

Personal Statement on Anglican Same-Sex Marriage Equality

General Synod Canon 21

Part I

Back in the 1980s, when I was living and working in Toronto, I regularly attended Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) meetings, a 12-step program patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous.

During the latter portion of each meeting, the group as a whole would break into smaller groups of five to eight for individual sharing. As is common in 12-step programs, participants were free to speak for three to five minutes on a topic of their choice, without any cross-talk or commentary from others.

At one meeting, a young man in his late teens raised his hand to indicate that he wished to share. The group leader acknowledged his hand, and the group's attention turned toward him. He shifted around in his chair, clearly uncomfortable, somewhat hunched over. Several times there was an intake of breath and his mouth would open slightly, indicating he was about to speak, then he simply closed his mouth without saying anything.

The group waited patiently, expectantly.

Then, gathering himself together, shaking a bit, he managed to choke out the words: "I'm gay." He took a deep breath, sat a little straighter in his chair and repeated in a stronger voice, "I'm gay." There was one more deep breath, then he sat straight up in his chair. In a voice that was now confident and strong, he said, "I'm gay."

This was well before coming out was as relatively common and accepted as it is now. I do not recall what else that young man said that night, but what remains etched in my mind is the white-knuckle courage it took for him to declare the truth about himself, and the remarkable physical transformation that took place as a result of doing so. It was as if he had not fully inhabited his body up until that point; the weight of society's stigma against homosexuality had clearly pressed down upon and stifled his spirit.

In choosing to no longer hide a fundamental aspect of who he was, in choosing to risk possible rejection and condemnation, he allowed his spirit to unfurl itself. In the space of a few minutes, that young man shifted from a place of shame and self-loathing to a place of self-acceptance and strength, his head held high. It was one of the most moving, holy moments I have ever experienced. I will be forever grateful for the opportunity to see and experience, first-hand, the transformative power inherent in fully accepting and living in accordance with the truth.

Over the years I have wondered about what became of him. At the time I was attending ACA meetings, the AIDS epidemic was cutting a wide swath through the local gay community. I recall overhearing one meeting participant wearily remark to another: "It's the tenth funeral I've attended in the past two months." It is entirely possible that young man also succumbed to an unpleasant death from AIDS within a year or two or three of my encounter with him.

Our paths crossed briefly, but in that small space of time he graced me with an indelible image of bravery and taught me an important lesson about tolerance and compassion. I hope he lived through the AIDS epidemic, but if not, he left a legacy in my life that is both thought-provoking and inspiring.

The ACA meeting that was most convenient for me to attend was located in downtown Toronto, held in the meeting rooms of a church located near the intersection of Bloor and Yonge streets. This location was a short distance from the Gay Village at Church and Wellesley streets, so a number of openly gay and lesbian participants attended this meeting. There was a great deal of brokenness and suffering in the backgrounds of everyone involved in ACA; many of the participants were also involved in 12-step programs for alcoholism, drug abuse, and sex and love addiction.

In the sharing circles, as the gay and lesbian participants described various aspects of their lives, I became acutely aware of the extra burden of suffering our society and religious institutions placed on them as a result of their sexual orientation.

It is disingenuous of Christians to believe that what I call polite prejudice has nothing to do with violent prejudice. The term polite prejudice refers to the desire to have your cake and eat it too, to engage in the kind of doublethink that allows a person to believe they are a loving, caring, faithful follower of Christ, while at the same time promoting beliefs that sow seeds of hatred, fear, injustice, and oppression.

So we have Christians from all denominations who condemn homosexuality, but in a polite way, earnestly quoting outdated scripture and applying misguided logic and reason to substantiate how unacceptable homosexuality is, in their own sight and, supposedly, in the sight of God. They believe homosexuality should be marginalized, suppressed, closeted, perhaps even eradicated, but of course, they are not suggesting that those with a same-sex sexual orientation should be beaten up, in the process failing to recognize that the seeds of intolerance they sow can result in just that.

