

Lectionary Tools
For the Inclusion of
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender
Themes in the Dialogue of the Church

Version 1

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For Lutherans Concerned/North America

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Introduction

This document has been published by Lutherans Concerned/North America as a tool for pastors and other leaders of the Church who are seeking ways to speak of the experience of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender persons. For much of its history, the Church has either been silent on this subject or has issued edicts of condemnation and judgment to any who do not fit the perceived norms of sexuality and gender expression. This document attempts to address this imbalance by providing links to GLBT persons within the passages used in the lectionary of the Church.

This work is not a formal commentary nor is it an exegetical work. Instead, it uses the hermeneutical tools of faithful experience, the theological primacy of Grace, and the Lutheran tradition to weave together themes that can move beyond traditional interpretations of the texts. Those who travel note that people from different cultures interpret even common parables in radically different ways. For example, is the parable of the Good Samaritan a story of loving others unconditionally or is it a story of deliverance from oppression? The answer depends on the reader's life experience. In the same way, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people will view the Scripture through different eyes from those who do not share their experiences. This work is intended to provide a small insight into this world.

This version of *Lectionary Tools For the Inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Themes in the Dialog of the Church* is incomplete. In the desire to make this information available as quickly as possible, this work will be released in stages. The sequence of releases will follow the following pattern:

1. Year B – Pentecost through Christ the King Sunday
2. Year C
3. Year A
4. Year B – Advent through the season of Easter

We hope that you find this material thought-provoking and enriching. To step into the shoes of another is to see the faith walk in new ways. Such an exercise might seem foreign and uncomfortable. This is to be expected. Yet through this process, the Church can begin to understand not only the diversity of creation but also the richness of the Christian life. To conclude, I would like to quote a prayer from *The Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 153:

Lord God,
You have called your servants to ventures
of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith
to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

John Caron
The Feast of St. Philip & St. James
28 April, 2003



Year “B”

B**The Day of Pentecost***Unity in diversity, life from death, grace as truth-telling*

Acts 2:1-21

The work of the Spirit can be seen in vss. 1-4 as a “tongue of fire” which functions in the story as the means to identify those who were filled with the Holy Spirit. Those who received the Spirit began to “speak in other languages”, which is to say that their perspective and witness was not their own but that of the foreigner, the person who is outside of the Judean circle. The Spirit continues to work in the Church as the advocate calling the people of God to move beyond their own cultures, genders, experiences, and comfort zones and to embrace those who are different, whether by gender, sexual orientation, race, class, or economic and cultural background. Paul Tillich refers to this as being “on the boundary.” For him the task of the Christian is to stand between worlds, embracing both the traditional culture of the Church and the cultures of modernity, in order to find linkages and language to communicate the Gospel of God’s unconditional love for all.

In vss. 5-13, the reaction of the crowd is mixed. While each person hears the Gospel communicated “in our own languages”, their context leads them to interpret this experience in different ways. Some were confused. Others were cynical, assuming that the disciples of Jesus started happy hour early that day. Notice that the text says that they “hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power”. It does not say anywhere at that point that any of them accepted this at face value. There were two groups mentioned: the confused and the cynical. When reaching out to those who are considered “foreigners” or “outsiders” or “different”, it is important to remember that the Word, even when transposed to the listener’s context, does not guarantee acceptance of the Gospel’s message. Many within the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender communities may meet modern Pentecost events such as workshops, outreach programs, and one-on-one encounters with similar derision. It is important to note that we, like Peter, need to treat this not as a barrier but as an opportunity for dialog. This is especially true considering the Church’s history of persecuting and making invisible people whose sexual orientation or gender identification do not conform to societal norms.

Vss. 14-21 embody the message Peter delivers to the assembly. Notice that the text refers to them as “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem”. Translating this admittedly gender-biased salutation into 21st Century language, we might say, “All you in the Church, both long-time members and those who have in the past felt excluded”. Peter then quotes Joel 2:28-32 as evidence that God pushes back the boundaries that humanity continues to erect between those who are “in” and those who are “out”. Note especially that the categories of gender, age, political status and economic class are mentioned. The writer is clearly pointing out an historic continuity in God’s inclusive action (we would use the word “grace”) within the experience of the Church. Verse 21 concludes by clearly stating that “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” No requirements or conditions are placed on this statement.

