

Head and heart

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, August 2, 2009.

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined together in every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.
Ephesians 4:15-16

In the Book of Exodus we read how God provided the Israelites with manna, a form of unleavened bread to sustain them on their journey in the wilderness. In his letter to the people of Ephesus St. Paul asks us to lead a life of humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit. When we are one body and one Spirit, God equips us for the work of ministry to build up the body of Christ. In John's gospel we read that Jesus is the true bread of life. He is all we need for sustenance as he gives life to the world. He is the one through whom all differences in the life of the church are resolved. It is he before whom we humbly kneel in adoration and praise.

While the task of the church is to be an instrument of reconciliation, the sad fact is that the Episcopal Church has experienced unprecedented divisions, largely over the issues of sexuality, but not entirely. It began with the church becoming involved with the issues of race and war, then the ordination of women, and more recently, reaching out to those of different sexual orientations.

At the recent General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Anaheim, California, there were many different issues that came before them, including the church's response to global poverty, hunger and disease and a strategy for ministries to Hispanic and Latino peoples. The only thing that was reported in the news was the church's response to people in same-sex relationships. Nothing else was reported of the church's work in missions, evangelism, and outreach. The unity of the church has been rent asunder by those of different cultures who disagree on the interpretation of the scriptures regarding sexuality. Yet we still proclaim one Lord, one faith one father of us all in the unity in Christ Jesus.

Faith is what enables us to move from the theoretical to the practical, from the abstract to the actual. The true test of our faith is how we live our lives and how we regard various issues, given our different cultures. For centuries in the history of the church there have been priests and bishops who were gay or lesbian who led faithful and honorable lives and ministries. I know that people are upset with those who are open about their sexuality and that the church seemed to get along without talking about it. It seemed that we were comfortable with the elephant in the living room as long as we didn't talk about it. Over the years, the church's leadership is far more diverse than when I began. Then, lay people, in particular women and girls, people of color, and gays and lesbians had little or no significant place in the life of the church.

Historically, homosexuality was termed as deviant behavior and was considered in psychiatric circles as a mental disorder. Given what we now know, homosexuality is no longer considered a pathological disorder. What seems unnatural to heterosexual people is quite natural to homosexuals. The real pathology is the attitude of disgust and revulsion toward them. For the past generation, we have reexamined much of our thinking about same-sex

relationships in a culture so clouded with the ignorance and fear. Most everyone has a family member or knows someone who is gay or lesbian, yet many are still uncomfortable talking about it.

Most of what the Bible has to say about this is found in the book of Leviticus that tells us that when a man lies with another man as with a woman, *they shall be put to death*, (20:13), This same book of Leviticus forbids eating leftovers, (19:7) planting two kinds of seeds in the same field, wearing garments of two different materials, (19:19) and wearing a tattoo, (19:28). When you read further you find that adulterers will be put to death, (20:10) and those using God's name in a curse *and the whole congregation shall put them to death by stoning them*. (24:16). Furthermore, anyone who is blind or lame or has a broken foot or hand, or is a hunchback or a dwarf shall not draw near to the altar. (21:16-19).

In the New Testament, St. Paul condemns effeminate males along with adulterers, thieves and drunkards whom he says are not worthy to inherit the kingdom of God, (I Corinthians 6:9). Jesus says nothing on the subject. This tells us that we must be very careful when we try to use the Bible to prove text a point of view. Historically, Biblical literalism was used to support the institution of slavery, the subjugation of women and the exploitation of children. Were it not for movements that challenged the status quo, slavery would not have been abolished, women would still be the property of men and would not have the right to vote, and children would still be working long hours in factories.

Sexuality is a gift from God. Some people are created heterosexual and others are created homosexual. We have no real choice in the matter. Both orientations have the capacity for wholeness and integrity as well as for abuse and destruction. People of the same gender can and do live in long term committed relationships that are faithful, monogamous and wholesome.

Our church has always lived with the tension of tradition and change. Tradition has to stand the test of time and must be examined and reexamined for its relevance and usefulness. Tradition for its own sake becomes traditionalism, the dead faith of the living. Episcopalians have a long tradition of using both our head and our heart in thinking theologically. What has long been accepted has to be examined to see if it still makes sense.

For years, the church stood on the sidelines and when we got involved in the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the ordination of women, the changes in the liturgy of the Prayer Book, there were those who did not believe we should be involved in change. Not everyone agrees on the appropriateness of including those with different sexual orientations in the life of the church but the last time I looked the *Episcopal Church Welcomes You* sign still lists no exceptions. Jesus as the bread of life did not single out people unworthy of being fed. We are all sinners in need of redemption and it is up to God to make judgments.

We may only be able to agree to disagree and we must respect differences, but I am not willing to sacrifice integrity for the sake of unity. If we are to maintain our integrity in Christ, we must give witness to his love at all times, in all places and among all God's people.