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Some Thoughts From A Pastor Who Serves as A Bishop

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The Biblical Faith

It was my first Sunday in my first Call. I was a 25 year old seminary graduate, not yet ordained. The worship service had gone very well and frankly, I was pleased with the sermon and the way I had conducted the liturgy. After worship I was shaking hands at the back of the Church and a little girl, blonde and five years old walked up to me. She grabbed my alb and pulled on my cincture. Putting her hands on her hips, she said to me: "Say, whatever happened to the other Jesus." It was at that point that I knew what ministry and even Christianity was all about. We who are baptized, we who are ordained are called to represent Jesus Christ to the Church and to the world. We are called, somehow, to be in the world but not of it. We are called to be in the likeness of Jesus, to act like Jesus.

The way we learn to be like Jesus Christ is through the Scriptures. We hold the Bible to be the Word of God. In the Ordination Service of our Church we say this:

"The Church in which you are to be ordained confesses that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and are the norm of its faith and life. We accept, teach, and confess the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds. We also acknowledge the Lutheran Confessions as true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures. Will you therefore preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions?"(1)

The crisis of Biblical faith is one of ignorance and apathy. I am always visiting congregation councils in my work. I sit with Call Committees, I work with Stewardship Committees, I try to assist congregations when there is a dispute within the parish—usually between a pastor and a Congregation Council. Again and again I am amazed how little the Scriptures and its teachings are valued by many of our people. Many of our congregations have little or no adult Bible study in place whatsoever. It is not unusual for Congregation Council meetings to begin with the briefest of prayer or devotions and then get down to the "real business" of the church. When congregational leaders do not study the Bible or participate in Christian study, when personal opinions trump the Scriptures, we are sick as a Church. We must pray that this spiritual malaise,

this illness, is not unto death.

The danger in interpreting the Scriptures in any way we choose is that the Gospel we preach and the way we live begins to look like something else than Jesus. I am convinced that we cannot twist the Scriptures to say anything we want them to say. To pretend that the Word of God approves of certain types of homosexual relationships is to be fundamentally wrong. We cannot change the Biblical concepts of marriage and family to whatever we want them to be. I have been using Luther's Small Catechism in my teaching and preaching this year. This treasure of a Catechism says it best when brother Luther explains the sixth commandment, "You shall not commit adultery."

“What is this?

Answer: We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.” (2)

One question I have personally struggled with is this. What if I am wrong? What if the recognition of homosexuality is the human rights issue of our time? What if I am wrong and this issue is really one of justice, and the Holy Spirit is leading us one more step down the road to human freedom and enlightenment? What if being a gay person is no different than being left-handed? I take very seriously that possibility. Is my hubris the sin here and not homosexual activity?

However, when I think on all of this, I am hit right between the eyes with the words of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel:

“If anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose his faith in me, it would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied around his neck and be drowned in the deep sea.”

(Matthew 18:6)

As a pastor and bishop of this church I cannot stand by while the word of God is manipulated, explained away or worse yet ignored. I must follow the dictates of my conscience as formed by the Scriptures and traditions of the Church. Those who advocate a change in our current practices regarding the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals and the blessing of same sex unions have not convinced me. If I can be convinced by the Word of God that I am wrong—so be it. I will then change my opinion on this matter. But that has not happened.

The Culture

As a Christian, I am convinced that the crisis in sexual ethics is much broader than homosexual relationships. By all accounts, same sex relationships involve fewer than one in ten persons. The crisis in sexual ethics is the failure to see sexuality as God intends for God's people. The crisis is the compromise with the secular practices of our time. The crisis is the normalization of those practices amongst our people.