Linkages to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people are clear in this text. Historically, GLBT people have been excluded from the Church. The walls of acceptability have been drawn among those whose sexual orientation or gender identity or expression are outside of the majority. The Church’s call is to learn the “language” of GLBT people and to appreciate their unique perspectives of life and faith. The Gay or Lesbian person is not asked to become heterosexual. The Bisexual person is not asked to be half a person. The Transgender person is not asked to suffer with a birth gender that does not reflect his or her true personhood. Instead, all humanity is invited to “call on the name of the Lord” (meaning to call on the ultimate and transcendent truth that gives people the grace to face their authentic selves). For Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual people, this acceptance of truth includes coming out, reintegrating faith and sexual orientation.

	<p>In the case of Transsexual persons, acceptance is marked by initiating the gender transition process, and in the case of Transgender individuals, acceptance means moving past the rigid and binary interpretations of gender common in most Western societies.</p>
<p>Ezekiel 37:1-14</p>	<p>The prophet is relating an ecstatic vision where he is placed in a valley of death (“dry bones”). There is no wiggle room for resuscitation or extraordinary life-saving measures. In vss. 1-6, those whose remains are in the valley are definitively and absolutely dead. Knowing that he is probably being set up, the prophet responds to Yahweh’s question as to whether these bones can live with, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Yahweh then commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the death scattered around him. God instructs him to say that not only shall the functional mechanisms of life be restored but also the spirit (<i>ruach</i>) – the very breath of God.</p> <p>In vss. 7-10, the narrative describes the prophet carrying out Yahweh’s instructions. As the prophet speaks, muscle and organ are joined to formerly dry bones. Once the bodies are complete, the breath (spirit) of God ignites the spark, and death is transformed into life.</p> <p>Once the scene is painted, vss. 11-14 provide the interpretation. The bones are the house of Israel in exile and without hope. The same prophetic word that brought life to “dry bones” can bring life to a people who feel no sense of hope, future, or authenticity. Furthermore, Yahweh promises to put the people of Israel on their “own soil.” This reference to bringing the people back to the land is to say that their birthright and heritage as a people are secured within the grace of God.</p> <p>This lesson could be an excellent way to build a bridge to the experience of a Transsexual person. To be completely alienated with one’s birth gender is to, in effect, be living inside of dry bones. The resurrection experience of a Transsexual person may involve two distinct steps. The first step, for those who have the means, is the rebuilding of the body into a vessel that is in harmony with the person’s true self. The second step is the grace-filled breath of God that integrates and heals the Transsexual person’s relationship with self, with community, and with the Church. For the Transgender person, the “dry bones” are not the body but rather the damage done when the person is denied the ability to express her/his gender as she/he needs to. The healing of this dissonance comes as the person first moves to accept him or herself as the unique and complex person God created. Then, as a mark of healing to self and within community, s/he builds the muscle, cartilage and flesh of a gender expression that reflects the truth of the person’s identity. Instead of pursuing the surgery option, the transgender person rebuilds the expression of the body, and this comes into harmony with self.</p>
<p>John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15</p>	<p>The context of the Gospel lesson is the impending arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. In vss. 15:26-27, John records the promised coming of the Advocate to the people of God. Notice the court language used by the author. The Advocate (defense counsel) will corroborate the words and deeds of Jesus. In traditional Hebraic jurisprudence, the truth of a testimony is established if it can be corroborated by at least two witnesses. Verse 27 calls the disciples to be co-advocates (truth-tellers) with the Spirit. To the original readers of the Gospel, John is clearly establishing Jesus’ connection with both truth and the “Spirit of truth”. The theme of Jesus as truth is established throughout the Gospel of John and is one of his main themes (see 1:14, 1:17, 5:33, 14:6).</p> <p>Vss. 4b-6 are a transitional section. Their main contribution to this discussion is how the author describes the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. The pain the disciples feel at the prospect of losing Jesus has them focused completely inward. The Gospel writer uses this to establish the reason for the coming of the Advocate.</p> <p>The last section of this lesson is difficult to follow. Vss. 7-15 are packed</p>

