

LIKE THE WIDENESS OF THE SEA?

Lewis B. Smedes

I remember the first time that I watched the General Synod of my (Christian Reformed) church in action. The Synod met back then (late 1940's) in the reading room of the old Calvin College library and, since there was no separate gallery for visitors, some of us got to nestle close enough to the delegates to make us feel as if we were right there in the dugout with the real players. The delegates, as they looked to me, were, most of them, old, all of them male, dark suited, and with such solemn demeanors they gave me the impression that they might that day be sealing the spiritual future of the world-wide Church. I was brand new to churchly deliberations then and when I now try to recall my feelings, the word "awe" does not feel to me like a huge exaggeration. But, then, this was no ordinary Synod.

On the table that day was the church's long-standing policy of excluding a certain class of Christian people from its inner circle. These were people who confessed their love for God and their faith in Jesus as their Savior and lived exemplary Christian lives in every way. Except one. And that one exception was serious enough to disqualify them for membership. It had to do with their marriages. They had been married once, then divorced, married again to someone else, and were committed to keeping their covenant with each other this time. That was the rub. Odd as it may have seemed to an outsider, precisely because these people stayed faithful to their marriages, they were, in the church's eyes, implicitly committed to sin and for that reason alone were excluded from the circle of grace.

The church believed that by excluding them it was simply obeying the word of the Lord. For the Lord had said, in terms that seemed as clear as mineral water, that people who stayed married to anyone other than their first spouse (if, to be sure, he or she were still living) were devoted to a life of continuous adultery.

"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another she [also] commits adultery." (Mark 10:11)

There it was, the Lord's Word, simple, uncompromising, absolute, with no casuist's accommodation to special cases or extenuating circumstances. People who divorced one person and then married another are really, in the Lord's sight, not married at all, but are only having an adulterous affair. And that was that. True, Jesus did not expressly say that, once wed, they went on living in sin every day of their married lives. But the church had long inferred, and with a certain logical necessity, that if divorcees commit adultery by marrying another person, they must be recommitting adultery every time they have carnal knowledge.

Harsh as it seemed, the church believed that its exclusion of such people was nothing else but obedience to the clear teaching of the Bible. The Bible said that adulterers cannot be members of the Kingdom of God. Jesus said that divorced and

remarried people are adulterers. And so any Bible believing church had to exclude the remarried from the Kingdom of God and the Body of Christ.

The only way they could clean their slate with God and the church, then, was to break up their marriages. The ideal solution would be for them to have gone back to their previous spouses. But in the event that their previous spouses had also remarried, maybe bred a nest full of young ones, and had no intention of breaking up their families, the next best thing was to live as celibates. Either way, go back to their first spouses or stay celibate, their only entree into the church's inner life was to break up their present marriage.

What their exclusion always came down to, outwardly, was banishment from the Lord's Supper. They may have been welcomed at its Sunday services, invited to its scalloped potato suppers, permitted to put money in the offering plates, and quite possibly been well liked by everyone in the congregation. But banishment from the Supper signed and sealed the church's judgment that they were banished from the circle of grace and the fellowship of Christ. While some churches may construe the supper to be a public dispensary of Gods grace, for mine it was a private meal for certified Christians. And when such a church turned you away from the Lord's Supper, it was saying that, no matter how nicely you fraternized with the saved, you were - as best it could tell - an unsaved soul.

The church could keep the matter this clear and this simple, however, only as long it leaped directly from the Lord's blunt statement about divorce and remarriage to its own banishment of divorced and remarried people. No pausing to consider any special circumstances that might have made their divorce necessary. No pausing to discern the love and devotion that the remarried people had for each other in their second marriage. No stopping to consider how bitter and cruel the consequences of its policy were for all the people it affected. As long as it read Jesus' words with no regard for the devastation that its policy inflicted on the human families involved, especially their children, the church could go on believing that it was only following Jesus' own instructions.

But once it factored human reality into its reading of the Lord's words, it was bound to ask: Could Jesus have actually meant the church to cast away people who were committed to him, on grounds that they were committed to each other too? It was thus, on that early June day a half century ago a new breed of church leaders pleaded for the church to change its policy of exclusion to a policy of embrace.

