

LUTHERAN (ELCA)

My Spiritual Journey by Pastor Peter Boehringer
Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Manchester, NH

In a previous blog I shared that the congregation I serve is a caring and loving place that accepts all people as they are, and that I, as a pastor, and as a person, would rather err on the side of grace. Shortly after I wrote that piece and posted it, my words were put to the test. A gay couple who have been vital members of the congregation for years asked me to preside at their wedding here in New Hampshire (a gay marriage state). I responded immediately by saying that indeed, I would perform their wedding.

My decision is the end result of many years of reading scripture, meditation, prayer, and conversation with trusted friends, family, and colleagues. My decision was certainly not immediate. As little as two years ago, I did not see myself ever presiding at a gay wedding. I was one who advocated that prior to sanctioning LGBT weddings, the Church should revisit the Doctrine of Creation, and clearly espouse a justification for reinterpreting a long held doctrine. Even though the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America opened the door to LGBT pastors in committed relationships, and the possibility of weddings in 2009, to date, no rite exists as for such a practice, so that those of us who choose to do such a wedding are largely on our own (and could face discipline).

I have come to the conclusion (as many others before me I suppose) that much of our visceral reaction to homosexuality has to do with its threat to patriarchal society in general, and to male dignity in particular. Despite a few passages in the Levitical code found in Exodus and a few sentences written by St. Paul, which we take largely out of context, the Scriptures do not create hostility to homosexuality. It has been hostility to homosexuality that has all too often prompted Christians to eisogete into the Scriptures our own fundamental prejudice and fear. Let's be clear; Christians have long since banished most of the Levitical code with the understanding that the code's concerns (for example the ban on eating shellfish which had more to do with the order of creation than sin or cleanliness) are not concerns that can be carried into the modern world. In most areas of our lives, my Lutheran brothers and sisters have moved beyond biblical literalism. No one is suggesting we turn the clock back to accept slavery, and most of us long ago acknowledged the tremendous contributions to the life of the church brought about by the ordination of women. Yet, the prohibitions against homosexual activity have remained.

One can certainly understand ancient Israel's prohibition of homosexual activity. The twelve tribes were infinitesimally small in comparison with the nations that surrounded them. Every body, every birth counted. Having children was a sacred national duty, and failure to participate was a treasonous abomination. Thus, barren women were much to be pitied and held in contempt, and homosexual activity was proscribed.

For me it has come down to this: I have come to realize that it is no longer my my task as a person or a pastor to try any longer to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages

that condemn it (that work has been more than accomplished by more worthy scholars), but how to reconcile the continuing persecution, punishment and rejection of LGBT people with the love of Christ, and the Doctrine of Justification. More and more I have lived through it and realized the disconnect. I have written of the Westboro church on a previous occasion, but their hatred and hostility toward the LGBT community further clarified a moral dilemma. How can a church, or an individual, bear witness to the ever widening circle of Christ's love as witnessed by the Gospels, Acts, and the letters of Peter, John and Paul (even considering Paul's prohibition of unnatural relations) and espouse such hatred for any group of people? The two positions are irreconcilable. We're left with discerning what the norm is for Christian life. In order to do this, we move beyond visceral reactions, we move beyond what is "natural" or acceptable, we look beyond the law that condemns us, to the heart of faith: the love of God in the Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ that saves. The Gospel.

Everyone is fond of quoting John 3: 16, "For God so loved the world...," but alongside this we can lay 1 John 4:17-21, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from Jesus is this; those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." The church has not always carried out this commandment, and while we can find fault with some on the Christian right (as it is known), the wider church throughout history has sown the seeds of disrespect and hatred for LGBT people, in such a way, that it should hardly surprise anyone that some people have chosen to use church teaching as the foundation to legitimize violence and hatred. I must admit, that over the past several years, I have found myself wondering how much responsibility the church must bear; how much responsibility I must bear for the epidemic of young gay and lesbian people who have committed suicide. We have, all too often, by our silence, given tacit approval to a heinous injustice. I have also, along with many of you heard the mantra that God "hates the sin" but "loves the sinner." Unfortunately, those who have been beaten, abused and even murdered, did not receive the ministrations of individuals acting in the name of a loving God.

In the end, I have come to the conclusion that if my ministry is going to have any integrity, if I am going to be any kind of vessel of the faith of the church, if I am going to exhibit any of the qualities in my life that do honor to the love of Christ that has been poured out so gracefully to me, --someone's sexual orientation cannot matter. Our relationships should be judged by their inner worth, by their spiritual breadth and depth, and not by the accidents (in the theological sense) of sexuality. There is nothing in Scripture that confines love; live giving and life affirming love, to the heterosexual community. It is God's own possession bestowed on all.

As intimated above, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the church in which I am ordained moved beyond biblical literalism a long time ago (a discussion of literalism must be reserved for another day). Is there anyone eschewing pork these days? Historically, this church has played a significant

role in the anti slavery movement, and we moved far beyond literalism with the ordination of women. It is, in my humble estimation, long past time that we did so for the LGBT community.

"And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice..." (Micah 6:8)

Walter Brueggemann wrote, "Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them."

Justice redefines the world. To do justice is to intervene in the workings of the powers and principalities of the world as Moses did with Pharaoh when he insisted on freedom for the Hebrew slaves. Justice is Nathan standing before King David and protesting David's murder of Uriah the Hittite. Justice is Elijah calling out Ahab and Jezebel for killing Naboth to steal his vineyard. Justice is Jesus welcoming to the table tax collectors and sinners. Justice is Jesus at the well of Sychar welcoming a lost child of God back into the community. Justice may be our realization that Scripture does not create hostility to homosexuality, but that our hostility to homosexuals has been projected onto Scripture.

Justice is saying that we cannot qualify the love of Christ poured into the human heart. Justice may be recognizing again, for another group of people, that what God has made clean, we may not call unclean. Justice may be saying to these people as well, "what God has joined together let no one put asunder."

I will be sharing more as time goes on.

Peace,

Pastor Peter Boehringer