**A trip through the Castro**

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Ephesians 3:1-13

**Introduction**

If you take the 33 bus from, say, the corner of 24th Street and Potrero in San Francisco inbound towards the Richmond District, you’ll get a pretty good tour of the city. First, you’ll go through the Mission District with its vibrant murals. Eventually you’ll turn at the corner of Haight and Ashbury, and you’ll see the Ben and Jerry’s ice cream stand erected at the epicenter of the Summer of Love. But before that, you’ll go through the Castro district, perhaps the most famous gay neighborhood in the United States. You’ll see bars and stores with names and merchandise I’d blush to repeat and an HIV clinic that I’ve had occasion to take a young person to for HIV testing. But you’ll also see the LGBT museum. And there’s another Ben and Jerry’s close by.

This week’s decision by the US Supreme Court legalizing same-sex marriage has, I think, been one of the defining events of this decade, something that will be remembered for a very long time to come. I’ve seen some pictures of the celebrations in the Castro, and there were some very, very happy people. My Twitter feed and my Facebook wall have been inundated with rainbow-themed photographs and celebratory statements; with some dissenting opinion, of course. But a large number of my friends and colleagues are liberals and progressives, and they have no fear of expressing their joy, while I can tell my more conservative friends are very hesitant to speak, perhaps out of a fear of being called bigots or homophobic. All the big tech companies, such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft, joined in the celebration.

On the one hand, we are witnessing the taming of gay culture and its incorporation into the dominant capitalist story. Gay culture sells ice cream, fashion, banking services, soap, . And what could be more tame, really, than a binding legal opinion from the stodgiest of US courts that gay people can participate in the contract law of civil marriage? On the other hand, we are witnessing the queering of fundamental ideas and institutions such as family and marriage. At the same time, we are seeing the ongoing consolidation of power by capitalist hegemonies which demand the right to declare what is good and fair, and we are seeing the smashing and erosions of old systems of belief and practice.

What’s a good Christian to do?

I feel that I have been too coy about my own beliefs and attitudes towards the major questions of gay inclusion facing the church today, including same-sex marriage, gay clergy, and church membership of gay Christians. With my liberal and progressive friends, I think I appear to go along with what are seen as the right views of liberals and progressives. When my conservative friends, I think I appear to go along with what are seen as the right views of conservatives; although, to be honest, I suspect most conservatives who have thought about it would suspect me of agreeing with the progressives.

And so, I want to spend a little time this morning describing my current understanding of what stance the church should take towards gays in its midst, and towards the general cultural changes it finds itself surrounded by.

I do this not only because of the recent Supreme Court ruling, but because these questions are facing our denomination and conference very squarely. Also, because it is not unlikely that conference and denominational recommendations will be for individual churches to decide what to do about these questions, it seems useful to express my current thinking. Of course, we won’t have time to explore these questions fully.

There might even be a little Scripture thrown in.

**Separation of church and state**

The first thing to remember is that we believe, as followers of Jesus Christ generally, and as Anabaptists specifically, that there is an important distinction to be made between the church and the state. When Jesus was asked whether he had come to take over the world, he replied that his kingdom was not of this world. When Jesus was asked whether his followers should pay taxes, he replied that we should give God what God deserves and give the state what the state deserves. Jesus’s power is not the power of the sword, of violent coercion.

What this means, I think, is the ruling by the US Supreme Court, though it cannot help but affect the general culture and legal environment within the church operates, does not play an especially significantly role in telling the church what her beliefs out to be. This, I think, is very important to keep in mind, because of the very strong victories that gays and gay allies have seen in our legal and cultural environments.

And this is just as true about the general culture. We don’t take our primary cues from the culture around us, which we rightly should regard with suspicion. It is the general culture into which we are born, and as we seek the rack and ruin in our own lives and in the lives of others, we should be hesitant to take our lead from it.

