

Gays as an Occasion of Grace

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CHANGE IS A MYSTERIOUS process. Sometimes it is painful. Most often it is uninvited, an interruption. The telephone rings. A stranger knocks at the door. We find ourselves altered. What at first seemed accidental later seems to have been inevitable. Most adult human beings have had the experience of meeting at least one human being—a lover, a teacher, a minister perhaps—as if quite by chance, only later to recognize a profound destiny at work in the encounter from the very beginning. We sometimes find ourselves remade by the experience, never to be the same again.

I am now in the eighth year of the closest relationship of my life. From the perspective the two of us share, one of the least significant things either of us could tell you about that relationship is that one of us is colored pecan and the other is colored peach. If others did not prompt us to greater awareness, by their own amazement, the two of us would make no more of our rather beautiful difference in color than we do of the fact that we are both deviant left-handers. True, we are nourished by the cultural diversity which our mixture of race imparts to our home, but at this distance, that diversity often gets lost in the far greater cultural similarity, rather as Americans who move to England begin to find how much like us the English are after the Americans get over the initial awareness of the intriguing but ultimately superficial differences.

Yet I was an adult with a master's degree before I ever met a black person with more than a high school education. I was a professional person before I ever met a black person who would ride in the front of the bus with me. In the part of the United States where I grew up our church, our universities, our concerts, our literature, our neighborhood and all of our other structures were segregated. When I graduated from Auburn University in 1959, I would have laughed at anyone who had told me that I would be able to experience with a Negro the reciprocity, the mutuality, the generosity, the love, the justice and the caring which Ernest Clay and I have experienced in these several years now.

"But how is it possible," said Nicodemus, "for a man to be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a

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second time and be born?" (John 3:4)

Or as I might have put it: "Lord, will I enter a black mother's womb to be born a second time?"

The answer was Christ's original one: "Flesh can give birth only to flesh; it is spirit that gives birth to spirit." My rebirth had to be a spiritual one.

"In truth, in very truth, I tell you, unless a person has been born again, she cannot see God's country" (3:3), or if you prefer more traditional language: "the Quendom of Heaven."

Passport to God's Country

The rebirth I dare to evoke today is the rebirth of heterosexuals. The time has come to say boldly and directly that unless heterosexuals can be born again face-to-face with their homosexual neighbors, heterosexuals cannot see God's country. I have it on very good if damning authority that as often as anyone has not ministered unto these deemed the least sisters and brothers, that person has failed to minister to Christ. Or as the Psalmist might put it: God looks out from heaven and sees both heterosexuals and homosexuals. It is God who fashions our hearts very much alike and discerns all that we do. Heterosexuals will not be saved by their great strength, by their power to dictate the laws, to control the literature, to make parishes into hetero clubs. God's eyes are turned towards those who hope for God's unending love. (See Psalm 33.)

In one of the cleverest tracts of our time, psychologist Dr. Raiph Blair has printed on a front cover, "WHAT JESUS CHRIST SAID ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY:" (italics mine). The inside is blank. The backside reads, "That's right; he said absolutely nothing." The more important part of that Gospel is what Jesus Christ said to *homosexuals*: "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only child that whoever believes, will not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Notice that Jesus did not say, "Whoever is heterosexual and believes," but only "whoever believes." Even in the boondocks of the Roman Empire, where homosexuality was surely visible, even as a sign of the enemy invader to some, Christ felt no need to address the subject.

I realize that I am speaking scandal. I am saying that God loves everybody.

The Gospel has always been scandalous.

Some will say that I am tampering with the texts. At St. John's College, the Anglican theological school in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where I shared a sermon on

similar texts earlier this year, one seminarian said afterwards: "But you have chosen only those texts which please you, and you have ignored the others." He had not noticed that then, as now, I have not chosen the texts at all: the texts were chosen by the liturgical officers of many denominations working in concert to appoint lections for Christian meditation throughout the world, and the Gospel proclaimed in these texts states no conditions that limit access for heterosexuals only.

"But you forget to say, 'Go and sin no more,'" another St. John's student urged. To the contrary, then as now I said very little else. I believe that it is sinful for homosexual persons to think of ourselves as less than children of God. I believe that the time has passed for us to go to the back of the bus. I think that it is sinful for heterosexuals not to love their homosexual neighbors as the heterosexuals love themselves. I think that perfect love casts out sinful fear, yes, even homophobia, or the irrational fear of lesbians and gay males.

Very often when I speak to heterosexual groups around the church, some kind person will take me aside afterwards to say, "But, Louie, you're asking heterosexuals to give to gays a kind of care and concern that we don't even give to one another."

A Chance to Choose

I know that. God has often used the despised outcast as a means of grace. It is not I, the tacky Georgia queen, who ask, but God who asks through me: "Do you love me? Feed my sheep."

