

Same-Sex Marriage A Pastoral Perspective

Introduction

I am a theologian in the sense that all Christians are called to connect what we believe about God and God's grace to the day-to-day ordinariness of where we live and what we do. What are God's will and purpose for me? How is the biblical narrative of God's saving grace my story? How do the promises of baptism shape the decisions I make and the actions I take? These and others are questions for every Christian. The particulars change at different ages and in different circumstances, but the quest for meaning continues. It is the journey of a lifetime.

I am not a theologian in the technical sense. I have no special training beyond a basic seminary education. I do not have advanced degrees in theology or philosophy, and I do not instinctively think in those categories. As an Episcopal priest, on the front line so to speak, I am primarily a pastor. My vocation is to proclaim the redeeming good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. My task is not so much to interpret that message in intellectual constructs, as it is to challenge and support those seeking to integrate faith and life.

That is not to say it does not matter what we believe; it matters greatly. What we believe shapes how we live. But that dynamic works in both directions. The things that happen along the way shape what we believe as well. The Great Commandments to love God and neighbor are only meaningful in terms of actual relationships. Relationships of love are the focal point of pastoral ministry.

The pastoral challenge is not to provide answers to the great questions of faith and life, but rather to be a visible and present support to those experiencing the questions and seeking answers. “You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him discover it within himself,” is a quote attributed to Galileo. The gender specific language is outdated, but the sentiment is still true, at least about things that really matter. In the jargon of the therapeutic profession, the pastoral task is to “sit with” those seeking to find and be found by God.

The question for many twenty-first century people is one of meaning. I spent some time once with a man dying of lung cancer. He was not a church person, and he had little if any faith. I spent time with him because he asked me to. He was a self-made, successful man who had risen high in his profession at considerable personal cost.

He told me that he wasn't afraid to die, and I believed him. He had no sense of injustice, or that he was unlucky. He did not ask the question, “Why me?” Death is the nature of all living things, and he had always known and accepted that. His problem was that in the face of the reality of his impending death the meaning of his life had disappeared. The places he had trusted to be filled with meaning turned out to be empty. “What was it about?” he would ask me over and over. “What did it mean?” I had little to offer him. The good news of resurrection and the eternal nature of love offered little comfort.

The activities of the pastoral profession are to preach, teach and support those seeking to be faithful in their every-day lives to the promises made in baptism. Preaching tells the story of the gospel, teaching tries to interpret the challenges of faith in relevant

ways that encourage self-discovery, and support offers the encouragement of love. The pastoral undertaking is to discover meaning and purpose from cradle to grave.

Goodness, charity, purity, generosity and compassion are not qualities unique to or reserved for Christians. They are attributes exemplified in the lives of countless people of many different faiths or no religious faith at all. The goal of Christianity is not a moral life beyond the morality of humankind at its best. What is unique for the Christian is the belief that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth the love of God was fully incarnate. It is in the words of Jesus, his actions and most of all his self-giving sacrifice that meaning is encountered in profound and healing ways. It is in love that hope becomes real and tangible.

One of the implications of the incarnation of God in Christ is that the love of God is encountered in the presence of another. Love is not a private thing done alone. Love is never general or abstract; it is concrete and specific. Love is relational. Love has a name and a face. The Christian conviction is that in love the deepest meaning of life is discovered. To join another in that discovery is to be a pastor.

The uniqueness of Jesus as the incarnation of God's love is both offered and claimed in word and sacrament. The worshipper is invited into the drama of redemption, the self-sacrifice of love and the hope of life and meaning discovered in the power of love. In the "changes and chances of life" we repeatedly encounter the presence of incarnate love and redemption *in the particulars of our own issues and realities*. It is a pastoral act.

Being pastoral is not the same thing as making people feel good, or even better. Being pastoral is speaking the truth in love. Truth without love is tyranny. Love without

truth is sentimentality. As someone else said, “The truth will make you free, but first it may hurt a bit.”

Of course, Pilate’s question remains, “What is truth?” One’s person’s truth is another’s folly. It is easy enough to say that Jesus is the truth, and I believe that to be so. But that begs the question of content in any specific issue or particular set of circumstances. It seems that most people who are convinced that absolute truth can be apprehended are also convinced that they have done so. The presumption of absolute truth is the error of all who disagree.

The best we can do may be to hold firmly to the conviction of love, knowing full well that our grasp of truth will always be limited this side of the Kingdom. The Holy Spirit may, indeed, lead us into all truth, but people of faith are clearly not lead into the same truth about the application of love in all its details.

From a pastoral perspective I am not convinced that truth and love are parallel categories of equal value. I am not convinced that there is such a thing as “absolute truth” apart from God and the mind of Christ, which I know only “through a glass darkly.” There are those who would say that places me on the slippery slope to relativism. I would suggest that the belief that absolute truth can be known starts one on the slippery slope to violence, emotional and physical, in the name of God. As we seek to love and speak the truth as best we can know it, it would serve us well to heed once again the admonition of St. Paul to the Corinthians: “Knowledge puffs up; love builds up.”

My purpose here in these reflections is pastoral not theological. . The Episcopal Church has been in conversation, conflict and upheaval about human sexuality for close

to half a century. The “truth” of various positions has been argued with conviction and passion. Many Episcopalians have never known a church not in the turmoil of internal battles.

It is not news that membership in the Episcopal Church, as well as most mainline Protestant churches, has been in decline for a number of years. I am not aware of much, if any, careful study that has been done to understand the causes of loss in membership. It is assumed to be the result of whatever position or action the church has taken to which one objects. The evidence is anecdotal. Everyone knows someone who left the church for almost any given reason.

I suspect there are a variety of factors influencing the decline of a particular model of church in this country. Many of those factors are demographic trends and social, philosophical shifts within our culture. And some of the decline may be the result of simple exhaustion from the seemingly endless and terribly destructive battle that we seem to cherish. Clearly for more than two generations we have been a church without an articulated vision of mission capable of unifying hearts, minds and actions. It is hard to believe that we have not expended enormous resources of people, energy and wealth in the pursuit of what may well prove to be a Pyrrhic victory.

Around issues of sexuality it is important that the biblical and theological work be done. It is sometimes argued that the church has not done its theological and biblical homework. I think it more accurate to say that the people of the Episcopal Church have not bothered to read the work done or explore the issues with meaningful dialogue. For at least thirty years biblical themes and relevant biblical texts have been explored and exegeted to the point where much has been said from different perspectives in an extensive

bibliography. Books, both scholarly and personal, have been written and published. It is important that that work be engaged and continued as well as studied.

As important as the biblical and theological work may be, it is also important that pastoral implications be explored. Frequently the pastoral dimensions of sexuality are presented in anecdotal narrative – a personal story about someone’s particular experience. My attempt here is to move beyond the individual story to something a bit more rigorous, a pastoral perspective that may offer some light on the decisions we make and how we make them.

I stop very short of an academic exploration or presentation. This is not a research paper, and there has been no attempt to notate it as such. It is not meant to be theologically subtle or sophisticated.

Finally, I make no claim to an objective viewpoint. I write with a bias and a case to make. I write from thirty-five years of experience and a passion for the healing and hope that I have seen born in the lives of people who have come to know the love of Christ in concrete, incarnate expression. I offer a pastoral perspective.

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Marriage

The clamor for “traditional family values” or “biblical family values” speaks of both fantasy and the oversimplification so prevalent in a high tech, sound byte culture. The image behind the words is often a vague and emotional idea, more felt than considered. The idealized family existed only for a brief moment in history, and even then mostly in the imagination of Hollywood and affluent Americans. The traditional family yearned for, its loss lamented, is largely nostalgic. The memory is better than the actual thing. There may have been families like Ozzie and Harriet Nelson’s, but they were rare, and they were all white and in the upper echelons of society. The popularity of such television shows in the 1950’s is a testament to the wish rather than the reality.

Much of the exposition of Scripture with regard to marriage and family is anachronistic; it reads back on to the text the notion of romantic love as the purpose of marriage and the nuclear family as the mainstay of society. Neither was the case in biblical times.

Genesis 2:24 reads: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” It is a leap beyond the warrant of Scripture to move from there to the enshrinement of husband, wife and children as the basic family unit ordained by God in creation. The husband-wife-children unit was certainly subordinate to the clan in biblical times and for centuries following. Very early custom was that a man left his clan to become a part of his wife’s people. Even in a patriarchal

ordering of life a man did leave his father and mother and cling to his wife's father and mother.