As reported in the StarMetro Edmonton, on April 25, 2018:

Hate crimes based on sexual orientation in Canada saw a 25 per cent jump in a single year, according to new data from Statistics Canada.

Kristopher Wells, an assistant professor with the Institute of Sexual Minority Studies and Services at the University of Alberta, wasn't surprised, and said the issue is likely much worse.

"I wouldn't be walking down Whyte Avenue holding my male partner's hand, because there are days when you don't want to deal with the homophobia and the threat of violence," he said.

"You've learned throughout your life to be very wary of the person who walks in front of you, the person who walks behind you, the person who walks beside you but also the person within you because of the impacts of internalized homophobia," Wells added ...

The majority of hate crimes based on sexual identity are violent, with 65 per cent involving assault, threats or criminal harassment ...

“No one is born with hate in their heart; hate is a learned value,” Wells said. “The real question is, where are they learning this kind of hatred?”

Where indeed? Could religious discriminatory practices against same-sex couples be playing a part in this?

Polite prejudice is still prejudice, no matter how well-meaning those who engage in it might intend to be. It hurts. It damages the spirit. It fans the flames of hatred, causing them to burn out of control, in turn leading to death and destruction and searing life-long pain for those who, in the blink of an eye, find themselves or their loved ones in the crosshairs of the intolerance that polite prejudice justifies.

As a teacher, Jesus implored us to connect the dots between our beliefs and actions and the results of our beliefs and actions, to consciously recognize whether a particular belief or action bears good fruit or bad fruit. In other words, it makes no sense to hang on to outdated prejudices and principles through circular reasoning – to argue that something is bad or wrong simply because it is bad or wrong. We have to be able to point to real harm that justifies the condemnation of behaviour as bad or wrong. In my view, this is where the arguments against Anglican marriage equality for same-sex couples run out of steam.

Same-sex marriage has been legal for a number of years in Canada. The last time I looked, the sky had not yet fallen, nor had the family disappeared or the values that it supports. Studies show that children raised by same-sex parents are just as healthy as those raised by heterosexual parents. It is now recognized and accepted that sexual orientation is not a lifestyle choice; it has been scientifically established that it is an innate characteristic. Exposure to homosexuality does not make anyone gay or lesbian, any more than exposure to heterosexuality turns gay and lesbian people into heterosexuals.

Clearly, extending civil marriage rights to same-sex couples in Canada has not ended civilization as we know it; life continues on the same as it always has for heterosexuals and their families. So what is the harm that is going to occur if marriage equality for same-sex couples is implemented by the Anglican church? Furthermore, in our daily lives as Christians the marriages of same-sex Anglican couples will have very little, if any, direct impact on us, but in their daily lives it will have an impact that is immeasurable.

As such, I fully support the same-sex marriage equality movement currently underway throughout North America and abroad that seeks to grant same-sex couples the legal right to marry, in a civil ceremony or a church service, according to their preference. In my view, anything less than full equality with the rights and privileges enjoyed by heterosexual couples is needlessly discriminatory and unworthy of a just society or a just religion.

Part II

I am fully aware of the acute discomfort that the implementation of Anglican marriage equality for same-sex couples creates for a significant number of Anglicans; however, it is important to

note that with respect to the overall activities of the Anglican church, the amount of time, energy, and resources that go into marrying heterosexual couples, let alone same-sex couples, is miniscule. On the other hand, there are countless ways in which the Anglican church, on a local church level and beyond, is a powerful and important force for Christ in the world.

Jesus said to Peter, ““And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church”” (Matthew 16:18). Jesus did not intend for his disciples to start a chain of holistic health clinics, or create a school or college where people could come to study and learn his teachings, or establish an enclave of calligraphers laboriously copying out his parables in the pre-printing press equivalent of a publishing company. No, he charged them with building his church, my point being that he saw great value in religion.

