

The Way Things Look From Here

"A Person and Not an 'Issue' "

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This article is the third in a series of five weekly articles leading up to our annual meeting on Sunday, February 8. The Zumbro Church Council has invited us to enter into a time of discernment regarding same-gender marriage. The purpose of these articles is to provide some perspective during this discernment process. Two weeks ago I discussed, "Why Now?" Last week I explored, "A Shift in Our Culture." Both articles are available at the ushers' stand and on the church website.

I've read several books and articles on the topic of homosexuality over the years. One of the more compelling pieces for me was a brief article by Peter Marty in *The Lutheran* magazine. Marty urges caution when talking about a person's sexual orientation. There's so much more to any of us than whether we happen to be heterosexual or homosexual. In the case of homosexuality in particular, says Marty, we have a tendency to refer to it as an "issue." We can forget that we're talking about real flesh-and-blood people who have personalities, families, and hopes and dreams for the future. [Note: Peter Marty's article is available at the ushers' stand and on the church website.]

I have to admit that back in the 1990s I was talking about homosexuality more as an "issue" and less from a personal perspective. I was leading a study of the first draft of an ELCA social statement on sexuality. It was my first attempt to talk about homosexuality in one of my congregations. I entered into the process with fear and trepidation. Much of the material was new ground for me. Because of the divisive nature of the topic, I wasn't sure what to expect.

The social statement draft differentiated between homosexual orientation (which it saw as a given) and homosexual behavior (which it saw as a choice). In seeking to better understand that choice, the draft asked us to consider homosexual behavior in one of three ways:

- 1) *It's a sin.* The Bible is clearly against it.
- 2) *It's a product of a fallen world.* It's not the ideal of creation but – and this was an unfortunate analogy – something roughly akin to a birth defect.
- 3) *It's a variation in creation.* It's similar to left-handedness; not something morally wrong, just different.

As we discussed these options, I asked people to express their opinions. There were thirty people in the class. Ten voted for option 1, ten voted for option 2, and ten voted for option 3. I wasn't especially surprised by the result, but I was surprised at what came next. I asked the class: *How many gay people do you know?* Those that voted for option 1 didn't know any. Those that voted for option 2 knew perhaps one or two. And those that voted for option 3 knew anywhere from two to ten.

Suddenly a light went on for me. I realized that regardless of how we might think about homosexuality on an intellectual level, or even a moral level, the relationships we form along the way are bound to affect our opinions. Someone has a gay brother. Someone else has a lesbian daughter. Someone else has a gay coworker. These relationships often deeply influence our thinking in this area.

Doesn't this say something about us as human beings? We have a tendency to fear and even judge something from afar. But when we come closer to the situation and attempt to better understand it, oftentimes our fears and judgments subside. "Rules" become less important than relationships. What I

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heard from several in the class is that the gay people they knew “were just like other folks.” Over time they had come to accept them for who they were.

Zumbro’s mission of *building bridges of understanding and peace* prompts me to reach out to those who are different than me. Whether those differences come in the area of religion, or politics, or sexuality, I find that when I get to know people, I often have more in common with them than I first realized. That doesn’t mean that those people and I will always think alike or act alike. What it does mean is that we share many of the interests, the same concerns, the same hopes and dreams. And going forward, I have a decision to make: Will our relationship be defined more by those things we hold in common or by our differences? The more I am able to embrace the things we hold in common, I think, the better I am able to see them as persons and not as an “issue.” And finally, the more I see them as persons, the better I am able to build bridges.

Upcoming articles in *The Way Things Look from Here*:

January 25 – Making Difficult Decisions in the Church

February 1 – What the Bible Has to Say about Homosexuality