

she suffered sexual abuse. She was finally drawn into a series of lesbian relationships through many years.

Her testimony is riveting. Over time, she was convicted of her sexual choices. She received God's forgiveness and healing. Today she and her husband, who also has been liberated from the homosexual lifestyle, teach widely about God's transforming love.

"What should the church do," I have asked friends like Andrea, "to help men and women who are facing homosexual temptation?" They tell me two things. First, the church must tell the truth. Don't send an ambiguous message. "I knew it was wrong," one woman told me. Don't compromise. Secondly, my friends tell me that the church must be ready to welcome those struggling with their sexuality. We must welcome them in our sanctuaries and in our homes. We must commit to costly, loving, caring discipleship. I confess that I haven't always done as much as I should have in forming a community of love and hope for my friends. I have failed them. The church has failed them.

Conclusion

Experience is not a source of true knowledge, apart from the elemental truths of God's word and world. Experiences come into our consciousness like sense stimuli: they can mean practically anything until we submit them to evaluation and interpretation. It is God's Word that helps us make sense of experience and then to conform our lives to His truth. We were designed by God. Marriage was designed by God. But we are sinners - and when we sin sexually, we abuse our bodies and we abuse God's design. The good news is that He can change us and free us. The Church - the Body of Christ - is to be an instrument of that transformation.

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Diane Knippers



The Facts and Faces Of Our Sexual Experience

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Introduction

I was able to attend much of the 1998 Lambeth Conference and was in the pressroom during the debate on the resolution on human sexuality. Ironically, there was a fire alarm in our building in the middle of the debate and the gathered press corps was required to evacuate the building. The bishops, unaware of our plight, went right on with their discussions. You can imagine how upset many of the reporters were at this interruption of what they thought was the BIG Lambeth story. Nevertheless, I heard and saw much of the formal and informal discussion on sexuality at Lambeth. This experience and my own study and prayer has led me to embrace the teachings of our Anglican bishops with great joy and appreciation. Count me as an Episcopal laywoman to whom and for whom the bishops did speak! It is my task, and really my privilege, to invite you likewise to embrace this teaching and be willing to allow its moral authority to guide you.

Naturally, I don't aspire to speak for the bishops. I am going to offer you my own reasoning, reasoning that has been informed by the teachings of the Church, the witness of Scripture, and, I believe, the presence of the Holy Spirit. I simply want to remind you of four points today, points with which I believe most of you will agree. They are as follows: (1) God has designed His creation with built-in facts of life, which include moral and social, as well as physical, reality; (2) marriage has a unique design; (3) God's mercy and grace transform our lives, including our sexuality; (4) God intends the Church to be the place which offers grace and help to fallen human beings. But I know and you know that this discussion isn't simply about verbal points or arguments. It is about people. It's not too long into this debate that we begin to see faces - faces that make us smile and that make us weep. So I will intersperse the

"faces" or experiences of some people in my explanation of how to understand sexuality in today's debates. In some cases I can use their real names, and in some I cannot. Let me begin with those who are promoting the change of sexual norms in the Episcopal Church.

The Faces of Louie and Sandra

Louie and Sandra are activists with Integrity, one nationally known and one I know locally. I've had opportunity to work with or speak with both of them. I like them both. I'm impressed by their apparent sincerity and their love for the Church. I believe they love God. I know God loves them. I also believe that on the issue of homosexuality, they are very, very wrong. I believe their ideas are dangerous - to our church and to our society, and particularly to young people who are exploring and forming their sexuality. So, I must work very hard to oppose their ideas. But everything I say, I say with their faces before me. Faces of a man and a woman whom God loves and calls me to love. From them I've learned that I can love and respect persons with whom I have very strong disagreements and deep divisions.

God's Creation Has Built-in Facts of Life

A sometimes dreaded duty of parents is to instruct children in "the facts of life." As Christians, we believe that God is our creator. So the facts of life includes the truths about our physical creation. We even sometimes call these truths laws, such as the law of gravity. Last Sunday, my rector told us that when he was a little boy he had a vivid imagination. He became convinced that he could fly. So one day, he climbed up on a fence and confidently jumped off, flapping his arms. Naturally, he tumbled to the ground. Even today he has scars on his arms reminding him that one cannot violate God's physical laws.

But God didn't just design His creation physically. We are more than physical beings. We are emotional beings, intellectual beings, social beings, and moral beings. God's ethical standards - His moral laws, if you will - aren't simply arbitrary rules about how we are to live with one another. They are guardrails around the high places where we are tempted to jump off.

So many people in our society are jumping off tall buildings when it comes to sexuality. The lucky ones walk away with scars. The rest are crushed, emotionally and even physically.

The Face of Peter

Peter was a member of my husband's family. I first remember meeting him when we visited him and his then lover in New Orleans - over 20 years ago. It broke my heart to see the behavioral choices he was making - and it worried me. Later, Peter developed HIV/AIDS. He went through times of serious illness and times when he was better. Tragically, he recently died.

Peter is family. Through him, I learned that homosexuality isn't gay. And I've learned that jumping over guardrails, even when we bravely flap our arms, can be deadly.

Marriage Has a Unique Design

Human sexuality is rooted in our physical nature as created beings. We are two sexes, fearfully and wonderfully made for each other. We are created male and female, in the image of God. This is an important point. We are not created heterosexuals or homosexuals. We are created men and women - and that creation reflects the image of God.

