

Presentation to the Diocesan Intentional Listening Seminars on Human Sexuality

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1. Introduction

A word of introduction as to why I am making this presentation today.¹

What I will say today comes about from an attempt to write something on the issue of the blessing of same-sex unions in a pastoral way for the parishes for which I am the rector. I kept promising the parishes to say something in our quarterly newsletter and every time I sat down to think about it new questions would arise in my mind.

I also began to see the limitations of my own response to the issue, which was, to be angered by the writings of those in favour of this issue, and discouraged from seriously engaging in their positions because it just seemed so clear to my mind.

I come to this question not just as a priest but as a scientist (I am formally trained and did practice as a Chemical Engineer before becoming a priest) – I have been unsatisfied with the quick assumptions people make about the science related to this question.

While I don't think any of us expect to leave here unified in our understanding of the issue, I hope we might begin to work through a way forward on this subject together in charity. I want to thank Fr. Gary Thorne, Chaplain at King's College and Dalhousie for organizing a listening process last Spring among students and others interested that showed such discussion is possible in a respectful way.

I have come to believe that our Communion has been greatly blessed by facing in a very public way this current controversy. It is forcing us to deepen our compassion for one another, to learn patience with one another, and to recognize the inadequacies of our current structures of decision making in our church—who can bear with the tension in Synods as we try to debate highly complex questions with time limited back and forth at the microphone? Do individual synods or even provinces in the Anglican Communion have authority to decide independently on matters of doctrine? We are discovering limitations to our mutual accountability as a worldwide Communion. But most importantly, it is making us struggle to bring *to* the light of Christ and *in* the light of Christ our hypocrisies as a Church and oppressive structures of thinking, speaking and acting. I don't believe we should stop talking about this and get on with other things—people are being hurt.

Two remarks about what I will say:

1. Our language often carries with it our assumptions. When the terms “gay” or “lesbian” or “homosexual” or “bisexual” are used in today's speech, there is very often an assumption that this is the state of a person “by nature” (born that way). Since I am contesting this assumption on the part of many, I will use a term which I

think all people can agree is true but doesn't carry with it the assumption. I will speak of people who have same-sex desire.

2. The second assumption is related to my view of Scripture. I understand it to be reasonable. And when something seems unreasonable, I don't assume that it is wrong, or that it reflects a society's sinful prejudices, but I believe I must sit with it until it makes sense. I will try to argue less from particular texts, to general trends, not because particular texts are unimportant (to my mind they are clear) but that getting too specific has not proved to be a fruitful avenue in these discussions.

My presentation begins with a discussion of the Law, since this is where the division arises from within the Church, and then moves to consider various ideas in the modern world that contribute to us demanding a just resolution of this issue, and concludes with suggestions for a pastoral response and questions that need to be considered further.

2. Law and Gospel

How do we know what is right or wrong in the moral realm? In the Christian tradition, there has been an understanding that we have an innate sense of what is right in our hearts – God has “imprinted on every human soul by general revelation” our understanding of what is right and wrong [Sayers]. This Natural Law, this innate sense of what is right and wrong in our relations with one another, can be violated. When these laws are repeatedly violated they can be forgotten. We can think of the horrific example of isolated communities where it is discovered that incest has become the norm. Those involved had lost all sense that what they were doing was wrong. Whole societies can embrace certain injustices, lies that need to be unearthed and exposed for what they are – e.g. practices of slavery, or ideas of revenge, or of racial or gender superiority. So our own sense of what is right and wrong needs always to be questioned – this applies to both sides on this current issue. To oppose the blessing of same-sex unions – is it simply reinforcing human prejudice or is it a genuine desire to uphold Natural law?

The Church has always understood the giving of the Law of Moses to be a step along the way in the recovery of Natural Law. Jesus says the Law is all about loving God and our neighbour (Mt 22:35-40). But how do we deal with all those 613 laws?

