

Crossing Lines

One person's thoughts about same-sex blessings

The Rev. Lowell E. Grisham, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, July 20, 2003

We all grow up being taught the conventional wisdom of our surroundings. I never knew anyone whom I could identify as being a homosexual until I was in college -- nice people didn't talk about that. On the other hand, early on I learned the language of ridicule.

There was a boy in our neighborhood named Tony. He was a bit younger than my buddies, but large for his age -- bigger than me. But Tony never played with us. We invited him, but he didn't want to. He preferred to play house. He had dolls and a playhouse. He got along great with the girls next door. We didn't get too close to all of that. There was something about it that made the rest of us guys nervous. So we made fun of Tony and called him sissy. One kid called him a "queer," so the rest of us did too, even though we didn't know what that meant. We didn't know any better. Or did we? Somewhere inside, it felt wrong to tease him. Mostly we ignored him. That was easy. He was different.

By the time I went to seminary, I knew what the words meant. Homosexual, heterosexual, gay straight, lesbian, though I wasn't sure what transgendered meant. There I met the first openly gay person I had ever known. Michael was a priest who came to tell his story to our first year seminar group. His story was like so many I've heard since. He knew he was different from childhood. He had no role models nor reference for being a gay person except the very strong message -- it was bad. So he repressed all of those thoughts and feelings and married his best friend, determined to be a good, loving husband. Eventually the lie was too much for him to live with; the emotional and physical costs were enormous. He and his wife came to an amicable divorce; by then, she understood. As I remember it, a couple of years after his divorce he met and fell in love with his life-partner, they created a covenant ritual with each other, exchanged rings, and were a loving, happy couple.

I well remember the question and answer session that followed. I looked Michael in the eye; I pointed my finger at him and I said with deep conviction, "But don't you know? Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit." His eyes never broke contact. He looked at me and spoke with a profound conviction. "Yes! My body IS the temple of the Holy Spirit." It was the first anomaly in my world view.

It was two summers later when the issue surfaced in earnest. That summer I was doing clinical training in a hospital with a small group of other seminarians. It was a remarkable group. Bright, gifted, spiritually committed. You get to know people pretty well when you are in an interactive small-group seminar five hours a day. Over the weeks, one person began naturally to rise as a leader among equals. Dave was informally recognized as the most spiritually mature, pastorally sensitive and theologically grounded person in the group. He had earned our respect. Then we learned that he was gay.

That summer, Dave gave us a great gift. He let a group of straight guys ask him every dumb question you ever wanted to ask a gay person. At the same time, we did some independent study on our own. With new information and some reflection, every one of us changed our minds.

I learned that our sexual orientation is given to us, not chosen. I learned that psychological tests show that gay people are just as sane and normal as straight people. (And just as crazy.) I learned that heterosexuals are more prone to pedophilia and sexual violence than homosexuals. When Dave asked off early one Friday to go to the 50th Anniversary celebration of a gay couple who were his friends, I learned another of my old stereotypes wasn't so true.

That summer I looked for the first time at the scriptures behind my assumption that the bible condemned homosexuals. There weren't many. Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. Most of the passages were from very culturally conditioned Old Testament sections that we no longer hold as binding. The biblical assumption is that everyone is heterosexual, and to behave in a homosexual way is unnatural. But, I wondered, what if someone is naturally homosexual? To be forced to behave in a heterosexual way would be unnatural.

Once I began to listen to the Bible with my openness to the possibility that sexual orientation is part of our inheritance, given to us by God, I began to hear the scriptures speak to the issue in many places. Think of all of the stories about discovering God's presence and blessing in the unexpected. A slave child floating in the Nile; a burning bush; the youngest son, the shepherd David; a still small voice; a Moabite named Ruth; the peasant child of a virgin; a short tax-collector; a Canaanite woman; an Ethiopian eunuch; an officer in the occupying Gentile Roman army; a Samaritan woman; a fisherman from Galilee. A major theme of the Gospel tells us that God surprises us in the stranger and the outcast; that God in Christ is breaking down the walls we've built separating people for no good reason. God in Christ knocks down those barriers and walks across the lines between upper class and lower, male and female, slave and free, outsider and insider, and most importantly in the doctrine of the Incarnation, God walks across the line between God and humanity.

