

Loving One Another – A Proposal to Bless Same-Sex Marriages at Portland Mennonite Church

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.” – 1 John 4:7

Key Questions

At Portland Mennonite Church (PMC), our commitment to “seek the peace of the city” provides a framework for discerning the way forward amid our discussions, agreements, and disagreements on human sexuality. We have identified three key elements of peace-seeking: *deep spirituality*, *warm hospitality*, and *active engagement*. They each pose important questions:

Deep spirituality: How are spirituality and sexuality linked? What makes sex/sexuality holy?

Warm hospitality: We all want to be welcoming, but *welcome* isn’t an abstract concept. People are welcomed into something. So what are we welcoming people into? And how do we create space in our community to welcome everyone who is striving to follow Jesus?

Active engagement: How can we bear witness to God’s love for all peoples?

A Theology of Sexuality

In the beginning, the scriptures make clear that we are all created in the image of God:

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

We are all created as sexual beings. Our bodies, our sense of self, the ways we interact with others are shaped by our sexuality. And our sexuality is intrinsically connected to our spirituality; something about being created “male and female” reflects the *imago dei* (“image of God”).

The language that the Bible uses to describe the connection of spirituality and sexuality is *covenant**. We are created in the image of God and, like God, we have the capacity to make and keep deep commitments in ways that make relationships meaningful, joyful, and holy.

In the Old Testament, the prophets used the metaphor of marriage to describe the covenantal relationship of God and God’s people. God was husband to Israel’s wife; God’s love was persistent even when Israel was unfaithful.

In the gospels, Jesus uses the language of covenant to describe our relationships to each other. He affirms the covenant of marriage. When he was asked about a man divorcing his wife, he replied:

* *Covenant* is different from *contract*. A contract is a *static* commitment to the terms of an agreement; a covenant is a *dynamic* commitment to a relationship that evolves and deepens.

“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?’” (Matthew 19:4-5). More broadly, he makes clear that *all* of our relationships are to be marked by fidelity, persistence, lovingkindness, forgiveness, warmth and integrity.

The notion of covenant also shapes our understanding of sex. Sexual intercourse is powerful. It can be powerfully good (healthy, intimate, life-giving); it can be powerfully bad (harmful, damaging, abusive). So how can sex be made holy?

The answer of the church has been *marriage*. The covenant of marriage is a strong enough commitment to contain the power of sex, to free sex from the fear or abuse or casualness that robs it of intimacy. Of course, betrayal and abuse happen; relationships break. We are all sinners. But the affirmation of the church has always been that marriage is what makes sex holy. That is a counter-cultural commitment that stands against casual or promiscuous sex; against anything that objectifies (sexism) or profits from sex (pornography); and certainly and always it stands against all forms of abuse.

We are all created in the image of God. We are all created as sexual beings. We are all created with the capacity for deep, meaningful, joyful, life-giving relationships with God and with each other.

The Practice of Hospitality

At Portland Mennonite Church we want to welcome everyone into a congregation within which we are all called to live out, to embody, to enact the *covenantal* love of God. We want to encourage friendships that are enduring, honest, and joyful. We want to honor the ones who are single and make sure everyone is included in all aspects of the life of the church. And we want to support, bless, and affirm marriages.

We recognize that we don’t all agree. Some of us have discerned that the historic understanding of marriage as being between “one man and one woman for life” is right (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* - 1995, Article 19), and that homosexual sex is intrinsically “sin.” Others have discerned that the Spirit is calling us to welcome people who are gay, lesbian and bisexual into the covenant of marriage, and that exclusion of them is “sin.”

We recognize that a many people at PMC have discerned that the inclusive, affirming stance toward the covenant of marriage is faithful. Some of us have felt frustration with the church’s reluctance to move forward; some of us have feared judgment and exclusion if we come out; and some of us are worried that there is no place for us at PMC.

We also recognize that those who hold the historic view have felt marginalized, disrespected and patronized. Some of us have been afraid of what others will think of us if our views are known; some of us have been offended when we hear “you’ll come around”; and some of us are fearful that there is no place for us at PMC.

The Way Forward

As a Leadership Table, after much discernment and prayer, and recognizing that not all of us agree, we propose:

- That PMC be a community that calls all of us (young and old; single, married, divorced and widowed; straight and gay) to embody the covenantal love of God; we are to love each other as God has loved us all (John 13.34).
- That PMC be a community that affirms marriage as a covenant for life for both opposite-sex and same-sex couples.
- That PMC authorizes our pastors to participate in marriage celebrations as they are led.
- That PMC be a congregation that is committed to being led by the Holy Spirit as we discern what it means to follow Jesus in the Anabaptist tradition.
- That PMC be a community which respects the understandings of people across the spectrum of views regarding same sex marriage.

This means that when a couple from PMC asks to be married, it will be important:

- That they are connected to the congregation;
- That they meet with a pastor to prepare for the marriage;
- That they understand marriage to be a covenant between two people for life.

We recognize that we do not all agree. We lament that this process has caused pain and grief. We confess that it is difficult to hold differing views. Trusting that the Spirit of Christ can bind us together amid our disagreements:

- We will aim to respect the intentions, integrity and faith of all in our community of believers. Our unity in Christ is more important than our diversity of understandings about this issue.
- We will strive to hear voices of people with whom we don't agree;
- We will form a 'Listening Group' to attend to relationships in the wake of this decision; the Group will be made up of people holding diverse views; the Group will report quarterly for one year directly to the Table.

We understand that this sort of complex community can be hard to sustain. It is difficult to hold differing views. But we are committed to this congregation and we trust that even when we disagree we can find a deeper unity in the love of Christ who embraces us all.

May it be so.

- Originally proposed by the PMC Leadership Table to the congregation on October 16, 2016
- Edited and approved by the Table for presentation to the congregation on April 5, 2017

Frequently Asked Questions:

Is PMC still committed to “Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995)” or not? Yes, we are still committed to the Confession to guide the faith and life of our church. This proposal disagrees with one sentence of one article—“Marriage is between one man and one woman for life” (Article 19). Instead, it understands marriage to be a covenant between two people for life.* Historically in the Mennonite Church, confessions have articulated our understanding of faith in a particular time and context. In that sense, they are always in process as we are continually attentive to the Spirit who promises to guide us into all truth (John 16.13)

Is PMC still committed to Mennonite Church USA? Will there be repercussions in our conference (Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference) for our congregation or for our pastors? We are committed to being an active congregation in PNMC and in MC USA. Both the conference and denomination have called for forbearance in our disagreements on sexuality. We do not expect any punitive actions.

How can we all read the same Bible and come to such differing conclusions? We affirm the scriptures as “the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and practice” (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 4). We also recognize that we understand the nature and function of the Bible differently. Some of us read the Bible as the fixed Word of God who is the “same yesterday, today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Others of us read the Bible as the story of God’s people striving to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). In any case, we are committed to the Anabaptist notion that we all have a responsibility to be attentive to the scriptures, to the Spirit, and to each other as we strive to interpret the scriptures faithfully.

* We, like *The Confession of Faith*, also recognize that “Some in the church experience divorce, abuse, sexual misconduct, and other problems that make marriage and family life burdensome or even impossible. ...the church, as a reconciling and forgiving community, offers healing and new beginnings. The church is to bring strength and healing to individuals and families.” (Article 19, Commentary 3)