Anglican Reformers in the 16th century, summarized the Anglican position at that time about the Laws of Moses [Article VII, see p. 701 of the BCP]. There are three kinds of laws: (1) Laws related to “Ceremonies and Rites” such as laws governing sacrifices and laws related to purity - food laws, washings, circumcision. These were pointing to and are fulfilled in Christ by his sacrifice [e.g Mk 7:19; Acts 11:5-10]. (2) “Civil precepts” relate to how a society orders itself such as whether there is

¹ These presentations were seminars held in the Spring of 2009 in the Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island in the Anglican Church of Canada.

a king, or how to punish violators. These can change, something demonstrated within the Old Testament itself. (3) There is a third category, about which Article VII states, “no Christian...is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.” It has been understood that these moral laws point to, recall us to, Natural Law. They teach us what love looks like.

This Christian understanding of the Law of Moses is being challenged today. It is of course legitimate to question if Anglicans need to come up with a new synthesis, a new principle, of how the Law in the Old Testament relates to the New Testament. I am open to seeing such a proposal, but it must take into account all of the New Testament passages which speak about the Law in a coherent way. I have not seen one. (see e.g. Mt 5:17-20; Jn 10:35; Rom 2-8)

Jesus fulfilled the Moral law perfectly, because his heart is perfect and in all his walking about on earth he was without sin. But Jesus did not fulfil the Law so that we needn't bother with the commandments anymore, but that we would not be condemned in our failure to try to attain them – they are expressions of perfect love.²

What about the Levitical law forbidding same-sex sexual activity? Is it a moral law? Does it refer to any such sexual activity? These are debated in our times. New suggested interpretations of *thou shalt not lie with a man as with a woman* have received little support among Biblical scholars. Maybe we can agree on what it does not say? It is not saying that deep loving friendships cannot exist between men and between women.³ The only thing that the law speaks of and, I would suggest, the Gospel would bring out further is that sexual relations in these friendships and lustful thoughts (in any relationship) are destructive in some way and inhibit us from knowing the fullness of joy.

Where does this traditional interpretation leave the person who has only or predominantly same-sex desire?

² There are two principles regarding the law that come about with Christ:

1. We are called to a higher moral perfection than just following the letter of the law. [e.g. Mt 5:21-30; Mt 23:25-28]
2. We are able to show greater mercy towards those who fail, because
 - a. we recognize ourselves all under the same condemnation and all in need of God's mercy; and
 - b. we are given the spiritual strength inwardly to overcome temptation in our midst.

³ There is nothing in the Law that says friends cannot chose to live together, care for one another for life. And there are apparently examples in Church history of covenanted friendships. Though the fact that this has had to be rediscovered may point to some problems found with such arrangements. Today there may be practical reasons why those who experience same-sex desire might find it easier not to live together. First, so that they are not troubled by lustful thoughts continually arising. Think of the case of a man and a woman who have opposite sex desire and are friends but want to live a celibate life – they are rarely found to live together – is it for this reason in part? Secondly, there is also the public perception, which is not unimportant - others might not understand the nature of the relationship (a burden one may not wish to bear) and it might undermine one's ability to be a witness. Imagine, for example, the response of many in a church community and of the wider society to an unmarried male priest asking a female or male friend to live in the Rectory with him and explaining to the parish that it is all chaste? I would question if in the current culture we are mature enough for this either personally or as a society. Part of the Rule of St. Benedict was that no woman should sleep in the monastery at night – out of concern that her close presence would be a temptation, even in the mind, to monks struggling with lust.

Abstain from sex or marry someone of the opposite sex. There is something in this conclusion, if simply left like that, that strikes modern ears and hearts as highly unjust. I would like to suggest a few ideas that our society and many of us in the Church hold that contribute to this sense of injustice: a misunderstanding of the purpose of sex; modern improper distinctions made between two kinds of love *eros* and *agape*; and confusions about the question of nurture or nature in relation to same-sex desire.

