

Statement from Rev. Dr. Susan Parker for Moravian Forum, October 4, 2015

Beginning around age 7 or 8, I began to understand that I was different from other children in my school. I had many friends who were girls, but had virtually nothing in common with them. Even in first grade, my friends would talk of having “boyfriends” and I just didn’t get it. I liked hanging out with boys, and was often selected to play pick-up games with them before school.

It would take many more years before I would realize the true nature of my difference, but even then, the word “homosexual” still didn’t seem to apply to me. As a child born in the late 1950s, the only thing I could learn about homosexuals was that they were very bad people, and I knew I wasn’t a very bad person. They also always seemed to be men, and yet by my teen years, I knew that I was a girl who liked other girls, yet I never seemed to hear about homosexuals like that.

I grew up in a Southern Baptist church in the western part of North Carolina. Church was a huge part of my life, and it was not unusual for us to be there multiple times each week. I loved being in church, and believed the people there were just an extension of my family. From an early age, I was involved in helping out in the nursery, singing in the youth and adult choirs, helping lead classes in Vacation Bible School, and serving as assistant pianist and organist.

It was not unusual for me to get into long conversations with my pastor, especially on days when I went to practice on the organ. It was on one of those

days, during the summer following my 16th birthday, that we had a conversation which changed my life. We had been standing just outside the church office, talking, when suddenly he asked me a question that I had not seen coming. “Susan” he said, “are you homosexual?” No one had ever used that word with me before, and I was shocked, but not so shocked that I would respond truthfully. “Well, no I’m not.” I said, waiting to see what would next happen. “Well, that’s good” he said, “because if you were, you couldn’t be part of this church, and God wouldn’t love you.”

I usually hear people gasp when I tell this story. I can still remember where I was standing, what I was wearing, the weather; that day changed my life. Something about me had triggered him to ask that question, and I no longer felt safe. He had also taken my church away from me, that place of refuge that had been just as comfortable to me as my own home. My life spiraled following this conversation, and all I could think about was getting away. My parents thought I was just unhappy at my high school, which was true, but not for the reasons they thought. With their help, I was able to begin my junior year of high school at Salem Academy, a place that saved my life, though probably not for the reasons you think.

For the next 20 years, I stayed as far away from the Church as possible. I no longer saw it as a place of refuge, though as a young girl of 12, I had felt a strong

call to ministry. I even dreamed of being in the pulpit, a pretty big dream given that Southern Baptists, then as now, do not ordain women to preach the gospel.

In 1995, I watched as my father died of cancer. I was still “in the closet”, and after spending so much time with him during his illness, and hearing his regrets about things he never did, I began to wonder why I was spending so much of my precious life in hiding. I was afraid to come out at work for fear of being fired, afraid to come out to landlords for fear of being turned away from housing, afraid of even simple things like answering the phone. Neither my partner nor I would answer our landline because in the days before caller ID, we couldn’t be sure if it were our parents, or not, and we didn’t want to explain why someone else was sharing the home. Fear was a constant.

Living in the closet, living in such fear, takes a huge toll. It causes you to waste energy, to put yourself into a double life that requires you to hide such important parts of life. At work, I couldn’t talk about vacations I had taken, or share stories from events I had attended. I couldn’t have pictures of my loved ones on my desk.

Following my father’s death, I began to come out. The first few conversations were with work colleagues, then with closer friends, and eventually with family. Most of the conversations went well, but some, like the one with my mother, went horribly. For a time, I thought I would lose that relationship

completely. We have managed to maintain a relationship only because we don't talk about my life. So she's never met my spouse, or our daughter, or our two precious grandsons. It's a big loss, but one she is willing to take because she believes I will go to hell when I die. Thankfully, most of the rest of my biological family is very supportive.

During my coming out process, I found supportive people of faith, as well. Their encouragement brought me to Wake Forest Baptist Church in 1995, where I found a sanctuary that allowed me to begin the healing process. The saints in that congregation loved me and nurtured me. One of them, a former religion professor at Wake Forest, was the first person to push me toward attending divinity school. After I told my story one morning in our Sunday School class, Mac Bryan looked at me and said, "You have been called to ministry, and we have a divinity school that is about to open on this very campus. You need to be in that first class."

Through my classes and research while in divinity school, I began to realize that many things I was taught by my church were not accurate. I finally had a chance to call out the sexism and racism of my denomination, and to recognize the shaming of all sexuality that had been a part of my church's teaching. I was able to read for myself, in Hebrew, of how God created all humanity – from male to female – in God's own image.

That beautiful creation litany of Genesis 1 was for me, the turning point. Prior to going to divinity school, I had been reading books about my lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community. One of the books I read was about intersexed persons, people who are born with chromosomal structures, and/or anatomical structures, of both genders. We seldom hear their stories, but about 1 in every 2000 births is an intersexed child (Anne Fausto Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*). What I read, to my horror, is that physicians and families are often so ashamed of a child not fitting into our binary gender construct, that they make surgical decisions for an infant that *creates* either a boy or a girl. On their way to this separation, they often leave the infant with lifelong physical and mental difficulties. Parents often tell their children, “Well, people had to know whether you were a boy or a girl.” But why?

In the Talmud, rabbis wrote that there were some in the community who might live as men, except that they would have menstrual cycles. The judgement was that these people should separate during their cycles and live with the women, be cleansed following the end of their cycle, and then return to the community to once again live as men. So even from the earliest centuries of the Common Era, the rabbis realized that there were people who did not quite “fit” into one gender or the other. Native Americans have long celebrated “two-spirit” people who embodied traits of both males and females, and who were thought to be quite special – some

would say holy. Other civilizations have found space for a continuum of gender rather than a strict either/or determination.