Soon custom shifted, and a woman left her clan to become a part of her husband's clan. As finances improved husbands generally added wives as both a sign of prosperity and as a means to increased prosperity. Jacob, later named Israel, was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, the covenant people of God. Each tribe emanated from a son, and the sons were products of two different wives and two slaves. King David had many wives, and Solomon is said to have had more than seven hundred. A man could have multiple wives and concubines as well. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, there is no evidence in the Bible of a woman having multiple husbands or whatever the male equivalent of a concubine might be called.

Polygamy was less common by the time of the writing of the New Testament, but it was by no means unheard of. John the Baptist was scandalized by the marriage of Herod to Herodias, but his offense was not because she was an addition to the several wives already in Herod's household, but because she was the former wife of Herod's brother. John the Baptist's moral outrage was occasioned by incest not polygamy.

The Epistle to Titus directs the recipients to appoint elders for the Church in every town being careful to select someone who "is blameless, married only once." (Titus 1:5). That is the NRSV rendering of the text, and the translation may represent an effort to mitigate the sexist nature of language that would assume the only men could be selected as elders. But the Greek reads, "husband of only one wife." It may have meant that the office of elder was limited to those not in polygamous marriages.

If the intention of Genesis 2:24 is to establish the husband-wife-children unit as the sacred foundation of family, the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures did not understand that to be the case. There are at least seven different kinds of “marriage” found in the Old Testament with implied and explicit endorsement.

There is no record in the New Testament of Jesus defining marriage per se other than citing the passage from Genesis 2:24. Jesus does define family/clan in terms of the covenant people of God. “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’” (Matthew 12:48b-50). Jesus was single. It is allegiance to the Kingdom of God that forms relationships that make manifest God’s redeeming grace.

The Book of Common Prayer cites Jesus’ presence at a wedding in Cana of Galilee as an act of support and endorsement of the manner of life depicted in marriage. But surely that is stretching a point. Jesus ate with prostitutes and sinners, but that hardly constituted an endorsement of a particular lifestyle. Jesus went fishing with Peter and others, but that does not elevate the occupation of fishing to a particularly holy, sacramental state. Whatever the wedding in Cana was, it was something quite different from a modern day church wedding marking a couple’s entry into the institution of marriage.

There is nothing new or remarkable about any of the above. The social norms and mores around marriage and sexual relationships were different in the days of Abraham and Sarah than in 2010. They were different in the first century and the early days of the

Christian Church. The ritual act of marriage became a religious event only in relatively recent times. Practices change over time and vary from culture to culture.

That does not mean that modern sexual norms should include multiple wives or concubines or fathering a child through the surrogate of a wife's handmaiden. The fact that the culture of biblical times was patriarchal is not justification for male dominated relationships today. It does mean that defining the details of marriage in the twenty-first century by superficial application of biblical texts is risky business. Everyone knows that already, but still there is a temptation to become biblical "fundamentalists" when it suits a particular point of view.

The fact is that until the middle of the nineteenth century, the primary purposes of marriage in its many and varied forms were the orderly control and transfer of property and the division of labor in ways that lead to a stable and relatively prosperous life. Marriage protected property and maximized the benefit of new connections and financial opportunities. Clans were increased and intertwined. When a family prospered the opportunities to marry well improved, and marrying well increased the likelihood of prosperity. Marriages were arranged to offer the best advantage possible not only to the husband and wife, but to the whole family, what today is called "the extended family."

Love had little to do with marriage, and as late as the early part of the nineteenth century love was still considered a risky foundation on which to risk one's happiness. Of course romantic love existed. The Song of Solomon is a love poem, or a collection of love poems, both romantic and erotic. There are love stories with all the elements of intrigue and tragedy in the Old Testament. Love and mutual fulfillment sometimes happened in marriages no doubt, but such things were neither a requirement nor an

expectation. Often cultural norms and expectations grew out of the belief that it was preferable to keep romantic love outside of marriage.

Divorce

While marriage was not the same thing in biblical times as it is today, it has to be assumed that Jesus quoted Genesis 2:24 for a reason. It is important that Jesus' comments came in response to a question about divorce not marriage. Jesus did not define marriage or establish the modern, nuclear family unit as the foundation of society, but he did say something about the relationship between male and female and especially the radical nature of sexual union. Jesus' teaching on sexuality comes in the specific context of divorce and especially remarriage following divorce.

The origins of marriage are lost in the mist of prehistoric times. It appears that divorce has been around as long as marriage in the various forms that marriage has taken. Divorce was common enough among the covenant people of the Hebrew Scriptures to necessitate provision for it in the Law of Moses. That it was an issue of some controversy is clear from the fact that in the Gospel of Mark, Pharisees try to entrap Jesus with a question for which there is no right answer: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

The Law of Moses provided that a man could divorce a wife if she did not please him or if he found something objectionable about her. The divorce was accomplished by the man writing a certificate of divorce and placing it in the woman's hand.

(Deuteronomy 24:1-4.) It was a one-way law; the same provision did not exist for a woman who found something objectionable about her husband. But then that is no surprise either.

Jesus responded to the Pharisees question by saying, “Because of the hardness of your heart he (Moses) wrote this commandment for you.” The provision for divorce does not reflect the way things should be. It is not a law coming from the heart of God, but rather is a reflection of the sinfulness of people. It is a provision from Moses to bring some sense of order to the failure of human beings to live into the fullness of creation.

At that point Jesus quoted Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 10:6-9).

Jesus grounded his answer in Scripture and in a theology of creation. The central point is not the ceremony of a wedding, something that was not seen as a religious event. Jesus did not institute marriage as a social custom. The point had to do with sexuality. The sexual union of man and woman is a part of creation, a partnership with creation. It is the order of things. The coming together of male and female throughout the nature of living things is a reflection of God’s creative will. With very few and obscure exceptions, procreation only happens through the joining of male and female.

Then Jesus moved the standard beyond the limitation of the Law of Moses. Because of the nature of the physical union of a man and woman, the union is indissoluble. It is not just a moral issue; it is the nature of the thing. The sexual union of

a man and a woman changes things irreversibly. They are no longer two but one flesh. They are joined. It is an act that cannot be undone. They cannot be “un-joined.”

The psychological implications of the union between husband and wife can be debated. Does it mean that two identities are lost and a third emerges? Do “I and you” somehow, mysteriously become “us?” But the Bible is not concerned with a psychological interpretation. Genesis was not written in light of Freud, and Freud was hardly concerned with interpreting Genesis. The biblical point is that in the procreative union of man and woman, creation takes place. A new thing emerges.

It is not that divorce is wrong; it is impossible. One cannot undo the joining of male and female anymore than one could change one of the animals of Genesis 2:18-20 into the sought for helpmate for Adam. The fullness of creation is experienced in the joining. “God made them male and female.” It is not that the union “ought” to be indissoluble; it is indissoluble by its nature. Divorce may be legal; there may be provision for it in the law because of the weakness of human beings. But it is a legal fiction. By the nature of creation God has joined the man and woman together; no one can tear that apart.

In Mark, Jesus’ public teaching ends there. One could draw the conclusion that divorce is lawful in a technical sense, though not desirable or even possible theologically. Husband and wife could separate with all the legal implications that might be involved around issues of property and children. But the union would not be torn apart. In private Jesus presses the teaching further with his disciples.

The problem comes not with divorce but remarriage. “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and

marries another, she commits adultery.” The sin that Jesus condemns is not divorce, but adultery.

When we talk about repenting of divorce, we miss the point. From the Bible’s perspective, there is no divorce even if a husband and wife live apart from each other. The only way to repent of divorce would be to rejoin the relationship. The sin comes with remarriage. If we were to repent of the adultery of remarriage, we would have to separate from the second relationship and return to the union that has been created by God. If return is impossible in an actual, physical way, it could at least be established spiritually. Repentance does not require mutuality. One person’s actions do not justify another’s reactions. One may remain faithful to a spouse regardless of the spouse’s behavior.

The parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew adds an exception to the indissolubility of marriage. Jesus says, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:9, NRSV). The unchastity clause is almost certainly a gloss, an addition to the text in its final form. The pastoral problem of remarriage after divorce apparently existed even in the earliest days of the Christian Church.

