

Thinking Sacramentally about Same-Sex Unions

Sacramental thinking

Yes or no? That is the question. It is a big issue. For the sake of clarity, I am making four working assumptions. First of all, I am presuming same-sex marriage will be legalized, eventually. Second, I see it as an opportunity for the Church to revisit its understanding of the sacrament of marriage. Third, I am making a distinction between the *institution* of marriage and the *sacrament*. Fourth, I am suggesting the question of *how* we approach these issues is critical. Expressly, I think a sacramental *perspective* could be very helpful.

To begin, the individual sacraments are tangible expressions of grace, set within the framework of the Jesus story, coming to life in the church for the enrichment of human relationships. Intuitively, Thomas Cranmer understood this. Avoiding the esoteric metaphysical debates of his day, Cranmer focused on the dynamic and communal nature of the sacraments as effectual signs of grace. Intellectually, Catholic theologians Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner, with their work on symbol, elaborated this sort of approach in the twentieth century. This shaped a generation of Anglican theologians (e.g. John Macquarrie). In this light, Christ is *the* symbol of God, embodying divine mystery and mediating God's grace to the world. In all this, the premise is the underlying mystery of God that makes earthly things effectual signs.

Accordingly, I am making a distinction between the God-world relationship *and* practices and beliefs surrounding the sacraments. Anglicanism, as an incarnational tradition, sees the world as infused by the mystery of God, which enables bread, wine, and water to come to life in our liturgies as effectual signs of grace. By sacramental thinking then, I am referring to a theological horizon that makes our liturgy, and our lives, meaningful. Further, I am proposing that sacramental thinking is a reasonable *starting point* for re-thinking the sacrament of marriage. Before I address marriage, I need to raise two important obstacles to renewed reflection and debate: the pervasive presence of prejudice, and inadequate conceptions of human identity.

Embedded prejudice

Demonstrably, there is an embedded prejudice in society against gay and lesbian persons, which surfaces in the use of language like *poofa*. Is it possible for us then to be immune to prejudice? Historically, the default position in the Church has been that homosexuality is wrong. This is based on circular reasoning, which entails the selective use of Scriptures and Tradition. The misuse of 'natural law' is a classic example. In all, this kind of thinking begins with *homosexuality is wrong* as a premise, and arrives at *homosexuality is wrong* as a conclusion.

Sexuality is complex, often controversial, and deeply personal. As such, I am not attempting to offer *simple* solutions. Instead, I am asking, "How do we think about sexuality?" Of course, in Anglicanism, Scripture and Tradition are prime sources of authority. But how do we use them? They may not always be the best place to start. In other words, I am making a plea for that other source of authority in Anglicanism, namely *reason*. In the spirit of reason then, what kind of interpretive approach do we bring to bear on a biblical texts and traditions relating to sexuality?

Our identity is formed

We are not born fully formed. In infancy, others inform and shape us, from the outside. Others, and our environment, populate our interior life. As such, most of us spend years,

trying to sort our interior life. Of course, the interior life cannot be *sorted out* like an untidy cupboard. Instead, by the grace of God, we befriend our inner life and discover moments of peace, as well as fragments of wisdom. There are always loose ends, and so we develop a creative pattern for living, through contemplation, worship, and participation in a faith community (i.e. rule of life). All this, however, begs the question “who am I?” And this is a question of identity.

The concept of *identity* is about *who I am in relation to you* (from *idem*, self or same). In the past, identity was largely inherited or imposed as part of the social fabric. In the pre-modern West, for example, there were racial and social identities. In terms of gender and sexuality, however, there was only one identity, which was (heterosexual) male identity. Historically, women were regarded as lesser men (or not human). For example, note the linguistic dependence, where the term *woman* is derived from *man* (from OE *wīfmon*).

Since the 19th century, somewhat begrudgingly, we have recognized that there are two identities: male and female. More recently, we have now recognized that there are more than two identities. This underlines the importance of the acronym LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer), which is testimony to human diversity. We also recognize that, with identity, we need to ask others how they see themselves.

