

A Letter to the Parish sent on May 24, 2018

Dear Friends:

In 2003, the first summer after my ordination, our national Episcopal Church approved the ordination of the first, openly gay Bishop. The decision plunged our church, nationally, internationally and locally, into intense debate, turmoil and division. As a priest, I was immediately confronted with theological and pastoral questions about gay/lesbian people of faith. Ultimately, these questions included the issue of same-sex unions. Since Episcopalians understand our faith through the eyes of scripture, reason and tradition, I found myself in countless clergy meetings discussing these issues. The meetings were educational, analytical and some even aimed at actual discernment. It was a hard and painful time for priests and lay people.

By 2003, Alabama had faithfully wrestled with inclusion of gay/lesbian people in the full life of the Church for some 42 years, since the national church declared such inclusion a priority. In 2003, the issue of same-sex blessings was undecided, difficult and painful then and surely remains so today. However, in the past fifteen years, much has changed.

First, our State laws concerning marriage between gay/lesbian people seeking monogamous, life-long relationships now allow civil unions, including here in Alabama. Second, our own diocese has established guidelines to allow Rectors and their Vestry to decide if same-sex unions can receive the sacrament of marriage parish by parish. Most importantly, our experience of including all people in the life of the Church, regardless of ethnic, racial, national, or gender identity has repeatedly affirmed that the Spirit of Jesus is best revealed and lived when we seek above all to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

In 2004, when I became Rector of All Saints, I was opposed to the blessing of same-sex unions. My opposition was based on what I read in scripture. Scripture, especially the creation narrative and the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:3-6 led me to believe I was right. For many years, I listened to the stories of parish members, friends, family and strangers that God brought into my path. Gradually, I concluded that the struggle to find life giving community is universal and essential to healthy faith.

As I read scripture, prayed, I began to wonder what God was doing? Both sides of the debate were interpreting scripture to support their own case, out of context and out of history. Clearly, sexual identity and human nature is mysterious, personal and also God-given? At the same time, our church truly needed a pastoral response to gay/lesbian people seeking to live a Christian life and aiming to build their family in the Body of Christ. What should that be?

Then in 2015, our parish experienced a sudden increase in the numbers of faithful, gay couples, some with children, hoping to make their home in our parish. Some were already married and some were seeking a sacramental blessing. I began to strongly believe God was bringing the issue to us and we needed a response.

In January when the new Vestry year began, I requested the Vestry's help with a formal discernment process, that intensified in April and was completed in May. With Charles and Anna Russell's wonderful assistance, I led the Vestry in a decision-making process according to the guidelines established by Bishop Sloan. We read and discussed the most often debated scriptural passages, using the resources from the Diocese, talking, listening and praying. We looked at how our tradition has changed over time and we shared our experiences and stories.

After prayerful consideration, at the end of the process, the Vestry and clergy came to believe that the Holy Spirit is leading us as the Body of Christ, to preserve the Tradition of marriage as we know it, and to expand it to include the celebration and blessing of same-sex couples in marriage. We believe doing so will not harm or threaten salvation and will build up the Body, as Paul urges us, in love. We were united unanimously in our decision. I then talked

with Bishop Sloan about our discernment. I requested written approval and he sent a letter approving the parish to offer such blessings.

In this process, all couples must meet existing guidelines for marriage whether gay/lesbian or heterosexual. These include premarital counseling with clergy and commitment in writing that they are seeking to lead a Christian life and make a monogamous, life-long commitment. Each gay/lesbian couple must also receive the permission of the Bishop. Any clergy can refuse to marry any person, without notifying the Bishop. The sacrament can be offered at All Saints or in a venue away from church.

I know some will welcome this decision and even rejoice. But I also am keenly aware that for some, this will be a disappointing and painful change to accept. We have included a document we hope will answer many of your questions about this decision.

I also pray that if you deeply and strongly disagree with this change, you'll be willing to talk with me about it. I promise I will not try and change your mind. But I want to listen and if possible answer your questions. I respect your feelings and your opinion. In the life of the church, consensus has not always meant agreement. In fact, our church's strength has often been based on placing different ideas about God and life on the altar, as we worship the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, together. Consensus may mean simply, though I disagree, I will aim to live with this difference.

Finally, as Rector, I want you to know I love you and yours. Jesus urged us always to seek unity, as Jesus and the Father are One. I hope and pray that this change will only build up the Body of Christ called All Saints, so that it may more truly reveal the Kingdom that God intends for us all.

Faithfully,

The Reverend Dr. Glenda Curry