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## Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

Steve Hoffard<sup>1</sup>

**Texts: Genesis 18: 20-25, 30-33 – 19:13; Psalm 139: 1-15; Ezekiel 16: 48-50; Luke 10: 25-37**

**T**here was a time when I thought there was something wrong with being gay. I assumed that it was sinful, and even one of the worst sins, much worse than lying or cheating or even stealing. It was right up at the top of the list. Even though it isn't one of the 10 commandments I assumed it was as bad if not worse than breaking the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment, thou shall not murder.

Now I want to be clear, I never heard that message from a Lutheran pulpit, that's not to say some Lutheran pastors weren't preaching homosexuality was a sin, but that's not where I heard it. I heard it from the wider society. The message was loud and clear as I was growing up that if I was attracted to men there was something wrong with me.

Now the religious folk who were preaching that message would say "the bible clearly says homosexuality is a sin", and often use the Sodom and Gomorrah story I chose as our first reading as proof. There are others but I choose this one to address today because it is the one most clearly not about same-gender attraction. It has often made me wonder if those who state "the bible clearly says" have actually read it or are they just going on what others have told them.

Because what the bible does make clear is that the sin of Sodom is arrogance, pride, and failure to help the poor and needy. The sin of Sodom has nothing to do with consensual same-gender relationships. But until I took the time to study this scripture text and the 6 others used to condemn same-gender relationships I thought the wider society was right and I must have been born as a sinful, wretched, and damned human being. Because it is true, in the words of Lady Gaga, "Baby I was Born this Way".

My sexual orientation was not something I chose. First of all why would I have chosen it? I don't think anyone purposefully chooses to be ostracized, condemned, threatened and made fun of as a way of being in this world. In fact, I tried very hard for the better part of 50 years to chose heterosexuality. I dated women, got married, and even had a child attempting to be straight. And for those in the pray away the gay camp. I prayed, I prayed hard, I prayed long, and I prayed often, and I even bargained with God to change me. Over the years, God has changed me in many ways, but I know now they never felt a need to change my sexual orientation.

Today I can thank God that I never attempted conversion therapy, as we now know that it is harmful, abusive, and most certainly doesn't work. And thankfully as of January 2022 it is a criminal offence to cause or promote another person to undergo conversion therapy here in Canada.

So this morning, this first Pride worship service for Trinity, I thought I should share with you some of my journey with God who has given me through it all a much clearer understanding of the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Hoffard serves as pastor of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Tavistock, ON. This sermon was delivered on Pride Sunday, June 23, 2024.

So I begin in the beginning with the question I am often asked, “When did you first realize you were gay?” I have always known, even before puberty and before I had words for it, I knew I was different in some way. Once I was able to name it, as I said before the wider society made it clear that this was something I shouldn’t share with anyone. And I can joke now that I hid it so well I should have won an Academy award for my performance as a straight man. But I knew that God knew and that caused a lot of guilt and anxiety for a very long time. So, I fought it as best I could, even getting married and having a child which I had hoped was pleasing to God in some way and that they would fix me.

Sometime around the year 2000 I also got much more involved in church life. At that time the church was having much study and conversation around human sexuality and orientation, and I was listening and studying very carefully. During this time 2 things were happening simultaneously. I was discerning a call to rostered ministry, and I was learning from the church that there was nothing sinful about being gay. Through much study, conversation, and prayer I ended up with both a masters degree in divinity and a clear understanding that I was created this way as a beautiful beloved part of God’s diverse creation. As we hear in Psalm 139, God knows me better than I know myself, because I was carefully created, knit in the womb to be who I am.

It was a great relief to come to that understanding and so some freedom seeped into my being. However, my plan was to stay closeted. I decided that I had invested too much into my pretend heterosexual life and I convinced myself too many people that I loved would be shocked, wouldn’t understand, and might even abandon me. So I prayed “God I understand there is nothing wrong with being gay, but too many people would be hurt if I came out and I can do better work for equality as an ally, so together let’s take this secret to my grave.”

