



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

WASHINGTON, DC

SSA: SACRAMENT, SACRIFICE, ASSISTANCE

Romans 1:18-32; Matthew 26:36-44; Exodus 17:8-15

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Introduction:

Homosexuality. LGBTQ. It wouldn't be an adequate series on love, sex, and relationships if we didn't broach this subject. And so, with some trepidation, I want to talk to you about same-sex attraction.

We need to recognize that there is real suffering for same-sex attracted people. It's a suffering that marriage rights, the proliferation of gay and lesbian television characters, and all the rainbow flags in the world seem powerless to alleviate.

- According to research in the Netherlands, where gay marriage has been legal since 2001, gay men remain three times more likely to suffer from a mood disorder than straight men, and 10 times more likely to engage in 'suicidal self-harm'. And in Sweden, which has had civil unions since 1995 and marriage since 2009, married gays and lesbians have triple the suicide rate of heterosexual couples.
- While statistics on this aren't kept for the United States, Canadian research shows that, over the past few decades, more gay men there have died from suicide than from AIDS.
- Relaying his own experience, the Seattle author Michael Hobbes writes of the difficulty of being same-sex attracted even in the most liberal of settings. He says: "I'm a perpetually single gay guy who was raised in a bright blue city by PFLAG parents. I've never known anyone who died of AIDS, I've never experienced direct discrimination and I came out of the closet into a world where marriage, a picket fence and a golden retriever were not just feasible, but expected. ...I've also been in and out of therapy more times than I've downloaded and deleted Grindr."

- I wasn't around for the parish council retreat in the spring, but I read these "Dear Rez: Love Letters" that are also available on the website. In one, a Rez member writes: "I experience same sex attraction....To answer the questions that are on people's minds: I have never had a sexual relationship or dated in a same-gendered context. I was not abused. My relationship with my parents was good. I have 'prayed the gay away' without success. I did not ask for this."

See, homosexuality or same-sex attraction isn't just an issue "out there". It's not just a moral question to be solved. It's not just a hot-button political issue in a culture war. No, it's an issue "in here"—for people we know and love, people who are our neighbors, family members and friends, and our brothers and sisters in Christ. It's an issue that impacts these people deeply.

I realize that a half-hour sermon is far from adequate to address this topic in anything approaching exhaustiveness, but I want to walk through our scripture readings to try and provide a theological framework within which we can engage same-sex attraction. (And my hope is that, with the assumed caveats, that what I say will help us toward thinking about things like transgenderism, etc.)

So, for now, let's take hold of the acronym SSA—same-sex attraction—and let's put it in a deeper theological context with the words "sacrament", "sacrifice", and "assistance".

But first, let me pray for us.

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Move #1: Same-sex attraction is a sacrament of the human tragedy

Here's the first word: sacrament. Same-sex attraction is a sacrament of the human tragedy. In other words, it is a visible and outward manifestation of universal fallenness. Same-sex attracted individuals point in a unique way to a core reality about human life.

To see what I mean, turn in your Bibles to Romans 1:18-32. It's on page 610. Just before this, Paul has said he is not ashamed to proclaim the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation in that it reveals a righteousness God will give to people by faith. Of course, you ask: salvation from what? Why do I need God's righteousness? The answers to those questions are found in the passage that spans verses 18-32. Here Paul tells a story of the universal human tragedy—a fall into

unrighteousness and the subsequent divine judgment. It's a complex passage, but you can get the essence of it by looking at one word—"exchange". "Exchange". In verse 23 Paul says that fallen humanity exchanges the glory of the immortal God for images—idols. In verse 25 he calls this the exchange of the truth about God for a lie. It's an exchange of true worship for false worship—this is the essence of sin. And so, as a response to this, God's wrath takes the form of an "exchange". In verses 24, 26, and 28, the text says that God responded by "giving up" humanity to the disordering of their very desires. (in the original "gave them up" is the same word as "exchange".) God allows their passions to run roughshod over them. This giving-up takes the form of runaway sexual desires in general, and all sorts of faulty loves that result in behaviour ranging from gossip and disobedience to parents, to hatred of God and murder. And, in the midst of this passage, Paul singles out one symptom of the tragedy for special mention. It gets its own little subsection in verses 26-27, where Paul speaks of the disordering of desire that takes the form of same-sex attraction ("dishonourable passions") that can lead, if indulged, to "shameless acts"—women with women, men with men.

Like many people today—even Christians in the church—you find Paul's singling out of this subject deeply troubling. You might say, "Ok, I accept that it says that, but let's just move on and not talk about it." But that's just avoidance. Or you look for something to explain it away, saying: "maybe it's not about what we know today as 'homosexuality'", or "maybe Paul just didn't understand what we know now about sexuality." But those responses won't stand up to scrutiny.

