

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
Sunday, March 22, 2020  
Fourth Sunday of Lent

“Lenten Apologies to Hermaphrodites”

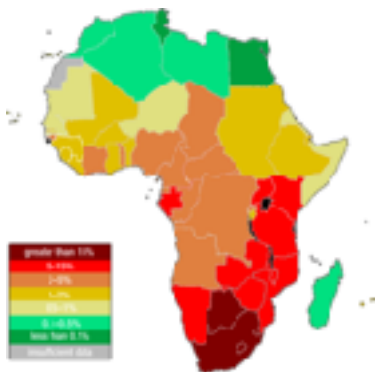
Fourth sermon in our series entitled:  
“Lenten Apologies to Galileo Galilei”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 7:1-5  
Christian Scripture: John 9:1-12, 35-41



The last time I did a sermon series on the intersection of science and faith was in the early 2000s when I ministered in South Africa during the height of the HIV and AIDS pandemic.



South Africa, specifically the region in which I ministered, KwaZulu-Natal, was the epicentre, ground-zero, of the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

Up to twenty percent of the population was HIV positive. So, the COVID-19 pandemic is not my 'first rodeo', so to speak.



The congregation and I initiated a ground-breaking homebased care ministry that legally administered anti-retroviral medication to members of the church and the community despite resistance from a denialist and slow-off-the-mark government. At the time, I remember I preached a sermon series that sought to teach, as well as preach.



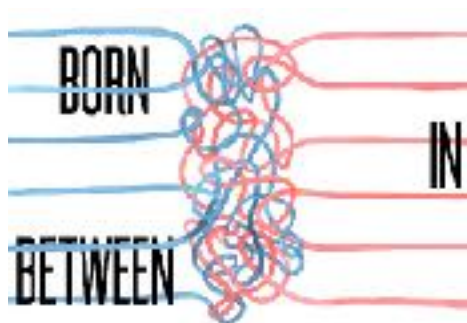
I remember, from the pulpit, I explained how HIV was transmitted and, from the pulpit, I said the words 'penis' and 'vagina' - not just once, but many times. Though all of my congregation was Black African, most turned white at the mention of these terms. Many in the church were conservative, as African, and global church, culture are (including

Centre Church). Many were just beside themselves that I mentioned that which all of them and I possessed, a penis or a vagina.



So, in the midst of another pandemic, that of COVID-19, I am not afraid to speak of the facts of life. Why should I be? The facts of life are authored by God and I as a minister of the Gospel am not afraid to speak, even from the pulpit, about those facts. Especially, especially, when doing so may preserve and enhance life.

During the HIV and AIDS pandemic, sexuality had to be discussed because there was a stigma against homosexuals despite the fact that heterosexuals were the primary spreaders of the disease.



I remember during one Bible study, I mentioned that some infants were born with both male *and* female genitalia, or their genitalia was 'ambiguous'. I specifically recall the men gathered were shocked,

dumbfounded, horrified, and in a state of disbelief. I recall that most of the older women, all of whom were *retired nurses*, looked at their shoes, were silent, expressionless, and did not react. I noticed their different reactions right away. I questioned them. Finally, the women confided that once in a while a child was delivered in the maternity ward and they would quickly and quietly scurry the child away before the mother or anyone else could view or hold the infant. A scandal was born, and some efforts, if possible, had to be made to rectify the situation. The matter was covered-up, the few that knew, just pretended from that time on that nothing was ever amiss. The child was raised as a male or a female, but never was the child raised as the child had been created.



In the book of Genesis, there is the story about Noah's ark. It is a Sunday school classic, one that even Hollywood movies depict ("Even Almighty", 2007). The scriptures read that Noah was instructed to obtain animals to load on the ark so as to repopulate the Earth after the flood. In Sunday school, we are taught that *a pair*, that is, two of

each type of animal was obtained. But this is not what the scriptures state. Depending on the translation, the scriptures state that Noah was instructed to obtain seven (that would be seven), or seven pairs (that would be 14), or seven times seven (that would be 49) of each animal!



Now, I have reviewed lots of the commentary by biblical literalists who attempt to scientifically figure-out whether we are talking two, seven, fourteen, or forty-nine of each animal. In their attempt to reconcile belief in the absurd and science, they perform astounding and dizzying acts of cerebral gymnastics.<sup>1</sup> I can't and won't recount them. (I have not enough time!) Suffice it to say, the story was not written to tell empirical history and thus it should not be interpreted literally. The story is to be interpreted theologically: Humans had a broken relationship with God (since they were in the

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<sup>1</sup> One example among many hundreds is: Tim Chaffey, "Did Noah Bring Seven or Fourteen Clean Animals onto the Ark?", *AIG Ministry*, Answers in Depth, Answers in Genesis, February 1, 2019, found at: <https://answersingenesis.org/noahs-ark/did-noah-bring-fourteen-or-seven-animals/>, accessed March 22, 2020.