As is often the case with controversial passages in Scripture, the meaning of the Greek word that is translated in the NRSV as “unchastity” is not all that clear. In some translations it is rendered “adultery.” It is a word that might mean incest or other sexual activity. It clearly refers to immoral sexual behavior.

There are modern day expositions of the text that suggest a broader meaning for the so-called Matthean exception. One presses for translating the Greek as “just cause.” “Whoever divorces his wife, except for just cause, and marries another commits

adultery.” That kind of use of Scripture suggests a desire to hold to the principle of the authority of the Bible and at the same time allow for pastoral application. While the motivation may be noble, it is a strained interpretation. The Mosaic Law already allowed a man to divorce his wife for just cause. If that law were just and holy, why would Jesus have countered with the nature of creation in the first place?

It is questionable exegesis to place great weight on the exception in Matthew. The sense of Scripture throughout both testaments is that marriage is an indissoluble union of man and woman, grounded in the nature of creation. It is difficult to offset that consistent theme of the Bible with a single verse in Matthew that seems to be a revision of Mark. Would one argue that the author of Mark was not aware of the exception recorded in Matthew? Or, did the author of Mark think the exception of such little importance as not to warrant mention?

Even if one accepts the Matthean exception, the issue is still remarriage and not divorce. In Matthew, Jesus would say that there are things of such impurity that they hold the power to abrogate the indissolubility of the bond of marriage. It is not that unchastity on the part of one member justifies the action of divorce on the part of the other. It is not tit for tat scorekeeping. The act of unchastity breaks the otherwise indissoluble bond. The marriage does not exist. The exception does not argue in defense of divorce. Quite the contrary, the exception emphasizes the indissolubility of marriage.

The Church read the Bible that way and understood the nature of marriage in those terms for more than nineteen hundred years. The Roman Catholic Church still does. The consistent teaching of the Church has been that there are things that hold the power to abrogate the indissolubility of the marriage bond, but that absent such things it

is a bond made by God in creation and cannot be broken. There is no such thing as divorce. It is a legal fiction. Husband and wife may go through a legal process, but the bond remains intact, and any sexual relationship outside the bond is an act of adultery.

The abrogation of the dissolubility of marriage is annulment. It is not the proclamation that the marriage has been dissolved, but rather that it never existed. The couple may have acted married, they may have even given birth to children, but the marriage was so flawed that it was never really a true marriage.

Throughout the years there have been various grounds for annulment. There have been times when adultery on one person's part was grounds for annulment, and there have been times when it was not. For years in the Episcopal Church an annulment could be obtained in the case of adultery, but only by the "innocent party." The lack of honest intention at the time of marriage was, and still is, a basis for annulment.

In spite of the complexities and manipulations of the annulment process, the Christian tradition has been consistent. There is no such thing as divorce. Thus, there is no such thing as remarriage after divorce. Remarriage cannot happen within the church; it would be tantamount to sanctioning adultery. Anyone who does "remarry" is living in an adulterous relationship and cannot be admitted to the sacraments of the Church. That was the position of the Episcopal Church in the United States until the middle of the twentieth century. It was a position consistent with that throughout the Anglican Communion.

Many moral and ethical laws have roots in practical considerations as well as theological. Every culture has incest taboos because the practice is detrimental to the health and vitality of future generations, and because it is disruptive to the clan/family

order on which the stability of society depends. Competition for mates between family members holds the potential to wreck havoc. It reduces the ability of the family to survive and compete.

The prohibition against eating pork and shellfish were reasonable health precautions in the early days of the Hebrew people. Pork was not particularly safe in the days before refrigeration. After a few people had dropped dead from allergenic reactions to shellfish, the law quickly made sense.

That is not to say that moral and ethical laws are not the will of God, or that they do not emanate from God. It should come as no surprise that the will of God should be reflected in the nature of things. God forbids incest not only because it is immoral, but also because it is bad for us. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say it is immoral because it is bad for us. Murder, theft and idolatry are not forbidden as arbitrary rules of a capricious God. They are ways in which human beings rebel against the nature of God's creation and the image of God. They are bad for us.

Beyond the vision of creation in Genesis there are practical reasons why divorce and remarriage after divorce are detrimental to both individuals and to society in general. That was especially true for the first eighteen centuries of the Christian Church.

Divorce and remarriage were disruptive in terms of the orderly transfer of property and the extension of the influence and wealth of the family/clan – the primary reasons for the existence of marriage in the first place. Divorce and remarriage often created competing sets of heirs for the same property. Elaborate laws of legitimacy developed, but even so fathers could redistribute wealth through gifts and wills that weakened future generations.

A primary function of marriage was to increase the potential for economic prosperity of the family/clan by gaining resources and extending the influence provided by the connections of in-laws. Divorce broke those connections and could often erode resources rather than preserve them. Remarriage often produced as many or more new enemies as friends.

Divorce put at risk the most vulnerable members of society: women and children. There were undoubtedly notable exceptions, but as a rule a divorced woman's situation was tenuous, even destitute. It was difficult, if not impossible, for a woman divorced by her husband to remarry. It was not unusual for the only choice available to be between begging and prostitution. The poverty of divorced women was especially devastating on children. If the former husband remarried it often rendered the children illegitimate as well as poor.

Obviously the law was not equal. A man could divorce his wife in most cases just by saying so. A woman had no such right. Women had little recourse. One of the few protections that women and children had against severe and damaging treatment was a divorce taboo.

A Pastoral Cruelty

In the early part of the nineteenth century, for the first time in recorded human history, love became the primary motivation for marriage. It didn't happen overnight, but gradually love replaced other factors as the primary consideration in choosing a mate. As

the motivation for marriage changed so did the expectations associated with it. As expectations rose so did disappointment. In *Marriage, A History*, sociologist Stephanie Coontz writes:

“Only in the last two hundred years, as other economic and political institutions began to take over many of the roles once played by marriage, did Europeans and Americans begin to see marriage as a personal and private relationship that should fulfill their emotional and sexual desires. Once that happened, free choice became the societal norm for mate selection, love became the main reason for marriage, and a successful marriage came to be described as one that met the needs of its members.

But each of these changes had negative as well as positive implications for the stability of marriage as an institution. No sooner did the ideal of marrying for love triumph than its most enthusiastic supporters started demanding the right to divorce if love died.” (page 307).

The divorce rate began to climb dramatically during the waning years of the nineteenth century, but it was still a small fraction of what it would become. The primary mitigation against divorce remained the inequality of men and women especially in economic terms. The truth is that until very recent times the options facing a woman in a bad marriage were either to endure it or face economic hardship if not actual poverty. It was considerably easier for a man to endure a bad marriage. In fact, the husband might not even have much awareness of the unfulfilling nature of the marriage. Stephanie Coontz again: “Until the 1970’s a husband could force his wife to have sex whenever he wanted. He had complete authority over the family finances and, under most legal codes, didn’t even have to consult her about where the family lived. Until the mid-twentieth

century, many families in Europe and American had two separate standards of living: one for the husband that included meat and beer and a lower one for the wife and children.” (page 298).

Things began to change at the turn of the twentieth century, and divorce rates began to climb. Two world wars and a depression slowed things up, but with World War II changes were set in motion that would transform the landscape.

Women left the home and entered the work force in record numbers. Once again, it did not happen overnight, but gradually women became economically independent, at least relatively speaking. They would never again return to the “inferior” position of dependency on a man for the basics of life. Even today divorce is more likely in a marriage in which both members work outside the home. The temptation is to interpret that fact as an indication that both partners working compromises the development of intimacy and erodes the more “traditional” roles of marriage. A more likely interpretation is that working women have more resources and therefore more options in a marriage that is less than what was expected.

The 1950’s may have been something of a backlash against the social upheaval of World War II, but the fault lines were already there. A way of life had disappeared never to return. The ideal family of the ‘50’s was a myth. The divorce rate began to creep up even as Americans tuned in to watch Ward and June Cleaver deal with the Beaver’s latest crises with a magical mixture of love and wisdom. The popularity of “Leave It To Beaver” and similar shows is likely an indication that people sought to escape to a fantasy family unlike the one they had at home. And then as the country moved into the

1960's and '70's divorces soared, stabilizing about 1980 after essentially doubling in twenty years.