The fact of the matter is, Paul does single out same-sex passions and homosexual practice in a unique way. It's important—and even helpful—to understand why. Richard Hays, a New Testament scholar at Duke University, argues we should see these verses in terms of the concept of "sacrament". Now, the sacraments of the gospel—baptism and the eucharist—are tangible embodiments of spiritual realities. By contrast, Paul portrays homosexual behaviour here as a sort of sacrament of fallenness—or an anti-sacrament, if you will. Hays writes: "When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator's design." The Creator's design, from the beginning, is the male-female duality of sexual complementarity within marriage, and for the sake of procreation. And the fact that some people deal with same-sex passions and engage in homosexual practice is a uniquely visible manifestation—a sacrament—of what is wrong with all of us. See, you might look at some of the other symptoms of fallenness, like, say, lust or greed, as just misdirected. It is good for you, man, to long for a woman, but just not *that* woman. It is good for you to want some wealth, but just not *that* amount of wealth. You might conclude that perhaps you

aren't *fundamentally flawed*; maybe you're just a bit misdirected. But the reality of same-sex attraction brings all of us—face-to-face with the reality that we aren't just misdirected people, but that, in our fallenness, our very nature is in rebellion against itself and the Creator.

Now hear this very clearly, please! Paul is not saying that those who struggle with same-sex attraction or even those who have engaged in homosexual practices are particularly worse sinners. By no means! Everyone is both guilty of, and corrupted by the effects of, the one capital-S Sin, which is false worship. There is no difference. But everyone feels the effects of this one capital-s Sin in varying ways. And those who experience same-sex attraction are grappling with a symptom that many of you struggle to imagine. They "did not ask for this"! They were indeed, likely, "born this way". In a very real sense they are bearing this aspect of the tragedy on your behalf. They bear it on your behalf in that sin as a universal reality is your sin too. They bear it on your behalf in that, as they manifest desires that are against nature, they are revealing your true situation. If you really want to think about this biblically and faithfully, you have to grasp this. You must have empathy.

Same-sex attraction is a sacrament of the universal human tragedy. These individuals show us something important about our human nature. They are a visible and outward manifestation of our universal fallenness. That's "S"--Sacrament

Move #2: Same-sex attraction can be the sacrifice of Jesus Christ

Now, I want to move on to the second "S"—sacrifice. Same-sex attraction can be a participation in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That is to say: it can be a suffering offered for the glory of God and the good of others. Just as it is a particularly difficult symptom of sin, so it provides an opportunity for a particularly vivid witness to God's coming kingdom.

Romans 1's account of humanity's "giving up" and being "given up"—that is the story of one garden. The garden of Eden. By itself, it's a tragedy. But mercifully, the Bible is a "Tale of Two Gardens"! There is another garden—the garden of Gethsemane. It's there in Matthew 26:36-44, the gospel reading for tonight. In this garden, Christ engages in a of "giving up"—a sacrifice—of his own. Christ as a human being, with a human will, has the desire to live, to flourish, to enjoy his life. He does not want to die. But as he nears Good Friday it becomes apparent that obedience to the divine will require everything of him. And so, there is a potential conflict. And the struggle is real. He says (v. 38): "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." He falls on his face and prays (v. 39): "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." He prays it

again, and again—three times. But at the end of each prayer, he says, “Nevertheless, not as I will but as you will.” Christ gives himself up! This is the high point of human existence in a fallen world! This offering in the garden is integral to redemption. Christ is reversing the first giving-up of Eden. The first human beings only had to live in accordance with their good nature, but they rebelled. To undo this Christ has goes against his good nature, “giving himself up” for the glory of God and the good of others.

Now—what does Gethsemane have to do with same-sex attraction? Well, it has everything to do with same-sex attraction! The same-sex attracted believer manifests this redeeming sacrifice, this redemption of humanity, in a particularly vivid way.

Thomas Hopko, an Eastern Orthodox priest, says it like this: “People with same-sex attractions who profess Christian faith...will accept their homosexual desires as their cross—a providential part of their struggle to glorify God...in a sinful world...They will see their refusal to act out their feelings sexually as an extraordinary opportunity for imitating Christ and participating in his saving passion.” What he means is that when a same-sex attracted Christian, through prayer and agony, offers their passions to God—that they are an especially vivid manifestation of Christ’s obedience and redemptive suffering. Think about it: we are all called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Every person is called to participate in the sufferings of Christ by putting their fallen desires to death. But those of us who are same-sex attracted do this in a greater way than the married man who puts to death his lust for a woman not his wife. And in a more radical way even than the single or celibate woman. In their faithfulness, same-sex attracted disciples bear witness by renouncing a desire at the very core of their (fallen) nature. They say, “Not my will, but thine be done.”

