

FAITH



MATTERS

Faith Matters & Scripture Matters

BY REV. CHRISTINE LESLIE

As I write, Vermonters are awaiting our high court's ruling on whether or not three couples who have sued the state for the "right to marry" will succeed. Many oppose a favorable ruling because they hold to unexamined beliefs they have based upon their biblical illiteracy. This is a deadly combination.

Biblical illiteracy does not serve anyone well. Being biblically literate equips me with the necessary information I need to refute homophobia that is allegedly based in scripture. It also has helped me grow spiritually, as it has for many who have taken the time and energy to acquire the skills and knowledge that form the basis of biblical literacy.

There's a lot to be gained from being biblically literate, whether or not we buy into the Judeo-Christian heritage. The level of scriptural misunderstanding in our culture is staggering, and it's the main reason why the fundamentalists get away with all that they do. Can you imagine what might happen if a majority of us took the time to understand the Bible? The impact could be monumental.

First, many GLBT people feeling shame and guilt because of their sexual orientation might not suffer so much if they knew there is no discernable biblical basis for teaching that same-gender sexual relating is inherently sinful and hated by God. I think this information alone could help reduce the rate of suicide among GLBT teens.

Secondly, were the majority of us to become biblically literate, we would be better equipped to deal with people who think they are biblically literate but are not. These folks need to hear the biblical scholarship that refutes their mistakenly bible-based hatred of GLBT people. This is especially true for those who don't adhere to a faith system that provides an antidote to their hate with a teaching that suggests they love their neighbors as themselves.

Perhaps Matthew Shepherd and Billy Jack Gaither might still be alive were there more biblically literate people confronting their misinformed, homophobic neighbors.

Thirdly, GLBT people raised in some version of Judaism or Christianity meaningful to them

prior to coming out might re-discover that authentic faith and love are not mutually exclusive. We can be part of a religious community and a faith system that nurtures and supports our spiritual journey. Religious communities that promote negative attitudes and exclusivity based

ple to gasp in horror, but rather help us engage in critical study that can lead to our spiritual growth.

Biblically illiterate fundamentalists reject GLBT people out of reactionary ignorance. We GLBT folks do no better when we dismiss the Judeo-Christian heritage

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on an uneducated scriptural readings are not the only options available to GLBT people who want to be a part of a religious community.

So what does becoming biblically literate involve? Primarily, it takes a willingness to accept the idea that scripture matters. The minimization and dismissal of these texts as outdated, useless, and unworthy of study leaves them in the hands of the biblically illiterate — for whom the scriptures matter a great deal. This is not wise or helpful. In fact, it's dangerous.

Many GLBT people and allies remain silent out of ignorance when confronted with bible-based bigotry and homophobia. We know that we don't agree with fundamentalists' interpretations, but many of us just don't know how to refute their positions. This is ironic for a community in which a popular slogan is "Silence = Death."

What's sad is that biblical literacy is not difficult to attain. It does not require that we go to seminary or become active participants in a church or synagogue. It's just a matter of opening our own hearts and minds to read a book like *The Good Book* by Dr. Peter Gomes.

Gomes has put lots of pertinent information into one very readable book. He introduces the basics of biblical literacy and then addresses major uses and abuses of scriptures, including an entire section on "The Bible and Homosexuality: The Last Prejudice."

By addressing three questions: "What are the Hebrew and Christian scriptures? How are they used and abused? What do they have so say to me?" Gomes has linked scripture matters with faith matters, showing us why both matter at all. I look forward to the day when questions like these no longer cause GLBT peo-

without having obtained the information needed to make an educated decision. At the least, grappling with these questions decreases our ignorance and equips us to refute biblically based homophobia. At the most, it might even increase our faith in ourselves, each other, The Holy One, and scriptural sources of wisdom, faith, hope, comfort, mercy, liberation, love, and compassion. ▼

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