You hear that message nearly every week in one of our four readings of scripture. Today: "But now in Christ Jesus you (uncircumcised) who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God." *Ephesians 2:13-16a*

Those were radical words, and the church's policy of inclusion of the uncircumcised was so threatening to many Jewish leaders -- and such a departure from Scripture and tradition -- that it cost many early Christians their lives.

Until Jesus and Paul and Peter, the uncircumcised were outside the lines drawn by their religion. But when Jesus and Paul and Peter saw the presence of God manifest in the lives of the uncircumcised, they walked over the line and drew a circle of inclusion. The Church has been doing that ever since.

The church has recognized that the social conventions of the Biblical ages are not the unchanging Word of God, and whenever we have discovered new possibilities for human liberation and for more abundant life, we have embraced them. The Bible prohibits lenders from charging interest,

assumes that government is led by kings and that slavery is part of the way things are, that women should be silent and obedient, and that divorce and remarriage are forbidden. But we've seen new possibilities of grace and changed our traditions, however, not without struggle.

We've had conflict and disagreement at every step. Good, sincere, faithful Bible-believing Christians have lined up on both sides of these issues -- Can Gentiles become Christians? Can eunuchs be baptized? Can we allow economic activity fueled by borrowing at interest? Do only kings have a divine right to rule? Shall slaves be free? Shall women serve on vestries, read the lessons in church, become priests? Can divorced people be remarried? Shall black people be equal?

It seems that every generation has to live through one of these conflicts. When I was growing up the issue was race. In Mississippi it was incredibly threatening to challenge centuries of tradition, after all, it was argued, God made the races separate from creation. Interracial marriage was a criminal offence and for most whites, emotionally repulsive. Good, sincere people left my parish church when the Vestry said black people would be welcome. The good news is -- most all of them came back, and none of them believes anymore that God intends for black people to be a separate, inferior race. Once integration occurred, it wasn't as bad, as unnatural as it seemed to some. They found their fears to be exaggerated. Today, what was formerly unthinkable, we don't give a second thought -- we sit in a restaurant next to a black person; a divorced Episcopalian has a wedding with communion at St. Paul's; we elect women to the Vestry; and Lynne Spellman celebrates at our altar.

In the words of our Epistle today -- "So Christ came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." *Ephesians 2:19*

I believe that the full inclusion of gay people in the life of our church and our society is as inevitable and as God-energized as the full inclusion of the uncircumcised, slaves, women and people of color has been. I believe it is the work of the Holy Spirit and it is ultimately irresistible.

I look forward to the day when boys like Tony are no longer teased, but are accepted, and can date and fall in love and give themselves to another person with the full support of their church and an understanding society, just like I did. I look forward to the day when young men like Michael don't have to repress their true affection and will no longer marry their best friend and doom themselves and their wives to an unfulfilling future. I look forward to living in a society when we no longer oppress lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people so that they feel they must live in closets. I look forward to a day when we draw a wider circle and cross that line to allow gay Episcopalians to commit themselves to the church's values that I've pledged myself to with my spouse -- "fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God." (*General Convention, 2000*) More than a hundred Episcopal Churches already offer blessings to those commitments; St. Paul's would not be the first, even in Arkansas.

I think when that day comes for us, it will not seem so strange or awful as some may now fear. Let me give you a snapshot of how that might look. How it looked in another Episcopal Church, described in Nora Gallagher's memoir "Practicing Resurrection." Their first service of blessing was back in 1997 between Charles and Philip. The story begins with a conversation between Mark, the

priest who would be presiding at that evening's blessing, and Martha, the Altar Guild member preparing for the service. Earlier she had let them know, she would not attend.

In the sacristy, Martha Smith was ironing the linens. Her hands moved across the old ironing board that flipped down from the wall next to the processional cross.

"I will be coming to the, uh, ceremony," she said to Mark as he wafted out of the inner sacristy. "But --" And she stopped.