Now, if this is right, it means that same-sex attracted disciples of Jesus are worthy of the greatest honor in the church. As they, through prayer and repentance, put to death their desires, they are heroic figures. They are emblems of Jesus Christ. They are making a sacrifice that the church can benefit from. They convey inspiration and hope to the whole body of Christ, and a testimony to the world of God’s coming kingdom. Just as the church has always looked at her martyrs and her self-abnegating monastics as worthy of special celebration and imitation, so too can she now look to these disciples. The gospel calls every Christian to die to their old ways and live to Christ, and the same-sex attracted person shows in themselves how profound this call is! Churches need to get this. They need to look through a gospel lens at this issue. If they did, there could be no subtle shaming of those with same-sex attraction, no being weirded-out by them. There could be no tendency to treat their failures as worse than others. The church would know that, through spiritual participation with

Christ, same-sex attraction doesn't make a disciple of Jesus a second-rate Christian. If anything, it gives them a special place. Now, this is not to say that they must be perfect. No! Jesus was perfect on their behalf. But they can be examples and inspirations in their victories as they abide in Christ, and also as they confess and repent of their failures. If they can die to their old nature, if they can confess and repent, so too can we! They are offering themselves as a sacrifice that brings us closer to Christ, to a deeper understanding of death-to-sin and the hope of resurrection.

Same-sex attraction provides an opportunity for vivid witness to God's coming kingdom. It can be a sacrifice, a suffering offered for the good of others and the glory of God. It can participate in a special way in the suffering of Christ. That's the second "S"—sacrifice.

Move #3: Same-sex attraction requires the assistance of the whole church (cf. Exodus 17:8-15: an imperative of the whole church to bear the burden of homosexuality together through love, support, friendship).

Now here's the "A"—Assistance. Because of the unique struggle and unique opportunity same-sex attracted people face, the church must offer them assistance. The church must lift up their hands as they do battle. Their victory is our victory, so we must offer them assistance.

Heroes need assistance. Even the Son of God needed—or at least wanted—help in his struggle. He took with him his three closest friends to help him in his struggle to overcome the sin of the world. And when they failed him and fell asleep, he said: "Could you not watch with me one hour?" And a similar dynamic of heroes needing help in spiritual battle is evident in the Old Testament reading today from Exodus 17:8-15. Moses serves a key role in the battle of Israel against the attacking Amalekites. His intercessory prayer overlooking the battle is the *sine qua non* of their victory. As the Israelite warriors look up and see Moses interceding on their behalfs they are inspired and strengthened and become victorious. If he succeeds, they succeed. But Moses cannot successfully serve this function alone. He takes his two closest friends with him, and when he grows weary, the text says in verses 12-13 that "Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword." Heroes need assistance.

The same-sex attracted Christian has a heroic role to play in the kingdom of God—their victory is the victory of the entire church. They can only succeed through prayer in community, spiritual friendship, and practical support. And the question for the

other believers in the church is whether we are going to be more like Aaron and Hur—assisting them, strengthening their feeble knees and holding up their drooping hands, or whether we are going to be more like Peter and James and John and fall asleep on the job. Are we willing to provide them with the friendship and practical support they need as they bear witness to us and to the world? Are we going to pray for them and with them regularly? Are we going to go out of our way to affirm them in their extremely high calling to holiness, to show admiration and respect for them? Are we going to celebrate their victories with them? Are we going to be ok with hearing about their failures? Are we going to make sure they are included in our family dinners? Are we going to invite them to come on vacation with us?

We must answer “yes” to these questions. Offering assistance to these believers is our calling! If one member of the body of Christ suffers, everyone suffers. If one member—especially a same-sex attracted member—fails to fulfil their vocation to manifest Christ, our Christian witness is poorer for that fact.

Whatever it takes, the church must come alongside same-sex attracted people and offer them assistance. We must lift up their hands in the midst of the battle. After all, their victory is our victory; their witness is our witness.

Conclusion:

So, here we are. SSA—sacrament, sacrifice, assistance. This is the framework I have tried to provide to think about the issue of same-sex attraction. I’m sure it isn’t lost on you that embedded in this re-framing is an affirmation that there is something disordered about same-sex attraction, and that disciples with these desires are called to put them to death with Christ. I may have just offended many of you by saying these things.

A couple weeks ago, The Post had a write-up on a new Pew research poll that found that 47% of evangelical Christians born after 1964 now favour same-sex marriage. The famed Christian author Eugene Peterson just this past week issued and then quickly retracted the view that he sees no reason to be against same-sex relationships or marriage. There is a general malaise in the Christian community as we hear time and time again that our view on sexuality is retrograde and hateful, and so there is this inclination we naturally feel just to believe that, and give in, so that we can be culturally respectable.

There is something spiritually anemic about us if the only two options we can think of are simply condemning the behaviour or total capitulation to culture!

But I have tried to convince you that we have another option—to go deeper into the Bible’s teaching on same-sex attraction—to understand it more theologically, not less. And that in doing so, we can actually hold out to people an elevated and heroic role in the kingdom of God for same-sex attracted individuals.