So imagine my amazement at reading Genesis 1 to see that, as the Hebrew reads, God created humans from male to female – on a continuum – just as there is a continuum of skin colors, and heights, and weights, and intelligences. Intersexed people live along that continuum, part of God’s creation, but a part that has been hidden from us because it doesn’t match our culture’s need for gender certainty.

As human sexuality researcher Alfred Kinsey found, there is also a continuum of sexual attraction, with some people being exclusively heterosexual, others exclusively homosexual, and still others falling at various points along the continuum. Life on the continuum means that some people might seemingly be changing their orientation, when in reality they were already at a point that means a change might be a slight one, and not a full category change as we often think of it.

In the animal world, there are species of birds, fish, reptiles, and amphibians that can change sex over their lifetimes, as well as hundreds of species with documented same-sex attraction and same-sex pair bonding. (Bruce Bagemihl in *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*)

I’ve often wondered whether our preoccupation over same-sex attraction would even be on our radar screens if we understood the fluidity of gender. But we seem to be so tied to our binary gender construct that we want to police the

boundaries tightly – at least in one direction. Have you ever wondered why we're OK with women wearing slacks, but would probably stare and point if a 6'5" male-appearing person walked in wearing a dress? At restaurants, it's not uncommon for servers to all wear ties, shirts, and slacks, but what would happen if a restaurant owner asked all waitstaff to wear dresses, regardless of perceived gender? Are we surprised then, to learn that among intersexed infants, the decision on whether to "make" a child male or female depends on penis size? If it is deemed "insufficient" the child is assigned female status, and subsequent surgeries address any additional genital cosmetic issues so that the child won't be "confused." But if you talk to adult intersexed persons, most wish their parents had not authorized surgeries that did nothing more than attempt to create a gender, rather than just assigning one, and most wish they had been allowed to be part of the decision-making at a later age. (This information is provided by the Intersex Society of North America at www.isna.org.)

So, now, what does all of this have to do with biblical, theological, and pastoral aspects regarding homosexuality? For me, the pastoral response to how we deal with what I believe are naturally occurring variations in gender and sexuality are found in the rabbis' response to males with menstrual cycles; instead of condemnation, there is conciliation; instead of punishment, there is patience for these people to be kept in the beloved community.

Theologically, God is already on the side of all persons. With God's creation of intersex persons as part of humanity, a humanity God decreed as very good, we are called to appreciate the variety and beauty of all creation, no matter how messy it might be to our human understandings.

Scripture itself, however, has for so long been used as a weapon against LGBT persons that it is difficult for us to unhear the so-called "clobber passages," most of which are taken from the holiness codes of Leviticus, or recognize that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah was, according to Ezekiel, that "[Sodom] and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy." (16:49), rather than about persons who experience naturally-occurring same-sex attractions. But let us remember that the Bible is not a scientific text, and that scripture has been used to justify disparate views on many issues. For example, just under 200 years ago, (1822) Richard Furman, a Baptist pastor after whom the University was named, wrote a long exposition about the morality of slavery, arguing that since neither God nor Jesus ever condemned the practice in scripture, it had to be moral to hold slaves. We are now horrified at such thinking, yet he was a well-respected theologian of his time.

Scripture is context-bound, and interpretations are always impacted by our location. None of us can read the text without bringing our own experience to the enterprise, thus Furman, as a white Southerner, found scriptural justification for his

cultural bias. Of course, our bringing our experiences to the texts doesn't mean that every interpretation is equally valid, but it does mean that we have to be especially careful when the interpretations are being formed and enforced by a majority over against a minority. Men, over against women. European American people, over against indigenous peoples and other people of color. Heterosexuals over against homosexuals. Majority opinion, just like majority interpretation, does not in and of itself guarantee validity. For me, the key is found in Jesus, and his admonition that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. If we read scripture using his hermeneutical key, we might approach texts with less arrogance and certainty.

If you are convinced that scripture always condemns same-sex attractions and relationships, then the next time you read scripture, I would like you to try and carry my story into the reading with you. I'd like for you to think of me at 7 or 8, wondering why I seemed to be so different from other children, long before I knew what sexual orientation meant. I'd like for you to think of me singing in the church choir, studying scripture, and trying to be the best young Christian I could be in the face of religious people who told me I was an awful person. I'd like for you to think of my fear, when at work one day, I was approached by my Human Resources Vice President regarding two openly gay employees, about whom he said, "Well, if they act too gay, just fire them. They don't have any rights." I'd like

for you to think of losing your relationship to your family simply because of a trait that is as natural for you as their right or left handedness is to them.

And where do you find this confused child and scared adult in scripture? Genesis 19? The Holiness Codes of Leviticus? Or do you find her in Jesus' entreaty to let the children come to him when others found that surprising? Do you find her in the Syrophenician woman's challenge to Jesus to show mercy, because even dogs get crumbs? Do you find her in Peter's dream in Acts, and his recognition that Cornelius was neither profane nor unclean, a view which challenged Peter to change his understanding of the religious law he had lived with his whole life?

I am extremely grateful for this opportunity to be with you today as you continue your journey, and look forward to your upcoming questions. I am heartened to hear about the work you have been doing and will be doing in the months to come. I will be praying for your process, and praying that at each step along the way, the Moravian church's motto will be lived out: In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, love. Thank you.