	<p>with material. The relevant text for this discussion is the verse describing the Advocate's function to "prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment". The writer has Jesus taking each of these three themes and relating them to himself. Again, the author is describing the truth-telling function of the Advocate.</p> <p>Truth-telling has radical implications for the people of God. We are called to be the community of truth. As the Church engages GLBT people, there need be no fear of what we will discover about the diversity of human sexuality and gender. A person's true identity is, at its essence, a reflection of the truth of God. It also follows that the process GLBT people go through to discover their identities is, in fact, the direct participation with the Spirit in the co-advocacy work to which we are all called (vs. 15:27).</p>
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B**The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost***Restoring the outcast, Uniting those who are outwardly different*

Jeremiah 23:1-6

This lesson follows the pattern of curse/promise. First there is a declaration of punishment to those who have not faithfully followed the ordinances of Yahweh. Then there is the promise of restoration to those who are weak, vulnerable, and helpless. The promise of justice is a familiar theme among the Old Testament prophets. Those who trample on the rights of the weak or the stranger will come to ruin, while those who are enslaved and in exile will be healed and restored.

In vss 1-2, the “curse” fell upon unfaithful shepherds who caused their sheep to be scattered. The ruling class of Israel and Judah was corrupt, and the pre-exilic prophets generally blamed them for the eventual defeat of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. These verses use shepherding imagery to condemn those leaders who caused the scattering of the people of Yahweh. The blame is not on those who are scattered or even on the invading armies that carried the people into exile. Rather, the defeat is blamed solely on those who were corrupt and who failed to discharge their divinely appointed duties.

Following the curse, there is the promise section (vss. 3-4). Those who were cast out by the unfaithful shepherd shall be restored to their fold. New shepherds will provide for their needs, and each sheep will be meticulously accounted for – an affirmation of the value of each individual within the flock.

In vss. 5-6, the symbolism changes from a shepherd to that of a king. This shift is significant because it takes what could otherwise be interpreted as a religious or metaphorical promise and moves it into the political arena of the day. In verse five, the king is referred to as a “righteous branch” and in verse six, he is called “The LORD is our righteousness”. Within the new political order, the theme of righteousness is key. The restoration of the outcast will be maintained by the application of Yahweh’s righteous reign of justice.

For Lutherans, there might be some degree of discomfort in using prophetic oracles within the context of current issues. This instinct is justifiable, since many in the Church feel free to call down fire and brimstone at the drop of a hat! The hermeneutical question here is “Where is the Gospel?” How can this lesson be used to declare Good News to the outcast without sacrificing the Gospel for those who did (or do) the excluding? One answer to this would be to remember Luther’s second use of the law: to demonstrate to a person her/his need of the Gospel and to provide the means by which that Gospel may be accepted. We can view this passage as a call for the Church and for Christian individuals to move to repentance when it comes to exclusionary practices toward others, including Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender persons.

Ephesians 2:11-22

The overarching theme of this passage is unification within diversity. Verses 11-13 discuss the major issue of the Church at that time: whether or not to allow uncircumcised Gentiles within the community. This was an issue of Word, of theology, and of tradition. It was no less painful and traumatic to 1st Century Christians as the issue of GLBT inclusion is to the present-day Church. The method the writer uses to bring together those who are separated is to remind those in the circumcision camp that they were also, at one time, excluded – even while having the mark of circumcision.

The passage continues with vss. 14-22 by declaring that through the cross, the “dividing wall” that had separated both groups is removed. The ones who were far apart have been brought together, and both groups of Christians are one body and are no longer strangers and aliens but “saints and members of the household of God”. The analogy of the body is continued, indicating that differences do exist but that diversity is critical in order to build and maintain the healthy body of the Church (see Romans 12:4ff, I Corinthians 12:12ff). The

author's understanding of unity is clearly not *uniformity*. Instead, it is an appreciation of both physical and cultural differences.

In addition to the use of this passage as an invitation to the Church to welcome GLBT people, this passage can also be seen as an extended analogy of the struggle of Bisexual persons within traditional western culture. In most Euro-American cultures, people are taught to deductively define themselves in terms of polar opposites. A person is either male or female, Gay or Straight, liberal or conservative. Seldom does the dominant society tolerate a merging of the lines that separate the traditional structures that define a person's identity. Within the existential reality of the Bisexual person, some of these distinctions become meaningless – namely the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual attraction. The Bisexual person lives, within his or her own person, the diversity demanded of the larger Church. Distinctions between male and female are recognized by the Bisexual person (they are not gender-blind). Yet these distinctions can be embraced and appreciated for what they are.