And here’s an example: let’s say I’m interested in investigating some attitude — I don’t know, for example, whether you like kale. And what if, if you told me your age, I could guess with some certainty what your attitude was. For example, if you were 20 years old, you were 80% likely to have a positive association with kale, if you were 30 years old, you were 70% likely, 50 years old, you were 50% likely, etc. I think you’d agree that our attitudes towards kale were more reflective of our age cohort — that is, the general culture surrounding people the same age as us — than the essential goodness of kale. But it turns out that’s pretty much true of US attitudes towards same-sex marriage. If you’re 20 years old, you are 80% likely to have a positive attitude towards same-sex marriage, if you were 30 years old, you are 70% likely, 50 years old, you are 50% likely, etc. Now, I am *not* suggesting that attitudes towards kale and same-sex marriage are mere preferences or equally important. What I *am* suggesting is that our age-based attitudes are neither indicators of progress nor degeneration. What we want is to look to our Bibles, especially through the lens of the life and teaching of Jesus, for guidance.

## Jesus and Paul on Marriage

It is sometimes asserted that Jesus never talks about homosexuality. And this is somewhat true, especially since the word “homosexuality,” wasn’t invented until the 19th century as a technical term to describe same-sex attraction. But Jesus does teach on marriage, in Matthew 19.

Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.”

Jesus’s standard for marriage is even higher than ours. He anchors it in the creation story itself, reminding us that the Biblical account of the creation of humanity was to make us into male and females. So, although same-sex marriage is not addressed directly here, the rootedness of heterosexual marriage in the creation story itself and in the teaching of Jesus is not easily dismissed.

The apostle Paul echoes this in Ephesians 5, and, in fact, reveals that heterosexual marriage, when done well by mutual self-giving, reflects the very relationship that Jesus has with his body, the church – which is Paul-speak, of course, for the very thing that Jesus calls a kingdom.

So, in some sense tentatively, but in all humility, I believe we ignore Jesus’s and Paul’s teaching to our peril.

## Mind-bombs?

On the other hand, I might be wrong. A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon on the mind-bombs present in the preaching of Peter on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given to the church. Peter declares the vast sweep of salvation history: that the Holy Spirit and the church was spreading beyond the male-centered Jewish nation, to Jews everywhere, and to men and women, young and old, slave and free, so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Peter, and then Paul spread the gospel to non-Jews as well. We noted that some of this mind-blowing revelation was seen before the end of the written canon of the Bible: the gospel spreading to some Gentiles, and the Spirit pouring out on some women. But it took 1800 years for slavery to finally been seen as incompatible with Christian equality, and 1900 years for women. And, many would say, this work is still not done.

And so I would suggest we are cautiously seek to understand whether this expanding inclusiveness has anything to teach us, the gay people and the straight people of the church, anything about recognizing the worth and work of gay people in the church. One positive way to describe the divisiveness in the church today over this issue is that we are running experiments in love and boundary setting. Let us continue to discern in what ways the Holy Spirit is working, or not working, among conservative and progressive factions in the church. For example, most Christians involved in “conversion therapies” have pronounced this experiment a failure. And, of course, as I have preached again and again, let us be patient with each other, in all humility working out our salvation and trying to be the body together.

## Lament

Lament for harm done.

## A hearty welcome to a difficult road together

There is so much more to say, and so perhaps this is just the beginning of a conversation in our church. For example, it would be worthwhile to reflect on what celibate gay Christians are saying to the church. Tim Otto, of the Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco, reminds us that when Jesus talked about *family*, it meant something very different from the nuclear family of middle-class America, and it would be good to explore how we can be family to one another beyond (and even in challenge to) the American family system. Wesley Hill, too, has written of the need for the church to meet the relational needs of single people. And it would be worthwhile to reflect on what gay Christians who affirm same-sex marriage have to say: people like Justin Lee, Matthew Vines, and Eve Tushnet.

In any case, as Wes Hill wrote yesterday,

According to the promise of Scripture, *baptized* is a name offered freely to every last one of us, gay or straight or anywhere in between—and it’s a name that means *beloved*. That is the good news the church is given to proclaim, now more than ever.

{THE HARD ROAD}