The Church is a part of the culture, and we in this church seem to be as confused as the rest of

the world about how to live as sexual human beings. Congregational leaders and pastors are not teaching Biblical sexual ethics. Pastors do not preach about marriage. Marriage is understood in this culture, and too often in the Church, as a personal decision with few consequences for the community. The Church has failed to teach Christian sexual ethics. And now that failure to articulate a solid understanding of sexuality, marriage and family is erupting in our time as a discussion on the ethical normality of homosexual practice. Indeed the chickens are coming home to roost! The current struggle that the whole Church is engaged in is the result of our failure to know what the Scriptures say about marriage and sexuality and then the failure to make that teaching, in the words of our own church constitutions, “the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.”

Ask any parish pastor in my synod or in yours about the normal state of pre-marital life. It is “living together.” It seems almost quaint to call that non-marital cohabitation, “living in sin.” Not only for those who are under 30 years of age but in all age brackets, the social stigma attached to pre-marital sexual relationships has nearly vanished. One pastor told me recently that he has in three years of ministry yet to join in marriage a couple who were not living together. The exceptional has become, in the past decades, the normal. And now living together before marriage is more than normal. It has become the expected.

Children born this year to parents who are not married total one-third of all births in the United States. Our rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan and the north woods of Wisconsin exceeds the national rate. In all things sexual, what was once exceptional has become usual.

Psychologist and therapist William Pinsof is president of The Family Institute at Northwestern University and director of its Center for Applied Psychological and Family Studies. His new analysis of family appeared in the respected Family Process Journal. It reflects the normalization of the formerly exceptional. Pinsof writes:

“Divorce should be regarded as one of the normal social events in the life course of modern families. Living together should be seen as a legitimate end-state in itself.” (3)

So how does the Church of Jesus Christ speak to this issue? How do we as a part of the Christian community address this huge change in the values and behaviors of our families? The Church seems not to have a message here. It is pretty quiet out there. Our Church has yet to find a voice.

Writing of the curious silence in regards to sexual ethics, Pastor Phillip Max Johnson has written in Lutheran Forum this powerful critique of all of us in the Church:

“We are so compromised by our pastoral silence regarding sexual behavior, so embarrassed by our personal failures, so jaded by the general ethical chaos, that clarity or courage on the matter of homosexuality seems out of reach ... The “need” for sexual expression, the quasi-religious status granted to romantic love, the “right” to happiness, the shrinking of marriage down to the single dimension of mutual happiness, the general separation of sexual love from fecundity, the naturalization of lust: these cultural

orthodoxies and influences hem us in. The call to chastity can be heard only as the imposing of a cruel and unusual punishment.”(4)

Church Unity

Those who would advocate a change in our current practices in our church in regards to the rostering of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons are well entrenched and well funded. They probably do not represent a majority of the laity of this church but may represent a majority of key decision makers.

Gary Wills is an author and journalist. In his superb book Certain Trumpets he writes about leadership and the power of a determined minority within democratic institutions.

“Not many people will vote with their whole lives—give their days and nights, their money and influence, to a single cause. But those who do have a disproportionate impact on society, as one would expect from their investment of energy and conviction, as compared with the lukewarm or diffident commitment of others. This is why intense minorities often prevail over lackadaisical majorities in a democracy.”(5)

This issue of homosexual acceptance amongst our clergy, albeit championed by a minority in the whole church, may become accepted by our Church, that is our democratic church, expressed in national assemblies.

An activist minority can make all the difference. St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church of St. Paul, Minnesota states in a June 2002 letter to the bishops of this church that it has a budget of \$116,445 to distribute a videotape entitled THIS obedience which it plans to send to each voting member of the Churchwide Assembly. In their letter to me requesting funds for this project, this movement has decided to make this issue a justice and even faith centered question. It is being thus elevated to a doctrinal question. The letter says, “The best ways to change minds in the fight for spiritual equality is through the personal stories and journeys of our Gay Lesbian Bisexual and transgendered brothers and sisters.” (6)

How much money, how much energy will be expended to obtain the desired political outcome at the decision making conventions or assemblies. Does anyone doubt that in many synods, there will be slates of candidates advanced with this one agenda item in mind? Does anyone doubt that there will be those going to these meetings who will be there only to change the current practice? Does anyone doubt that there will be those going who will be there only to vote to retain our current practice?

