

Shall We Extend God's Blessing?  
Trinity Sunday  
June 15, 2014  
Rev. John Cleghorn

Psalm 139  
2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Today is Trinity Sunday on the church calendar. It comes one week after our celebration of God's gift of the Holy Spirit. We set this day aside to recognize and remember the fullness of God – God in three persons, Creator of all, Redeemer of all and Sustainer of all.

Here at Caldwell today, we are also invited to ponder the fullness of God's love for us and the fullness of love that can be shared between two people. For committed couples, that fullness of love is fully realized and witnessed in the gift of marriage. God gave us marriage as a pattern for two people to become one, to give themselves to each other fully and without reservation, that each might more fully live.

This week, our denomination faces a question: Shall we extend this blessing from God to same-gender couples? Shall we practice equality as a church in permitting clergy to perform same-gender weddings?

When two men or two women have fallen in love, pledged themselves to each other alone and themselves together to God ... will we as Presbyterians marry them in the house of the Lord and in the eyes of God?

Whatever answer emerges from this week's deliberations, one thing is sure - debate will ensue. We will find ourselves in dialogue if not debate, hopefully gracious debate, with others. At Caldwell, my bet is that we stand on the side of our LGBT sisters and brothers. This is emotional issue on both sides. There are raw feelings involved and the pace of people's thinking on this is highly individualized. People may be "getting there" but they may not be there yet and we need to be gracious.

What's more, how we make a case for a position matters. While there are political, scientific and sociological angles on the question, we are, first and foremost, people of faith. So I want to look at both sides of the issue through the lenses of scripture, theology and a bit of church polity.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has discussed the question of homosexuality since the late 1970s. As with other minority groups through the decades – first African-Americans, then women – we have searched scripture and our hearts for answers as the broader society has asked itself the same questions about equality and civil rights. Shamefully, too many times, we Presbyterians have fallen short of our call to lead our nation toward justice, compassion and mercy.

For the LGBT community, some might say the dam against equality was, at least, seriously cracked, two years ago. That's when our denomination voted to ordain gays and lesbians, both as elders and as ministers of word and sacrament.

Now, this week, the waters at that dam are built up around Detroit, the site of the 221st General Assembly. A vote on marriage equality two years ago was unexpectedly close, but did not pass. Because many conservative congregations have left over the ordination decision, some believe the balance of the vote may be different.

Some might say that the tide of public opinion and state law in favor of same-gender marriage is enough reason for the PCUSA to approve marriage equality. But it's best for the church to reach a conclusion on its own terms, through study of scripture, through examination of Christ's life and teachings, through opening ourselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said all of that in another way: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." In other words, the church should set its own standards, apart from the world's, just as Jesus called his followers to stand apart from the power of Rome.

So, let us turn to scripture.

First, we find that, from cover to cover, scripture bears witness to the value and blessing of marriage, and that marriage and sexuality go together. God gives us the gift of our physical bodies just as with our spiritual selves. So, we should not leave sex out of this conversation, just to be polite. The two topics are deeply and unchangeably connected. In marriage, we are to give ourselves wholly to another. In that is the fullest expression of ourselves and our capacity to love another person. To that much, surely most can all agree.

Then, as with so many issues, the conversation turns to one of Biblical interpretation.

In looking at homosexuality in general, traditionalists<sup>[1]</sup> focus on specific passages that address same-gender sexual acts, mostly found in the Old Testament, most referring to acts of abuse, violence and oppression and all lacking contemporary understanding that homosexuality is genetically wired-in and not a "choice."

Traditionalists hold the view that, according to scripture, marriage is a bond only for a woman and a man. Traditionalists uphold Biblical themes of purity and point to sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman as impure. Traditionalists call on those with same-gender orientation to practice chastity, in effect to deny God's gift of sexuality. Traditionalists grant that the church has come to new understandings of scripture in regard to women and racial difference. Yet they maintain homosexuality is a different matter.

Traditionalists warn the church against the tendency to conform to social trends. They warn of a slippery slope leading toward all-out anarchy in sexuality in America. Some

traditionalists fervently believe that gay and lesbian individuals can somehow be rewired, reprogrammed into being heterosexual. They interpret Psalm 139's words that we are each "fearfully and wonderfully made" to mean that we are all supposed to be made one way.

Not so fast, others say.[\[2\]](#) There is more to the story.

The Bible also includes examples of men who had more than one wife and fathered children with women who were not their wives. The Old Testament Law commanded a man to marry his brother's widow, regardless of whether love was in the picture. The Old Testament Law also commands rapists to marry their victims.

Are we to uphold *those* guidelines of so called "Bible-based" living? Are we to adopt this ancient "view of women, and their sexual purity, as belonging to their fathers or their husbands?" Are we to propagate a male-dominated, patriarchal paradigm for life?[\[3\]](#)

Or ... Or are we to remember that God gave us a new commandment in Christ Jesus? Are we to heed Christ's call to love God with all of our "heart, soul, strength and **mind**" and our neighbor as our self? Are we to remind ourselves of that old Presbyterian mantra that has given new life to our tradition time and again, that we are a church that is "Reformed and always being Reformed" namely by our Sovereign God?

