righteousness of others." (Stephen Veazey column, *Herald*, February 2003, p. 15)

Let me close with a quote from Homosexuality and the

A Beacon of Liberal Religion

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Rev. Lisa Schwartz
Minister

10:30 a.m. Sunday



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Rev. Kathryn J. Timpany

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Celebration of Dr. King's Birthday

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7:00 p.m. • Celebration
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[Desserts and Donations welcome]

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Arts In Prison has organized this concert along
with a coalition of congregations led by Central
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(For more information call 785-232-4388.)

Bible: Two Views, by Dan Via and Robert Gagnon. These are the words of a gay man who also happens to be a distinguished New Testament scholar: “Any interpretation of scripture that hurts people, oppresses people, or destroys people cannot be the right interpretation, no matter how traditional, historical, or exegetically respectable. There can be no debate about the fact that the church's stand on homosexuality has caused oppression, loneliness, self-hatred, violence, sickness and suicide for millions of people.

“If the church wishes to continue with its traditional interpretation it must demonstrate, not just claim, that it is more loving to condemn homosexuality than to affirm homosexuals.

“Can the church show that same-sex loving relationships damage those involved in them? Can the church give compelling reasons to believe that it really would be better for all lesbian and gay Christians to live alone, without the joy of intimate touch, without hearing a lover's voice when they go to sleep or awake?

“Is it really better for lesbian and gay teenagers to despise themselves..?”

“Is it really more loving for the church to continue its worship of ‘heterosexual fulfillment’ (a non-biblical concept, by the way) while consigning thousands of its members to a life of either celibacy or endless psychological manipulations that masquerade as ‘healing?’

“The burden of proof in the last twenty years has shifted. There are too many of us who are not sick, or inverted, or perverted, or even, ‘effeminate,’ but who just have a knack

for falling in love with people of our own sex.

“When we have been damaged, it has not been due to our homosexuality but to your and our denial of it. The burden of proof now is not on us, to show that we are not sick, but rather on those who insist that we would be better off going back into the closet. What will build the double love of God and of our neighbor?”

(Rev. Kathryn Timpany is the Pastor at Topeka's Central Congregational Church, United Church of Christ.)

Beachy Appointed to Human Relations Commission

On October 10 Topeka City Councilmember Clark Duffy appointed CENTER Executive Director Bill Beachy to the city's Human Relations Commission. The HRC is Topeka's civil rights enforcement agency that addresses and enforces civil rights laws as they pertain to the Federal Civil Rights Act, Fair Housing Laws and the Americans With Disabilities Act. Beachy said “We must ensure civil and human rights in our community in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodation. We need to develop economically, but we need to do it fairly and in a way that includes all citizens.”

HRC accepts, investigates, mediates and holds public hearings in resolution of civil rights complaints brought forward by the general public. Its office can be reached at 785-368-3606 or <HRC@Topeka.org>.

Wrestling With the Texts Part II: **Scripture Invites Us Into a Relationship With a Loving God**

by Rev. Lisa Schwartz

I am a preacher's kid, which means for one thing that I was raised to respect the Bible. My parents taught me the Bible's consistent message of God's love for all people, and especially about Jesus' theology of grace and forgiveness. Mom and Dad also taught me about the poetic language the writers used to impart their powerful message. I recognized that when the psalmist says to God, "hide me in the shadow of your wings," I was not to interpret that literally, as if God had the body of a bird or a butterfly. Yet the language is a wonderfully comforting image, nevertheless.

As a preacher's kid, of course, I was also inclined to question a lot about the church and the Bible, especially as a teenager. During those years I read that the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association had both made unequivocal statements that homosexuality was not considered a mental illness or an emotional problem. According to those scientific minds, homosexuality was just one possible "sexual orientation" that could be expected in a certain percentage of the human population.

It seemed that our culture was making a major shift, as it had many times before. In the historical questions regarding women in ordained ministry or mixed-race membership in churches, most mainline denominations had responded to earlier cultural shifts by expanding their definition of what was acceptable. Why, I wondered, was it so difficult to make such a shift where gays and lesbians were concerned?

The answer most often given to me was that homosexuality was clearly forbidden in the Bible. (No one talked about the text that advises slaves to be obedient to their masters, or women to be silent in church, or how the mainline church had reinterpreted those ideas to fit more modern values.)