"But Louie," one member of a diocesan sexuality commission once told me, "you scare these folks to death. Each one here has something to hide—be it adultery, a loss of faith, or whatever. It is as if you had taken off your clothes and said, 'Can you be this honest?'"

Or as a bishop who had punished me publicly merely for speaking the truth later confided, without claiming to reconcile the earlier deed, which must still be on his agenda: "Louie, I have to admit that all is not so orderly in my own household as I would like. My wife and I were shocked to learn recently that our son is living out of wedlock with a woman. What shocked us the most, though, was that we liked the woman he chose to live with outside wedlock better than we liked some others whom he had earlier considered for marriage." (Isn't one of the marvels of our being Christians our ability to be thus vulnerable with one another, even in our disagreements, as we grope for understanding?)

We lesbians and gay men who wear our Scarlet Q openly—and wear one all gays must in this culture, either secretly in one's heart or publicly for all the world to

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see—we who wear our Scarlet Q publicly, soon learn that heterosexuals who react hostilely to us tell us far more about themselves than they tell us about us. A 66-year-old gay told me recently: "Only those who are unhappy in their own lives ever need to take the time to make us miserable." He should know, as he takes their unlove and translates it into munches that keep him at 400 pounds.

On the other hand, redeemed heterosexuals also often reveal the state of their health by the ways in which they treat us. For example, once several years ago I was having coffee in a huge open area in the University Center of the black campus in Georgia where I worked. Feeling hands at the back of my neck, I started to say, "Hi! Ann," as a greeting to my office-mate, only to realize that those huge black hands were not Ann's delicate ones.

I froze. The hands belonged to a former student who was now the captain of the college football team.

"Roger!" I uttered in consternation with a stage whisper to reach him, as I covered my face with my hands.

Roger ignored my concern and started talking about some trivial campus event, his strength still nestling gently at the back of my neck in view of several hundred students, including many who were beginning to stare.

Again I implored: "Roger, you're not even gay. Why are you doing this?"

He continued talking and touching, ignoring my concern.

I could stand the stares no longer, shot out from under his touch, and stood to confront him: "Why are you risking the stigma? Why"

He stared me into silence gently and said for all within six or seven tables to hear: "Louie, don't you understand anything? You're my friend, and I'm talking to you. I don't give a damn what anyone else thinks."

It really is more blessed to give than to receive!

We should not allow those whom Martin Marty calls "the fundelicals" to preempt our own use of the important truth of spiritual rebirth. Too many folks use the phrase "born-again Christian" as if they had taken out a patent on it, with access now reserved exclusively for those who send a pledge to the Moral Majority or to some other political organization.

Gifts Are Not Earned

I have a close friend who was brought up in a rigid fundelical home, where rules

replaced love. Today she is a professional psychologist with a rare gift of love and with much intellect.

"How did you ever rewire all those circuits?" I asked once.

"I didn't," she replied. "I just walked into another room."

"How do I get back into the womb?" asked Nicodemus.

"You don't," Jesus replied. "You just move into a new spiritual dimension."

"What work can I do to get there?" one asked.

"Not a thing," St. Paul answered.

If we, like Roger or my female psychologist friend, are to experience this spiritual change, it will be God's free gift, not because of anything that we can do to deserve it.

Heterosexuals are not the only ones with homophobia to exorcise. For example, I hope that you detected my own homophobia as I confessed to feeling unworthy of Roger's simple gesture of kindness: My fear was not altogether an unselfish concern for his reputation.

Slowly I personally learn to receive God's affirmation in larger doses, mainly through folks like Roger. I confess that I would often rather sit under a gourd vine and complain rather than ride the Greyhound whale to Nineveh, especially when Nineveh or Fort Valley or Stevens Point shocks me by occasional repentance. I have only seen the promised place. I can affirm its existence, but I have not yet walked into it fully. Perhaps I am still too busy trying to rewire the circuits.

It is important that we be very honest about what happens in this rebirth spiritually. The old person dies, but there is no funeral, no sense of sacrifice, for no one of value has been lost. The meaning of my marriage to Ernest is not something he brings to me nor something I bring to him. It is finally not important that the old me, the white supremacist, died. His death was not a sacrificial gift and was of no consequence. The gift—and it is God's, not my own—is the reborn peach fellow, alive, together with the pecan fellow, growing, changing.

The meaning of heterosexual rebirth is finally not important as a gift to lesbians and gays, but as a gift to heterosexuals themselves. Their new self-affirmation is worth far more than is the heterosupremacy which gets killed in the process.

The faith which we are considering is really not new at all. If one counts all the Jews past, present, and future, one still will never match the number of descendants God promised to our foremother

Sarah and her husband Abraham their faith was counted for righteous and you and I here in this time have grafted on to be numbered as the descendants. We are a Sarah people dwell in tents. We believe in change resurrection, in rebirth. This place is our home, for we have staked every on the new Jerusalem.

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