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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Have Faith in Love

By ERIC LAX

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THE election, two months ago, of the Rev. Mary Glasspool, a priest who has been in a committed relationship with another woman for more than 20 years, as a suffragan (assistant) bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, [has brought added turmoil](#) to the Episcopal Church in the United States and to the worldwide Anglican Communion. There has been sporadic schism since the regular ordination of women as priests in 1977 and especially since the election of the Rev. Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003. He is the first openly gay bishop in the history of those Christian bishops — Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Greek and Russian Orthodox among them — who trace their succession back to the apostles.

In protest, several dozen parishes have aligned themselves with conservative Anglican bishops in Africa, and the Roman Catholic Church has offered to take in disaffected Episcopalians. In 2008, the leadership of the Anglican Communion, to which the American church belongs, tried to keep things together by urging the Americans not to elect other openly gay people as bishops until the Communion could establish more common ground. The Los Angeles electors' choice of a gay woman as bishop has pushed the denominational envelope to the point of tearing.

The Glasspool election and its ensuing uproar make me realize how much has changed since 1976, when my father, who came to the Los Angeles diocese as a priest in 1947, died. About the biggest controversy within the church during most of his ministry was over proposed revisions to the 1928 Book of Common Prayer.

At that time, marriage was strictly Adam and Eve. Gays were closeted, whether they were in the congregation or the male-only priesthood. Until 1971, when women were first ordained as deacons, the highest post a woman could attain was member of the vestry, the elected group that manages parish business. But even that was uncommon; usually the highest ranking woman in the parish was the leader of the altar guild, which arranges the flowers in the church, sets up the Eucharistic vessels and washes and irons the linens used in the service. Women could not be priests because — according to the reasoning that had held for two millenniums — none of the apostles was a woman. This made as much sense as saying that, as none of the apostles was a scholar, scholars could not be priests, or that because all the apostles were Jews, only Jews could be ordained.

In 1977, I interviewed one of the controversial new priests, the Rev. Carol Anderson, for an Esquire article, and thought she was simply marvelous. Twelve years later, as either coincidence or a wave of the hand of God, she arrived as the new rector of my now nominal parish, All Saints' in Beverly Hills, and we have become great friends. Oh, and now the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church is a woman, Katharine Jefferts Schori.

These changes did not come until I was in my 30s. I had always been deeply devout, an altar boy from age 6, a regular at church camp and then on its summer staff, and the vice president and then the president of our diocese's Episcopal Young Churchmen. I attended Hobart College, in Geneva, N.Y., which is affiliated with the Episcopal Church, my tuition paid in part by a clergy scholarship. Until well into my 20s, I gave regular consideration to becoming a priest myself.

I had a good model in my father, a man of immense humor who understood the frailties of humanity and who annually challenged his faith by reading agnostics from Thomas Huxley to George Bernard Shaw. He was a solid defender of Anglican orthodoxy and the guidance of the New Testament, but he also believed that every bit of Christian teaching could be summed up in three words: God is love. "The miracles," he once told me, "are window dressing."

Love. Treat others as you would have them treat you. If you feel you are a child of God, then honor your common and equal status with others as children of God. Except (and there are always exceptions with sibling rivalry) if they are women and therefore not qualified to perform the holiest sacraments of the church. Except if two members of the same sex engage in long, committed and faithful love; God may be love, but this love is ungodly.

Just look, some vigilant Christians say, at the "clear teaching" in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 ("Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers — none of these will inherit the kingdom of God."); in 1 Timothy 1:9-11 ("The law is laid down ... for the unholy and profane ... for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God."); and especially in Romans 1:26b-27 ("Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.")

I know that this will offend some Christians, but the notion that Scripture is perfectly clear is wishful thinking, as a recent white paper prepared by the All Saints' clergy demonstrates. The writers of the four Gospels don't agree on even so simple a thing as which people were present at Christ's empty tomb. Considering that, over the centuries, the Bible has been translated into and out of multiple languages, it only makes sense to consider the context of what's written rather than believe that every word is literal divine revelation. In rebuttal to the notion of a clear teaching of Scripture, the evangelical author and speaker Tony Campolo has said that "sodomites" is a word of dubious translation. "Nobody knows what the word means," he said. "Interestingly enough, up until the 14th century it was translated as masturbation."

Timothy's reference to sodomites, for its part, is in the context of boys who were castrated to maintain their feminine and childlike characteristics and then exploited for sex — a far cry from two consenting adults of the same sex consummating their committed love.

Today, there is much reference to the supposed Christian teaching that marriage is a sacrament between one man and one woman, but it was not until the 12th century that marriage became a sacrament in the Western church.

Sex, though, has always been a particularly Christian problem. Orthodox Jews are commanded to marry, but the early Christians found celibacy a high calling. St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7 that he wished all

Christians could stay single and celibate, as he had. He knew, however, that not everyone could and so he adds, “But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”

Less quoted than Paul’s advice that it is better to marry than to be engulfed by desire is what he says earlier in the passage: “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.” One having one kind of gift and another a different kind is a pretty good definition of humanity in all our variety, and to me this passage expands the heart of what it means when two people, gay or straight, commit themselves to each other in the sight of a God who understands human differences.

A central tenet of Christianity is that all of us are born into sin. Then, as we grow older, we decide that some of our equals sin more than others, and in far worse ways than we do ourselves. We divine the word of God to mean that the acts we don’t like of others — what they eat, how they pray, whom they fall in love with — are an abomination in his sight, as if we can presume to decide in our own way what pleases God, and therefore what acts should be excluded and whom we can judge and damn in his name.

Exclusion always seems to become part of some people’s faith, though often over time what was excluded becomes accepted, only to be replaced by another ban: People of one denomination can’t marry those in another; people of one color cannot marry those of another.

Among my father’s parishioners in the 1950s were two men in their late 40s who came every Sunday to the 7:30 a.m. communion service and who shared a house. My parents referred to them as “confirmed bachelors,” code words for the love that dare not speak its name. They were kind and gentle men, who to even a 10-year-old obviously had some sort of special and personal bond. I am certain that they were in a loving and committed relationship that the church would then not recognize or bless, but as long as the fiction of their just being two people who happened to live together was maintained, they would continue to be accepted and valued members of the congregation. Which, of course, was well meaning but also hypocritical. Now, a multitude of parishes across the country would openly welcome the couple.

My own faith has eroded over the years, though my father’s belief in the supremacy of love still guides me. And so I can’t help but wonder, how can Christians not recognize and honor love that binds two people, any two people, together unto themselves? And if a priest has fulfilled her sacred duties with the distinction that persuades those to whom she would minister to elect her their bishop, and has led an open life of committed love that honors the essence of their God, why should her choice of a partner matter?

Eric Lax is the author of the forthcoming “Faith, Interrupted: A Spiritual Journey.”

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