
A Statement Favoring the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions

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Grace to you, every one of you, and peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Isn't it fun to be in this Church? I say *unfasten* your seat belts, friends, because this is a great flight, a blessed pilgrimage; God will get us home gracefully.

If you are visiting this conversation tonight, please know that the Episcopal Church is a Christian tradition which is both orthodox and comprehensive; both faithful and adventurous. That is why we gather tonight, and we invite you to join us. I have been asked to speak tonight in the affirmative; I accept with honor, and with gratitude for my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. Yes, the Church should develop liturgies that bless certain non-marriage relationships.

However, I speak in the spirit of Philippians, chapter two, in humility looking not to my own interests but to the interests of others, seeking the mind of Christ.

I speak in humility because I know that my affirmative vote does not represent all Christians, or all Episcopalians, or all in my parish, the Cathedral of St. Philip, in Atlanta. I am in favor of developing, and studying, liturgies that would bless same-sex unions; but I know that many faithful folks do not share my view.

While my particular view does not speak for all in my parish, I do speak for a thriving congregation who has learned how to live and pray and work together even when we disagree on sexuality issues. I hope that all churches in the Anglican Communion, and all Christian Churches, can follow that example. We can serve our Lord Jesus Christ together even when we disagree on this issue.

I speak in humility, too, because I always know I may be wrong. I have been wrong before, and I have changed my mind before.

In fact, I have changed my mind on this issue, the blessing of same-sex unions. I've certainly had plenty of time in these last thirty years of prayer and study, hope and anguish! I suppose that this issue, with its arguments and stories familiar to all of us, has become a part of every one of our parishes in one way or another.

I first understood the issue as one of nature, and of natural law. I love nature. Most of us, like me, are heterosexual. That is natural for me-and, I might add, wonderful, even fabulous! Personally, I do not understand what homosexuality is like. But I do believe that a certain percentage of humanity will always be gay or lesbian. This orientation is as natural for them as my orientation is for me. The percentage is small, and it will always be small; it is no threat to the institution of marriage.

Each of us, gay or straight, can commit sin in our sexual expression. There are sexual sins, deep and divisive because sexuality is such a deep part of our lives. But homosexuality, in and of itself, is not a sin. I count four verses of our sacred

scripture which might indicate otherwise, four verses which I-and you-have examined endlessly. I do not think those four verses speak about what we experience today as homosexuality. They do not speak about same-sex relationships that are faithful, life-long, other-serving, self-sacrificing, grace-filled, and God-directed.

In cases of controversy, my Protestant principle of scripture interpretation-and yours-is that scripture interprets itself. And here is where I have changed my mind.

Our arguments about same sex unions should not be based on nature or natural law at all. I believe God honors creation and loves creation and blesses creation. But throughout scripture, God emphasizes something much greater even than creation. God's Word lifts up the blessing of covenant, the grace of fidelity, and the power of single-minded commitment. Theologically, that is the faith of monotheism. The great commandment is that we should have no other God but Yahweh (Deuteronomy 6.4-5). Monotheistic commitment. No idols. God wants us to be in covenant with one God.

This is the real commitment that God blesses. Thus, the Church should be about blessing only those human relationships and events which point to the glory of one God. We should not bless any relationship just because it is natural-heterosexual or homosexual.

Let the state do what it wants! Let the followers of natural law do what they want! The Christian Church makes another kind of claim altogether: that we are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The Church blesses faithfulness. The Church blesses those relationships and institutions which symbolize, represent, and point to, a new creation, a new order. In that new creation, grace overcomes what we think we know by nature. (This is what Galatians 3.28 means; in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female.)

Marriage itself has been defined in many ways within the Christian tradition. It is a Catholic sacrament, a Reformed covenant, a Lutheran social estate, an Anglican little commonwealth. However, in any Church, marriages are properly blessed only insofar as they represent the single-mindedness and purity of heart and faithfulness that we ought ultimately to have for God.

Let us acknowledge that same-sex unions not only can, but they do, now, offer some gays and lesbians an occasion to make sacred commitments to one another, commitments which point not to themselves, but to God. God is not ultimately interested in our changing social estates. God is interested in our life-long devotion and allegiance. Throughout scripture, God blesses those people and relationships that point to God.

I understand that acknowledging the grace of some non-marriage relationships startles, and even shocks, some people. But the Bible is full of God's actions that startle us from our sense of order. Consider Jacob's surprise: "God is in this place, and I knew it not (Genesis 28.17)." Consider Isaiah's words, when he spoke about the foreigner and the eunuch, a minority order of person who was regarded as unfruitful and not permitted to serve: "Let not the eunuch say I am just a dry tree" (Isaiah 56.3). Consider Peter's vision that he must not call unclean what God has called clean (Acts 10.15). Startling!

Relationships that glorify God bear fruit, what St. Paul called the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5.22-23). Paul was clear that those values of Spirit-filled grace, like Jesus, fulfill all the law (Matthew 5.17; Galatians 5.23). Hence, relationships which show the world those values should be blessed by God's church. My argument begins with nature, but it does not end there. We must end with grace.

Article XX of our historical Thirty-Nine Articles states that no place of scripture should be expounded so that it is repugnant to another. I agree with that principle. Four verses of scripture should not be expounded so as to be repugnant to the overwhelming message of God's grace.

Today, the resolution before us is not about marriage. It is not about what would become a customary part of the Prayer Book. It would not be required. The resolution acknowledges what is occasionally, occasionally, the case in many our parishes. There are non-marriage relationships in the Church which mediate the grace of God (our last convention affirmed that!), and which point to the commitment that all Christians should have for God. Many of you here tonight live in such relationships and you knock on the door like a friend at midnight, like an importunate widow. (If it were not for our culture's obsession with sexuality in general, I doubt this issue would be drawing so much attention.)

No relationship is perfect here on earth. It is only thanks to my wife that my partnership even comes close. All of us have

sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3.23). No relationship is ideal. But insofar as any relationship shows us the grace and glory of God, that relationship is properly blessed by the Church.

A word to those whose unity with the Episcopal Church is threatened, even by this very conversation tonight. *Do not fear!* God has brought the Christian Church through far bumpier flights than what we experience today. We need one another, even in this disagreement. In fact, I appreciate this disagreement with my friend, Kendall Harmon. We need this conversation to remind ourselves what the catholic essentials of the faith are.

The Anglican Communion, only a fairly recent historical fellowship, is not unified by universal jurisdiction. The Anglican Communion is unified by holding catholic essentials in local jurisdiction. When the Church makes the transition from Rome to Canterbury, from London to Philadelphia, from the North to the South, the Church adapts catholic essentials to local custom. Even in the United States, many of our local customs differ. None of them is powerful enough to destroy our catholic essentials, or our unity in the faith.

Do not fear. This is the word of prophets and angels; it is the word of Jesus. I am proud of the Episcopal Church and hopeful. We can be a thriving Church whose members disagree on the issue of homosexuality. And, at the same time, we can be a thriving Church that includes occasional, blessed same-sex relationships - certain unions which are wholesome examples of the grace that God has poured out for each one of us. Every one of us is saved by that grace, in Jesus, Christ our Lord.

Thank you.

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