The divorce rate is often said to be about 50%, and that is probably true enough though not a statistical measurement. At present trends about half of all marriages will eventually end in divorce. A more precise statistic it is that in 1960 about 10% of married Americans divorced in a year. In 1980 the rate doubled to about 20%. There has actually been a slight decrease in the divorce rate in the first decade of the twenty-first century, though speculation is that it has more to do with the economic recession than a general strengthening of the institution of marriage.

When seen in the context of the historical development of marriage within the changing cultures in Europe and the United States, it becomes clear that the dramatic increase in divorce has not been the result of a general degradation of morals or any particular sinister influence such as rock 'n' roll, communism or an atheist agenda to destroy the Church.

The context of marriage changed. With romantic love as the primary motivation for marriage there came a concomitant, perhaps unrealistic, ideal of marital bliss. Lack of sexual and personal fulfillment became acceptable, even expected, causes for divorce. Disappointment was an adequate reason to look elsewhere for the elusive "happiness" promised by the culture, even when it was generally recognized that such bliss was largely myth. Women had options even if those options were still limited.

As divorce became more common it also became more acceptable. The stigma of being a divorcee gradually lessened until it disappeared altogether. The presence of women in the professional world increased, and the economic freedom and power of

women improved. A woman was no longer required by the fear of social rejection or economic necessity to stay in a “bad” marriage however that might be defined.

The church in the second half of the twentieth century found itself with a pastoral cruelty. One option was for the church to insist on the biblical image of marriage as an indissoluble union of a man and a woman. The pressures and changes of the modern world do not change that fundamental truth. Divorce is not immoral or wrong; it is impossible. What God has joined together in the nature of creation cannot be separated. Remarriage after divorce is not a marriage at all. It is a legal fiction legitimizing an adulterous relationship. The church cannot bless it; the church cannot accept it.

That is precisely the position that the catholic tradition of the Christian Church, including the Anglican Church, took. To do otherwise the church would have to reinterpret the plain sense of Scripture in both testaments. It would mean understanding the Bible through the lens of a changing culture rather than challenging culture with a prophetic voice based on the authority of God’s Word. It would be nothing less than the accommodation of culture.

It is important to keep in mind that the problem was remarriage after divorce. To accept the new marriage as something holy and God-given would separate the church from more than nineteen hundred years of the consistent teaching. It would constitute nothing less than a redefinition of the fundamental nature of marriage.

The traditional position on divorce and remarriage created a class of people outside the pastoral bonds of the church. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century the population of that body began to grow. By the middle of the century it became too large to be ignored.

The pastoral care offered to people, especially women, in unhappy marriages was to counsel endurance. The expectation and desire for love, sexual and personal fulfillment, and meaning in life are temporal and passing yearnings, it was said. They are, at best, of secondary importance, and at worst they are reflections of the baser nature of humanity. In any event, they are not necessary in order to live a holy and godly life. There are countless examples of saints and ordinary people who lived holy, full and contented lives without the benefit of marriage or sex.

With love and personal fulfillment as the ever-increasing motivation for marriage, it was inevitable that there would be an increase in impulsive and ill-suited unions. The passions and attractions of youth tend to fade with maturity and the economic realities of life. A mistake made at eighteen or twenty years old was a mistake for life. If one could not endure the relationship of marriage, the only alternative was to live separately and chastely.

There is something cruel about speaking from a position of moral authority to deny others the possibility of joy in life. It is especially cruel when the counsel comes from someone who has eschewed such fulfillment through vocational celibacy for whatever reason, or who has found such joy through wiser choices and stricter discipline. For a happily married or celibate priest to tell someone in a painful marriage that he or she does not need the happiness of marriage to live a full life is patronizing and condescending. Worst of all, it simply ignores the psychological and emotional health of the person. It is “soulless” pastoral care.

The church’s position made outcasts of those who had divorced and remarried. Often they were denied the sacraments of the church. They were not admitted to the

communion rail, and they could not be baptized. It would be an emotionally strong person indeed who could endure that kind of isolation and remain in the fellowship of a Christian body. The loss of a marriage and the dreams of happiness were coupled with the loss of a supportive faith community, which almost always meant the loss of friends. Today there are still those who were deeply wounded by the rejection of their church because of divorce and remarriage. Some have come back seeking some degree of healing and reconciliation. Many have not.

As the divorce rate – and the incidence of remarriage – grew, the church became more and more an exclusive body for “traditional” families. The expectations of church life were family expectations of marriage and children. It was difficult not only for people divorced and remarried, but also for single adults and married couples without children or the prospect of children to find a place and feel included.

The church’s theology and practice of marriage made it difficult to proclaim the gospel to a large and growing segment of the population. The message, “Jesus loves you,” rang hollow when the church clearly did not. There were obvious evangelical implications, but there were pastoral concerns as well. The church did not have the ability to offer the care of its ministry to a growing body of people. As remarriage after divorce increased so did blended families. Parents who are not welcome in a church community are unlikely to take their children there. More and more children were growing up in essentially unchurched homes isolated from Christian formation and other support from a faith community.

As Western culture shifted in its convictions about remarriage after divorce, there were pragmatic impacts on the church. More and more people who contributed

financially, sometimes generously, to the operation and ministry of their local parishes were being locked out. Much of those contributions began to dry up. Who would want to give money to an institution that condemned them?

Divorce, remarriage, and blended families became more and more common. By the 1970's it was a rare American family that was not touched in some way by divorce and remarriage. Essentially everybody knew somebody divorced and remarried. There were stepchildren, step-grandchildren, and other complicated relationships. It is one thing to hold firm and "pure" opinions when the number of people affected is few and removed. It is another thing when it touches someone known and loved. Ethical positions are often black and white from the outside only; from the inside they tend to grow gray.

Divorce and remarriage became accepted simply by its pervasiveness. The American culture grew used to it. There is no moment of change, no clear line of demarcation. Opinions shift one person at a time until a critical mass – a tipping point – is reached. There came a day when the vast majority of American people just did not believe that millions of people – many of them family, friends or neighbors – were living in sin. Most people came not only to accept remarriage after divorce but also to endorse it as second chance and a new opportunity find joy and fulfillment in life.

And so the Episcopal Church changed. The change was essentially pastoral. It is said that the church has not changed its teaching about sexuality and marriage. That just is not so. The Episcopal Church, as well as many Protestant denominations, changed what it teaches about the indissolubility of marriage, and it changed its understanding of

Scripture in doing so. And it separated itself from almost two thousand years of Christian teaching and tradition.

The change did not come quickly or easily. It took almost a century, and it came with loud cries of criticism and accusations of moral deterioration. The church, it was said, was abandoning Scripture for the accommodation of a culture adrift from the moorings of fundamental moral principles.

The General Convention of 1898 debated a canonical proposal to forbid any priest in the Episcopal Church from solemnizing the marriage of a divorced person whose spouse was still living. Bishop Potter of New York proposed an amendment that would allow for the remarriage of the innocent party in cases where the divorce had been the result of adultery. As the Episcopal Church is wont to do, the matter was referred to a committee of the House of Bishops for study. That the matter was debated with such energy, and left unsettled, is an indication that it was already an issue of controversy. The effects of a cultural shift were beginning to be felt.

On November 15, 1900 the *New York Times* reported that the study committee was offering for general response a proposal that would prohibit remarriage of any divorced person in the church. It went a step further and prevented participation in the sacraments of the church by any divorced person who remarried outside the church. A “pastoral” exception was made exempting the wronged party in divorces resulting from adultery.

Six years after the study committee had been formed, at the General Convention of 1904, the proposed canon was debated for four days. The canon was rejected on the basis of the exclusion clause. In 1910 the General Convention passed a canon outlawing

divorce even in cases of adultery; even the “innocent “party could not remarry within the church. It also barred from baptism, confirmation and Eucharist any divorced person who remarried outside the church.

The issue continued to be debated by General Convention, and in 1925 another commission was appointed to study divorce and remarriage. After another six years of study, the commission published a recommendation to the whole church for consideration and comment. The recommendation was to allow for remarriage after divorce, but only under strict restrictions. Nine acceptable grounds for divorce were laid out; the same grounds that already existed for annulment. A couple could be married only after applying to the bishop and receiving permission. It would be permissible for an Episcopal priest to officiate at the marriage, but it could not be in a church, and the *Book of Common Prayer* could not be used.