It is clear to me that if the Church accepts the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals what will follow is the marginalization and finally the proscription of any teaching of sexual ethics that does not include homosexual activity as a viable option. And those of us who do not find homosexual activity as God-pleasing will at first, unofficially but eventually officially, be placed in the same category as Lutheran racists of fifty years ago or those who opposed women’s ordination in a generation past. Candidacy Committees will soon eliminate candidates

for ordination who believe that the Scriptures do not approve of homosexuality. Our seminary faculties will soon face a theological “litmus test” of a new homosexual orthodoxy. All of this will happen very quickly. And those who believe that homosexual activity is wrong will be, in short order, considered fundamentalists.

Pastor Leonard Klein has done us all a service by articulating the questions that must be asked if this Church is to sanction committed homosexual relationships. If we as a church body bless these unions or allow pastors to live in such so called committed relationships, questions need to be asked. Klein writes:

“How will the ELCA know what a committed relationship is, when it has begun, or when it has ended?...Will parishes be expected to consider partnered gay candidates on the same basis with other candidates for call? Will they be denied candidates if they refuse?

Or will the ELCA assume that Partnered Gay clergy are only to be sent to a certain subset of parishes and institutions that have said they are willing to have them? What impact would that have on the unity of the denomination? Will pastors who refuse to accept Partnered Gay clergy as fit colleagues be reprimanded, disciplined, or discriminated against in the call process? Will bishops and synods who refuse to ordain or accept Partnered Gay candidates remain in full and harmonious communion with those who do and with the ELCA as a whole?

Will parishes be expected to allow Partnered Gay clergy and their partners to occupy the parsonage? Will they be expected to provide housing allowances that are suitable for a single person or for a couple? Will parishes be expected to accept public displays of affection between Partnered Gay clergy and their partners? To what degree?

Will Partnered Gay clergy who break with their partners be regarded as the same as divorcing clergy? At what point will a change in partners constitute a disciplinary problem? Will it be acceptable to divorce a spouse and thereafter enter into a same-sex relationship? What about the opposite case?

He continues on and on in that vein with more excellent questions:

“Will the Church health and Pension plans extend benefits to the partners of Partnered Gay clergy? Will congregations be required to provide such benefits? What will Partnered Gay clergy be expected to preach and teach about marriage?”(7)

The last time I counted, the constitution and bylaws of my synod told me that I have 37 different responsibilities in this office as bishop. The first one listed is to be the “synod’s pastor.” The second one charged to my responsibility is to “Preach, teach and administer the sacraments in accord with the Confession of Faith of this church.” Reflecting on those responsibilities, listen to a few questions that come to my mind. The bishop must relate, work with and be supportive of all of her or his pastors when they are serving God faithfully. How do I support a pastor who is taking a position on this issue that I believe to be wrong? How do I walk with, serve and assist a congregation that blesses same-sex unions when I find no evidence in scripture or in tradition

for such a practice?

How do I respond to the life-long Lutheran who tells me that she will not be able to worship in a church that allows homosexual unions before God's altar? How do I counsel a celibate homosexual pastor who asks me to explain how the Word of God can be changed by a Churchwide Assembly when he or she has spent a life time struggling with this issue and has resolved it in a very different way than has the Church? Can a majority vote at an Assembly change the hearts and minds of faithful laity and clergy? As a bishop, can I honestly counsel a pastor who is having problems with a same sex partner especially since I am of the belief that God does not approve of these relationships even if a future Churchwide Assembly does?

