

Re. Same Sex Marriage in the Anglican Church of Canada

Since I am the person who made the motion to begin the process of approving same sex marriage in the Anglican Church, it would behoove me to say why I think this is a good thing. I am going to approach this from a number of perspectives: an argument from nature, an argument from Scripture, an argument addressing the issue of the world wide Anglican Communion and an argument addressing the issue of people leaving the church. After that I will answer some of the commission's questions regarding the nature of Christian marriage.

Argument from Nature:

Medical science generally agrees that homosexuality is something which is inborn and not a matter of choice. It is a minority tendency, like having blue eyes or being left handed, but a natural one. This is something that human beings share with other mammals and it is something which has been in evidence from the dawn of recorded history. Social attitudes towards homosexuality have varied from complete acceptance to complete rejection, as they do today.

If homosexuality is inborn, as medical science tells us, and if it is not a matter of choice, then it's hard to see how it could be sinful. Sin involves, in my understanding, a choice to do something against the will of God. If people cannot choose whether or not they are homosexual, then I don't see how it can be sinful, any more than left handedness is sinful. Human beings tend to dislike diversity, however, and when my left-handed mother went to school she was severely punished for using her left hand and made to write "normally" with her right hand.

Furthermore, if we believe that God created the universe and all of us, then it seems a bit arrogant to suggest that parts of that creation are OK and other parts are not. God said it was all good. The argument that is usually adduced at this point is that homosexuality came in with the fall and was not part of the original creation. This seems a bit tendentious and circular, but of course, it would explain all the things we find objectionable in nature or creation. I do not personally accept this argument. I believe that homosexuality was part of God's good creation.

An Argument from the Bible:

Homosexuality is not mentioned very often in the Bible, certainly not as often as things like idolatry or looking after the poor. However, let us admit at the outset that when it is mentioned it is mentioned in negative terms. For a Christian who is in favour of same sex relationships, this needs to be taken seriously and wrestled with. I have wrestled with it myself, because I do feel that Christians ought to be guided by the Bible, but I am aware that many people, particularly people who take a conservative view of the Scriptures, will not find my arguments persuasive. In fact, I will go further and suggest that much of the disagreement about homosexuality is also disagreement about how we read and understand the Bible.

I should note at the outset that I did this Bible study years and years ago and I no longer have any idea what sources I used. I am sorry not to footnote everything appropriately, but this would take a tremendous amount of time which I don't have at the moment. If anyone wants to pursue it, they can find the passages I refer to in a concordance and use a variety of commentaries to explore their meaning.

I understand the Bible contextually. That is, I believe that in trying to figure out what the Bible means we need to understand the context in which it was written and what it meant to the people for whom it was originally written and those who have edited it over time. Next we need to think about the principles that were being put forward at that time and then figure out how these principles apply to our own day.

The culture of the Bible was very different from our own. Their society was patriarchal and their view of marriage was very different from ours. The biblical writers saw wives as chattels of their husbands and as owing obedience to their husbands. Their chief purpose was bearing children. There was no thought of equality or mutuality in marriage. In this context, homosexuality would be abhorrent to the writers of the time, simply from cultural reasons. We need to take this into consideration when we think about what the Bible says about both marriage and homosexuality, because our society is considerably less patriarchal.

I don't think that the sort of homosexual relationships that we are promoting, that is, life long, committed, marriage relationships, are what is talked about in the Bible. This concept would have been inconceivable in biblical times. I think that when the Bible talks about homosexuality, it is not talking about what we are promoting, but rather about what the writers saw around them. They condemned these practices and I think we would do so, too.

In my study of the Bible, I looked up every instance that I could find in which homosexuality was mentioned or alluded to. I found that it was mentioned in three different contexts. Specifically, it was mentioned in the context of Sodom, in the context of temple prostitution and in the context of contemporary Greek, especially Corinthian, culture. Let us take these one by one.

In the case of Sodom, the men of Sodom want to gang rape the angels of the Lord, who are visiting Lot. There are a lot of problems with this passage, not least the fact that the writers seem to feel it's quite all right for the men to gang rape Lot's daughters. However, for our purposes we need to note that what is being condemned here is gang raping men, or angels, breaching hospitality, and probably adultery, too. It is really not clear in what way this might apply to committed, monogamous, same sex relationships.

The second context in which homosexuality is condemned in the Bible, both Old and New Testament, is that of temple prostitution. The fertility cults tended to have temple prostitutes of both genders for worshippers to sleep with. This is roundly

condemned each time it is mentioned.

If there is one thing the whole Bible condemns regularly, even monotonously one might say, it is idolatry. Anything that is even remotely related to idolatry is also condemned. Even the famous passage in Romans 1 is related to idolatry. The fact that the Bible condemns temple prostitution is not surprising. The main thing that is condemned is idolatry and the rest is icing on the cake. In any case, it is hard to see in what way any of this would apply to committed same sex marriage relationships.

