

Loving the sinner? Yes please ...

September 17, 2007 Commentary by Roger T Schellenberg

A Good Question: ... As Episcopal Churches go I guess you'd have to say we're different here at Church of the Spirit. We're a blend of catholic faith and sacraments along with worship that focuses more on your relationship with God than on "doing church." Our structure here is different too ... we have no committees, don't focus on meetings, but do have a wide range of workshops and small groups that help you find a place to connect with others, and of course, with God. That's because for us we're more concerned with building a relationship with God and building a community with one another. That raises a question though, posed by one of our visitors recently: What does the church say about being welcoming, affirming and inclusive? On the whole it's hard to say you're against any of that. "No I'm not welcoming!" But there's more to that question than meets the eye. And even more than you might assume about the answer, any way you look at it.

Someone recently wrote me and said, "What I want and need is a community of people who accept me as the woman I believe God made me, and who accept my relationship to be as true and as good in God's sight as any heterosexual marriage." The person went on to ask whether Church of the Spirit was that kind of place. That's an excellent question to ask. I'd like to offer an answer that might be helpful to us all in the current controversy in the Anglican world.

On Your Personal Identity ... OK, well let's start by identifying who we are ... First and foremost I see each person I meet as a beloved child of God. That for me is who God made you and me to be.

To think God decided to make you with specific desires really puts God in a very manipulative place. I figure that my hair color had more to do with genetics than with a choice God made (not that he couldn't be involved). Did God make you have desires for people of the same sex? I wouldn't think so, but then I am not a scientist. From all that I have read, there is an ongoing discussion within the scientific community over whether sexual orientation has to do with genetics or with how a person grew up, i.e. nature vs. nurture. Few discussions if any, suggest God chose some people to be attracted to people of the same sex.

So God made you a child and sees you as his child. And me too. I don't like to define people by other sets of issues, desires, thoughts, names ... as if there were black children of God and Asian children of God and Republican or Democratic children of God, lesbian, gay, and straight children of God, or even "theologically-trained, motorcycle-riding, middle-aged, white, ordained, Mountain-Dew-addicted" children of God. We are children of God, and yes, we have things that makes us each unique. But the main thing is our relationship to God. I think you are saying that you identify yourself as a person with a particular lifestyle or as a person with a particular sexual orientation. I don't. Just like I'd rather not have people identify me and treat me as a "straight guy," and that somehow summed up who I really am. Like I don't eat quiche and I am not sensitive. It seems to me we are more than our desires. And I'm not comfortable letting my desires define me, when I believe God has already defined me as his own.

I am willing to accept you just as God has made you. I hope you'll accept me in the same way, as a brother, and a child of God. What a person's sexual orientation is, just like what a person's desires and likes are, is not a determining factor in any way as to being part of the church family. At least not any church to which I have belonged ... I hear the Bible tell me that once we are "in Christ" we are "no longer slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile" and God loves us not for who we are so much as because of who he is. So all are welcome ...

As for the community here at Church of the Spirit, I can't speak for them. I see us as a largely conservative theological bunch, but then there are people who believe all kinds of things here. I can't guarantee how anyone will be treated. I can say we value welcoming all people and all questions. We are not, however, equally welcoming of all doctrines or ideas. There are some things we simply believe to be true, and that means there are some things we do not believe. And we try hard to be clear and say so. In the same way I can't tell you fully how you will be viewed in God's sight. I sometimes try to speak for him, but I am not him. We can all be happy about that.

Now About That Bible ... Which leaves me with how we as a church look for answers to the big issues of the day. Not everyone agrees on this one, which explains our current controversies. I can, however, speak for myself, as a leader of a local congregation.

I look to the Bible as the ultimate standard for faith and behavior. That's been the officially adopted stance of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church for a long time (though at the moment it is a big issue to be sure). All of the controversy in the Anglican Church and the Episcopal Church seem to me to stem from how we look at the Bible. In what ways is it authoritative for us today?

Some folk want to say. "Whatever is in my Bible is the truth, the whole truth and that's that." They miss the subtle ways in which language is used. Do the seven days of creation refer to 24 hour periods of time or are they symbolic in some way ... is the story of Jonah a parable or historically true? We can ask these kinds of questions of the Bible. We can look more closely at what is said. For instance, when Jesus says, "I am the gate" who really expects to find hinges on his back? The other extreme says we are smarter now about things than the people were when they wrote the Bible, and so the Bible needs to be updated. The most recent document from the House of Bishops in this country has just restated this principle. Everything in the Bible needs to be reinterpreted based on our present understanding of God. But what if our present understandings are faulty, or culturally conditioned? I am amazed at the naivete that claims to discard portions of the Bible because Paul was a man of his culture, but neglects to see the danger in thinking your interpretation of the Bible is free of our own 20th Century cultural interpretations. So, who gets to choose what needs to be updated ... and how? And if some parts of the Bible can be thrown out, then what authority do the other parts have? If, for instance, we do away with the image of Jesus ascending into Heaven (as Bishop Spong of NJ has suggested), then on what authority do we keep the fact Jesus rose from the dead? You see how it gets to be a slippery slope?