In what must have been one of the better debates in the history of churchly Synods, they pleaded with the Synod to consider the fact that these people wanted to be faithful to their spouses and to their Lord. They asked the Synod to consider the tragic consequences of compelling them to divorce again. They asked the church to consider how spiritually betrayed such devoted Christian people felt when they heard the church's door slam in their faces over and over again.

The ministers who challenged the tradition of exclusion lost the debate the year I heard it. But they had put it on the church's agenda, and no-one could take it off again. Finally, in the middle 1950's, the church did reverse its policy of exclusion and began embracing divorced and remarried couples into its family circle. The grace of Jesus Christ, it decided, could bless and support remarried people in their second marriage. The result is that today, rather than requiring them to break up their second marriages and families, it devotes itself to helping them keep those marriages alive and well.

How did the church come to such an amazing reversal of its age old exclusionary practice? Was it because the champions of embrace argued more persuasively? Was it because the party of embrace just happened to have the majority at a given Synod? Was it because the Spirit moved the hearts and minds of delegates in a new direction? All of these factors, human and divine, were doubtlessly at work. But congregations paved the way for the reversal by a change in their personal experiences with divorced and remarried people.

First, more sons and daughters of the faithful were getting divorced and were marrying again. Before World War II, the church could comfortably exclude such people on the assumption that they would very rarely turn up among their own loved ones. After the war, however, local congregations discovered that persons whom they loved as brothers and sisters in Christ - and, yes, their own children - were doing it. And it was very hard to look their own sons and daughters in the eyes and say to them: "You will go to hell unless you leave your present spouse."

Second, ministers and congregations were revising their sense of the sacrament. Reformed congregations had always had double vision when they looked at the Lord's Supper. At one level, they saw it as the prime occasion for the faithful to signal that all was well between them, their God and their brothers and sisters. At another level, they saw it as a gift of strength to help unworthy sinners fight the good fight. Earlier, people focused on the first vision; you could tell it by the buzz that bounced through congregations when anyone stayed away from the Supper more than once. After the War, they focused on the second vision; they came to the Supper, not to witness that all was well with them, but just as they were, "torn about with many a conflict, many a doubt, [with] fightings within and fears without" and so they came "without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me."

Third, the church came to see that it had to factor the consequences of its policy into its discernment of what the Lord required. When it had seen the cruel consequences of its practice of exclusion, it also came to see that Jesus simply could not have meant to lay down a hard-fisted rule for excluding remarried people from the family of faith. Instead, it concluded, the Lord must have been witnessing to God's original intention for married people, an intention that included keeping our covenants to each other as long as we lived. But if, in our broken life, people did get divorces and did marry again, surely God would want them to keep their covenants the second time around.

In these ways the way was being paved for a new policy of embrace; the hearts of the people were ready for it.

I have gone on this long about my church's about face in its ministry to divorced and remarried people in order to set the stage for asking about its exclusion of another group of Christian people. I refer to homosexual people who trust in Christ as Savior and want to follow him as their Lord. More specifically still, I have in mind Christian homosexual people who have committed themselves together in a monogamous partnership. These Christian people have always been, and still are, officially disbarred from membership in the inner circle of the church.

Which brings me to the question that I wish to raise.

Was the church's embrace of people who were once divorced and are now living faithfully in second marriages a precedent for embracing homosexual people who live faithfully in covenanted partnerships?

To answer this question, we must answer two others first. The first question is this: Is a partnership of two homosexual persons morally similar - in relevant ways - to the marriage of divorced and remarried heterosexual people? The second question we must answer is this: Does the Bible's word about homosexuals lay down a rule for excluding partnered Christian homosexuals from the church's fellowship? Or does it witness to God's original intention for sexual orientation without laying down abiding rules for the church?

How can we find the answers to these two questions?

It seems to me that the only way to answer the first question is to take a good look at what is really going on with partnered Christian homosexuals and then compare what we see in them to what we have seen in remarried heterosexuals. And the only way to answer the second question is to go back and study the Bible's teaching on homosexual behavior in the light of what we have discerned about what was really going on when homosexual people committed themselves to a monogamous partnership. In short, we have to do the same thing the church did when it decided to embrace remarried people.

Are the two situations significantly and relevantly like each other? Let me share five ways in which I think they are.

Both divorced and remarried partners and homosexual partners are seeking to fulfill a fundamental, God-implanted human need for a shared life of intimate, committed and exclusive love with one other human being.