I eventually rejected the Bible and the church, which had more to do with being a preacher's kid than with being righteously indignant about any particular justice issue, I must admit. When in young adulthood I reclaimed my relationship with the church, though, I sought a group that accepted gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual people to membership, ordained them to ministry, and performed

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I began seminary training in 1990 with a lot of assumptions about the Bible, and when I enrolled in the basic Bible class I was pretty resistant to finding anything new or particularly meaningful in that dusty old tome. I sat in class "with my dukes up," mentally daring the material to challenge me.

What a surprise it was to discover that what came my way were not Bible bombs, but love letters! As I studied the text and delved into the magnificent poetry and literature, I was challenged in ways I never would have believed. I discovered that many of my assumptions about what the Bible had to say were based on what others had said about the Bible, rather than on an examination of its passages. I became a lover of the Bible again, and for the first time, a serious student of its texts.

One thing that is clear to me is that the Bible is a very tricky book. It often plays on our human tendency to judge and condemn others, but just when it seems to justify our wrath it turns the sharp critique back on our own behavior. A good example of this is the story Nathan tells to King David in 2 Samuel about the rich man who steals a poor man's precious lamb. David doesn't realize that Nathan is referring to David's own behavior with Bathsheba, and he is quick to condemn the unjust man. Imagine his dismay when Nathan reveals the kicker: "You are the man!"

In a similar way, the apostle Paul gets his audience on board early in his letter to the Romans. In 1:25 he refers to the sins of the people in question. If you look carefully, the reason Paul says that God gave those people up is "because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie..." (NRSV) When Paul begins to describe specific behaviors, he is clearly listing the results of idolatry. And incidentally, it's not abundantly clear what he means when, for example, in verse 26, he says that "women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural." Since he doesn't mention lesbian behavior, and since ideas about what constituted "natural" intercourse in that rather primitive society might well have been pretty limited, there seem to be many possible interpretations of what Paul might have meant. He may well have meant to include some non-standard sexual acts between a married woman and her husband. To completely exclude that interpretation seems to beg the question: Aren't there "unnatural and degrading passions" for heterosexuals? But I digress.

Paul's list of sins expands in 1:29-32 to include some

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pretty mundane stuff, like covetousness, gossip, insolence, and rebellion towards parents. My take on this is that he meant to construct a list that would include all human beings—no one should have felt above the seemingly petty infractions he includes. Paul’s “kicker” comes in 2:1, “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself.”

This seems to me a compelling indictment of all of humanity, not of people with particular sexual practices. And although I don’t agree with those who believe that the Bible condemns homosexual practices as sinful, I’m not going to spend my energy trying to convince them that I’m right. I do ask, though, that those interpreters deal with this text in its entirety, where Paul seems to say “a sin is a sin is a sin—and we are ALL sinners.”

But let us remember that his opening sally is far from his final word on the subject. Paul may spend some time in Romans condemning us all, but he goes on to say that nothing “in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God...” (Romans 8:39) That simple passage seems consistent with the graceful, encompassing message I find throughout the Bible.

I think the point of the Bible is to invite us into relationship with the God of that graceful, encompassing love. There’s an ironic tendency for some people to deify the Bible itself, essentially falling into an idolatrous relationship with a book that clearly condemns idolatry! When the Bible is used to exclude any of the children of God from the family, it seems like an outrageous misuse to me.

As I wrestle with the texts, I find that the questions the Bible asks me most pointedly are about my behavior, not others’. And if the Bible’s message of a radically inclusive community makes for some strange bedfellows sometimes, it puts us in the same situation of the early church in figuring out how to find unity in the midst of the God-given diversity we find in the world.

(Rev. Lisa Schwartz is the Pastor at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Topeka.)

Wrestling With the Texts Part III: **Scripture Calls Us To Be In** **Ministry For and With All People**

by Bishop Fritz Mutti

The United Methodist Church has four criteria for seeking understanding in matters of faith. They are Scripture,

Tradition, Experience and Reason. We affirm that “the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” (*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2000, p. 77*)

Scripture is primary, containing everything necessary for salvation. This is not to say that everything in the Bible is necessary for salvation. It does affirm the centrality of scripture as we seek to bear a faithful Christian witness.