From the *New York Times*, April 27, 1931: “A majority of the commission felt that, in view of the fact that the law allows for the remarriage of divorced person and that therefore new marriage relations are entered upon and new families formed, it is desirable that the Church should bring into those new homes every possible spiritual influence. On the other hand, there was an equally clear desire that in doing this the Church should take no steps which might seem to condone divorce.”

After six more years of comment and debate in a broader arena, the House of Bishops adopted the recommendation. The House of Deputies, the more conservative body at the time, rejected it by a vote of ninety-nine to thirty-three.

Three years later a new commission was appointed to study the matter chaired by the Bishop of Michigan, Herman Page. He was quoted as saying, “[The Episcopal

Church's position on divorce and remarriage] has been termed in some respects the most merciless in Christendom." He went on to say, "The steadily mounting divorce rate in American is the real basis for the need for adjustment of the whole point of view on marriage." Surely that must have sounded to some like rank accommodation to culture.

The General Convention of 1946 adopted a new canon to become effective on January 1, 1947. Divorce was recognized as a reality, and the nine impediments in a marriage that could justify an annulment became the nine acceptable grounds for divorce. It was a complicated canon, and it remained almost impossible to remarry in the physical confines of an Episcopal Church building. In the years that followed there was much confusion about the actual application of the new guidelines. The legal grounds claimed in the divorce process were frequently not the real, pastoral reasons. For a variety of reasons, the "guilty party" was often not the same as determined by a court of law. The church was in a state of confusion with a wide diversity of practice from diocese to diocese and parish to parish for two decades or more.

In 1965 the Anglican Church of Canada adopted a change in its practice of remarriage after divorce. While the revision was still subject to formal approval, the *Montreal Gazette* of September 4, 1965 reported: "...one unhappy effect of the law has been to drive people from the church... their break with the Anglican communion is made with great suffering." "The change marks a revolution in the church's thinking about the marriage bond." "Remarriage of divorced persons is possible in the Episcopal Church of the United States, but does not occur in the mother church, The Church of England, or elsewhere in the Anglican Communion."

The General Convention of 1973 finally adopted the revision of the marriage canons as they now exist in the Episcopal Church. The new canons recognized divorce and dropped the legal fiction of annulment. One could, of course, have a marriage annulled on the basis of certain conditions, but an annulment was no longer necessary to remarry in the church.

The 1973 canon established a requirement for the bishop's consent for remarriage within the church, but with a significant change from that proposed in 1931. It was not required that a couple receive the bishop's consent in order to be married; a priest had to obtain the bishop's consent before officiating at the ceremony. The provision was meant to be pastoral, assuming that a second (or more) marriage required additional attention and care. The canon did not intend for the bishop to make a judgment on the appropriateness of the marriage. Rather it was meant to give the bishop the means of providing accountability to insure that appropriate pastoral care was given.

Today, less than fifty years later, divorce and remarriage is commonplace within the Episcopal Church. It is not seen as an impediment to anything. The ranks of bishops, priests and deacons are filled with people divorced and remarried, sometimes more than once. Whatever else may be said, it is clear that the Episcopal Church has changed its teaching on marriage. While the debate has taken more than a century, the change itself has been in the lifetimes of many of today's church members. It has been a change motivated not by new insights into the Bible or the teaching of the church, but rather by pastoral impact.

The point is not that the Episcopal Church has lost its identity and needs to return to the marriage laws of Moses or the early church. Such a return is impossible even it

were desirable. American and European cultures are not going to return to the days of marriages arranged by others for pragmatic purposes. The nature of marriage both as a relationship and as a social institution has changed in ways that are permanent.

Change is inevitable and not necessarily a bad thing. The halcyon days of low divorce rates and simpler family ideals were also days of elitism, racism and second-class citizenship for women. But change is always is challenging. Each generation is frightened and unsettled by the changes of the next generation.

Throughout its life the church has been called to a pastoral as well as prophetic ministry. The church changes as the context in which it does pastoral ministry changes. For some that is a negative thing, characterized with words like “revisionism” and “liberalism.” Even so, there is nothing new about it.

One can argue that in its current practices of divorce and remarriage the Episcopal Church has abandoned Scripture and separated itself from Christian tradition in both an historical sense as well as a contemporary ecumenical sense. One can argue that the church is accommodating culture, for surely it is.

And one can argue that the Episcopal Church has made a pastoral response to the world we live in. The healing word of Christ is spoken in different languages and in different contexts. The reality of the world is a true reality. Redemption and healing happen in response to particular expressions of brokenness. The pastoral implications of the gospel are simply not the same as they were a hundred, or even fifty, years ago.

The Episcopal Church’s pastoral response to marriage after divorce is not consistent with the clear sense of Scripture. It just is not. There are few things about which the Bible is so clear and unambiguous. We can do all manner of exegetical

gymnastics trying to make the texts say something they do not say, or not say something that they do say. In the end what has changed is not Scripture, but rather how the church understands marriage and divorce from a pastoral perspective in the world we actually live in. Law and grace cannot be separated.

Same-sex Marriage

As recently as forty years ago homosexuality was a rarity in the public view. There is no reason to believe that there were fewer lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgendered (LBGT) people as a percentage of the population, but very few gay people were “out” about their sexuality. They were, by and large, invisible. Out was not a safe place to be. Professional opportunities were severely limited for openly gay people. There was no pressure either legally or socially to limit discrimination in employment practices concerning people even suspected of being homosexual. Discovery of same-sex orientation was cause for dishonorable discharge from the military. The FBI considered homosexuals in sensitive government positions to constitute a risk to national security. Emotional and physical abuse of gay people was not uncommon.

There were no gay people in the Episcopal Church in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Of course that is a ludicrous statement. There have always been gay people in the Episcopal Church on both sides of the altar rail and at all levels of leadership offering significant gifts and creativity. But those people were invisible in terms of their sexuality in the church as well as in society in general. The church was no safer than any other place in which to be open and honest. Indeed, people went to great lengths to hide that important part of their identity. That they chose to stick it out and even devote their lives to the

proclamation of the gospel is a remarkable statement of commitment and hunger. The church did not make it easy.

The current issues of sexuality claiming so much energy and attention in the Episcopal Church today were simply not present in a visible way fifty years ago. In 1960 the talk of women's ordination to the priesthood had hardly begun and was inaudible to the vast majority of Episcopalians. Liturgical renewal – or revision, depending on which side of that issue one stood – was the hot debate. The notion of gender-inclusive language had not even occurred to people, at least not in any way to influence the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

If there were conversations going on about homosexuality they were limited and invisible in the public arena. Homosexuality was firmly implanted in the public psyche as an undesirable condition. There were no known homosexuals in churches. It was both easy and natural to assume that homosexuality was wrong, or sinful. The church's condemnation of homosexuality was hardly ever spoken, though assumed. It was just not a relevant issue. The idea of blessing same-sex unions would have seemed bizarre. While there were gay priests and bishops in the Episcopal Church they were firmly ensconced in the closet. Ordaining homosexuals just never occurred to anyone. It would have been outrageous.

It was quite possible to grow up in the 1950's and 1960's without knowing anyone known to be gay. Homosexuality was not a topic of open, acceptable conversation. Gay people were rarely portrayed in movies and then only as broken and disturbed characters tormented by their condition. The subject of homosexuality was taboo for television. What most people "knew" about homosexuality they learned from

stereotypes, off color jokes told in private places, and pornography. Commonly accepted myths were that gay men were pedophiles, dangerous predators and indiscriminant about sexual partners.

In the early 1970's college text books on Psychology still listed homosexuality as a form of mental illness. It was defined as "deviant behavior." One popular theory was that it was caused by a domineering mother and an absentee father. It was a self-fulfilling etymology. A homosexual person had a domineering mother and an absentee father by definition. The mother's behavior was seen through a filter set to identify domineering characteristics. If the father had not been absent physically, then he must have been unavailable emotionally or psychologically, or some other way that had not yet been identified.

The homosexual was said to be "maladjusted." Failure to adjust in sexually healthy ways made homosexuals maladjusted in all aspects of their personality. The enlightened of the time saw them as "sick" and unfortunate to be pitied and treated with psychiatric help. There was no blame attached necessarily, but homosexuals were nonetheless considered unreliable and vulnerable to other manifestations of mental instability. Various treatment processes were proposed, but none was thought to be very promising.