Finally, this passage also speaks strongly to the lives and experience of Transgender persons, whose experience of gender goes beyond the neat classifications of male or female. Some Transgender persons would describe their experience as a blending of the genders. Others would say that their gender is something unique, beyond the truth of either male or female. In either case, it is clear that God's creative activity defies our limited understanding of gender identity and expression. The phrase "neither male nor female" speaks not only to the distinctly male or female person but also to those that are outside either classification. And in Paul's conclusion we find the clear statement to the Church: "We are all one in Christ."

B**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost***Hope given to the outcast, the rejection of all distinctions, and the healing of foreigners*

Isaiah 35:4-7a

This passage is addressed to “those who are of a fearful heart”. Fear is a common feeling among those who are at odds with the political, societal, and religious structures of the day. The first casualty of fear is hope. All the major news services regularly report of the harassment faced by Transgender persons. The T-community faces loss of family, jobs, friendships, and even the loss of their places of worship – all because of their desire to live honestly within the gender of their own self-understanding. Being rejected by her/his community of faith is perhaps the most devastating to the Transgender person who is looking for support systems to help with the inevitable existential questions faced while attempting to reconcile birth-gender with internal identity.

First Isaiah proclaims in passionate language that God him/herself will come to the defense of the outcast who lives in fear. In today’s world, all sexual and gender minorities are vulnerable to the political, cultural, and religious hate-speech heard on the airwaves, in the legislative chambers of government, and in the pulpits of most every denomination and religious tradition. This passage is clearly a message of both hope and despair. The message of hope is directed toward all people are who without hope, due to the actions (or inactions) of the community to which they belong. The message of despair is aimed at those who are the instruments of fear and exclusion in this world. The vengeance of God is unmistakably linked to the act of saving the people who have suffered at the hands of others. Furthermore, by linking the acts of restoration and vengeance, First Isaiah is making it clear that oppression is, at its core, incompatible with God’s reign of justice and peace.

James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17

This passage is introduced with a rhetorical question that cuts to the core of James’ argument with his readers: “Do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” Written in the first century to a congregation that favored those of obvious wealth, this question forces Christians of all eras to scrutinize their actions and motivations. It incriminates those heterosexual persons who participate in actions and systems of discrimination toward sexual and gender minorities. It charges those Gay men who value only men who meet their standards of physical perfection. And it indicts those Lesbians who define their community by strict rules of political allegiance and gender expression.

Vss. 1-7 tell the story of those congregations “in the Dispersion” that judge acceptability based on economic standing – a dynamic also common in the Church of this era. This story shows in graphic detail the practices that, in reality, probably occurred in more subtle, innocuous ways. After detailing the actions he observed in his congregations, James points out that the people the early Christians favor are the very same people who bear responsibility for the persecution of Christians and the defamation of the Gospel message (“the excellent name that was invoked over you”).

James’ admonition to the Church in vss. 8-13 is to fulfill the “royal law according to the scripture”, which is the second commandment (love your neighbor as yourself). Discriminating against others, for whatever reason, is for James a clear violation of the second commandment. The trouble is that everyone, to one degree or another, discriminates. Vs. 10 echoes Romans 2:12-13 when it says “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”

According to James, the solution to this dilemma is the “law of liberty” (or in Pauline terms: “grace”). We are to recognize that the state of being in grace is inexorably linked to our striving to speak and act *gracefully* toward others. Vss. 12-13 are hard for Lutherans to hear, since it seems to advocate justification based