Lastly, Paul condemns homosexual behaviour in his letter to the Corinthians. Again, the context is important. He would have seen the behaviour of the Corinthians generally, which shocked even the Greeks, and seen this as part of a bigger picture. We know that the Athenian men liked to disport themselves in bath houses with each other's adolescent sons. Probably this also happened in Corinth. So, in this case we would have married men committing adulterous pedophilia with young lads. Paul condemns this along with all the other excesses of Corinthian society and advocates instead an ascetic lifestyle for Christians, even going so far as to suggest that marriage itself is undesirable. I believe that this is a case of Paul speaking in extreme terms to combat the extreme behaviour of the people to whom he was writing. In any case, I don't think it applied to the idea of a committed, lifelong, monogamous relationship, because there is no reason to think that such things were practiced in the societies to which he was writing.

In each of these contexts in which homosexuality is noted in the Bible and condemned, what is being condemned is the behaviour that the writers saw being practiced around them. None of these cases applies to what we are advocating today. No one today is advocating gang rape, adultery, pedophilia, idolatry or any of the other things that the biblical writers observed and what they thought of when they thought of homosexuality.

When the Bible does not directly address a situation, then we need to take the broad general principles of the Bible and apply them to our situation. In this case, the broad principles that I think need to be applied are those of the overwhelming, unconditional love of God for all people and also Jesus' repeated commands that we should love one another as he loved us. Jesus made a habit of eating and drinking and socializing with the outcasts and undesirables of his society. He did not insist on any kind of reform before this happened and he accepted people as he found them. The only people he roundly condemned were the Pharisees and Sadducees, generally for their self-righteous and hypocritical behaviour.

Jesus required of people that they should follow him, love God and love one another. He almost never commented on their sex lives, probably because this wasn't all that important to him. He did comment repeatedly on how people were to treat one another, probably because this was important to him. Jesus was also very clear that we were not supposed to judge each other, that judgement was God's prerogative and God's alone.

I believe that Jesus, if he were living today, would be just as accepting of gays and lesbians as he was of everyone else. I don't think he would have asked them to live in ways against their nature. I may be wrong, but if I'm going to err, I would rather err on my interpretation of Jesus' sexual ethics than on my interpretation of his command to love one another as he loved us. I would rather err on the side of being a bit too loving and accepting and possibly too lenient on sexuality, than on the side of being not loving enough and being strict about sexual ethics. I would rather do this because this is the emphasis Jesus himself gave.

Biblical interpretation is a difficult matter. It is rarely possible to be quite sure of what the Bible says and means, of what God intends, in any particular situation. Our culture is so different from that of the Bible. How much of what is said reflects the human culture behind it? How could such a strongly patriarchal society accept homosexuality? The Bible did not accept women in leadership and yet we have decided that this was a cultural matter. The Bible does not accept the remarriage of divorced people and yet we have decided that it is permissible. I think the case of same sex marriage is comparable.

We should also keep in mind that God the Holy Spirit is not dead and does continue to work to enlighten us. Sometimes it takes a while before we get the message. I believe that the Holy Spirit continually works to bring us to a deeper understanding of who God is and how we should be in relation to God and to one another.

An Argument Addressing the Issue of the World Wide Anglican Communion

An argument has been made that even if we in Canada were in unanimous agreement that we should allow same sex marriages, we should not go ahead with this because it will rupture our relationships with Anglicans around the world, and also with other churches, such as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. This is a serious consideration. No one wants to be estranged from our fellow Anglicans around the world and no one wants to make our union with other churches any more problematic than it already is.

With respect to other churches, it should be noted that while allowing same sex marriage would make union more difficult with respect to some churches, it would make it easier with other churches, such as the United Church of Canada. Furthermore, at the moment, we already have so many barriers to union with the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches (women priests, remarriage of divorced people, attitude towards the pope, to name a few), that it is hard to conceive one more thing making a significant difference.

The situation with respect to other Anglicans is more serious. We are currently in communion with Anglican churches around the world and at the moment this union is shaky and that is largely because of our actions on same sex relationships, though women priest also seem to be a matter of some difficulty in some parts of the world.

If we agree to allow same sex marriage in our churches, it is indeed possible that some churches around the world will sever communion with us, in spite of our efforts to maintain the bond of love with them.

What does this mean for us? Let us assume for a moment that we believe that we ought to allow same sex marriage. Should we delay our approval until such a time as other Anglican churches around the world are also ready to approve it? Or at least put up with our approval? I don't believe we should.