In between these, I work hard to understand both the original context and the original intent of the Bible's authors. I believe the words of the Bible are the ultimate authority in my life, trumping all others. But that does not mean I will give up on thinking and questioning, or in listening to what others have said about the Bible. That's what was meant by the three-legged stool in Anglicanism, that we value all three ... Scripture, Tradition and Reason ... but Scripture still holds the highest place for us. And as for new interpretations of the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit, I simply do not agree with the House of Bishops document that tells us the Holy Spirit will lead us into new truths that contradict what God has already said and done. Like God got it wrong before and now is smarter?

It's About Behavior ... So what can we do with the verses in scripture that talk about homosexuality? First some critics call them the "clobber verses" because they have been used to persecute those with alternative lifestyles. That persecution is a sad statement about the church to be sure. Not its finest hour. To be honest, the church has had a number of times when it has not lived up to its high calling. I suppose that should be obvious since we let all kinds of fallible people into our churches, and allow some to become priests (fallible people like me for instance). Some of us would say we're in one of those times right now when the church is acting up instead of acting well. But to call some verses of scripture "clobber verses" is not altogether fair to the Bible ... for the few verses in the Bible that talk about homosexuality are part of a much broader set of teachings about all human sexual behavior. It's absolutely true that the Bible never talks about homosexual orientation — or any other orientation. That is not

condemned. Even the Roman Catholic Church in its new Catechism written in the 1990's said that a homosexual orientation was not sinful. But while the Bible does not talk about a person's orientation or desires, it does have a lot to say about our behaviors, and which behaviors lead us closer to God, and which ones get in the way of a deeper relationship with him. The church around the world and through the centuries has acknowledged that it is hard for us all, straight, gay, trans-gendered, whatever, to live in ways that honor God. Our desires often tempt us to do things we should not.

(One of the problems in 20th Century Christianity has been its focus on homosexuality as if it were the biggest of all sins in the world. It's simply not. There are other sins like pride and violence and failure to meet the needs of our neighbors, not to mention self-righteousness, that rank so much higher ... Even in the early church homosexual activity was considered a small sin indeed. When did sexuality become the litmus test for all things Christian?)

For me personally to say that God is OK with people expressing themselves in sexual/physical behaviors outside of marriage, I would have to get rid of the plain reading of hundreds of verses of scripture, the tradition of how the Bible has been understood and is still understood by Christians world-wide, and what I believe makes sense. I'm not going to do that, even though I would be seen as more modern and caring. I find the truth to be always quite modern, even if it comes to us from ancient times, and the truth remains the best way to experience God's love for myself. So I'm sticking with what I believe God has said ... no one made me in charge of changing God's words. No one died and left me in charge (certainly not Jesus ...)

I understand that the Bible's call to chastity is a challenge for people. For all people. And not just the LGBT community at that. After all, the same standards for behavior in the Bible tell me that it's not appropriate for the man who is a widower to be sexually active outside of marriage; the woman who's husband is institutionalized for mental illness ... her need for sexual activity with another man may seem understandable, but is not spiritually helpful to her; sexual activity before marriage for anyone will lead people into lives that honor God less than in relationships where sexual activity is left for later ... each of these is a similar example of not living up to the standards of God. You see, for me it's a much bigger issue that strikes to all of us as children of God. I also recognize that no one, as the Bible says, no one lives up to God's standards. Paul says, "We have all fallen short, everyone one of us." Me too. So I have no basis to condemn anyone. My job here is to shine a light on the path that I believe God has shown that leads us closer to him.

Loving The Sinner, But ... Some folk say we should love the sinner but hate the sin. Others say if you call their identity sinful you are not really loving them ... not unless they change. So which is it?

Here's a problem with identifying yourself not as a child of God but with one of your desires. We are all sinners, so loving the sinner is our only option. Do you want me to say that your desires are not sinful? Well OK, temptations themselves are not sins, it's what you do with them that matters. Do you want me say that your sexual activity is not sinful? I can't say that. Folks, if you go outside of God's ways you are separating yourself from God (i.e. committing a sin). Do sinful actions keep you from coming to a church? Nope ... otherwise churches would all be empty. Can you love someone and still want them to be changed? (No wife jokes please ...) How could we not love people and yet hate their sins? One main message of the Bible tells us again and again that we are to be changed, transformed, by the power of the Spirit at work in our lives. All of us ...

So, loving the sinner and not having to affirm everything that person does is not a bad thing. It's all we've got, really. Otherwise, how would anyone love me? How could I hope for God to love me? I think I am only fully accepted by God because he's such a good sport, and not because of anything I am or have done or could do. And thanks be to God, God is so loving. Otherwise I would be toast. Mr. Rogers may love me just the way I am. I think

God only starts there, and asks me to become something much more, in fact, to become like his son. What do you think God is calling you to be?

If you are struggling with these issues as a gay or lesbian person, I have a question for you. “What would you do if as you were seeking a closer relationship with God, as you were praying and listening and experiencing his presence in your life ... what would you do if you felt convicted that God was asking you to be just who he created you to be, but to also live within the boundaries of being chaste?” Or let’s put it this way, “What if God said, ‘I know about your desires, I know about your needs, but here’s what I am asking of you. I want you to live in a way that is sexually pure ... so your desires can be more about me.’” It’s something to think about ...

If you can not conceive of God asking you to remain chaste, whether you are married, single, gay or straight, that would say a lot about how you view God, and about what comes first in your life. One local church leader in the 1800’s suggested that when it comes to God’s truth, we should each “follow the truth, whatever it costs and where ever it leads you.” That’s what I am trying to do in my life. I pray you will also.