	<p>on works of law. It is, however, important to see these verses in the context of the surrounding argument. James is indicating that grace is not found in the law of commandments because it is clear that we would all “be convicted by the law as transgressors.” Instead, grace is found through the law of liberty. Notice that in vs. 12 the past tense is used, indicating that the Christian has already been judged by the law of liberty (grace). It is now the Christian’s responsibility and calling to act in the same way toward others, thus fulfilling the second commandment by means of grace (forgiveness) rather than by means of law (which demands perfection).</p> <p>James amplifies this position in vss. 14-17 when he asks another rhetorical question: “What good is it... if you say you have faith but do not have works?” Again, this is not in conflict with the Pauline tenant of justification through faith (Romans 3:26 et. al.). Instead, James sees faith and “works” as both compatible and necessary. For James, it is not that works are required for justification (a misunderstanding of the law of liberty) but rather that works are the visible manifestation of the grace that <i>has already been given</i> to the Christian. Faith without works is as absurd as liquid without the quality of wetness or food without the quality of nutrition (junk food aside)!</p> <p>Concerning GLBT persons within the church today, the message is devastatingly clear. Discriminating against others or showing favoritism toward those who are considered normal, acceptable, or politically expedient reveals which “law” is operating within a person. We can choose between the law of commandments and ordinances, which leads to our own condemnation, or the law of liberty, which leads to grace and which demands the graceful love of others, regardless of their circumstances, economic situation, sexual orientation, or gender identification.</p>
Mark 7:24-27	<p>This passage contains two stories. The first is the healing of a Syrophenician woman, who was not only a Gentile but also, due to her illness, ritually unclean for purposes of temple worship. The second story is the healing of a Galilean deaf man (who was more than likely a member of the ancient Northern Kingdom of Israel and who was considered to be heretical to the orthodox people of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judea). It should also be noted that deaf people were ritually unclean, since they were considered to be physically “damaged”.</p> <p>If the writer of the Gospel of Mark were to try, he could not have come up with two more offensive groups for Jesus to minister to. This passage shares the themes of the first and second lesson for this Sunday. Jesus challenges the societal norms of acceptability, holiness, cleanliness, and morality. These groups were no less reviled in Jesus’ time than sexual and gender minorities are in our culture today. In all cases, there were ritual and cultic rules as well as precepts from the Torah that prevented these people from being included in the congregation of the Temple. Yet, in both cases, Jesus chose to ignore these tenets in favor of hope (First Isaiah), liberty (James), and grace (Paul).</p> <p>One argument for excluding GLBT people from full participation in the life of the Church is that there are no precedents in Scripture that allow for it. It is said that in other areas of discrimination, such as slavery and the oppression of women, there are mixed messages in Scripture that allow for the Church to form its own opinion within the context of a contemporary understanding of the Gospel. It is said that no such positive messages exist for GLBT people within Scripture. Jesus, however, in his historical context, had no such mixed messages to fall back on when dealing with these two individuals, nor did he even care to look for them! Instead, he reacted instinctually, with love and mercy for the outcast. His act of healing was born out of his understanding of the Reign of God and was, as James would put it, faith active along with works (James 2:22).</p>

B**Reformation Sunday***Justification through faith apart from works of the law, Christian freedom*

Romans 3:19-28

This passage is set within the context of a large and intricate discussion on the nature of the law and of justification. Paul begins this passage by stating that the law functions as the means to hold humanity accountable to God. It is a truth-telling mechanism, revealing to each person their inability to be justified under the law. To put it another way, since the law is the lens by which people see their authentic selves, Paul's assertion is that by honestly looking at oneself, one understands that people cannot find justification/completion in and of themselves. The law, then, is that which reveals humanity's ultimate need for God. Thus, Luther's condemnation of "works righteousness" is saying something far more radical than the notion that people cannot follow rules in order to be saved. Reformation theology, relying on its Pauline roots, teaches that humanity, through the law, discovers its own radical need for God. In other words, the law allows us to see ourselves for who we truly are. We see our need for "the wholly other": both in terms of God (the First Commandment) and for neighbor (the Second Commandment).

This condition of need is a universal truth of humankind ("There is no distinction."). The solution to the human dilemma is that we are justified by faith. Faith comes as a free gift of God, available to all people. Any attempt to put restrictions or strings on that gift turns the message from grace back to law again. For Paul, the condition of humanity is not primarily an ethical problem; it is an existential flaw in the core of the person. Thus, individual behaviors neither save nor condemn in and of themselves. Justification is predicated solely on whether one trusts in oneself (self-justification/justification by works) or whether one trusts in God (justification by faith/the grace of God).

Those who are members of sexual or gender minorities are often condemned by society and the church for living a sinful "lifestyle". Yet the only sinful lifestyle that Paul recognizes is living under the law. And the alternative to living under the law is not being a heterosexual; rather it is faith in Christ. As Reformation Christians, we must hold up the radical truth that *any* preconditions to faith lead to law, not salvation! Therefore, any roadblocks that the Church might attempt to construct to block Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender persons from full membership and participation in the Church is counter to our Lutheran heritage, to Paul's fundamental theology, and to the Gospel of Christ.

