

**Opening Remarks for Debate with Dr. Michael Brown
Charlotte, NC, Feb. 14, 2008
Harry Knox, Director, Religion and Faith Program**

I am grateful to each of you for the great effort it took for you to be here tonight. Time is precious, and time with loved ones even more so. So for you to give up a Valentines Day evening to come hear and interact with me and Dr. Brown is a great gift. Thank you.

You have come, I suspect, for the same reason I have - because the stakes are high. We are in the midst of a conversation in the church and in the larger society about who we lesbian and gay people are, what God thinks of us, and whether or not we should be safe and embraced and respected in our congregations and our secular communities.

Perhaps you have come because you care passionately about the condition of my mortal soul, or the soul of another person. Maybe you've come because, like me, you have been singled out for violence because of who you are. Perhaps, like me, you have been denied the right to work because you are lesbian or gay.

Maybe, like me, you love someone so much you have taken on all the responsibilities of making a family with him or her and yet you have been denied the basic protections and benefits available to your married neighbors.

Some of you have come because you have seen the injustices perpetrated against your gay and lesbian sisters and brothers, heard the injustice blamed on the God you love, and had a difficult time reconciling what you know of God's unconditional love and boundless grace with the hatred and vitriol you see directed at your neighbors in God's name. And you have wondered what it is doing to your own soul to be aligned with such unkindness and outright violence.

Because the stakes are so high our discussion tonight requires two things that are often contradictory - utmost civility and care for each other in word and deed - and absolute honesty. May God help us confront our own sinful natures and those of others with both honesty and grace.

I have spent my adult life begging my mostly Christian neighbors to stop killing me with kindness. For the most noble of reasons, a desire to call me to holiness, my neighbors have denied me the right to work, looked the other way when I was a victim of hate crimes, denied me and my partner the protections and benefits of marriage, sought to silence my voice in church and heaped ridicule and shame on my family.

No matter their motivations, they have proven that they are not my friends. You cannot deny my basic human rights and expect me to consider you to have my best interests at heart. The stakes are much too high.

Those who have sought to punish and oppress me have used the most powerful tool I know of as a weapon against me. They have perverted the Holy Bible - that powerful standard of justice for even the most marginalized among us - the touchstone of grace that offers hope and reconciliation - they have perverted the Bible into a tool of oppression.

I'm a Christian and a gay man. I am at perfect peace with God about the condition of my soul. I have prayed through many sleepless nights begging forgiveness for the sins that separated me from God and those around me. But as God and I have worked together through what it means for me to be gay, as I have studied the Bible and prayed, and sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I have been given perfect peace about the fact that my sexual orientation is one of God's many gifts to me and therefore to deny it is to deny the One who is its author and who seeks its highest good through me.

I have come to that peace, not in spite of the Bible, but because I have studied it with reverence and found it to be a model of liberation and reconciliation, not a tool of terror. But if, having studied it and come to love it, I mostly run to the Bible now with confidence, it was certainly not always that way.

I first studied Genesis 19 not out of love for the text but out of a drive to survive. My hands shook when I turned the pages, and if yours don't, go back and read it again until they do. For though I found when I actually read the

story that it doesn't have a thing to do with committed relationships like mine with my partner Mike, it speaks very powerfully to me as a person of privilege in America.

Do you remember the story?

Angels who look like men show up at Lot's house in Sodom and Lot does what is required by his faith and the rules of community, he takes them in and feeds them. As they are eating, there comes a loud knock - a banging - on the door. When Lot goes out he sees all the men of the city standing around his house. No women - that's no surprise - women have only in my lifetime begun to be sent out to war - and make no mistake, those men are out for blood.

"Bring those guys out here," they say, "so we may know them." That sounds benign doesn't it? "So we may know them." Lot can tell the difference. Scholars have argued about the Hebrew word that's used here, but the context of the story makes it clear that the men of Sodom intended to use one of the oldest tools of war to make sure those two visitors to their city - and anyone else like them - knew they were not welcome. They intended to rape them in public.

There's a story that is almost the mirror image of this in Judges 19-20, only the city is called Gibeah. Same scenario - strangers, people we don't understand, people not like us, people not from around here (you might call them immigrants) are taken in by the householder and the men of the city show up demanding that they be turned over to them. The householder refuses, but does precisely what Lot had done in the same situation - he offers his daughter to the men instead.

Women, are your hands shaking yet?

Unlike the men of Sodom, the men of Gibeah accept the householder's daughter and they rape her until she dies. They throw her dead body up on the steps. The householder (hard to call him a father) cuts her up in twelve pieces and mails one piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The tribes are so incensed at this horrible act of

injustice (hard to just call it inhospitality) that they dispatch twelve armies to wipe Gibeah off the map.

The sin of Sodom is not homosexuality and the sin of Gibeah is not heterosexuality. Their sin was the same: gross mistreatment of the stranger, the person not known or understood, and the horrid use of rape as an act of war. These were hate crimes - crimes committed not just against the immediate victims, but perpetrated in order to send a message to everyone remotely like the victims - you are not welcome; you are not welcome; you are not welcome. And for these sins Sodom and Gibeah were removed from the earth, but not from our history.