As bishop and as a parent—How do I deal with my own children's pastor if she or he teaches Christian sexuality in the Confirmation Class that is foreign to my understanding? If my children's pastor teaches a theology of sexuality that is alien to my understanding—what do I do? Shop around for a new church? If as bishop, I am too strident in my position in this issue will I be marginalized by my colleagues in the Conference of Bishop? Or will I just be “put up with” until I retire, accept a pastoral Call, or until the folks in my synod see fit to replace me with someone more “progressive?” Already I have witnessed conversation on this issue quickly turn to label tossing. All who suggest that the Church maintain its current status must in short order defend themselves from being called “homophobic.”

Will this debate divide our communion more than it is already divided? I pray not. Instead of fracture, what seems to me most likely is that whatever the issue outcome, a significant portion of this church will be alienated. Unity and financial mission support beyond the congregation, already in short supply, will further decline.

Our Church needs all of us, pastors and laity to reflect on these issues. My sense in our congregations is that there is only small interest in studying this issue. This time of journeying together will not work if our congregations are silent and then only reactive to decisions that are made by elites within the church.

Pastors and lay leaders, we must learn how to talk about homosexuality. And it must be a genuine conversation with all people. If there continues to be a reservoir of avoidance amongst us on this issue, we will only face trouble in the years ahead. Can we promise ourselves that this natural resistance to deal with this issue will be overcome by us as we continue this conversation? This effort should not be a political campaign but an opportunity to listen to the Word of God and to God's people.

Those of us who oppose the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals also must be asked some questions. Indeed we must be willing to face facts. Do we have the courage in this church, at this time, to stand with the person who believes that she or he is homosexual in orientation? Instead of encouraging them to form a homosexual union, can we help them to remain celibate? A bishop in this church has told me that out of this debate on the ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons must come structures and methods of supporting those gay sisters and

brothers who wish to remain celibate. There are pastors of this church who consider themselves gay and who believe sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is wrong and sinful. They are quietly calling on this church to help them remain celibate. What are we going to do? Should we tell them that their own conclusions to a lifetime of discernment and study were unnecessary or even un-Christian? Are we to say to these long struggling folks, “Sorry—the Church has changed its mind. You are now free to form a gay relationship?”

Many forces are threatening to tear us apart as a Church, including rampant congregationalism, materialism, and individual interpretations of the Word of God. Wilfred M. McClay, professor of Humanities at the University of Tennessee, has written in his essay on U.S. History that:

“The story of American Protestantism in particular is a vexing story of one church quarrel after another, nearly always eventuating in bitter division, mitosis without end. Which suggests why the larger story line of American religious history is the collapse of Protestant dominance, which has gradually yielded ground first to Roman Catholicism..., then to a vague Judeo-Christian tradition, and then to a more and more wide-open religious pluralism, which has moved far beyond Judeo-Christian limits.”(8)

One of the most beautiful prayers attributed to Luther is his Sacristy Prayer. I pray it today for all of us who are seeking God’s will for this church in this time of decision.

“Lord God, thou has made me a pastor and teacher in the Church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer this great and responsible office, and had I been without thy aid and counsel I would have surely ruined it long ago. Therefore do I invoke thee. How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry, I desire to teach the congregation. I too desire ever to learn and keep thy word my constant companion and meditate thereupon earnestly. Use me as thy instrument in thy service. Only do not thou forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I would certainly bring it all to destruction. Amen.

NOTES

(1) Occasional Services 1982: Augsburg P. 194

(2) Timothy Wengert Translation Luther’s Small Catechism p 16.

(3) July 29, 2002 U.S. Today page 4d.

(4) Pastor Phillip Max Johnson in "Homo-Genital Love and Same-Sex Unions"
Lutheran Forum Summer 2001, P.16.

(5) Page 40 Certain Trumpets by Gary Wills (Simon and Schuster 1994)

(6) Letter dated June 2002 from St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church of St. Paul, Minn.

(7) Leonard R. Klein Equivalent Marriage: Questions to Ask? July 2002 Forum Newsletter

(8) A Student's Guide to U.S. History by Wilfred M. McClay Copyright 2000 ISI Books
Wilmington, Delaware P. 76

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