Garden of Eden). The broken relationship ended-up destroying not just humans, but much, if not all, of life on Earth. Yet, God offered another chance to save ourselves from our own destruction.



Before we move to the Christian scripture, let us notice one thing: the number seven. Why an odd number? Why not a pair of each animal, two? Why not three pairs, six? Why is it seven? Why the odd number? A clue may be that seven is the number of perfection. Seven cannot be divided into two equal possibilities.



Perhaps God intended for there to be male, female, and 'intersex' (the term now used for 'hermaphrodites').



In the gospel of John, a man was believed to have been born blind as a consequence of sin. Now, because he was born blind, the sin could not have been committed by him, but by others, say, by his parents (his next of kin). Our story revolves around the social stigma this blind man carried because the theology of the day was that, well, something was the matter with him, otherwise he would not be blind. The theology at the time was ‘if God is a just God, then God would not allow blindness to inflict an “innocent” man’. What we realize in this story is: It is not God that is unjust, but rather humans, for it is they who declare that which God has created to be a mistake, or a sinful product, and therefore they judge unjustly. Jesus says in the gospel of John that neither this man nor his parents sinned.



Rather, he was born blind in order that “the work of God might be displayed in his life”. Wow! How incredible is that?! From this narrative, I conclude that the diversity existent in nature and in humankind is the way it is so that the work of God may be on show!



Intersex people are born with both male and female sexual organs, chromosomes, and/or hormones. Or if they are not both, then the organs, chromosomes and/or hormones are ambiguous. Approximately one to two people out of every hundred are intersex. This is the same percentage of people that have the genes that render a person a red-head. As a comparison, ten percent of people are left-handed. Whereas truly ambidextrous people are only one percent of the population. Albinism is rarer; in the USA, only 1 in 19,000 are albinic.

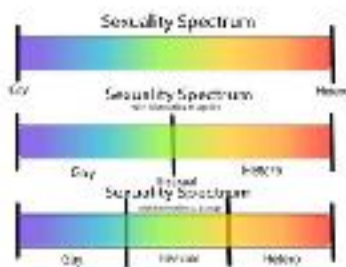




My point here is that God created diversity. Diversity is beautiful.

Diversity proclaims the glory of God!

Today's lesson is not exclusively about intersex people. It is about sex (or gender) and sexuality in general.



Science confirms that throughout the animal, insect, and plant world, sexual characteristics do not exist in strict binaries, they exist on spectrums, with extremes on both ends and everything in-between.

Clown fish are hermaphrodites.

## Sequential Hermaphroditism

An organism with both male and female sex organs that matures at different times, then an animal can be born as either and change into a female - and vice versa. They are not divided into two categories.

### Protandry

Organism is born male and changes into female (Clownfish)



### Protogyny

Organism is born female and changes into male (Parrotfish)



In fact, some species are ‘sequential hermaphrodites’, which means they change sex during the course of their lives. Humans did not invent transvestites! The Pacific spadenose shark is “in a long lineage of gender-fluid, gender-bending, and even ‘trans’ animals to be documented by scientists”.<sup>2</sup> In Botswana, there are lionesses with manes that sound like a males. The diversity continues with hyenas, slugs, bearded dragons, snails, butterflies. I could go on (but, again, I have not the time. The examples are seemingly endless in the plant, animal, and insect world.



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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Page McBee, “An Intersex Shark Discovered Near Taiwan Sheds Light on Fluidity in the Animal Kingdom”, *Quartz*, December 27, 2017. Found at: <https://qz.com/1166351/can-animals-be-intersex/>, accessed on March 22, 2020.

During the Lenten season, we are to be introspective and repentant. This sermon series seeks to benefit from science and expand our faith.



As an Open and Affirming congregation in the United Church of Christ we appreciate science that proves that God created creatures, including humans, as male *or* female, as male *and* female, and as ambiguously male/female.



God once told the disciple Peter “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts of the Apostles 10:12).



We do not merely ‘tolerate’ or ‘accept’ gays, lesbians, transgender, intersex, and gender fluid people - we ‘affirm’ them. There is a large difference between the two verbs. When God created the Earth and the creatures therein, **she** did not say, “It’s mediocre; it’s so-so; it’s acceptable”. No. Instead, when God created the world, **he** declared it “good”. He affirmed it.



Go back and read the story of Noah and speculate with me: for what reason was the seventh, unpaired, animal included in the story? Perhaps, it was to reveal the glory of God. For seven is the number of perfection!

The number seven in the Bible  
represents divine perfection, totality  
or completion and is mentioned at  
least 490 times.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of  
God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".