

Submission to the Commission on the Marriage Canon

Rev. Dr. Jane Barter Moulaison
Honorary Assistant, Parish of Saint Mary Magdalene
Diocese of Rupert's Land
80 Ranville Rd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3X 0G5
j.bartermoulaison@uwinnipeg.ca
204-235-1545

After years of witnessing this debate, I am convinced that one of the most doomed procedures for addressing issues concerning marriage and homosexuality is through an appeal to occasional biblical texts. Certainly both sides can trot out passages that would buttress their points of view, but the questions that we put to scripture are both too complex and too pointed to offer any immediate clarity. Scripture is perspicacious, I believe, on matters such as the abiding love of God for his people, or of God's unqualified mercy to sinners, but that does not lead us to a straight and easy path to canonical change.

Instead of searching scriptures for answers to the question of marriage—a road by now well travelled but labyrinthine—I wish to ask two preliminary sets of questions about our heated and relentless quest: First: Why this question? Why is sex the dominant question that occupies our theological debates? And second, given the clear and obvious acceptance in our society of gay marriage, why is the Anglican Church of Canada so recalcitrant in following suit?

Why so much sex?

Almost forty years ago now, a philosopher by the name of Michel Foucault asked critical questions about our preoccupation with sex: not with sex itself, but with knowledge about sex (what Foucault calls 'discourses'), with the endless struggle to get it "right," to categorize it, to catalogue it, to bring it under scrutiny and control. Such control is no longer chiefly characterized by sexual repression; on the contrary, it is concerned with endless enumerations of sex's meaning. Foucault writes:

Let us consider the stratagems by which we were induced to apply all our skills to discovering [sex's] secrets, by which we were attached to the obligation to draw out its truth...¹

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, an Introduction, trans. Robert

In other words, Foucault argues that in our very quest of extracting the truth about sex we impose another form of discipline upon it. Foucault asks us therefore to interrogate our own interrogations. What do our endless commissions, debates and studies say about the local networks of power relations in the church? Foucault had a few theories about the kind of power that seeks to uncover the mystery of sexuality, and the church is, in my view, by no means immune from such power. He argued that it was a form of *biopower*, that is an effort to bring bodies under control, to render them docile, and to do so primarily by segregating out the body from its cultural and social home. In so far as the church attempts to develop a theology of human relations that is predicated primarily on genital sex, it reinvigorates biopower for it segregates out sexual acts from their context, which is the life, the living contours and irreducible biographies of men and women. It separates act from being, in the old categories of theology, and it does a violence that most people today instinctively recognize when they say that the sexual orientation simply doesn't – or shouldn't – matter. The church's efforts to assert stringent boundaries around a thing as wily and gratuitous as human love is not only repressive, it is also foolish. The heart knows whom it loves. The heart will not be straitjacketed by the dictates of the church. And if we are looking for a proof text, I suspect that this human insight is echoed a good deal in the biblical story. The Song of Songs comes immediately to mind, but so too does Luke 24: 32. "*Were our hearts not burning within us...?*"

Why the recalcitrance?

Which brings me to my second question: Why the recalcitrance of the church on this question when our culture clearly acknowledges the goodness of same-sex love? According to the Pew Research Center study of 2013, 80 percent of Canadians believe that homosexuality should be accepted, and only 16 percent believe that it should not.² Canons and theology have been changed before when the church was awakened to the truth by the events of the world. This is especially evident as we consider the manner in which church teaching and liturgy were transformed in the aftermath of the Shoah. We rightly recoil when we remember our former Primate Derwyn Owen's 1938(!) pastoral letter and we rightly take pride in the strides the Anglican Church has made since:

The presence in the world today of all that is meant by the term 'anti-Semitism' and its consequences, gives to the Jews a new claim upon our sympathies. ... We have witnessed with horror and regret the sufferings and injustices, which have been done to them. *This distress also lends urgency to the need of evangelism among them.*³

² <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality/>, accessed October 23, 2014.

³ Cited in Haim Genizi, *Holocaust, Israel and Canadian Protestant Churches* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), p. 190.

It took visionaries such as Roland de Corneille to help us to see clearly that to which the world awakened first after the Shoah and to make eventual amendments to our liturgies and to our theologies. We no longer take for granted that the Jews need to be converted. We recognize that we were wrong. We excised our prayers for the conversion of the Jews, even though it took us until 1992 to do so!⁴ Both the sufferings of the past and the dedicated efforts of Jewish-Christian dialogue enabled us to see “the Jew” as more than a figure in need of conversion, but to see her instead as a gift, as fully and irreducibly human.

The opening of the marriage canon to same sex couples is an analogous moment in history. We must be likewise prepared to act with and on behalf of those who have been persecuted and doomed to self-loathing or hiding for far too long. And as in the case of anti-Semitism, the need for the Church to change is all the more urgent because it has been all too complicit in such oppression. As in the case of anti-Semitism, we are now presented with an opportunity to repent, to change our liturgies and challenge our theologies--in short to become more faithful.

We ought not to be afraid of the change to which we are called for we know that we are richer for LGBTQ* presence in our churches and we have witnessed their love to be a sign of a peace and goodness that the world desperately needs. That the church has dragged its feet is not surprising: the church has become insular, shriveled and afraid. But we ought not to be afraid, for “It is the Lord who goes before [us]. He will be with [us]; he will not fail [us] or forsake [us]. Do not fear or be dismayed.” (Deuteronomy 31:8.)

⁴ Ibid., p. 194.