

From This Day Forward: Gay Marriage and the Episcopal Church

by Polly Ingraham

I'm having trouble finding the church, and it's getting late. On this hot summer Saturday afternoon, my son's birthday, I've driven an hour into the city to see two people I hardly know exchange vows. No one would miss me if I turn around right now, but I have to get there. I can barely remember what happens at a wedding, and—like a person too long in the desert—I need to drink one in.

I am a minister's wife, so you'd think I'd have had my fill of weddings. But there have been no nuptials in my life for too long, and it's getting weird.

More than three years ago, I picked up the local paper (the *Amherst Bulletin*) and read: "To some the Rev. Rob Hirschfeld is a hero, a prophet, even a Gandhi. Others call the rector of Grace Episcopal Church a demon, a moral anarchist, a promoter of eternal damnation." I had seen various sides of my husband through the years, and probably had even called him some names too, but this was new.

The Presiding Bishop of his denomination had recently called on clergy to maintain a "fast" from performing any same-sex weddings. The issue had stoked fiery disagreement in the denomination all around the world; she was asking for a pause to reflect. My husband, after much thought and consultation with the leadership of his church, decided to take her words one step further—he announced, in a sermon, a *complete* wedding fast for a period of one year. "We are called to abstain from any wedding ceremony ... until such time as my bishop ... allows us to celebrate the holy faithful relationship of all persons." He said he understood this would cause some pain, but he asked that we all join together "in solidarity" with the members of the church—and those in the larger society, too—who had been barred from a fundamental sacrament honoring love between two people. At the back of the church that day, he heard almost unanimous expressions of support. Considering that our town—Amherst, Massachusetts—is way left of center, this wasn't surprising.

When the story hit the national news wires, however, Rob found out that he had touched a kind of third rail: hate mail flooded in, mostly from the South. He didn't show me all the vicious messages, didn't even read them all himself, just withstood the vitriol quietly. Our child answered one nasty call from a stranger, but all that soon quieted down. And then, perhaps partly because of the criticism from far and wide, my husband became a kind of hometown hero.

For me, it was a strange time. In my college thesis I'd written about Rosalind and Beatrice—heroines who bring about multiple marriage celebrations in Shakespeare's comedies. Now I had to react to a flood of adulation for my spouse who had just said NO to weddings. Over the tomatoes in the grocery store or dropping off a child at school, it was the same: "Oh, please tell Rob that he's my hero!" or "You must be SO proud of him!" My own work in an urban high school suddenly seemed bland by comparison.

It's hard to say how effective his stance was: many of his colleagues elsewhere said they admired what he did but they couldn't pull it off at their churches. About a year and a half later, Rob did a wedding—just like the old days—for a man and a woman, although the couples didn't exactly come rushing back after that. The fact that the place was under construction and big equipment was all around may have discouraged some lovers from knocking on the door even when the official year was over. And then there's the matter of church affiliation: Rob isn't fond of accepting requests from people who just want a church on a pretty town green—the "drive bys" as he sometimes calls them.

Meanwhile, two summers ago the Massachusetts Legislature (having already legalized same-sex marriage) voted to repeal an old law prohibiting out-of-state same sex couples from marrying here. Newspaper stories happily predicted a whole new wave of wedding business. But my husband's clerical hands are still tied: these couples still cannot get married in his church. Indeed, he stands—uncomfortably—at the crossroads between the political and the ecclesiastical.

Twice I have actually sat in the pew while Rob gave a wedding sermon. The first time, he compared getting married to starting a compost pile and even presented the surprised couple with an actual green bin. When he said something about marriage being the most humbling experience of his life, and talked about all kinds of rotting vegetables mixing together to form something new, I didn't exactly feel flattered. But I understood.

Our own wedding was not held in a church, as my husband might have preferred, but on my parents' big front field, the site of countless baseball and football games over the years. The weather had been stormy, but the sky cleared to a sparkling September blue by late afternoon. My father had recently emerged from a long period of depression and was elated with the whole occasion. He and my mother held hands joyfully, and our best man read some lines by Walt Whitman:

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

During our wedding ceremony, when the priest who married us predicted in his sermon that "You two will grieve together as you've never grieved before" we thought it struck an off-key note. Now, however, we can see that it was, in fact, true. And yet the glory of that day remains.

Coming out of my reverie on this hot summer afternoon, I finally find the church, a nondescript building, and park in a liquor store lot across the street. The groom, my colleague at work, is proud to introduce me to his bride, who is gracious despite being tired of shaking too many hands. I am glad to be there with them on their day. Whether or not churches across the land will sanction same-sex marriages anytime soon, I hope that plenty of souls—gay or straight—will continue to come together in love. After whatever kind of ceremonies they have, in all the various locations, they will begin their joined lives of composting, creating, nurturing, and—yes—grieving. It's all there waiting for them.

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