

11 January 2004

Baptism of Jesus, C

Isaiah 43: 1-7 and Luke 3:15-18; 21-22

Theme: Exploring the issue of same-sex marriage within a context of faith

Last year the Courts of Appeal in both Ontario and British Columbia decided that it was unconstitutional to discriminate against gay and lesbian people for the purposes of marriage. And both Churches and courts in those two provinces began to marry people of the same sex.

Last year, also, our General Council of the United Church of Canada met here in Nova Scotia - in Wolfville, you may remember that - and during the course of its 10 days of deliberation resolved to call on the Government of Canada to recognize same-sex marriage in our federal marriage legislation. You probably read about that in the paper or saw it on the news. We made the news!

That was last year. In the several years before 2003, the federal, provincial and territorial governments of our country had begun granting certain rights, privileges and benefits to same-sex partners *in the same way* as they had been granted to common-law spouses, people of opposite genders who chose to live together but not to get married. These include survivor benefits, CPP benefits, the right to adopt children, health plan benefits, and so on.

In our church, in the same years leading up to now, say from 2000 onward, it has been our consistent policy to affirm and work toward the civil recognition of same-sex partnerships; to affirm that human sexual orientations, whether heterosexual or homosexual are a gift from God and part of the marvellous diversity of creation.

If you feel as though this issue sneaked up on you, somehow, then either you haven't been paying attention or we in leadership in the church haven't been communicating clearly enough.

Or maybe a little of both. Because really, here in Shubenacadie, you would not call this a hotbed of homosexual culture, now, would you? There are a few gay couples that I am aware of - you probably know more - but most people who

don't fit the cultural norm, the punks and the goth kids and the artistes and all those living alternative lifestyles, including gay people - most of them tend to leave the villages and the rural communities for the urban centres. It's safer there. And even if people think you're weird in the city, you can just ignore them and make a life.

So maybe we haven't been dealing with this issue here because we don't think it's about us.

But it is about us. If, as some psychologists estimate, 1 in 10 people in our society is gay, then there are probably around 7 gay people in this room. They may be married. They may not even know they are gay. But they may be here, or downstairs in our Sunday School today.

Some of you have a gay child. Or a gay grandchild. You may know that - or you may not have realized it. But it is possible.

Just because homosexual couples are not beating down our door to get married here, does not mean that it isn't about us. And then there is the wider issue of our Christian obligation to care for others, as Jesus did. We even put that in our Mission Statement: We are called to build community through enthusiastic worship, a growing spirituality, and *caring* for the people and the world around us. There it is - caring for the people around us.

Your Session, the elders of this church, have received several pieces of information from our General Council offices over the last year, and several invitations to address the issue of same-sex marriage. At our final meeting in 2003, the Session decided that it was time to do that. We are reading about this stuff in the paper, we are seeing it on TV, it's being talked about in coffee shops and in the parking lot - at least one family has left our church because of this issue, and we haven't even studied it yet.

So, the Session is inviting any who are interested to come to the four workshops in January and February, starting Wednesday, where this issue will be opened up, explored, discussed, understood - and perhaps some action taken. Perhaps not.

Why four workshops instead of one? It's a complicated issue! It deserves

careful attention. And I will be following the workshop process as outlined by our General Council - which our sisters and brothers across this country in United Churches just like ours, from Newfoundland to Nunavut, are also following. We're all walking the same journey. And we are all free to make our own decision for our own congregation at the end. I hope that you will make a point of coming, listening, sharing your opinion and your feelings and praying over this for our little church.

I have done a lot of reading in preparation for this, and I would like to share with you some of what has crossed my desk. These are stories and voices. Every issue about people is told in stories and voices.

Isaiah says: BRING MY SONS FROM AFAR AND MY DAUGHTERS FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH - *EVERYONE* WHO IS CALLED BY MY NAME, WHOM I CREATED FOR MY GLORY, WHOM I FORMED AND MADE.

- Billy, who is 4 says, when someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.
- And Chrissy, who is 6 says, Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.
- And Terri, 4 says: Love is what makes you smile when you're tired.

*The story of Allen and Glen: A few years ago, Allen's partner Glen was suddenly incapacitated by a stroke. To his shock, Allen found that even though they had been together for 23 years, he had no right to make medical decisions on behalf of Glen because those rights belonged by law to the "closest family member." Because the law didn't recognize Allen's and Glen's relationship, the closest family member was defined as Glen's sister, whom Allen had never met. She had long opposed their relationship and had refused to ever enter their house. However, upon the death of her brother, she stepped in and took over the decisions affecting Glen.*

*Allen was not able to meet with doctors to discuss medical decisions. He was barred from visiting. When his partner died, he discovered that he had no right to*

*make funeral or burial arrangements. Glen died without a will, so Allen inherited nothing. Their family home was in Glen's name, so Allen was evicted, and the house sold. Allen received no pension benefits or death benefits.*

The gospel of Luke says: WHEN ALL THE PEOPLE WERE BEING BAPTIZED, JESUS WAS BAPTIZED TOO. AND AS HE WAS PRAYING, HEAVEN WAS OPENED AND THE HOLY SPIRIT DESCENDED ON HIM IN BODILY FORM LIKE A DOVE. AND A VOICE CAME FROM HEAVEN: YOU ARE MY SON, WHOM I LOVE; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.

- Bobby, who is 7 says, Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas when you stop opening presents and listen.
- Noelle, who is also 7 says, Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day.
- Karen, 7 says: When you love somebody, your eyelashes go up and down and little stars come out of you.

*Marti's story: Marti had been in a same-sex relationship for 15 years when her partner left her. The two had jointly raised two adopted children, but the children were adopted by Marti's partner because the law prohibited same-sex couples from adopting jointly. When the couple separated, Marti had no right to spousal support, even though she was the one who had chosen to stay home to care for the children. She had no right to apply for custody and was cut off from any access to the children with no legal recourse. And she was not accorded the protection married couples receive for property division.*

BRING MY SONS FROM AFAR AND MY DAUGHTERS FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH - EVERYONE WHO IS CALLED BY MY NAME, WHOM I CREATED FOR MY GLORY, WHOM I FORMED AND MADE

YOU ARE MY child, WHOM I LOVE; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.