3. The Purpose of Sex

It is hard for us to remember sometimes the profound changes that have happened in the understanding of the purpose of sex in modern Western societies in the last 50 years. Popular TV shows, movies, novels and the examples in our midst encapsulate and in turn sustain these new understandings, and promote them. These new ways of looking at sex become the very air we breathe and we are not surprised or shocked any more, they have become the norm.

Rowan Williams, in an influential article *The Body's Grace* from 1989, tried to articulate a modern understanding of what might be the fruit of a sexual relationship that doesn't intend procreation. He speculates that it is for healing, for human growth, for making sense of ourselves, and about learning to be human.⁴

It is in this way of understanding why sex matters, that it seems to many in the modern world as a great injustice to deny those with same-sex desire, the possibility of a sexual relationship that they too might grow. Many think that for young people growing up, the pattern will probably be or even should be that they will have various relationships involving sex until they discover the right person. It is just a necessary part of coming to maturity, and “thanks” to technology we've worked out some of the kinks - unwanted pregnancy and minimizing of sexually transmitted diseases. This is a sea change. Some will say immediately – yes, and for good reasons. I believe it is a cause for weeping.

I would argue that sexual relations are not needed for human growth, for spiritual maturity or to know one's self or another – they can only be a reflection of love, of an intimacy, that already exists. [In a longer paper more could be said about the purpose of sex within marriage.]

These new ideas of the purpose of sex are a radical departure from Scriptural norms. Throughout Scripture there is the call to chastity – in the Law of Moses, sexual desire is restrained and directed to within heterosexual marriage and lust is covered by the 10th commandment (thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife). In the New

⁴ Quotations from Williams' article: Sex helps us to know “the body's capacity to heal and enlarge the life of others”; sex has to do with “the business of human growth and human integrity”; “the whole project of ‘making human sense’ for ourselves and each other”; “what part sexuality plays in our learning to be human with one another”; “the entry into a collaborative way of making sense of our whole material selves”; “to let my body be recreated by another person's perception”

Testament, Jesus recalls us to the ideal of one marriage (e.g. Mt 19:3-12) and says that to lust after another is not a problem because it *leads* to adultery, it *is* adultery (Mt. 5:27-30). St. Paul counsels treating one another in the Church as brother, sister, mother – without lust (1 Tim 5:1-2). If you are not married you are not to have sex, if you are married you are free to have sexual relations, and lustful thoughts are to be put to death by all.

Chastity seems to be everybody's business. Why? Why do Jesus and St. Paul seem to be tightening the restrictions on the expression of our love for one another in sexual relations outwardly and in our minds? Such an understanding just seems unreasonably unfair to everybody! Why does this seem so strange, so un-liberated, to our modern sensibility?

4. The Unity of Loves

There are no doubt many reasons that Jesus and Paul call us to restraint. It has to do with the flourishing and perfecting of friendships and of Christian fellowship. It has to do, in many ways, with strengthening the institution of marriage, which is to be an icon to the world of God's deep and faithful love for the soul or Christ for the Church, and for the flourishing of family life, which is its fruit. These reasons have profound implications for individuals and society. But there is a further reason at least as profound.

In the Bible and in Western culture there are different terms used to describe the different kinds of love – love of family, friendship love, romantic love and love of God. (see for example C.S.Lewis' *The Four Loves*)⁵

Usually when we think of *eros*, we think of that love which is involved in earthly romance. We are moved by the beauty of another person, and we desire to move towards the object of our love and possess her or him - to be united, in friendship, and to be fulfilled. Traditionally, the consummation of that love includes sexual relations, but only in the context of marriage.

If we think that there is one kind of love which moves us to fulfil human romantic love, another kind that moves us to friendship, and another kind of love that is reserved for God or is more God-like, then we think that, if I am to be fully human I must satisfy all these loves to be whole. That we hold this idea is demonstrated by our attitude towards the celibate life – to think of commending it to ourselves or to friends may strike us with horror and sadness, like a failure, a diminishment of our humanity.