I used to read Genesis 19 and Judges 19-20 and think they were good stories, but they didn't apply to me. But then I saw the pictures from Abu Graib Prison, men stripped naked and stacked on top of each other, dog collars and leashes hanging from their necks and a soldier, one of my neighbors from America grinning stupidly beside them. And my hands started to shake.

I dropped back to Leviticus and wrestled the Holiness Code for a blessing.

Sometimes it's hard to take the Holiness Code of Leviticus 18 and 19 seriously. Are you going to give up eating shrimp and pork, wearing wool coats with cotton pants, and playing football in order to prove you're a good person? All those things are on the list of proscriptions that includes me lying with a man as with a woman.

There are a lot of people who want me to live up to the Holiness Code and I understand why. I understand the desire to live as a reflection of the love of God in a world that wallows in the dark misery of sin. I do. I hear with power and resonance the teacher's command to the Israelites wandering in the desert to set themselves apart from the idol worshippers of the land to which they were going - to set themselves apart by not wearing the kinds of clothes the Canaanites wore, by not eating the local foods, or touching the dead skins of the unclean pigs that must

have seemed nasty, abominable to sheep herders. And I surely understand a rule against copulating with homeless boys taken in as temple prostitutes by the priests servicing the Canaanite idols. Good children of Abraham that we are, we wouldn't want to do the things that might cause us to be mistaken for those who recognized any God other than the one true God. I get that.

What I don't get is what any of that has to do with my love for my partner and the generative creativity of our shared life or the ecstatic community we feel on the rare and sacred occasions when our bodies speak of love and trust and sacrifice and mutual care in language unutterable. But I do understand how unspeakably bad it is to value anything of this world more than we value the God who created it. The message of Leviticus 18 and 19 is that we must be willing to stand out in order to call the world away from idolatry.

Here's what makes my hands and my heart quake. You and I have been called to ministry, whether lay or ordained, at a time of great ferment in the Church we love. Most of the denominations that purport to represent Christ are in thrall of a great idol called the unity of the Church. They are heaping before its unblinking visage the bodies and souls of your lesbian and gay sisters and brothers in an attempt to satisfy what cannot be sated. The idol always wants more and never really gives anything in return. While over and around us weeps the God who requires only justice and mercy as acceptable sacrifices.

I turned to Paul's letter to the Roman Christians.

Ancient Rome was full of temples to fertility gods and goddesses. In those temples priests copulated with adolescents - you know they were homeless kids with nowhere else to go - in hopes of ensuring good harvests and growth in populations threatened by disease and war. The lives, the feelings and well-being of individual children were sacrificed for what was perceived to be the common good and in the process it became a commonplace of the priestly life to take part in orgies that, if they were not good for the children, were pleasurable indeed for the adults. To leave that part of the story out of your study of Romans 1 is intellectually lazy for you and spiritually life-threatening for your lesbian and gay neighbors. But

explanation of Paul's writings in that context, though scary and provocative, offers you the chance to speak words of real hope and reconciliation to a nation obsessed with sex and talking about sex in every venue except church. And please don't forget to go on to study Romans 2, where Paul begins to admonish us not to judge our neighbors.

How badly America needs to hear the message of hope through Christ expressed in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1! As Mel White has written, "Paul shouts across the distance, 'You are breaking God's heart by the way you are treating one another.'" In those texts Greek words that lazy, or prejudiced, translators have shortened to "homosexuals" actually mean boy prostitutes and the older men who patronize them. Congressman Mark Foley needs to hear a sermon preached on those texts. And lest you think it's only the gay Congressman's problem, remember Congressman David Vitter was recently caught exploiting the bodies of women in Washington.

I pray you won't fail to preach those sermons and share those insights in Sunday School and in your home Bible study. At the same time I pray you will help people understand those texts don't say a word about my loving relationship with Mike. The word homosexual didn't even exist in the English language until the middle 1800s. We have only just begun to understand anything about sexual orientation and we must not put words into Paul's mouth that he wouldn't even have understood.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he urged him to remember Who he served and to confront and encourage those around him consistently even though it would cost him.

I know what it costs someone to preach on Leviticus 18 and 19 and point its message at the institution that holds her or his retirement account. It cost me my ordination, though not my ministry.

I know how much easier it is let people think the Sodom story is about people like me when it's really about empire and war and a lot of things you don't want to touch when making your livings at places like Fort Bragg.

I know that since 90% of pedophiles are men who abuse girls, and that since it is your neighbors who make pornography one of the largest industries in America, it is

easier for you to let folks think Paul was only worried about homosexuality.

But I must finally be true to my calling and ask you to live deeply in the texts that are before you. I urge you to be true to those texts and to live into your tasks as pastors and teachers because the stakes are high. Your parishioners and neighbors are desperate for your guidance and if you fail to teach them what these troubling texts are really about there will surely be others willing to do your job for you in order to accomplish their own ends.

I come to you with quivering hands. I say all of this to you with the discomfort and trepidation required by our task for today. I would like to send you out shouting, but that is not my job. Mine today is to have you hear the words of Paul to Timothy that have proved timeless enough to become scripture:

"Always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully. I myself am already being poured out..."