An additional point should be made as well. Many groups within the Church say that they welcome GLBT people, as long as they are willing to change and/or deny their gender identity or sexual orientation. This position goes against the central premise of this passage – that no action or preparation on our part is sufficient or necessary to be justified. Luther notes that we cannot even come to Christ by our own strength. It is by God's action that we even have the faith to come to God. If this is true, then all those who have faith – who trust in Christ's saving grace – do so as a direct and intentional act of God. Therefore, the Church cannot declare that these people are outside of the Reign of God, no matter what their gender identity or sexual orientation. God has already accomplished the act of faith in these people. The Church, if it is to be true to its mission, can do nothing but acknowledge that the person is, in fact, part of the community of the faith.

John 8:31-36

The Judeans who were interrogating Jesus in this text were attempting to justify their position by means of their genealogy – the fact that they were descended from Abraham and were thus incontrovertibly among the community of faith. Jesus rejects the notion that one's bloodline or family history inherently justifies a person. Instead, he turns their argument around and states that only the Son can make a person free. All humankind is a slave to sin (an analogy to our estrangement from God). The Son, being the ruler of the estate, has the authority

	<p>to free the slave. The slave, having no legal rights, cannot free her/himself.</p> <p>By extension, any argument for membership in the community of God that relies on incidentals of physiology, psychology, gender, or sexual orientation is doomed to fail. Jesus' assertion in this text is that being a child of Abraham is neither necessary nor sufficient to becoming free. The only means to freedom is the act of the Son setting the person free. Consequently, no gender identification or sexual orientation is necessary or sufficient to either justify <i>or condemn</i> a person. It is the act of the Son setting the person free that makes the difference.</p>
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B**The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost***The Lord our God, the Lord is One, Love your neighbor as yourself*

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

This passage contains one of the most profound insights into the nature of God in the entire Bible. In particular, verse 4 may be interpreted in several ways – each conveying a different understanding of Yahweh. The NRSV lists four possible translations:

1. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” (preferred by the NRSV)
2. “The LORD our God is one LORD.”
3. “The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” (used by Mark in today’s Gospel lesson (12:29))
4. “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one.”

Rather than try to choose the most likely translation, which is beyond the scope of this project, it can be useful to discuss the text as if the ambiguity of interpretation might have been part of the editors’ intention. The first translation emphasizes the total primacy of Yahweh within the life of the people of Israel. The second reflects the singularity of the one true God. The third translation speaks of the inner unity of the life of God. Finally, the fourth interpretation combines the notions of the oneness of God and the fact that Yahweh is the God of Israel.

If we accept that the limitations of language and human experience require more of the poet’s eye than the scientist’s precision, then we can recognize that the Western inclination to define God in precise, dogmatic language is, at best, a futile exercise and, at worst, idolatry. The ancient cultures of the land did not believe that their gods were literally the stone and wood statues that adorned their altars. Instead, they held to the belief that by creating an image of the gods, adherents were able to capture and own something of the essence of the god or goddess. This same hubris is present in those theologians who replace stone statues with intricately crafted dogmas and theological constructs on the nature and identity of God.

Extending this reasoning further, it is clear that if humanity’s limited vision and experience prevents scientific definitions of God, the same can be said for humankind, made in the image of God. Aspects of human identity, including sexuality and gender, defy categorization. Luther’s method of doing theology has been called “theology from below”, meaning that we can only speak of God as experienced in the human incarnation of Christ. In the same way, we must do anthropology from below as well. We cannot speak of the interior life of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Transgender person if we live outside of those realities. Instead, we must rely on the experiences of those people as relayed to us through the written and spoken word and through personal relationships. Those who condemn GLBT persons and prejudge them based on their external “definitions” are guilty of the anthropological counterpart to idolatry and as such are removed from the true mystery and beauty of the *imago Dei*.

Mark 12:28-34

In this exposition of the first two commandments, Mark records Jesus’ linking love of God with love of neighbor. Mark then uses the character of the scribe to drive home that these two commandments are more important than all the religious and cultic practices that were considered to be central to Judean life and faith. Temple worship, complete with ritual sacrifice and offerings, was as important to first century Judeans as Baptism or the Eucharist is to the life of the Church today. Mark makes clear that as important as these practices are, they are meaningless without love of God and of neighbor.

As we approach the discussion of sexual and gender minorities in the Church, we must remember that these discussions must also be driven by the primacy of the first two commandments. It is imperative that we clearly speak the Gospel message of God’s inclusive and unconditional love of all people and that all

	other theological and ethical statements of the church must be built upon this premise.
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