The reason that Jesus and St. Paul call on us to tighten the restrictions on the expression of sexual desire, to restrain ourselves, is not to put that desire to death, but so that we can redirect that same longing, that same love towards God. If we are completely satisfying our desire here, dissipating it here, we will not grow in Christ. We need that very *eros*, that desire, to lift us heavenward - our *eros* becomes our wings, and grace is the increase of that desire for God needed to bring us home. It is why the Church counsels fasting sometimes, or St. Paul counsels couples to stop having sex by agreement sometimes to pray – it is taking that same desire and redirecting it heavenward.

When one turns inwardly, in faithfulness, with purity of heart, we are promised by Jesus that we will discover the well spring of living water welling up in us, renewing us

inwardly, giving us new life – that is the consummation of *eros* (of desire or love) when directed to God.

In the modern understanding, the call to crucify the passions of the flesh, a putting to death of earthly desire sounds morbid and simply about killing joy [Ingham] - a sure formula for depression and despair [O'Donovan]. Well, Jesus says to his disciples, if you don't want to commit to one woman for life, you could always be a eunuch (Mt 19:1-12). And St. Paul, *our citizenship is in heaven* (Phil 3:20) - what? that place where they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels (Mt 22:23-33) - who wants that? Do Jesus and St. Paul just not understand basic human psychology?

But in the light of the general call to chastity and with the understanding that all love has one source and one final end and that you need that very same desire, by grace, to ascend the heights, the call to be chaste (which for someone with only same-sex desire is the call to abstain), is not about never being able to have what others have, but more like an expedited call to go up first, where *all* others must follow. It is the same call for those with opposite-sex desire who are unmarried and for the many who are divorced or widows and widowers who decide not to marry again – it includes many people. It is the inward and upward call to find God, to know our citizenship is in heaven. It is not a citizenship which is a diminishment of our humanity but fullness of being. It is to be *filled with all the fullness of God*, to be on fire with love - it is being like Jesus, doing like Jesus, and knowing the world like Jesus. (Eph 3:14-21)

This is not to say that the call to be chaste is in any way easy – it is a real dying to ourselves to curb our desire that it may be redirected. But it is done so that we might rise anew in Christ, it is that we might find true life even now. It is a dying, but it not unlike the many deaths that we are called to if we would be a follower of Jesus and ascend to God [e.g. other ways our love misses the mark - pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony].

5. “Nature” versus “Nurture”

What is the reason that some people experience same-sex desire? Is it by nature (people are just born that way) or nurture (their desire is shaped by their environment and chosen)?

When one enters a discussion with anyone on the question of the blessing of same-sex unions, it quickly becomes apparent what are the underlying assumptions being made with regard to “nurture” versus “nature”. If one believes it is a matter of nature, then it seems clearly a matter of justice and fairness that he or she should be able to have the same opportunity as those born with heterosexual desire to enter a relationship with the one he or she desires and to participate in an activity which brings joy (because they have also made modern assumptions raised earlier about the purpose of sex). If one believes that sexual orientation is a matter of nurture, i.e. that sexual preference is something that is chosen by a person, it presumably can be un-chosen or re-chosen, and should be. This position seems to carry with it a kind of judgement on the individual that the understanding that it is a matter of “nature” does not.

The truth is that to date, scientists are not in agreement on the reason why some have same-sex desire, though the majority would say that it is a combination of factors which

⁵ Affection (*storge*), especially love of family; friendship love (*philia*); romantic love (*eros*); divine love (*agape*).

are different for different people – it is not a clear cut question of nature versus nurture. The Church’s response to this issue should not be based upon the assumption that it is a matter of nature; that would be unscientific, it would be unreasonable.

