

A Pastoral Statement

A Pastoral Theological Reflection on Blessing Same-Sex Unions

Covenantal Unions: What we believe we are doing when we bless them

What do we think the Church is doing when it blesses same sex unions? And how do such unions relate to Christian marriage as described in the Book of Common Prayer? As we attempt to answer these questions, our hope is that a spirit of "mutual forbearance" (Eph 4:1-3) and respect for conscientious disagreement will continue to prevail among us, for the sake of our common witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A holy or covenantal union is a godly, life-long covenant of two persons to be faithful to one another in mutual care and affection, becoming one with each other, as a means of sanctification and for the service of God. Since same-sex marriage has no legal status in Pennsylvania and since neither the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) nor the Canons have yet been altered to authorize use of the marriage liturgy for same-sex couples, members of the diocese may only use the liturgical rite approved for use by the action of the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

Pastoral theological reflection on the blessing of same-sex unions may help us more deeply ground our understanding of all covenantal unions in Christian faith and discipleship. We believe that the (a) goals, (b) vows, and (c) sacred character of all covenantal unions are at the least similar to those of Christian marriage as defined in the Book of Common Prayer. All such unions involve the "sanctification of nearness" and can be a means of grace and promote growth in holiness in those who participate in them.

The Purposes that Define Covenantal Unions

We believe the Christian marriage is the model for all human relationships built around the union of two persons. In the Book of Common Prayer, three goals (or ends) are given for Christian marriage. They are: mutual joy, the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity, and "when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord" (BCP, p. 423).

Mutual Joy

Mutual joy mirrors the divine joy among the three persons of the Trinity, who give themselves to each other for all eternity in a perfect communion of mutual love among equals. Human beings are never so fully one as the Trinity, yet the triune being of the one God is the creative source of our human tendencies toward friendship, community, and ecstatic joy in the near presence of the one who is beloved.

The Help & Comfort Given to One Another

The second goal of covenantal unions reminds us of God's consistent fidelity to God's covenants—and, above all, of the mystery of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32). Covenantal unions point us to the "godly respect" (*agapé*) that Jesus showed for all people, which Paul, in turn, recommends as a model for life in Christian community (Philippians 2:1-18). Pure love in which each person seeks the good of the other in an unqualified manner, sets the standard for any and all Christian community, including that which exists within any covenantal union. The fact that we fall short of it in no way detracts from this standard. This purpose is central to the vows that the partners in any covenantal union make.

Moving Beyond the Self

The third purpose of a covenantal union extends beyond the couple. In Christian matrimony itself, this is expressed in terms of the procreation and Christian nurture of children. This third purpose as stated in the BCP is qualified by the phrase "when it is God's will," because not all unions involve children, whether through birth or adoption. Where a couple has children, their union must be open to welcoming them and forming them in the knowledge and love of the Lord, in imitation of Christ's own hospitality and his call to discipleship. At the same time, all covenantal unions, with or without children, must have a purpose beyond themselves. This is what is reflected in the prayer: "Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others." (BCP, p. 429) Like Jesus himself, Christians live in community not purely for their own sake but also for that of their neighbors. Covenantal unions, therefore, strengthen us to love and serve the Lord.

The Vows that Effect Covenantal Unions

In the BCP, the promises and vows that frame Christian marriage help frame the sort of relationship the Church is blessing when it blesses a same-sex, covenantal union. The form and content of the vows should be fundamentally the same for all covenantal unions.

Each person promises "to take" the other as his or her partner (in the BCP, the traditional, gendered terms, husband and wife, are used) "to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death" (BCP, p. 427). Similar definitions of this kind of relationship are found in the declaration of consent earlier in the liturgy (BCP, p. 424), which highlights the voluntary character of the union. The declaration adds "forsaking all others" and the notion of being "faithful." Hence, *exclusive fidelity to a single partner* is presupposed and put into effect by the promises.

Three things should be noted about the promises and vows themselves.

- They are *lifelong* in intent. The Church now recognizes the tragic reality of divorce and makes pastoral provision for remarriage under certain circumstances, but the couple ought to work to preserve and nurture their union, so that it may endure for a lifetime.

In some cases, such as abandonment, adultery, or abuse (physical, emotional, or psychological), divorce may be the best option.

- Three clauses, "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health," express an *unconditional commitment* to the partner, regardless of circumstance. No hedging of bets is permitted. As already noted, this is related to the second goal of covenantal unions of all sorts, "the help and comfort given to one another in prosperity and adversity."
- The heart of the vows is "to love and to cherish." "Love" means that Christ sets the standard. Covenantal unions involve a *vocation*, a calling to love our partners as Christ loves the Church. Neither passion nor romance, important as these are, is sufficient to sustain a couple in this vocation over time. Friendship and *agapé*-love of the partner are both necessary. Covenantal unions, as Christian communities, are schools of charity, in which we encounter difference and practice forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation. "Cherish" indicates that covenantal unions are close and intimate relationships, unions "in heart, body, and mind" (BCP, p. 423) in which each partner to the covenant places a preeminent value on the particularities and person of the other partner.

An additional consideration to note is that these vows are witnessed, not only by God but by the community. No provision is made to write one's own vows. This reflects the fact that one is entering into a *publicly accountable institution* and *divinely-given covenant*, not of one's own making. This is not to denigrate the relationships of those couples, same-sex and opposite-sex, who may decline for various reasons to enter into publicly accountable unions. Their experience and presence among us does raise important and complex issues for Christian ethics and pastoral care, to which the Church must also respond, but since they are not seeking the Church's blessing, these issues do not concern us here.

The Sacred Character of Covenantal Unions

The last remaining task is to say something about the sacred character of covenantal unions. In the Prayer Book, the Church is said to celebrate, witness, and bless a marriage but never to create it (BCP, p. 423), where "celebration and blessing" is used in the title and "witness and bless" in the first full paragraph after the rubrics). The union of the couple "in heart, body, and mind" is something they enact in all the details of their life together before God. In fact, the relationship being blessed precedes the liturgy of blessing, and it continues to grow and be nurtured afterwards. Nevertheless, the act of celebrating, witnessing, and blessing does create a change, even for couples who have been together for some time. Within the liturgy itself, *it is the couple's exchange of vows that effects the union*. The blessing comes later in the rite (BCP, p. 430), after the couple has already made their public commitment and the community has prayed (BCP, p. 428-429). The change in question is fundamentally one of mutual, unqualified commitment, publicly offered and witnessed, in the context of communal celebration and blessing. The grace conveyed is related to the form of the signs used to signify that grace. As the liturgy unfolds, the couple's life together comes to embody the faithful, mutual, loving union of Christ and the Church. If same-sex unions are defined by substantially similar purposes and vows and are blessed in the context of a similar liturgy, then the sacred reality is at least

similar. Through sacred actions, God continues to make the incarnate Christ visible, tangible, and effective throughout history and in the lives of human beings. Such actions draw us ever deeper into the mystery of Jesus in his living, dying, and rising for the life of the world – the essence of the Gospel message. In turn, the Holy Spirit, who fills them with their life-giving power, is always one and the same.