

## **A Parable by David Gushee**

*This is a response from David Gushee to George Guthrie's review of his book, *Changing Our Mind*. George is a man David considers a friend, highly respects and considers to be the very best of his tribe. However, on this matter, they disagree.*

*The response takes the form of a parable:*

There once was a devout Christian father. We will call him Abraham. He loved the Lord, loved his wife Sarah, and loved his son Isaac. Every day he read the Bible. Every day he prayed. Every day he instructed his family in the way of the Lord as he understood it. Every week he took his family to church.

Around the time that young Isaac turned 7, Abraham noticed that Isaac preferred to play with dolls rather than blocks, with girls rather than boys. Father Abraham encouraged Isaac to play with the boys and the blocks. Isaac tried.

Around the time Isaac turned 10, Abraham learned that Isaac was being bullied in his Christian school by the other boys, being called a 'sissy' and a 'fag.' Abraham complained to the teacher, but encouraged Isaac to try to be a little more masculine. Isaac tried.

Around the time Isaac turned 14, Isaac discovered that unlike his male peers he did not feel any particular interest in the developing forms of the girls in his school. While he still liked being friends with girls, he was attracted in a very different way to a particular boy in school. Isaac, responding to his biblical training, prayed earnestly that God would help him be attracted to girls rather than boys. Isaac tried.

Around the time Isaac turned 16, with his attraction to young men rather than women growing all the stronger despite his many prayers, fasts, and tears, Isaac finally told Abraham of his struggle. Abraham was shocked and dismayed at this news from his son. He walked his son through the biblical passages that address same-sex acts. He promised to pray with his son for him to be rid of these sinful, disordered attractions. He asked his son to follow the biblical path and commit all the more to suppressing his same-sex attractions. Isaac tried.

Around the time Isaac turned 19, despite three more years of praying, studying, weeping, and fasting for change of his sexual attractions, and never once acting on them, Isaac began a course of counseling at his Christian college. The counselor walked him through the same six Bible passages that Isaac had long ago memorized. He told him that change was possible if Isaac only prayed, fasted, studied scripture, and repented of his wrongful desires. Isaac tried.

Around the time Isaac turned 21, he became very depressed over the persistence of his same-sex desires and their irreconcilability with Christian faith. Isaac decided not to tell his father Abraham about his depression, for which he continued in counseling and eventually began taking medicine.

Around the time Isaac turned 23, he fell in love with a male colleague at his new job. But Isaac, trying hard to be a good Christian as he understood it, finally decided that he could not move ahead with the relationship. One night, despondent, he took an overdose of the pills he had been taking for depression. He survived.

Abraham and his wife Sarah came to visit Isaac in the hospital. Isaac finally opened up to them about the strength and permanence of his same-sex attraction, and of the spiritual misery he was experiencing in trying to reconcile his faith with this apparently permanent part of himself. Abraham and Sarah counseled Isaac to stand firm, to pray, fast, study, and weep before the Lord, saying God would provide the needed strength. Isaac tried.

Around the time Isaac turned 27, he fell in love again. He was utterly torn. Finally he attempted suicide again, unable to face the prospect of either renouncing his faith in order to at last have a partner, or renouncing the partner to stand firm with his faith. Abraham and Sarah were concerned for Isaac. They urged him to pray, fast, and study Scripture. Isaac tried.

After this second suicide attempt, Isaac turned to a new counselor. Eventually he made a new decision. He concluded that he could no longer live in this way. He could not live without the kind of companionship that his parents enjoyed and that many of his friends now enjoyed. It wasn't about sex. It was about partnership, love, companionship. At Christmas, he told his parents this news. Father Abraham told him, "If you pursue this path you will be in sin. We will not recognize your relationship. We will not attend any wedding of yours. We will not welcome your partner in our home. We will pray that God will turn your heart and spare your eternal soul. You will have displeased us greatly." Isaac grieved.

But finally Isaac decided that he could not follow his father's path any longer. Around the time Isaac turned 30, he found a partner. Abraham did not allow Isaac to bring his partner to the family home. Isaac told his father: "if you do not allow my partner to visit you, I will not visit you ever again. To welcome me, you must welcome him." Abraham said, "If this is the price I must pay to be faithful to God, I will pay it." Isaac did not come home. Relations worsened. Eventually Abraham and Isaac broke off all ties.

And so, Abraham sacrificed his relationship with his son Isaac on the altar of his faith.

And so, many Abrahams sacrifice many Isaacs on the altar of their faith. These Isaacs are legion. They can be found enduring their predictably tortuous lot in millions of Christian families, churches, and schools. They can be found eventually alienated from these same Christian families, churches, and schools. I have met or heard from hundreds of them in the last few months. They and their friends and allies are asking for some relief.

Finally, today, some Christians are paying attention. Some are allowing the predictable yet tragic suffering of the Isaacs of the church to play a role in how they think about the overall message of the Bible to this particular 5% of the human family. The intense suffering of LGBT young people attempting to navigate this particular landscape of dead ends doesn't resolve all the theological or ethical issues. **BUT IT MUST BE CONSIDERED. NO TREATMENT OF THIS ISSUE THAT FAILS TO ADDRESS THAT SUFFERING IS ADEQUATE.** That's all. Some call that commitment on my part "existentialism" or allowing "experience" to displace scripture. Others might call it an attempt to fulfill the core moral teaching of both Old and New Testament -- love your neighbor as yourself. That's what I am doing here. And that's what I will continue to do. Others will disagree. So be it.

And if you think it wrong to consider that suffering, just ask yourself this; what if you were Abraham, and it was your son who was Isaac? Would you sacrifice your son on that altar? Is that what the God we have met in Jesus Christ would require of you? Or might there be a faithful biblical alternative?