While the psychiatric/psychological associations pride themselves on their enlightened stance of removing homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in the mid 1970’s, it was they who stigmatized people by putting them on such a list in the first place. But the Church has always understood same-sex desire as simply one of a number of possible ways that our love can miss the mark – and every human being is on that list in a number of ways. All of us must rely on God’s mercy. [See Dante, a poet from the 13th century, who, in Canto XXVI of *Purgatorio*, describes a truly enlightened position.]

On the side of this being a matter of nurture, a matter of choice, there is strong evidence:

1. The assumption that our desires are formable, is so basic to Scripture that we hardly think about it as a psychological truth. God gives us commandments which we are told to follow, and prohibitions which we are to avoid. If we are obedient, putting away vice and following in the way of virtue, we are told that the law becomes written on our hearts. The idea that habits are formed by practice is basic psychology recognized by the great pagan philosophers, and by modern behavioural modification psychology. The whole advertising industry is based upon the assumption that desire is formable.

2. The fact that our societies go to such lengths to define male and female character, suggests that we know that there is some uncertainty in the matter and that desire can be shaped. [e.g. colours, language]. It is hard to imagine all of the subtle reinforcements daily that contribute to this project of parents and of society both positively (through encouraging heterosexual love) and negatively (through shaming, sense of disgust, undermining those with same-sex desire). It is these negative ways of promoting heterosexuality that need to be examined and challenged.

3. I would argue that the idea that it is just a matter of nature is a modern construct we have come up with to help us. We have removed the idea of taboo, we have removed the idea of the law forbidding same-sex sexual relations, and we don’t want to judge, so we latch on to this idea. It provides an internal way of restraining desire for those with either kind of desire (one thinks one is born this or that way and so is not susceptible to the other kind of desire). But there is a darker side to holding this idea that it is just a matter of nature (e.g. it can bind those who have same-sex desires, encourages some into acting on these desires, it is used by those who would seduce, it divides humanity).

Even if it was found that same-sex desire was only a matter of nature, the reality is that we are not living in Paradise. All of nature bears witness to the fallen character of the created order. We cannot discern God’s plan for creation by the use of unaided reason alone – we must turn to the divine revelation given us in Scripture. That plan includes love for all person regardless of sexual

desire along with an account of how we are to respond to that love and be found in Christ eternally. [Thorne]

Recommendations/Conclusions:

For the Church:

- When there are so many conflicting voices within the Church itself (our Diocese, the Canadian Anglican church, the Anglican Communion, and the Christian Church worldwide) and its leadership, within the scientific community, and even within the community of those with same-sex desire, it is not a time for a decision of the Church that would change its teaching. It is a time for us to clarify our understanding and teaching on human sexuality in general including sexual relations within and without marriage (which is, I hope, what these discussions are a contribution towards).
- The blessing of same-sex unions? Blessing of friendships, if that is what is desired, but not as a cloak for marriage, or as an endorsement of same-sex sexual activity.
- Recover the ideal of the celibate life – and promote it through teaching about how it is lived out (e.g. what is it to sublimate our desire in a healthy way? how do we tap into the well-spring of living water leading us to eternal life?).
- There is a need for greater teaching about the ideal of friendship love which has in the past been seen as the highest of loves.
- Recover teaching about the unity of loves.
- Recover teaching about the fullness of our sanctification in Christ or else Christians will not be looking to the heights of holiness or even hoping for the gifts of the Spirit that have been spoken of more widely in times past.

To Christians of whatever desire:

- Seriously re-examine our understanding of the purpose of sex.
- A call to chaste behaviour for all – lust is forbidden.
- Take care in our language – “gay” versus those with “same-sex desire”.
- Affirm heterosexuality in a way that does not undermine those with same-sex desire.
- Unveil subtle power relations in our conversation – the unhealthy ways that are used to undermine the masculinity, femininity of others.
- Reflect on our ideas of masculinity/femininity – there are variations among cultures and individuals – is our view too narrow?
- Recover ideas and ideals of masculine and feminine virtue and choose to practice them.