Both are fulfilling their God-given human need in the only way available to them, not what the Creator originally intended for his children, but the only way they have.

Both are striving to do the one thing the Lord considered supremely important about all sexual relationships: they are living their sexual lives within their covenants with each other.

Both are trying to create the best lives they can within the limits of personal conditions they cannot change.

Both want to live as followers of Christ within the supportive embrace of the Church.

It seems to me, therefore, that the moral and spiritual situations of divorced and remarried heterosexuals and the situation of homosexuals in a covenanted partnership are significantly similar. Enough alike, at any rate, to lead us into the second question: Is the biblical basis for excluding partnered Christian homosexuals any stronger or clearer than it was for excluding divorced and remarried heterosexuals? I suggest that we examine just one passage, Romans 1:18-27, the text most scholars agree is the New Testament's most definitive judgment on homosexual behavior.

In this passage, Paul tells us that God had abandoned people who refused to worship and give him thanks for his gifts. These God-forsaken people - bereft of the restraining presence of God - lapsed into a swarm of deplorable behaviors with which most of us are experientially familiar. Some of them fell into unnatural homosexual lusts with which most of us have had no personal experience. (Mind now, God did not abandon them because they had done such things. They did them because God had abandoned them.)

Who were these people, the ones who were having sex with partners of their own gender? Temple prostitutes? Pederasts? People engaged in wild orgies? Nobody knows for sure. But it seems to me that we can be certain of who they were not; they were not the sorts of people that I am talking about in this essay - Christian homosexual persons who are living out their need for abiding love in monogamous and covenanted partnerships of love. Three things about these people tell me that the apostle could not have been talking about them.

The people Paul has in mind had refused to acknowledge and worship God and for this reason were abandoned by God to their lustful depravity.

The people I am talking about have not rejected God at all; they love God and they thank God for his grace and his gifts. How, then, could they have been abandoned to homosexuality as a punishment for refusing to acknowledge God?

The people Paul speaks of had turned from "natural" heterosexual practices to homosexual practices.

The Christian homosexuals that I am talking about have not given up heterosexual passions for homosexual lusts. They have never been heterosexual. They have been homosexual from the moment of their earliest sexual stirrings.

The people Paul had in mind were constantly lusting after each other and in their actions were only following their lusts.

The homosexual people I am talking about do not lust after each other any more than heterosexual people lust after each other. They seek abiding personal companionship, enduring love, shared intimacy and complete trust from each other just as heterosexual people, at their best, do. Their love for one another is likely to be just as spiritual and personal as any heterosexual love can be.

Hold on, wait just a minute, a sharp reader may say: "You ignore the fact that Paul said that these people were doing something contrary to nature. If what they did was contrary to nature in Paul's day it must still be contrary to nature today. And their sexual practice does not become more natural by doing it in monogamous partnerships. Remarried heterosexual people's second marriage sex is natural. So what makes the cases essentially different from each other is that one is natural and the other is unnatural."

Well, Paul certainly did consider the sorts of homosexual behavior that he had observed (or heard about) to be contrary to nature. But what he meant by "contrary to nature" none of us knows for sure. The traditional Catholic and Reformed view has been that it was contrary to nature because, to be natural, sex had to be capable of conceiving children - a view derived reasonably enough from the simple biblical story of how God created his children. Therefore homosexual relations are not natural and, being unnatural, they are essentially different from and much worse than the sexual relationships of remarried heterosexuals.

But not many modern evangelical Protestants believe that only baby-making sex is natural. Most believe that God meant sex to be the most intimate way to express love within a committed partnership. To be consistent, then, modern evangelicals would have to agree that, at least on this score, homosexual relations within committed love can be as true to nature as are heterosexual relations within committed love.

The whole argument would be avoided, some say, if homosexuals were willing to be celibate. When the church asks homosexual Christians to be celibate, they say, it asks no more of them than it asks of any single heterosexual person. But in fact it does ask more, much more of homosexual people. To single people in general it says: you must choose between celibacy and marriage. But to all homosexuals it says: You have no choice; you may not marry and you must be celibate.

The apostle conceded that most heterosexual people did not have the gift to be celibate. Such people, he said, were free to get married even though celibacy might have been more ideal for them. (1 Corinthians 7: 8,9). If Paul thought that most

heterosexual people lacked the gift of celibacy would he not have thought that at least some homosexuals lack it?