Today it can be difficult to realize how strongly those views were held only a relatively few years ago. There are still at least two generations of people who grew up on those theories as the science of the day. Some still believe it. As recently as twenty years ago "inherent promiscuity" was presented as a serious argument against the

ordination of LGBT people. Gay people, it was said, are not capable of making long-term commitments in relationships.

Attitudes about homosexuality have changed in the last forty years. Some mark the change from December 15, 1973 when the executive committee of the American Psychiatric Association voted unanimously to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or the DSM II. That decision was later ratified by an overwhelming majority of the membership of the association. Other associations of therapeutic professions soon followed.

Such dramatic moments are more myth than reality. Change is a gradual thing, and clear lines of demarcation are visible only in hindsight. But whenever and however it began, the shift in attitudes concerning homosexuality has been widespread and pervasive. Successive surveys show a consistently increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships especially by younger generations. In most American and European communities in the twenty-first century it would be unusual to grow up not knowing gay and lesbian people. Anti-homosexual sentiment is still alive and well. There are still those – perhaps many – who cling to former beliefs and positions. But they grow fewer and fewer. The stigma and stereotypes grow less and less in more and more places.

More and more companies no longer have discriminatory hiring practices concerning homosexuality, and more and more are offering equal benefits to same-sex and opposite-sex couples. That shift has not been motivated by the “liberal politics” of some companies or by altruism. It has been repeatedly demonstrated as simply good business. As more and more people are willing to be open about sexual orientation, the arbitrary exclusion of homosexuals limits the availability of creative talent. There are

studies that suggest that inclusive communities are more conducive to economic success for business than more restrictive environments.

Prejudice about gay and lesbian people still exists. In 2010 it is not always easy to be open and honest about sexual identity in all situations. Openness does not always come without cost. But as more and more LGBT people are open about themselves and their sexuality there are more and more places of safety where they are not only accepted but also encouraged to be who they are. It may not always be safe, but it is becoming safer. As more homosexuals “come out,” the gay population grows making it socially more acceptable to be gay. As it becomes more socially acceptable it becomes safer. As it becomes safer in more places more LGBT people come out.

In short, LGBT people have come out of the closet, and they are not going back in. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” is a flawed strategy for dealing with homosexuality in the public arena. An increasing number of LGBT persons are simply no longer willing to be dishonest or secret about their sexual identity. The truth is that “Don’t tell” always, sooner or later, involves hiding. “Don’t tell,” means, “Don’t let it be known.” More and more gay people are unwilling to hide their sexual identity. Like it or not, homosexuals are a visible, active part of all areas of American society, and they are not going away.

As more and more homosexuals come out, more and more people know people who are gay and lesbian. They are co-workers, friends, neighbors, and members of families. They are no longer removed and distinct, easily categorized and characterized as a group. They are individuals with all the diversity that is present in all people. “They” are no longer “they.” They are people we love and care about. More straight

people know more LGBT people not as sexually defined but as complex and complicated individuals with gifts, flaws, hopes, dreams and disappointments just like everyone else.

As the “issue” of homosexuality becomes more personalized, more visible and more pervasive it also becomes more accepted. Recent poll data indicates that about forty percent of the American population supports some form of same-sex marriage. That percentage is higher in the younger segments of the adult population; it can be expected to grow. In 2004 a *USA Today* poll reported that fifty percent of the eighteen and nineteen year-olds supported the legalization of same-sex marriages. Nineteen percent of those over sixty-five shared the same sentiment. The simple fact is that a growing number of people in this country just no longer believe that homosexuality is either pathological or immoral. They have not experienced homosexuals in ways that would support such a conclusion. If it is neither sick nor sinful to be homosexual, it is hard to understand how it could be just or loving to exclude gay people from the intimacy and fulfillment of relationships like marriage.

The church is not isolated from society. There is a sense in which the church speaks prophetically to audiences beyond its own membership as the conscience, or even judge, of culture. The church certainly has a vocation to speak theologically to the world, interpreting to the best of its wisdom and ability the will of God for the times.

In another sense the church is the collection of people who constitute it. The church at any given moment is the people of God gathered to worship and do the work of Christ. The church is the people. The people who make up the church are the same people living in the world with all its ideological currents and attitudes. Most Christians are not isolated from the world, and they are not immune to being shaped by it.

Over the years changes in worldview have effected changes in how the Christian faith is articulated, in how the Bible is read and understood, and even in particular theological positions. For the church change is slow and often painful. There is comfort in sameness, especially in a world that moves so rapidly. The church seeks to offer comfort, and at least in some sense its success is measured by how well it delivers the product to its people. But change will come, welcomed or not. In the 1950's in pulpits across the country Rock 'N' Roll was denounced as a threat to the moral fiber of America's youth. Today it is a medium for communicating the gospel. The music in many so-called "Bible-based" churches today would have been scandalous two generations ago. The church follows the changes in worldview. It always has.

The Copernican revolution from a geocentric to a heliocentric understanding of the universe did not come from new theological insights or biblical discoveries. Historically the church has always resisted and suppressed new ways of thinking and understanding. Change is always threatening to those in power. More often than not, the church as an institution has been the last to come to the realization that the cry for justice arises from injustice and will always demand that things be different.

The church resisted mightily the conclusion that humanity is not the physical center of creation and fought it with all the weapons in its arsenal. But the change penetrated the very psyche of people everywhere, and the world was forever different. Eventually even the church, enshrined in all its tradition, responded to a new world and a new understanding of our relationship to the universe.

There are members of the Episcopal Church who are gay and lesbians, as there are in all churches. Some have been Episcopalians for many years and are only now

finding enough safety and comfort to be open about their sexuality. Some have come to the Episcopal Church in the last two or three decades as they have found increasing acceptance in practice if not theology in some parts of the church. And some are not yet able for whatever reason to be publicly identified as homosexual.

As the number – or at least the openness – of homosexuals has increased in today’s culture it has also increased in the Episcopal Church. In essentially every diocese gay and lesbian people are members of parishes and other institutions, striving to be faithful to the promises made in baptism, worshipping, providing leadership and creativity, giving of their resources and supporting the ministry that we share. To welcome LGBT persons into the fellowship of the church, to profess our love for them and to accept their contributions of time, talent and treasure while refusing access to all the sacraments of the church is duplicitous and pastorally cruel.

“Don’t ask don’t tell” is something worse than a half step. The parallel would be requiring heterosexual people to hide their sexuality and not reveal it to anyone. It may not be a topic of constant conversation, and people may not ordinarily wear identification labels, but sexuality is an essential part of any human being – physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. Inclusion in isolation of sexual identity is conditional inclusion. It is conditional love, and it may be more painful than open rejection.

“Love the sinner, hate the sin,” is a confusing notion when applied to LGBT persons. It assumes that homosexuality is pathological or immoral, or both. The starting principle is that homosexuality is sinful. It may be possible to love a thief and hate thievery, but it presumes that thievery is an action taken, not an essential part of a particular human being’s nature.

The scientific debate continues as to whether homosexuality is genetic or environmentally formed. Is one born that way, or is it the result of developmental factors? The data are not conclusive and may never be. Most responsible scientists, however, believe that the mounting evidence points to a combination of factors both genetic and developmental.

That is not the same thing as choice. If a particular aspect of a human being is environmentally determined – or even predominantly so – it does not follow that one chooses it. Does anyone choose to be homosexual? If the answer were “Yes,” it would by logical necessity have to apply to heterosexuality as well. If one chooses homosexuality it would have to follow that heterosexuality could have been chosen, else there would have been no choice. It would mean that all people choose their sexuality. When is that choice made? Physical stature is clearly a result of the genes inherited from one’s parents, but it is also affected by nutrition in childhood as well as other developmental factors. Would anyone suggest that we choose how tall we are, or that we could choose something different?

Even though there are various opinions on the etymology of homosexuality, there is broad consensus on the belief that it is not the result of choice in a moral or ethical sense of the word. It is not a matter of “unchoosing” or choosing some alternative. It is not a pathology that needs to be treated or cured. All major national mental health organizations in this country have adopted policy statements rejecting the appropriateness of so-called reparative therapy as unlikely to be successful and involving significant risks of harm.