God, as God often does at our best humanmade plans laughed but allowed me some time to realize that my plan wasn’t the best one. Then about this time of year in 2016 at the Eastern Synod Assembly I met someone, recently ordained, openly gay and called to a fairly traditionally conservative congregation. I think that was yet another nudge from God to come out of the dark closet, a glimmer of light if you will as I saw a real life example of how it was possible to be both gay and a pastor. That summer I spent some time with that pastor who told me his coming out story over several cold beers. I don’t know if it was the effect of the beer or the beautiful vulnerability, I got to experience in hearing his story. In any case I surprisingly found myself letting down those large protective walls I had built around me and for the first time ever I told another person, “I am gay too!”

I don’t even know how to describe that moment anymore; I was overwhelmed by a feeling of fear and vulnerability and at the same time a great weight was lifted from my shoulders and I felt lighter than I ever had before. But then I made him promise that this was a secret we would both take to our graves. He agreed but I think he also knew that a flood gate was slowly being opened so he agreed that he would also be a listening ear whenever I needed one. We talked a lot after that. Seems I had a lot to talk about.

It wasn’t long until I realized I couldn’t keep who I was hidden anymore. Back in 2016 we were preparing for the 500th anniversary of the reformation with the themes, “Creation not for Sale”, Salvation not for Sale, and Human Beings not for Sale.” And I was using those themes for a summer preaching series. They say the best sermons preached are the ones we need to hear ourselves. I studied, wrote and preached the sermon “Human Beings not for Sale” and didn’t think that much of it until Monday morning, my traditional day off when I regularly used to walk to the coffee shop and use it as a time to review the week prior before

delving into the next one. It was on that walk that I reviewed what I had said in my sermon about how the gospel frees us. That Jesus on the cross has made all of us regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, ability, or any other human characteristic, free and equal. That God shows us in love, that every single one of us is most precious. Not even one of us a commodity to be bought or sold and how we must be brave and bold in insisting with God that human beings are not for sale!

It was in that moment I realized that in staying in the closet not only was being unfair to myself as a human being I was being unfair to my wife. I had preached that it was our calling to stand up and reject callous practices that do not allow liberty and freedom for all people. I heard the gospel message loud and clear and, in that moment, decided to start practicing what I preach.

It then took me another 6 months to work up the nerve to tell Sylvia, which led me to telling my pastor, my bishop, my son, my parents, and a handful of friends. I still wasn't ready to tell the rest of the world. I had led the congregation I was in through the process of becoming an opening and affirming reconciling in Christ congregation and I was afraid they would think in doing so it was self-serving. I decided I would keep the secret until I was in a new call and would be open and honest with them from the start.

That was my plan and I told Bishop Mike about it. He was very pastoral and said he would support me in whatever I decided to do. But he also added a piece of advice. He said our Lutheran Church is a small one, and should I go for a call interview anywhere else in the synod and was open about who I was, he assured me that by the time I got back to Kingston someone will have called someone and the secret would be out. He suggested I slowly start telling some people in the congregation I trusted and felt safe with and see how that goes.

I did follow that advice and on Christ the King Sunday Nov 20, 2016 at the end of the worship service I asked the congregation to sit down and I read to them a letter I had prepared. I told them little bits of the story I just told you and then I added.

This admission comes from a life's journey of discovery, growth and revelation. My own study, preaching, teaching, and spirituality have allowed me to grow in faith and I find myself trusting more deeply everyday in the very thing I have been called to proclaim, the love and grace of God. From that trust I have discovered comes new life and the courage to face my own fears.

I am now conscious that to be authentic I must not only preach the truth, I also have to live it. I can no longer proclaim to you that you should live lives of transparency and vulnerability without fear unless I also do the same.

The grace and love of God has called me to rest now in my full identity. My own mental health and well-being depends on me owning who I am. Shame about being gay and caring about what others will think about me in this regard is toxic and needs to be put to rest. My orientation is my orientation. I do not choose it and I also no longer desire to change it. I am now good with who God created me to be, and more than that I see it as a gift. This journey has shaped me in ways that have made me sensitive to the struggle of others and this has made me a better pastor.

My vision of the church has always been a place where we all can safely be who God has created us to be. A place where we leave our shame and the world's definition of who we should be at the door. It is as the assembled body of Christ that God meets us in grace and love and challenges us to live lives of compassionate and diverse discipleship."

My fellow siblings I have been freed by the gospel of Christ, unbound so that in my freedom I can work to unbind others from whatever binds them. This is not just my call; it is our call as the body of Christ.

And so may we live into that calling boldly and bravely. Amen.