So let us look to Jesus, in whom God revealed God's self in human form, fully human, fully divine. Let us look to the one conceived in an unwed peasant teenager, hardly an icon of traditional motherhood. Let us look to Christ, whose own life, never marrying, never procreating, departed from what some say is the "pattern" and the "norm" for all. Let us look to the one who went to the margins of society time and again and broke down barrier after barrier. Let us look to the one who gave his life that all might receive God's inclusive grace.

The Apostle Paul wrote up to half of the New Testament, expanding on that grace, including today's reading in 2 Corinthians. I realize some may bristle at the mention of his name, given how some of his writings in Romans have been used to "clobber" the LGBT community. But, as we have covered in past sermons, we know those verses are not about homosexuality as we understand it today.

Indeed, in Christ, Paul wrote, we see that God is always doing the "new thing" that the prophet Isaiah foretold. That new thing is a promise of renewal, an assurance that if we are faithful to God through Christ all things are made new. Paul wrote in his own time about the inclusiveness of Christ, saying in Galatians 3: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ."

Through Christ, as Paul wrote, God is reconciling our incomplete understanding to a more complete one, one that doesn't compromise its standards of moral conduct but, at the same time, through Christ, extends God's grace and love to all of God's children. Paul wrote:

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to God’s self through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God’s self, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making an appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

As a nation, we have crossed over a threshold of new understanding and possibility, the possibility of a more just and loving society. Now, we face an “unprecedented opportunity for gay people to live openly in faithful, egalitarian committed partnerships ” that are sealed in the covenant of holy marriage. [\[4\]](#)

Are we to put limits on "anyone," as Paul says "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation?" Are we to put limits “everything” as Paul says that in Christ "everything is made new?"

Are we to understand that because the Bible does not address same-gender marriage specifically that it does not belong in the Kingdom? Or can we honor the love of committed, same-gender couples by opening our church to any wedding and any marriage in which God is honored?

And, especially in this matter of marriage, shall we, as Presbyterians, break from our sin of silence on the question? As a witness to other denominations, shall we be ambassadors for Christ to other Christians and to the world as Paul urges?

In all candor, when I arrived here six years ago, I would, at best, have said that I had a lot of thinking and praying to do on the subject of marriage equality. Instead, God let me just live, just live and serve, and worship and pray, teach and learn and suffer and celebrate with you through your own individual journeys.

All along, you have borne witness to the power, meaning and faithfulness of how same-gender relationships can be. You, our LGBT members, have opened my eyes more fully and I know I am not alone here in that. You allies have stood with our LGBT members in matters of justice and recognition, even receiving all of our protesters graciously and patiently.

Together, as one person said to me recently, we are family. We are family. If only all churches – and all commissioners in Detroit this week – could have even a glimpse of the integrity and love you show here.

This week the General Assembly can take one of three paths. First, the commissioners may decide to study the matter of marriage even more. I doubt that will happen.

Second, our General Assembly may vote to allow clergy to perform same-gender weddings and then ask the nation's 172 Presbyteries to ratify that action by a majority vote that would span the next 12 months.

Third, the General Assembly can forego national ratification and immediately extend freedom of individual conscience to ministers, freeing those who want to conduct same-gender weddings to do so without imposing any view on those who decide otherwise.

When we gather next Sunday, it may be to celebrate the extension of the blessing of holy marriage. Or it may be take up the call of advocacy, to raise our voices in favor of marriage equality as the question goes out to Presbyterians nationwide.

Either way, there will be conflict. If marriage equality is granted, there will be a line of theologically conservative churches headed in a hurry out the back door of the PC (USA) to other denominations, taking mission funding and wiping their hands and removing the dust of the matter from their feet on the way out. May God show us a better way. Through Christ, may God reconcile us in ways we mere human beings can't seem to find.

I close with a newspaper story I found on the website of a group that opposes same-gender marriage. But stick with me. It may not end as you would expect.

It featured a young Harvard University student who came out to his parents while visiting home recently. His father said he immediately felt sick, in part because of his own views, in part because of the challenges he knew his son would face in his identity.

Still, for six months, father and son studied scripture together. The father's eyes were opened, not just to new understandings of God's Word and will but also to how so many churches wound members of the LGBT community with words of rejection and rebuke, something our LGBT sisters and brothers have shared with us here.

Then came the day that their church voted to leave the PC (USA) over its stance on ordaining gays to the office of elder and minister. The family had been deeply involved in the life of the church. The father was an elder.

The church pastor uttered those self-absolving but empty words that risk costing the church a generation of young people.

"They were never asked to leave," he told a reporter, "nor were they asked to reject their son in his struggle with same sex attraction."

No. Instead, the family left the church on its own, to seek a church where doors, hearts and minds were open.

"There are many churches," the father said. "But I have only one son."

In the name of God's only son, may the same love prevail this week.

Amen.