There are Anglican churches in countries in which homosexuality is illegal, even severely punishable. The Anglican churches there have said very little publicly about this. We have not disowned them because of this. There are Anglican churches in countries in which polygamy is allowable in which the church does not condemn this behaviour, because of their culture. We have not broken our relationship because of this. There are many Anglican churches around the world which do not allow women to be ordained. We have not severed our relationship because of this.

My point here is that in the worldwide Anglican communion there are many differences in culture and practice. We cannot expect uniformity in any of these cases. We ourselves are willing to maintain our communion even where other Anglican churches are doing things that we ourselves would condemn. Up to this point, other churches have also been willing to do this. While we cannot control the behaviour of other churches, we can express the importance of being sensitive to one another's cultures and making some allowances.

I don't think we should decide our behaviour on this or any other issue based on how others might respond. I think we have to do what we think is right and then do our best to maintain the bonds of union given that reality. If we are shunned because of our behaviour, well, then we need to keep the door open on our side for reconciliation. But ultimately we have to act on what we believe is right and proper because it is right and proper and not because others might not like our decision.

Every social change that has come about has met with opposition. When slavery was abolished there was a large contingent of Christian churches which condemned this for various reasons. The same is true when our churches decided that racism was not to be tolerated. Ordaining women has brought us some criticism. But we have done these things because we believed that God wanted us to, that it was the right thing to do. Therefore, I believe we must decide what we think is right and act on it, regardless of the possible consequences. After all, Jesus warned that doing right might well lead to persecution. We can be tactful and considerate and remain open and listen to criticisms, but ultimately we will be judged on how we behave. I would hate to have to stand before God and say that we didn't do something we thought was right because of peer pressure.

Of course, the first thing we need to do, if we want to take this stand, is decide what we think is right and I am well aware that we do not agree on that matter. But I

believe that is the matter we need to discuss, not the possible deleterious effects this might have on us, the Solemn Declaration notwithstanding.

An Argument Addressing the Issue of People Leaving the Church

Another argument that is brought forward is that if we allow same sex marriage some people will leave the church. This is almost certainly true. Some people have already left because we are talking about this at all. On the other hand, some people have left because we are not allowing same sex marriage. I myself was tempted to leave after General Synod in 2010 because I was so depressed about the lack of progress (as I see it) on this issue. Some people who have already left may come back if we allow same sex marriage.

None of this is predictable. We cannot know how many have left already because of this issue on both sides. We cannot know how many may return if we decide it one way or another. It is all conjecture. I thought of leaving but didn't. Others did. If we allow same sex marriage some may come back. Or they may not. I work with young people. Some of them may well find the church less irrelevant and odd if we allow same sex marriage. Some elderly people may shake their heads and wonder how we came to this. Or they may find themselves saying, "At last!" We just don't know.

But once again, we need to decide based on what we believe is right, not on the probable results to our numbers or money. Jesus did not promise us big numbers or lots of money in the collection plate. Jesus told us to be faithful and also to be prepared for controversy. So we need to decide what a faithful response is to the gays and lesbians in our midst who wish to be married and act accordingly, and be prepared for the controversy that will certainly follow.

The Nature of Christian Marriage

Marriage in our church is a sacrament and this is different from a civil marriage specifically in our view of God's part in our marriages and our welcoming and invoking of God's part. We believe that marriage is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In my opinion, marriage is like an icon of the love of God as shown in the holy Trinity. It is only by God's grace in our marriages that we can grow together in love and mutual support and all the other things that one hopes for in a marriage. It is only by the grace of God that we can raise our children in faith and loving kindness. I don't think any of this is affected by the gender of the partners in a marriage (except bearing children of course, but elderly people are married in our churches and also cannot bear children).

When we deny our same sex couples the right to marry in the church, we are denying them this sacramental nature of their marriages (although that doesn't necessarily stop God from being present in their marriages anyway). Even if civil marriages are blessed, it is a different thing. When I was married, I wanted God to be

central in my marriage. My gay and lesbian friends want the same thing. I see nothing in the nature of marriage to preclude this for them.

Conclusion

It is clear that I believe the Anglican Church of Canada should allow same sex marriage, since I brought the motion to change our marriage canon. I believe this because I believe this is something God created and intended from the beginning, because I believe the overarching message of the Bible supports it and because I believe we need to do what is right regardless of the consequences. Ultimately, I would rather be standing with the oppressed, being oppressed with them, than standing with the oppressors because they are my friends. That is how I see this issue.

When I introduced the motion at General Synod I said that we had included a conscience clause, because we do not want to force anyone to perform or otherwise participate in a same sex marriage against their conscience. Right now, however, those of us whose consciences tell us we should perform same sex marriages are being forced to act against our conscience, because we cannot do this and we must turn people away. This is a grievous burden for us. I am asking the church to relieve us of this burden, to allow us to act according to our consciences on this matter.

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