"But?" he said, turning, one hand on the ironing board.

"I will not come to communion."

"How come?" he said gently.

"Because I don't believe in this," she said softly, tilting the iron back to rest on its beel and smoothing the fair linen with her hands and then smoothing it again.

"That's okay," Mark said, putting a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Thank you for telling me. Just promise me one thing."

Martha nodded.

"Promise me you will come."

"I will," she said, and took the iron back into her hand.

Nora's narrative then describes the opening of the service, observing, "I think probably each one of us was asking whether we felt, well, different, at this wedding than at other weddings. I felt the same tears coming as I always do when two people walk down an aisle with so much hope and promise in their hearts, engendering so much renewal of hope for others. These two were, like others I had seen before them, proclaiming the human gift of making a promise."

After the declarations of consent, the preacher Anne Howard began her sermon.

"We stand today on new ground," she began. "It is a new day. We have never been here before, and it's a little scary."

Then she told a story. She told of her family's visit to the ancient shrine of St. Cuthbert in Durham, England. A beautiful, massive Norman cathedral.

And then I looked down at the floor. . . . I looked down and saw a long, wide black marble line inlaid in the stone floor. It stretched across the entire width of the nave, across the back end, the west end. I had never seen anything like it. And then I looked up and saw a framed sign posted on the column, explaining the line. The sign said the marble was laid there in the 1100's, when the cathedral was built, to keep the women back, to keep the women away from the

main part of the church. It was a protective barrier, to keep the altar and St. Cuthbert's holy shrine pure and free from the corrupting power of women....

It hurt to see that line. It hurts to remember it even now -- that barrier established in the name of purity. That day, as I stood there, surrounded by the power and might of the church, I thought of the men who had laid that marble and all the women who had stayed behind the line.... We all know about lines....

That line on the floor of Durham Cathedral serves no purpose anymore. It is a relic from the past. I believe that the day that marble was laid, God wept. And I believe that every time we cross a line like that, God dances.

Today, we cross the line. Today, old barriers lose their power, old wounds can lose their sting. Today, as we gather our collective courage and our good will, healing is possible because we gather to celebrate something larger than ourselves.

Today we celebrate not only the love of these two men but the love of a God that invites us all to cross the line, to stay back no longer, to step into healing, and into hope and into joy.

Today, we cross that line. And so today, God is dancing. Amen.

She sat down. The church was as quiet as a deep forest. We sat there, in the quiet, and then Charles and Philip stood up and exchanged their vows....

[A]fter I had taken communion, and sat back down, something made me look up. And down the aisle in the communion line came Martha Smith, solemn, quiet, measured.

She crossed herself and reached her hands up when she arrived in front of Mark and opened her palms like a crane coming to rest in water.

"The Body of Christ," Mark said, placing the bread on her uplifted palm.

"Amen," she replied...

Afterward, in the sacristy, Martha Smith was cleaning the chalices and placing the linen in the laundry bag hanging by a hook near the door.

Mark came in from the church, and he saw her there, going about her Altar Guild business, matter-of-factly, solemnly. She looked up at him and he looked at her.

"May I ask you, Martha, why did you come to communion?" Mark asked. "If it is any of my business at all."

"Because I've drawn too many lines in my life," she replied and held his gaze for a second or two, and then she reached down and picked up another chalice to wash.

In the parish hall for many hours, we danced."

(Nora Gallagher, Practicing Resurrection, 120-124)

I have seen the presence of Christ in the lives of individual gay people. I have seen the fruits of the Holy Spirit manifested in their committed relationships. St. Paul tells us that the fruits of the Holy Spirit are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control." And he goes on to say, "There is no law against such things." *Galatians 5:22-23*

I believe that it is time to remove the line that has separated the church from recognizing and blessing the holy and loving life-long intentions of committed gay couples. I believe that God has already blessed them. I truly believe that God is lovingly inviting the church "to cross that line, to stay back no longer, to step into healing, and into hope and into joy," and to join the eternally expanding circle of God's dance of reconciliation.