“Love the sinner, hate the sin,” carries the explicit conviction that homosexual behavior, and perhaps homosexual orientation itself, is sinful. That places clearly before the LGBT person of faith the goal of change. If sexual orientation is a given – whether by genes or development – it is tantamount to saying, “I love you, but I hate what you are.” It would be hard to imagine being fully included in the Christian fellowship without changing. That is pastorally cruel and encourages people into what overwhelming scientific opinion says is futile and emotionally dangerous. It requires the denial of the nature of one’s self as a moral imperative.

Of course it is possible for the LGBT person to choose chastity. It is possible for anyone, at least theoretically, to choose chastity. In a passage probably shaped by the expectation of the soon return of Jesus, the Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians, “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” (I Corinthians 7:8-9. NRSV). Apparently in actual practice it is not possible for all people to choose chastity, at least not without detriment to the person. Some people have a vocation to chastity and celibacy; not everyone does.

Without question marriage is not essential for a full, faithful and godly life. There are people who never marry for a variety of reasons. For some it just never happens. There are people who make choices for other commitments and responsibilities. Some have physical conditions that make marriage unlikely. The unmarried are not outside the fullness of God’s love. Marriage and sexual intimacy are not essential for a life of faith, hope, love and joy.

That is just as true for the straight population of the church as it is for the gay. But the church does hold marriage up as a sacrament. It is not the only way to know the redeeming and healing love of God, but it is one channel of God's grace, and it is an important channel. Not every marriage is healthy or filled with grace. There is no marriage that is totally healthy or filled with grace all the time. But the relationship, the intimacy and commitment, holds the potential for grace.

To insist that LGBT persons choose chastity and then justify that requirement with the statement that marriage and sexual expression are not necessary for salvation is condescending and cruel. That is especially so when coming from divorced and remarried people who are not bound by the same restriction. Marriage and sexual expression may not be the primary purpose of life. But they are aspects of life that bring to some a deep and profound sense of love and fulfillment.

The Episcopal Church's present official position does not support the LGBT individual emotionally or spiritually within the context of a relationship of love, fidelity and life-long commitment. The church does not offer support for covenant love between gay people.

In the Episcopal Church today there are same-sex couples that have been in committed relationships of love and fidelity for ten, fifteen, twenty and even fifty years. That is not to say that it has been easy or without the ups and downs experienced in heterosexual relationships as well. As is true of a large percentage of heterosexual marriages, not all same-sex relationships are healthy or last a lifetime. Not all relationships make it, but some do. The amazing thing is that same-sex relationships have done as well as they have without the support of either society or the church.

The actual data indicate that many homosexuals want and succeed in committed, durable relationships. Somewhere around half of gay men in this country are currently involved in romantic relationships. The percentage is a bit higher for lesbians. The inability to marry makes it difficult to measure the success and stability of those relationships, but about a fourth of gay couples have lived together for ten or more years. Same-sex and opposite-sex couples are essentially equal in measures of satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships. Many of those couples are in our churches finding support for their relationship in their faith and seeking support from their faith community.

More and more same-sex couples are living in families with children. In 2002 the American Academy of Pediatrics called for legalizing the adoption of biological children by same-sex partners. In 2003 thirty-three percent of same-sex female couples and twenty percent of same-sex male couples had biological children in the family. In the same year forty per cent of adoption agencies in the United States reported the placement of children to gay and lesbian parents. More than twenty-five years of research has indicated no difference in the emotional and psychological adjustment between children raised in same-sex and opposite-sex homes.

To exclude the children of same-sex families from the formational support of the church is pastorally irresponsible. They do not live in bizarre or even eccentric homes. Children in same-sex families are not abused or mistreated any more than in the general population. They are in need of all the moral and spiritual support that the church can give them.

There is clearly no consensus in the Christian Church or the Anglican Communion concerning the access of LGBT persons to the sacraments of marriage and ordination. The truth is that there is no consensus about the nature of homosexuality or homosexual persons. There are varying opinions all along the full spectrum. In responding to the nomination of Elena Kagan to the Supreme Court, Bryan Fisher on his American Family Association blog wrote, “We cannot afford to have another sexually abnormal individual in a position of important civic responsibility especially when that individual could become one of nine votes...” In the city of Houston’s mayoral race in 2009, conservative pastors organized opposition to Anise Parker’s candidacy solely on the basis of her sexual orientation. The limited inclusion of LGBT persons in the life of the Episcopal Church compromises any prophetic or pastoral response that can be made to such hateful distortions of the Christian gospel. While it may be unintentional, the church is nonetheless complicit in promoting discrimination, if not oppression.

It may be the cruelest hurt of all to insist to LGBT people that they are loved and accepted as they are, but that it is “untimely” to include them into the fullness of the church because not everyone agrees. To delay inclusion is to delay love unless we really do believe that there is something broken or immoral about homosexuality. That is the real issue. Either the church believes homosexuality to be sinful or else it lacks the will to act on its convictions.

In 1963 Martin Luther King responded to eight religious leaders in the city of Birmingham, Alabama (including two Episcopal bishops) criticizing protests and demonstrations as being, among other things, untimely. “We,” they said, “expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the

courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed.” Those courts were, of course, presided over by white judges with all white juries.

Dr. King’s response, one the truly inspirational documents of the twentieth century, came to be called *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. In it he said in part:

“Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was ‘well-timed,’ according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait!’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ It has been tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’ We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights.”

The issues of desegregation and the full inclusion of LGBT persons are not the same and perhaps not even parallel. The struggle against racism and racial oppression has a history unique in this country and is not an archetype for other struggles. But it is true that postponement of justice always impacts individuals in personal ways in the context of their particular lives. The Episcopal Church has been in study, conversation and debate about the inclusion of LGBT persons for almost fifty years. In the overall scheme of Christian history, that is not very long. For a gay or lesbian person it is most of his or her adult life. One who was thirty when it began is now almost eighty. To counsel patience to the person on the outside waiting to be fully included in the life of the

church waiting for a consensus that may take a century or more to arrive is to say “Never.” That is pastorally cruel.

The change in the church’s theology and canons concerning divorce and remarriage did not come by consensus. Linda Nichols of the Anglican Church of Canada writes about the change in marriage canons to allow for remarriage after divorce in the 1960’s.

“A trajectory that began in the late 19th century reached an official conclusion in 1967, nearly seventy years later. As with other changes to tradition and practice, the received theological tradition came under pressure from pastoral and social changes. Different parts of the Anglican Communion made changes at different times with Canada near the forefront of changes in the 20th Century. As noted in a report for the Church of England in 1971 “...it appears that the steps taken by the Church of Canada in 1967 are providing a pattern for other Churches to follow.”

The future of the Anglican Communion is a matter of great significance and importance. The Anglican Church has a unique set of gifts and perspectives to be offered to the body of Christianity. A divided and conflicted communion is a weakened one, or perhaps no communion at all in reality. As has been frequently quoted by those opposed to recent actions in the Episcopal Church, “Actions have consequences.” It is clear that actions taken by the Episcopal Church over the last decade have brought great stress and tension into the Communion. It may be that the bonds of fellowship and relationship may not be able to withstand the forces that press against them.

The demise of the Anglican Communion – or its significant reconfiguration – would be a tragedy and a cause of great sadness in the hearts of many on both sides of the

sexuality issues. But the Anglican Communion is not the only important issue at stake. Actions of exclusion and diminishment of LGBT persons also have consequences. Unity at any cost is almost always a price too high to be paid. Unity at any cost may result in a unified body without much purpose or mission.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 but before his inauguration the next March, the country was being torn apart by the issue of slavery. Seven slave states in the south took legislative actions to secede from the Union. Representatives, senators and others were resigning positions, packing and taking leave of Washington to return to their homes. Lincoln and his future cabinet were working “behind the scenes” to hold things together at least until he took office.

William H. Seward, Senator from New York, an avid anti-slavery advocate, and Lincoln’s future Secretary of State, delivered on January 12, 1861 a major speech on the floor of the Senate in which he offered propositions which were in reality compromises designed to appease and reassure the border states. He called for a Constitutional amendment to prevent any Congress in the future from interfering with slavery in states where it already existed. He moved to strengthen the Fugitive Slave Law, which required the return of escaped slaves who made it to states where slavery was illegal.

