

AN ECUMENICAL CONSIDERATION FOR GAY MARRIAGE

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This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

The Christian Century magazine, in its June 15, 2004 edition, published an article that I believe offers insights commonly overlooked in our Lutheran understanding of marriage and the proposed blessing of same-sex unions as a local option within the ELCIC. The author, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., looks at the subject from an Orthodox standpoint, by which is meant Eastern Orthodoxy. He does so from the viewpoint of sanctification, a view not often heard in discussions of marriage, at least among Lutherans. We Lutherans focus, and rightly so, on justification. However, that has often meant, for better or for worse, that we lay less emphasis on sanctification. Giving an ear to what Rogers has to say is thus potentially illuminating. While *The Christian Century* is widely read by clergy in the United States, it is not apt to be found in the studies of many Canadian Lutheran pastors or on the coffee tables of parishioners or even in many public libraries. I therefore venture to spell Rogers' argument out in some detail, offering some comments of my own along the way, in the hope that it will lead to fuller understanding of some of the issues in our current discussions.

Rogers considers the theology of marriage “under the rubric of sanctification.” His approach is “consistent with the tradition of the Orthodox Church, which regards marriage as a way of participating in the divine life, not by way of sexual satisfaction, but by way of ascetic self-denial for the sake of more desirable goods.” “Theologically understood,” says Rogers, “marriage in the Orthodox tradition is not primarily for the control of lust or for procreation.” Rather, “it is a discipline whereby we give ourselves to another for the sake of growing in holiness — for, more precisely, the sake of God.”

Citing an Orthodox theologian, Rogers suggests that “marriage and monasticism are two forms of the same discipline. They both are ways of committing ourselves to others — a spouse or a monastic community.” Thus “both the monastic and the married give themselves over to be transformed by the perceptions of others; both seek to learn, over time, by the discipline of living with others, something about how God perceives human beings.

In quoting Rowan Williams, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rogers reminds us that

Grace for the Christian believers is a transformation that depends in large part on

knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way; as significant, as wanted. The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, "all of us," as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's Son makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created (and we marry) so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God."

I see this understanding of grace is consistent with our understanding of grace as Lutherans.

As to sexuality, it is (says Rogers) "a means by which God catches human beings up into the community of God's Spirit and the identity of God's child." Moreover, "monogamy and monasticism are two ways of embodying features of the triune life in which God initiates, responds to and celebrates love." On the one hand, "monasticism is for people who find a bodily, sexual sanctification first and foremost in the desirous perception of God." On the other hand, "Marriage is for people who find themselves transformed by the desirous perception of another human being made in God's image." Therefore, whether "in a marital (relationship) or monastic community, the parties commit themselves to practising faith, hope and charity in a situation in which those virtues get plenty of opportunity to be exercised."

Christianity has often focussed on the soul, overlooking or even denigrating the body. But bodies matter: "this way of understanding the Christian life obviously takes seriously *the embodied* character of human life." and "the Holy Spirit characteristically rests on bodies: the body of Christ in Jesus, in the church, in the sacraments and in the saints." Specifically, "as the Spirit forms the bodies of human beings into the body of Christ, she (the Holy Spirit) characteristically gathers the diverse and diversifies the corporate, making (all of us) members of one body." Citing a number of the Genesis passages, Rogers makes a strong case for understanding God's call to "Be fruitful and multiply" to include diversity, lots of diversity, i.e. water, earth, vegetation, etc. "Christian thinkers `have always' argued against the notion that the diversity of creatures and persons is the result of the Fall rather than of God's creation of a multifarious world. Creatures require diversity that the Spirit rejoices to evoke."

Following his discussion of diversity as part of God's creation, Rogers turns to the social and societal aspects of being human and of human sexuality in relation to the three traditional Christian virtues: "no human beings exhibit faith, hope and charity on their own, but only in community." From this it follows that "it is hard to argue that gay and lesbian people ought to be left out of social arrangements, such as marriage, in which these virtues are trained."

"To reflect Trinitarian holiness," sanctification must involve community, more specifically, commitments to a community from which one can't easily escape, whether monastic, nuptial or congregational. Such commitments are very purposeful: "gay and lesbian people who commit themselves to a community — to a church, or to one another as partners — do so to seek greater goods, to embark upon a discipline, to donate themselves to a greater social meaning."

In whichever community we find ourselves, our whole selves are made vulnerable — including

that part of ourselves that needs healing, growing, maturing. At the same time, that vulnerability opens up possibilities: healing, growing, maturing take place in community — be it marriage, a congregation or a monastic community. It is in relationships with “the other” that we grow as people and as people of God. That is as true for homosexuals as much as it is for heterosexuals:

for gay and lesbian people, the right sort of otherness is unlikely to be represented by someone of the opposite sex, because only someone of the opposite, not opposite, sex will get deep enough into the relationship to expose one’s vulnerabilities and inspire the trust that healing requires. The crucial question is, “What sort of created diversity will lead one to holiness?”

Not surprisingly, “The answer is no doubt as various as creation itself,” says Rogers. But what is basic is that the counterpart has to be, as he says, “apposite, not opposite”:

same sex couples find the right spur to vulnerability, self-exposure and the long and difficult commitment over time to discover themselves in the perceptions of another — they find all this in someone of the same sex.

“Theologically” says theologian David McCarthy, “Gay men and lesbians are persons who encounter the other (and themselves) in relation to persons of the same sex.” “Some people,” comments Rogers, “therefore are called to same-sex partnerships for their own sanctification.” That is, “opposite-sex partnerships wouldn’t work for them, because those would evade rather than establish the right kind of transformative vulnerability.”

By way of conclusion, Rogers notes “that conservatives wish to deprive same-sex couples not so much of satisfaction as of sanctification.” This is “contradictory,” according to Rogers, “because so far as I know, no conservative has ever seriously argued that same-sex couples need sanctification any less than cross-sex couples do. It is at least contradictory to attempt in the name of holiness to deprive people of the means of their own sanctification.”

The bottom line for Rogers: “Conservatives often claim it’s dangerous to practice homosexuality, because it might be a sin.” However, “I want to propose that the danger runs both ways. It is more than contradictory, it may even be resisting the Spirit to deprive same-sex couples of the discipline of marriage and not to celebrate same-sex weddings.”

As I reflect on these words, I am mindful of Martin Luther’s explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Third Article of the Creed. It is the Holy Spirit who

calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy (sanctifies) the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian Church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins — mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day, the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

In what Luther writes I note the word “all.” The work of the Holy Spirit — God’s Spirit — includes *all* believers whether attracted to members of the opposite sex or the same sex. Rogers concludes that “not to celebrate same-sex weddings may be morally dangerous.” I would venture to go further and suggest that not to allow same-sex blessings as a local option in our Lutheran congregations might possibly be a hindrance to the work of the Holy Spirit. As noted above, we as Lutherans believe everyone is called by God and sanctified (made holy) by God. For those of us who are married to a member of the opposite sex, we believe our marriage is also part of our calling because marriage helps define us in who we are. Why would we want to deny same-sex couples that opportunity to grow together in mutual love and companionship under God’s grace and sanctification? To deny same-sex marriage seems also contradictory to our understanding of God’s grace and how God’s grace and God’s love are manifested through the Holy Spirit to *all* of us, including persons of same-sex orientation. Same-sex orientation individuals and couples experience God’s grace and God’s call the same as opposite-sex oriented individuals and couples.

It is my hope that these reflections will aid our conversations within the ELCIC on a local option regarding the blessing of same-sex couples in our congregations.

References

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