In summary, *identity* is not a rigid box, which we force others into. In fact, there is no *one-size-fits-all*. Moreover, identity is partly given but also constructed, through complex familial, psychological, and social processes. As such, identity is the locus of personhood, which flourishes in community. Aspects of identity can be shared across a group (cf. social class). Nevertheless, I am not saying that there are no significant differences. On the contrary, it is giving differences, and different people, respect. In this perspective, difference is a gift, and not a burden. With this in mind, let’s look at marriage.

Marriage in historical perspective

Historically, marriage as an institution in the West, has been preoccupied with preserving the male name, his lineage, honor, and incumbent property ‘rights’. For example, marriage eventually was taken up formally as a sacrament in the Middle Ages, partly because of the nobility’s concern for the control of property (J. Martos, 2014). This is similar to the 19th century aristocratic concern about clandestine unions (M. Foucault, 1978). So, with this in mind, let’s look at the social world of Jesus.

Jesus was Jewish. He lived in a first century, pre-modern, agrarian, patriarchal community. In this context, first century marriage involved the couple’s respective fathers negotiating the terms of the marriage by considering the others social status and property entitlements. Incidentally, each family was referred to as *the house of the father* (R.R. Ruether, 2000). All this makes the interpretation of Mark 10:2-9 a complex task, in that this ancient text does not relate directly to our modern era.

Mark 10:2-9 is often used in arguments against same-sex marriage. Specifically, it has been used to say Jesus is arguing that marriage is for male and female only (v. 6, hardly a surprising deduction for a first century Jew). But look at his sources. Anthropologically, the Adam and Eve story (Gen 2-3) is a very ancient agrarian *dreamtime* story used by ancient people to explain their own domestic situation. That is, it is a story of a type that is used to explain the status quo. For us, it is more complex than that. So, while Jesus advocates something like a modern notion of equality, between male and female, it is done within the limited framework of “the house of the father”, with its implied entitlements (v. 4; cf. E. Schussler Fiorenza, 1983, 1994).

Overall, the point is that an *ancient* text like Mark 10:2-9, does not address *modern* problems, directly or unambiguously. Jesus was in some ways a child of his time. Remember, he did not explicitly critique the institution of slavery. Besides, in the first century, there was no grasp of what we mean by *identity*, let alone sexual identity. So, is there an alternative starting point?

An experiment in faith

If same-sex marriage is legalized, which seems inevitable, then I think it is important that the Church revisits the issues of sexuality and the blessing of same sex unions. In the past, we had polemical debates or no debates at all (cf. General Synod 2004, Fremantle). From experience, the process was often adversarial, and without direction. On that note, I am suggesting, not a solution, but a direction. What if our starting point on issues of sexuality was a sacramental perspective? In other words, before we address specific biblical texts or Anglican formularies, we think about how we do that, and what we bring implicitly as well as explicitly. In the present case, I am commending sacramental thinking as an interpretive framework (i.e. a theological hermeneutic).

Sacramental thinking, as such, is premised on the belief that God as mystery imbues the universe with unconditional grace. Moreover, the principal sacrament of the Eucharist has been shaped by the table-practice of Jesus. Consistently, the focus of his teaching was the reign of God, which he interprets as a banquet. Certainly, the earthly Jesus was partly captive to the first century; but the banquet of the risen Christ transcends contingent historic, social, and cultural constraints. Here is a remarkable, life-giving, Christ-like, theological horizon for starting anew important discussions in the Church. So, I am not saying *anything goes*. I am saying, however, that our starting point makes a significant difference to the conclusions we draw.

In conclusion, this is an invitation to a *thought experiment*, that is, an experiment in faith. Instead of a controversy, it may in fact be a precursor to renewal that is deep and enduring. So, let me leave you with some questions:

- What about seeing the sacrament of marriage as a gift for the purpose of enriching loving relationships, rather than the possession of particular groups?
- What about approaching same-sex marriage from a sacramental perspective?
- What about seeing a theology of grace as foundational?

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