When the church confronts the emotional issues around homosexuality, several biblical passages are usually cited as relevant passages, including Genesis 19:1-29, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9-11, I Timothy 1:10. In a presentation made on September 19, 2003, Dr. Lindsey P. Pherigo notes that only the Leviticus passages and the verses from Romans specifically refer to homosexual behavior. He concludes, “The biblical evidence, though scarce, is quite clear: homosexual behavior is a capital sin, and according to ancient Hebrew tribal law, homosexuals should be put to death.”

An official study for the denomination was published in 1994. It is titled, *The Church Studies Homosexuality*. The task force preparing the report agreed that scholars have come to different conclusions about the theological and ethical significance for the church today with regard to the several biblical references. The study was officially received and therefore is an official statement of the church.

Passages in *The Book of Discipline* also give voice to the church’s struggle to find a faithful biblical and theological witness. In summary, these statements declare that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. When it comes to homosexuality, the church’s struggle is evident. Here is the central statement: “Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.”

To keep the conversation going, the church is best
(Continued on page 6.)

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CALENDAR

- Jan. 13 Beginning/Intermediate Yoga classes every Tues. and Thur. 5:30-6:30 p.m.; Zen meditation practice 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Thur. and 6:00 to 7:00 a.m. Tues. and Thur.; Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, 4775 SW 21 (Call Bill Lucero, 785-232-5958, for more info.).
- Jan. 15 Kansas Action Network: The Coalition for Workers Rights, Social Justice and Economic Fairness, bimonthly meeting, agenda includes state legislative strategy, 10:30 a.m., KS AFL-CIO, 2131 SW 36th, Topeka (785-232-4388).
- Jan. 20 **CENTER Board Meeting**, 7:00-9:00 p.m., 1248 SW Buchanan (785-232-4388).
- Jan. 24 **NAACP** Topeka Branch monthly mtg., 1:00-3:00 p.m., Hillcrest Comm. Ctr., 1800 SE 21st (William E. Richards, 785-234-4555).
- Jan. 24 Last Minute Folk Concert, John Walker, blues performer of 2000 and 2001 and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Nebraska Wesleyan University, and Rick Bruner, known locally as the "beatmeister," 7:00 p.m., Unitarian Fellowship, 4775 SW 21st, \$8.00 (785-272-9233 or 785-274-1133).
- Jan. 27 INTERFAITH OF TOPEKA Annual Meeting, "Taking Interfaith Into the Future," 7:00 p.m., potluck supper 6:00 p.m., Southern Hills Mennonite Church, 511 SE 37th (785-266-9403).
- Feb. 1 Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Lawrence-Topeka chapter, monthly meeting, 2:30-4:30 p.m., offers confidentiality, support, education and advocacy for equal rights for LGBT loved ones (Bonnie Cuevas 785-246-0730 or <pflagks@juno.com> for location).
- Feb. 12 Lobby Day Against the Death Penalty, morning briefing and afternoon visits with legislators, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (Donna Schneweis, 785-234-3061 or <dms2@mindspring.com>).
- Feb. 20-21 Kansas Sustainable Agriculture Roundup with Mark Ritchie, Pres., Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy; for farmers, advocates, and consumers, Throckmorton Hall, Manhattan, KS RURAL CENTER (Jerry Jost 785-865-2555 or <jjost@myvine.com>).

..All People..

(Continued from page 5.)

helped when persons share their personal stories. About three years ago, I participated in an event where six persons served on a panel. Three of the panel members had left the church because they thought its position was too restrictive; the other three left because they believed the church was too narrow in its policy. Each person was treated respectfully

and the dialogue was always civil. This model could serve us well in many other times and places.

Wrestling with the Texts: An Open Conversation on Faith and Sexuality provided a safe forum for persons to seek understanding. I hope that conversations like these will continue and that persons representative of diverse theological points of view will participate.

(Bishop Fritz Mutti is the Resident Bishop of the Kansas Area United Methodist Church.)

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COOPERATION TIMES, ©2004, is published by the **TOPEKA CENTER FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE**. Bimonthly circulation is 4,535. Readers are invited to respond with letters to the editor or with articles. Opinions expressed are those of the writers and not necessarily policy statements of the CENTER. Items for the next issue should be submitted by February 20.

The CENTER is a Kansas nonprofit, tax exempt, organization that works to promote justice and peace through education and action for social

change by working with individuals and organizations in the greater Topeka community. Its Board of Directors meets bimonthly on the third Tuesday at 1248 SW Buchanan Street. All CENTER members are welcome.

The CENTER's Executive Director and Editor is Bill Beachy.

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