Jesus clearly communicates to us how important the Christian church is and how important religion is to him – not as a passing stage in human development that we should at some point outgrow, but for all time. Its core message regarding the centrality and reality of Christ, its teachings and body of knowledge about Jesus must be preserved for future generations, in order that they too may come to know the healing power and saving grace of Jesus Christ.

If the reason for leaving the Anglican church comes down to simply being very uncomfortable with same-sex marriage, the likely response of Jesus to that will be to hold up his arms as they were when they were nailed to the cross, his point being that the degree of discomfort caused by continuing to belong to the Anglican church under these circumstances pales in comparison to the discomfort he endured for humanity, for the salvation of each and every one of us on the cross.

“In return,” Jesus conceivably asks, “is it so impossible for you to tolerate some discomfort for the greater good of my Anglican church?”

The early Christians were tortured and killed for their faith. Around the world today, there are countries in which Christians are persecuted for their faith. Why do they stick with it? For Jesus. They put their own comfort and wellbeing aside to remain faithful to him. That is why being a Christian is so very difficult at times. We commit our lives to Jesus, and in doing so we give up the right to determine what is in our own best interests, and we also commit ourselves to undergoing challenging tests of obedience, in accordance with our Anglican baptismal vows which require us to turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Saviour; put our whole trust in his grace and love; and promise to obey him as our Lord.

Why do we vow to obey Jesus? The answer to this question is related to our first three baptismal vows: renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God; renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God; and renounce all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. The only way to fulfill these baptismal vows is through absolute and strict obedience to Jesus.

When I finally shuffle off this mortal coil and meet Jesus face-to-face, I want to be able to show him that I too added my little pebbles to the rock upon which he built his church; I too did what I could to strengthen it; I too did what I could to ensure that the gates of Hades will not prevail

against it. A line from one of my favourite hymns says it best: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

But living out that intention can be very challenging at times. I candidly admit that many years ago, I disobeyed direct guidance from Jesus because I wanted to do what I chose to do, instead of what he wanted me to do, my goal being to experience a more comfortable, happier life; and yes, his rebuke was fearful. I realized then that if I was going to remain faithful to my baptismal vows, the road ahead would lead to my own Gardens of Gethsemane, my own painful crucifixions and deaths to self-interest along the way. He was basically saying, “This is what you are signing up for, so if you are going to leave me, I’d rather you leave now. There’s the door.” The choice was that stark.

I decided to submit and to stay. As the Rolling Stones put it, wild horses couldn’t drag me away. Why? Over and over again, I have decided to submit and to stay because I refuse to give Satan and the dark side the satisfaction of successfully engineering my downfall away from the Anglican church and from Christianity, and because I love Jesus so much I can barely look at pictures of him without feeling like my heart is going to explode. It is a wonderful, terrible love. I have suffered greatly for it at times, to the point where I felt like I could not bear to be a Christian any longer.

Whenever I have gone through these kinds of difficult situations, the only thing that saves me from abandoning Christianity is to once more sink to my knees beside Jesus in his Garden of Gethsemane and pray with him, “Nevertheless, thy will, not mine, be done.” As the peace of Christ that passeth all understanding begins to flow into me, the feverish, frantic attempts to be in charge of my life begin to dissipate. His acceptance of his own suffering becomes my acceptance of my own suffering. His decision to be at peace with his life purpose becomes my decision to be at peace with my life purpose. His desire to continue to be in a relationship with God, to follow his will, come what may, becomes my desire to continue to be in a relationship with God, to follow his will, come what may.

So to all those who intend to leave the Anglican church in response to the implementation of same-sex marriage equality, I say, welcome to your own Garden of Gethsemane: the place in which God asks you to accept that which you consider unacceptable, for a higher purpose, and that is the continued unity and strength of the Anglican church. It will be a bitter cup from which to drink, and the temptation will be very strong to run away from the discomfort, to leave the Anglican church altogether.

I hope and pray that with the help of Jesus, instead you will choose to submit and to stay.

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