A man's body was created to enable him to enter a woman, to fit into her, and her body was created to receive him and his seed. The man and the woman were created to desire one another, and to give each other pleasure. A woman's body - so we are reminded every month - was created to nurture new life, to provide life-giving sustenance and care, both before and after a child is born. This unique physical design of the human person - male and female - is quite evident. And we know that this physical design is related to our whole being - emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and socially. This is a great and wonderful mystery of God's creation. Our sexuality is a miracle and source of wonder. We must treat it with a reverent awe as a gift of God.

Marriage is of course not simply a physical union - as central as what we even call "the marital act" is to marriage. It is designed by

God as a social institution as well. Now there are various goods of marriage: physical union, procreation, mutual joy, help and comfort, sexual discipline, social cohesion, and, perhaps most awesomely, to the call to exemplify the covenantal relationship between God and his people. My husband and I take seriously the calling to live out in our marriage an image of the faithful, long-suffering, sacrificial, joyful, loving commitment of God to His people. This is the evangelistic purpose of marriage, if you will. Thus good marriages proclaim the gospel - the good news that can transform lives and nations.

But once you have compromised the male-female design of marriage by authorizing a substitute, on what basis do you argue for monogamy at all? How do you answer the person who says, "I'm bisexual and I was born that way. Don't limit me to just one sexual partner." Once we have cast off God's gold standard of marriage, how will we ever invent and agree upon and convincingly offer a substitute standard? The only substitutes I've heard proposed are vague notions such as teaching that persons should have sex only with mutual consent and love between them. But we all know many persons in objectively damaging relationships who can offer the excuse, "But we love one another."

The Face of Martha

Martha is a strong, gracious, godly woman. She is an Anglican from an African nation whom I met at the World Council of Churches in Zimbabwe. She was a leader in standing up for biblical teaching about sexuality. I came to admire her and love her. Imagine my shock to discover a personal burden she faces - the fear that her husband may take another wife. She rather matter-of-factly explained that he would consult their children before he does this. What will they say, I wondered? "I will find out if they love me," she answered. For Martha, maintaining God's standard of marriage - in her culture or in ours - isn't a theoretical issue. She knows that if the American church can't say no to alternatives promoted in our culture, her church will find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to say no to alternatives in her culture. From Martha, I learned that the Body of Christ is one - and that what we say and do here ... matters to our sisters and brothers elsewhere.

God's Mercy and Grace Transforms Our Lives, Including Our Sexuality

I no longer believe that there is such a thing as a fixed sexual identity. Our sexuality is comprised of our design from creation, as well as countless physical, emotional, and social influences - both good and bad. We don't have a fixed sexual orientation. We do have sexual desires, longings, aspirations, behaviors and habits. We also influence our sexuality by the habits we develop, the fantasies we nurture, the influences we allow ourselves. Our sexuality changes.

To say that we cannot control ourselves sexually is to dehumanize us. Animals may be at the mercy of their instincts and physical desires. Human beings are not. We *can* change. To argue that we cannot is to preach hopelessness. When we offer ourselves to God, He is in the business of transforming us - our character, our nature, our desires. He is making us holy, by his power and mercy and love.

Of course this isn't easy. I doubt there is a person ... who hasn't at some time or another railed against heaven, demanding to know why our sex drive is so powerful, so difficult to control. I suspect there isn't a person here who hasn't committed a sexual sin. If there is such a person, I would love to meet you and discover your secret! Particularly in our society, so many of us are scarred by sexual sin. We know what self-directed anger, frustration, and shame feel like.

And my friends, these struggles are not unusual. But beyond these garden variety, albeit difficult, struggles, there are people who wrestle with much more difficult addictions and compulsions - pornography, incest, pedophilia. Wherever they are on the continuum, persons who experience same-sex attachments and desires may find sexual control to be very difficult. Transformation will be a long, difficult process.

But God loves us. He changes us. He picks us up when we fall, and fall, and fall. He forgives us again, and again, and again. And he heals us so we can forgive ourselves. Even in a sex-saturated society, we can be free. We can live holy and wholesome lives, some in marriages and some in singleness.

It is possible. The gospel is a message of hope and wholeness, of openness to the future. God's love changed me. That's a gospel we can preach.

The Face of Bob

Bob was homosexually active for several years. I've just gotten to know him recently. He has been wonderfully transformed and healed. Bob is single and is celibate. He is involved in a ministry to and with men and women who seek transformation. While the ministry began with a focus on individuals who struggle with homosexual desires and longings, Bob tells me that they have increasing numbers of heterosexuals who take their courses. These heterosexuals also struggle with sexual brokenness - with desires and habits that are not holy and life giving. Bob is a gentle man with deep convictions - and a passion to share the new life he has found in Christ with others.

God Intends the Church to Be the Place That Offers Grace and Help to Fallen Human Beings

Last night, one of the speakers at microphones spoke of the children of the church. He was asking us what message we would send to gay, lesbian, and bisexual Episcopalians - children of the church. I'll tell you what I think. I think we are failing them. I think we are failing to tell them the truth about God's life giving, life-saving moral guardrails. I think we are failing to offer them forgiveness and hope. But, most seriously, I think we are failing to love them.

Let me be frank. I'm used to hearing criticism of the church from folks who are active in Integrity, for example. But that's nothing compared to what I hear from my friends who have come out of homosexual lifestyles. They charge the church with showing them rejection, distancing, contempt and loathing. At the same time, they were longing for love and acceptance - not acceptance of their sexual behavior, but of them - as human beings.

The Face of Andrea

Andrea is a dear friend of mine - whose life has been transformed by the love of God. As a child,