

When theologies collide

By [Crystal St. Marie Lewis](#)

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There were only 30 short minutes left in my biblical interpretation class when James, my fellow seminarian, began his presentation. It was his turn to summarize an assigned reading for our class. We had all been writing short essays and developing informal presentations using excerpts from *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary*. James chose to develop a presentation based on the commentary designed for June 29—the day in Christian liturgy on which many churchgoers will celebrate a new feast, the Gifts of Sexuality and Gender.

James opened his presentation by reading directly from our liturgical manual:

“A gracious, liberating church will teach us to claim our right to a pleasurable and good eroticism... Contrary to many voices inside and outside the church, sex and desire are not necessarily dangerous, selfish, or self-indulgent. Rather, erotic power can be an indispensable spiritual resource for engaging joyfully in creating justice.” (Marvin M. Ellison, pg. 300)

The level of oxygen in the room decreased dramatically. We were all visibly uncomfortable. We knew that we were suddenly listening to a very candid endorsement for... well... Sex. And not just any old run-of-the-mill sex. Our liturgical manual was advocating for great sex. And this book was asking us to tell parishioners to go home and enjoy a little (or a lot) for themselves.

James continued, this time from page 301:

“[This week's] texts have chosen to aid us in thinking deeply about ‘gifts of sexuality and gender.’ Usually ‘gifts of human sexuality’ gets reduced to discussions about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning/queer peoples, but rarely about heterosexual people. Such discussions uncover the biases and beliefs that heterosexuality is the only

‘normal’ way to be in the world?... When women, whatever their expressions of sexuality, are not valued simply because they lack a penis? When men who are not considered ‘manly’ are labeled ‘gay’ as a perjorative term? When gay men and lesbian women are considered some alien life form because they are not heterosexual... [but] sexualities are complicated...” (Bridgeman)

James closed his book and explained that he was attracted to those two texts because issues of human sexuality and the Christian religion have impacted his family in a very personal way. His daughter, a lesbian, came out of the closet five years ago. He had been a minister in a Southern church for several years when she dropped her bombshell. She was ostracized by their congregation and has never stepped foot inside any church since then. After his daughter’s experience, the issue for James was no longer about theology. It mattered very little what the Bible said about “those gays,” because suddenly, one of “those gays” was close to him... Instantly, it was about his child; someone he had known her entire life, and someone who –in his view– deserved love and happiness more than anyone in the world.

James stood up and walked to the front of the classroom to activate the overhead projector. He played a Youtube video of a child no older than five singing “Won’t Be No Homos In Heaven” to a cheering congregation. The video ended and James, my fellow seminarian from deep in the Bible Belt, asked emotionally: “What in the world are we doing, you guys? Is this love? Is this justice?”

Most of us were mortified by what we saw in the video. We openly voiced our frustration with the lack of acceptance for gays in Christian churches. And then another student spoke up:

“Listen, guys... I don’t want to be the one to take the more controversial side here, but I have to ask the all-important question... Is homosexuality a sin?”

Answers to his question echoed from various corners in the room... “No!” and “Yes!” ... Lengthy historical arguments ... Short, pithy dismissals. Suddenly, we were arguing. The tension in the room was nearly unbearable. Emotions were high. Some of us said too much. Others, too little.

I looked at the clock and discovered that James’ presentation had been going on for 40 minutes instead of a half hour. Class had technically ended– but no one was leaving the room. Our professor chimed in, hoping to stop the rapidly devolving

discussion and restore peace to the group.

“Everyone,” he said, “let’s pray together...” We bowed our heads, overwhelmed... angry... frustrated... Calmly, my professor petitioned the Divine: “Holy Creator... Help us to remember that we are all a part of you... And help us to see you in every human being we meet.”

I realized we were praying *again*, and that prayer can be an avoidance tool, and that I felt complicit in what seemed like a cowardly cop-out.

What happens when we know the truth, but are too afraid to tell others what we’ve seen?

I didn’t want to pray anymore. I was tired of praying.

I wanted the professor to stand up and tell us what I’m sure he knew: That the word “homosexual” didn’t appear in the Bible until the year 1958... that the Book of Leviticus is speaking of temple prostitution... that the words in the New Testament which have been translated to read “homosexual” mostly stem from a Greek word with no English equivalent... that Bible printers intentionally sell weak translations to the public because they fear backlash from conservative fundamentalists...

I wanted my professor to just tell us that our generation is doing it again... I wanted him to tell the class that Christianity is doing to gays what it has done to women and various “otherly” groups for centuries... That we haven’t learned much from past Bible-centered mistakes like the Crusades, or the trial of Galileo, or slavery...

But instead, we prayed.

I wondered if a day would ever come when we’d stop praying and do something... when we’d get real about the limitations of the Bible... when love would overcome fear... Thinking about all of it made me angry. I walked home and fought back my tears. I also fought the urge to pray.

Originally posted at [Lewis's blog](#)