His wife, Frances, was bitterly disappointed and wrote to her husband. “You are in danger of taking the path that led Daniel Webster to an unhonored grave ten years ago. Compromises based on the idea that the preservation of the Union is more important the liberty of nearly 4,000,000 human beings cannot be right. The alteration of the Constitution to perpetuate slavery – the enforcement of a law to recapture a poor,

suffering fugitive... these compromises cannot be approved by God or supported by good men...

“No one can dread war more than I do; for 16 years I have prayed earnestly that our son might be spared the misfortune of raising his hand against his fellow man – yet I could not today assent to the perpetuation or extension of slavery to prevent war. I say this in no spirit of unkindness... but I must obey the admonitions of conscience which impel me to warn you of your dangers.”

Of course the issues are not the same, but the point is taken. Was the Civil War, which claimed more American lives than the cumulative total of all subsequent wars, worth the cost? Was it worth it to prevent the perpetual institution of slavery in parts of this country? Historians argue that slavery would have eventually died of the weight of its own economic inefficiency if not from its immorality. Maybe that is true. How long would it have taken? How long would have been too long? That question would have been answered differently by someone experiencing the daily oppression of slavery than it would by a free person, perhaps a slave owner, who sought to preserve the Union.

Unity at any and all costs is not the preservation of the mission of the church but the surrender of it. The baptismal promise to “respect the dignity of every human being” is not an abstract, philosophical commitment. It is incarnational. Human dignity is found – or denied – in the concrete realities of individual people’s lives. It is just as accommodating of culture to deny justice in the name of unity, as it is to change the teaching of the church in response to changes in the world. It all depends on which culture is being accommodated.

The pastoral response to LGBT persons within the faith community is to rethink the church's historic and traditional theological positions on marriage and sexuality in light of the realities of our world. It is not to promote a theology of "Anything Goes." Anything most definitely does not go. The church continues to teach the biblical ideals of fidelity and life-long covenant commitments. It is to do our theology incarnationally. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humankind not humankind for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27).

It is impossible to separate love from justice. Love is justice in action. Love without justice is sentimentality. Justice without love is some sort of tyranny, even if benevolent. If homosexuality is one potentially healthy expression of human sexuality then the failure to affirm and support gay relationships is unjust as well as unloving. A pastoral response has to include prayer, word and action to promote change. Canons and liturgies are important. They are the way in which the church orders its life, worship and sacraments. Such things cannot be torn apart from the way in which pastoral care is enacted. We cannot profess our love without striving to change unloving rules and practices.

Moving ahead without the consent or participation of all members of any community will always seem arrogant to those in disagreement with the principles motivating the movement. Refusal to set the preservation of the Anglican Communion as the highest good possible will run the risk of being heard as arrogance. That does not mean that all who move to the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the church do so without heavy hearts because of the consequences and the pain caused.

It may be true that the Bible is given more authority in the hearts and minds of some than others. The Bible remains the foundational narrative of the Christian faith, and how it is read and interpreted is an important discussion that needs to be taken seriously. But it should come as no surprise that the application of Scripture to the teaching and actions of the church with regard to homosexuality is different in different parts of the world. Homosexual persons are perceived and understood in ways that are dramatically different.

What the Bible has to say about human sexuality is to be taken seriously. The relevant passages of Scripture are few and not always clear. They have been discussed at great length in many other places and will not be reviewed here. It is worth noting, however, that the word *homosexual* does not appear in the Bible. It is a modern word, coined in the late 19th century. The culture of Bible times did not have the same understanding of sexual orientation as it exists in the twenty-first century. Of course there was homosexual behavior; people were aware of homosexual acts. Those acts were understood in a different context. There was a different pastoral need and a different pastoral response.

One may disagree, but it is not a superfluous or unfaithful argument to suggest that the Bible does not say anything about same-sex relationships between two people of homosexual orientation. The pastoral response needs to be grounded in all of Scripture, the life and ministry of Jesus, and the experience of the Christian community. The fact that the ministry of LBGT people in same-sex relationships of love and life-long commitment is experienced by the church as a blessing and a witness to God's redeeming

love is not insignificant. That experience is impacted – even shaped – by how the culture around us perceives and accepts those relationships.

The crux of the matter is pastoral. The question is what one believes about homosexuality. Is it a sin or a blessing? On one end of the spectrum is the conviction that homosexuality is an abomination deplored by God. That conviction can be, as can most positions on any controversial issues, defended by a particular reading and interpretation of Scripture. It is a position that separates itself from any kind of pastoral relationship with LGBT persons.

At the other end of the spectrum is the belief that homosexuality is a normal expression of human sexuality found throughout history and throughout nature. If that is true, homosexuality is a gift from God to be celebrated. The fact that human sexuality all along the spectrum can be expressed in ways that are manipulative, oppressive and even violent is no secret. Normal sexuality does not necessarily mean healthy sexuality for people of any particular sexual orientation. But if homosexuality is normal then it holds the potential of healthy expression. It holds the potential of being grace-filled and redemptive. The pastoral responsibility of the church is to encourage and support that healthy development.

Unity within the Episcopal Church does not exist, and it is not unlikely that it will not be reached in the lifetime of those engaged in the discussion today. The achievement of honest unity in the near term would almost certainly require those on both sides to abandon deeply held convictions, not to mention the rejection or suppression of a large number of Episcopalians who contribute with generosity and creativity to the ministry of

the church. It is hard to imagine the conditions under which that would happen. Such a pretense is neither pastoral nor just.

The question presents itself: What do we do in the meantime, especially when the meantime might be a long time? How do we treat each other in ways that are pastoral even if we cannot achieve unity? How do we love our neighbors as our self when we have such divergent and strongly held convictions?

The so-called local option already exists de facto if not de jure. There are dioceses and parishes where same-sex relationships are blessed routinely without fanfare. In states where same-sex marriage is legal there are parishes where same-sex weddings are conducted. Gay and lesbian persons in loving, committed relationships are being ordained deacons and priests and elected to the episcopacy.

And there are dioceses where non-celibate homosexuals are formally barred from all ordination processes and where any kind of blessing of same-sex relationships is prohibited. Within dioceses that permit the blessing of same-sex unions, there are parishes that do not practice such liturgies. The canons of the Episcopal Church explicitly provide that any priest may refuse to officiate at any marriage for any reason. Vestries are not required to call clergy deemed inappropriate for its particular context.

The current situation, while not as neat and tidy as some would prefer, may be the best pastoral response that the church can make today. There are congregations desiring to include LGBT persons fully and in all respects. There are congregations where, for whatever reason, such inclusion would be scandalous and destructive. The healthiest way forward may be to openly accept the situation as it is, for those who wish to move forward to do so while not requiring any change from those who do not.

The presence of “gay-friendly” churches side by side with “traditional” parishes in the same dioceses, sometimes in the same city, is not perfect. It may be particularly offensive to those who cling to the hope, even if illusory, of a unified church and a unified Anglican Communion. It presents to the world something other than a church formed around a common understanding of Scripture. It is less than a clear statement of acceptance and inclusion of all God’s people. In the opinion of some it falls far short of the biblical imperative of justice. Surely it adversely impacts the mission of the church. It may also be the best that can be done. It may be the most pastoral thing that the church can do in the moment.

It was Dame Julian of Norwich who recorded a vision of Jesus appearing to her with the message: “And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” The vision came as the Plague was sweeping Europe and Dame Julian thought herself to be dying. They were words of profound hope not the sentimental denial of extreme hardship and personal distress.

The pastoral solution does not lie in “just getting along” as if the issues that divide the church were not important. It is more important that the church speak with integrity and honesty than that it be of one voice. It is also true that our self-absorption can move beyond mere narcissism to sinfulness. It is possible to elevate our ideology to a higher place than love. G.K. Chesterton said, “Angels fly because they take themselves lightly.”

This, too, will pass. All things other than the Kingdom of God will pass. “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” But the generation that left slavery in Egypt following Moses did not survive to see the Promised

Land. That was given to their children and grandchildren. Their call was to the Wilderness. And so it may be for the church today.

The way in which people are treated and respected is even more important than rules and liturgies. The practices of the church emerge from its experience of love, not the other way around. In the meantime, in places where full inclusion is not allowed, the church may bless LGBT persons and relationship by the way in which they are treated if not by formal action. Recognizing, respecting and supporting same-sex relationships is not the whole thing. It is not equal treatment of all people. It is a beginning.

Though it may seem a bit flip for so serious a matter, the words of Tiny Tim come to mind: “God bless us all, every one.”