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Recognize limits of understanding

FOCUS ON THEOLOGY



PASTOR RONALD P. BYARS

Is homosexuality a sin? This is a question from which the churches are finding that they cannot hide. Even the most conservative of churches, who believe that they have long since settled this question, find that it's not settled after all. Jimmy Allen, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, has had to deal with the question personally rather than abstractly. Two of his sons are gay, and one is HIV-positive. His daughter-in-law, infected through a blood transfusion, has passed the virus on to the children of a third son.

It would be nice if churches and their members did not have to think about difficult questions like this one. However, it happens not infrequently that our own children, or children we have helped to nurture in faith, grow up to identify themselves as homosexual persons. When there are faces and names and person-

alities involved, it confuses our thinking! It's far easier to resolve questions that have no beloved names or faces attached to them.

Is homosexuality a sin? The Bible doesn't mention same-sex relationships frequently, but in the few instances where it does, it condemns them. Of course, each of these occurrences has a context that may create special circumstances — rape or cult prostitution, for example. Some scholars say that the Biblical writers exhibit no familiarity with the homosexuality we have learned to identify in the 20th century, based on powerful physical attraction to persons of one's own gender.

Is homosexuality a sin? Students of human sexual development are not at all sure what causes homosexuality. There is some evidence that it may have a genetic basis. Traditional explanations locate the cause in the dynamics of early family relationships. It does not seem likely that a person simply chooses same-sex relationships. All sexuality seems rooted in something more compelling than rational choice. If a person does not face the choice of

being heterosexual or homosexual, can we speak of sexual orientation in moral terms? Certainly the way any one of us exercises his or her sexuality needs to be governed morally. But is the mere condition of homosexuality automatically immoral?

Some argue that homosexuality is "unnatural." In other words, that God, or "natural law," has intended that we be oriented sexually toward the opposite gender. That certainly seems to describe what's required for reproduction. But what are we meant to do about it when that's not the way things turn out to be? Are we so certain that we can say what is "natural" and what is "unnatural"? Is a genetic tendency toward Tay-Sachs disease "unnatural"? Is it "natural" to have perfect pitch or a photographic memory or the musical genius of a young Mozart, or the phenomenal mathematical gifts of a so-called "idiot savant"? Is it "natural" to be born with six fingers on one hand, or to grow extraordinarily tall, like those who have Marfan's Syndrome? "Natural" and "unnatural" are rather hard to pin down.

Even when we think the Creator's purpose is clear, the line between natural and unnatural is sometimes fuzzy. Evolutionary history seems to show that new departures in the history of a species often begin with what seem to be "unnatural" mutations.

I don't propose to answer the difficult questions that keep popping up around this issue. I find my own thinking unsettled, in flux. It does seem certain to me that people of faith must always recognize the limitations of human understanding. That beloved chapter, I Corinthians 13, includes this word of caution: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly . . . We must proceed to work our way through these questions with due modesty, always biased toward kindness. 'Love never ends . . . For we know only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.'"

Ronald P. Byars, Ph.D., is pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. To leave a voicemail message, dial (313) 963-2047, Ext. 1851, from a Touch-Tone phone.

COMMUNITY MESSENGER

Community Messenger features spiritual announcements involving Oakland County religious institutions. Write: Community Messenger, Beliefs & Values Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. Our fax number is (810) 644-1314.

HANDS-ON

Young worshippers at Northminster Presbyterian Church in Troy have a hand in bringing biblical stories to life during the church service.

UP WITH MUSIC

The combined adult choirs of

Abiding Presence Lutheran Church and University Presbyterian Church in Rochester Hills will present John Luther's Magnificat at 10:30 a.m. Sunday, Jan. 28, in the Abiding Presence sanctuary, 1550 W. Walton.

Accompanied by chamber orchestra, harp and organ, the performance will feature soloists from the two choirs. Betsy Graham Marsh will direct.

The program will be repeated at University Presbyterian, 1385 S. Adams, at 9 and 10:30 a.m. Sunday, Feb. 4.

AUTHOR SPEAKS

The Rev. Ruth Mosley, author of "Prayer Celebration" and minister of West Side Unity Church, will discuss "The Power of the Spoken Word" at a program sponsored by Unity Bloomfield Hills-Troy Church, 11 a.m. Sunday, Jan. 28, at the Birmingham Community House, Birmingham. A workshop is scheduled noon to 2 p.m. on a free-will offering basis.

Rev. Mosley's upcoming book is "Lord Is It I?"

—compiled by Janice Tigar-Kramer

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