

Where the Bible leads me: On homosexuality

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

During the fourth century, at the height of the Arian controversy in Constantinople, one Christian wrote that it was impossible to go into a bakery for a loaf of bread without debating the nature of Christ. Was he the eternal Son of the eternal Father or was there a time when he was not? With bishops physically assaulting other bishops over this question and emperors changing sides on a regular basis, the debate spilled out of the church into the streets, where the Athanasians favored passages from John's Gospel and the Arians shot back with passages from Mark.

When I read this chapter of early church history, I thanked God for letting me live in a later one. Then I got back to planning classes and grading papers. That was before the 2003 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, however, when a majority of delegates from across the United States confirmed the election of the Rev. Gene Robinson as the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion.

Since then, North Georgia has come to resemble Constantinople in at least one regard: no Episcopalian goes anywhere without being asked for his or her position on homosexuality. While no physical assaults have yet been reported, the debate has split churches and threatened budgets. It has also involved heated references to scripture. Robinson fans tend to favor passages from the Gospels, while Robinson foes shoot back with passages from Paul. In the crossfire, it is not hard to understand why Anthony the Great fled civilization for the desert in the middle of the fourth century. Depending on who your neighbors are, snakes and hyenas can look like pretty good company.

The problem I run into at the bakery is that I do not have a *position* on homosexuality. What I have, instead, is a life. I have a history, in which many people have played vital parts. When I am presented with the *issue* of homosexuality, I experience temporary blindness. Something like scales fall over my eyes, because I cannot visualize an *issue*. Instead, I visualize the homeroom teacher who seemed

actually to care whether I showed up at school or not. I see the priest who taught me everything I know about priesthood, and the professor who roasted whole chickens for me when my food money ran out before the end of the month. I see the faces of dozens of young men who died of AIDS, but not before they had shown me how brightly they could burn with nothing left but the love of God to live on. I see the face of my 16-year-old friend, still waiting for his first true love, who says that if he found out he was gay, he would kill himself. Other people have other stories, I know, but these are the stories that have given me my sight. To reduce them to a position seems irreverent somehow, like operating on someone's body without looking him in the face.

I used to believe that swapping stories was one way to get closer to people who see things differently than I do, so that both of our truths get stretched, but I have almost given up on that. Where I live, at least, there is little sense that life stories can be "true." Only scripture is true, so that the debate about the place of homosexual Christians in the church today hangs on what various biblical writers did or did not mean by one of five passages that were written at least 1,950 years ago.

I love the Bible. I have spent more than half of my life reading it, studying it, teaching and preaching it. While I do not find every word of it as inspiring (or inspired) as some of my fellow Christians do, I encounter God in it reliably enough to commit myself on a daily basis to practicing the core teachings of both testaments. When I do this, however, a peculiar thing happens. As I practice what I learn in the Bible, the Bible turns its back on me. Like some parent intent on my getting my own place, the Bible won't let me set up house in its pages. It gives me a kiss and boots me into the world, promising me that I have everything I need to find God not only on the page but also in the flesh. Whether I am reading Torah or the Gospels, the written word keeps evicting me, to go embody the word by living in peace and justice with my neighbors on this earth, whatever amount of confrontation, struggle, recognition and surrender that may involve.

In this way, I have arrived at a different understanding of what it means to follow the Word of God. The phrase has become a double entendre for me, meaning not only the Word on the page but also (and more crucially) the Word made flesh. If Jesus' own example is to be trusted, then following the Word of God may not always mean doing what is in the book. Instead, it may mean deviating from what is in the book in order to risk bringing the Word to life, and then facing the dreadful consequences of loving the wrong people even after you have been warned time and again to stop.

These days I guess everything sounds like a position, even a confession like this one. I do not know what is right. All I know is whom I love, and how far I have to go before there is no one left whom I do not love. If I am wrong, then I figure that the Word of God will know what to do with me. I am betting my life on that.