In sum, then, the promiscuous and lust-driven people Paul was talking about in his letter to the Romans could not have been, it seems to me, Christian homosexual people who - being left with no better option - choose to live together in covenanted partnerships. And the biblical ground for excluding them from embrace within the church is actually weaker than was its ground for excluding divorced and remarried heterosexuals.

Early on, back when I was talking about divorced and remarried people, I mentioned three shifts in the church's consciousness that were going on behind the scenes and preparing the way for their embrace by the church. Let me recall them. For one thing, the church became sensitive to the growing number of divorces and remarriages among their own sons and daughters. For another, the church began to see and feel the sacrament more as medicine for our spiritual illness than as a symptom of our spiritual health. And, thirdly, it became more aware that it could not tell how the Lord's Word about marriage should be applied to real people unless they also had eyes for the real people it affected.

It seems to me that our attitudes toward Christian homosexual partners are being modulated these days in exactly the same way. And I wonder whether the changes might be preparing us for the consideration of a new policy of embrace just as they did half a century ago.

We have, in the first place, begun to see the "homosexual problem" in the faces of beloved homosexual persons who are our own or our friends' sons and daughters. We have, in the second place, become more sensitive to the sacrament as a support for Christians who are trying to do the Lord's will for them even though the Lord's ideal is out of their reach. And, thirdly, we have begun to see that we need to factor our discernment of what is really going on with partnered Christian homosexual people into our understanding of the Lord's will for the church's policy toward them.

Recall that I began this long discussion by asking this question:

Does the church's dramatic move from the exclusion to the embrace of divorced and remarried Christians provide a precedent for an embrace of homosexual Christians who live together in a committed partnership.

My own answer to my own question is, Yes, it does seem to me that our embrace of divorced and remarried Christian people did indeed set a precedent for embracing Christian homosexuals who live together. And I am here and there, as mothers and fathers of homosexual people tell me their stories, picking up signs of hope that eventually the church will see it as I - and they - do.

This is the end of my argument. Before I quit, however, I need to make a couple of personal remarks.

Some homosexuals feel devalued when people like me say that their orientation and their way of life is not how the Creator originally intended his sexual children to live out their sexuality. They say that their homosexuality is as at home in and native to God's creation as heterosexuality is. Some say that it is God's special gift for them to celebrate and thank him for just as their sexuality is gift for heterosexuals to celebrate. I cannot believe it is. I have not found quite the right word for it, but it seems to me that homosexuality is a burden that some of God's children are called on to bear, an anomaly, nature gone awry. But I do believe that homosexuality is the only raw material they have for living as good a life of sexual love as they can within our broken world where so much of life is bent out of shape.

I believe that God blesses us when we improvise on nature's lapses. To create my own family, for instance, three mothers had to have given away their own children. And my children had to suffer the deep trauma of being torn away, long before their time, from their mothers. Surely Doris' and my way of family making was no part of God's design for the family. But I know that he gives his supportive grace to such improvised families as mine. And, in the same way, I believe, he gives his supportive grace to the way homosexuals improvise marriage-like covenants for themselves even though they cannot by sexual means create families.

Some time ago, an elderly couple of a fundamentalist persuasion told me about their fear for their daughter's soul. She had left their church because she could no longer accept some of its fundamentalist demands on her life. The daughter still confesses Christ as her Savior, but her parents consider her denial of some fundamentalist standards an equivalent to a denial of the Lord. Their sorrow and fear for their daughter made me very sad. And, as happens to me often these days when I feel sad, a hymn popped into my head as a kind of anti-depressant: "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." I wished that my friends could believe that mercy so wide must embrace their daughter even if she is no longer a fundamentalist believer.

My church's exclusion of homosexuals who confess Christ and live together in committed love makes me very sad in the same way. And when I think about it, I am haunted by the same hymn. Is there really a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of sea? Is his mercy wide enough for people who, through no choice of their own, have no other way to fulfil one of the deepest of all human needs but the way that my wife and I have fulfilled them for fifty years - in an abiding partnership of lasting love? I think I know my own heart well enough to believe that if his mercy is wide enough for me, it must be wide enough for them.

Lewis Smedes (1921 - 2002) was a renowned Christian author, ethicist, and theologian in the Reformed tradition. He was a professor of theology and ethics for twenty-five years at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.