

Salt Lake: We Have a Problem

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I'm gonna tell God how you treat me
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One of these days

--Hollis Watkins, "I'm Gonna Sit at the
Welcome Table/One of These Days"

. . . We should be careful
of each other, we should be kind
while there is still time.

--Philip Larkin, "The Mower"

This is a true story; it is also a sad story; and it is a story that Mormons—leaders and lay members alike--need to hear.

I got a call last week from a woman, I'll call her Emily. This is her story.

Emily was raised in a large, Latter-day Saint family, one with long and strong pioneer roots. Growing up, she was furiously engaged in the Church, taking seriously its doctrines, standards, and gospel-centered lifestyle. She was aware from an early age that she felt differently about girls and women than she did about boys and men, but didn't attach any particular significance to this awareness. Starting in elementary school and lasting into her college years, she had a series of crushes on her female teachers. She didn't identify her feelings as gay, but when others made comments suggesting that there was something inappropriate about the relationships, even in early elementary school, she felt a deep sense of shame, a shame she didn't know the cause of and couldn't even name.

Wanting to be a good and obedient Latter-day Saint and believing in the promises that a temple marriage held, she married a returned missionary when she was nineteen. On the wedding night and thereafter, she knew something was terribly wrong as she experienced emotional and sexual intimacy with her husband as repulsive, although she still didn't identify as lesbian. In spite of her valiant efforts to be a good, faithful and loving wife, after a year of marriage, she divorced her husband, feeling that it was unfair to both of them to continue in such a conflicted, unsatisfying relationship. Her siblings blamed her for the failure of the marriage as did her husband's family. And although it

was very painful, she had prayed and fasted about her decision and felt a deep peace that it was right because she felt her husband should be loved in the way he deserved to be—something she knew deep within her that she could never give him. Instead of attributing the failed relationship to her being gay, she continued to tell herself that she just hadn't met the man who was right for her.

In the following years, her family kept pressuring her to remarry. Heartbroken, lonely and full of despair, Emily redoubled her devotion to the gospel. For nearly a decade she tried dating other men but the relationships always ended the same way because she never felt emotionally or physically attracted to these men. She threw herself furiously into school, work, and church service, often spending six or seven hours a week preparing her weekly gospel doctrine lessons. She knew she was different. Ultimately she began to fear what that difference was but tried all she could to run from it. She begged God to change her, to make her like all her women friends who were attracted to men. Experiencing an existential loneliness, Emily did the only thing she felt was still open to her—redoubled her efforts to live a righteous, even holy life and turn her life over completely to God.

During this period, she sought numerous blessings at the hands of her bishop and other priesthood holders. Reflecting on these later, she identified a common theme: all of them assured her that the Lord wanted her to be who she was. She wasn't sure she knew what that meant, but finally accepted it as some kind divine validation of her identity. Even so, she saw no way to reconcile being a lesbian with being a Latter-day Saint and, after "crying for months," made a deliberate and careful plan to commit suicide. When the night came to act on this decision, she had what she describes as a profound spiritual experience, one so sacred that she wouldn't describe it to me except to say that it was clear that God wanted her to be who she was as a lesbian even though she didn't necessarily conclude that this validation meant a relationship with another woman. Trusting God, she turned her life completely over to him, assuring him of her willingness to accept his guidance as she went forward, asking only that he show her the way.

At age twenty-nine, after this spiritual confirmation, she acknowledged her identity and orientation as a lesbian, but when she revealed this to her family, the majority of them became even more abusive, accusing her of being a deviant, a pedophile, and under the influence of Satan. They rejected her and cut her off from family events and forbade her from having a relationship with their children, her nieces and nephews. At the time, she didn't even know another gay person.

With a family she felt "hated her" and with no real friends, she once more poured herself into work and Church activity. Within a year, she met Rose at the place where she

worked. Although not a Latter-day Saint, Rose valued many things about the Church and was in fact living its standards. Tentative about the relationship, they slowly began seeing one another but kept their relationship chaste. Emily says that her prayers were simply, “If I am to be with someone and this is the right person, please let me know.” After praying this way for a period of time, she says she heard a distinct voice saying, “You will be with her some day.” Rather than seeing this as permission to move aggressively ahead with the relationship, Emily was once again cautious, saying to God in effect, “I leave this completely in your hands and will accept whatever you desire.” Soon the confirmation came that this was to be a relationship approved by the heavens.

Wanting to keep her covenants and abide by gospel principles, Emily and Rose became bonded through a domestic partnership, the only legal option open to them at the time. Shortly after doing so and having no idea how it would come to pass, Emily told Rose, “I have confirmation that you and I will be married within five years.” Rose was incredulous. Four years later during the 2008 battle over Proposition 8, the California ballot initiative challenging the constitutionality of same-sex marriage, Emily and Rose were married during a brief window in which same-sex marriages were legal. They have now been legally bonded to one another for nearly a decade. Fortunately, family members who once rejected them are now loving and supportive.

Now for the rest of the story . . .

Knowing the Mormon Church’s stance on same-sex couples and same-sex marriage, Emily and Rose have been faithfully attending another Christian church—as they have done for the entire time they’ve been together. Like good Latter-day Saints, they have scripture study, hold family home evenings, regularly fast, and live lives of integrity. Because of Emily’s love for the gospel, she and Rose would periodically attend Sacrament meeting at different wards just so Emily could re-experience the ambiance of the Church she loves so much. Although wanting to attend other meetings, they avoided them because they knew they wouldn’t be accepted if they answered questions about who they were. Recently, Emily has felt during her prayers a strong impression that she and Rose should return to the Church and attend all meetings. She has a deep longing in her soul is to find fellowship with her brothers and sisters in the Restored Church—and to find a place in a ward where she and Rose can worship together. They have also spoken of wanting to start a family and raise their children according to gospel standards in a Mormon congregation. Knowing how the Church regards their relationship and fearing what could be a painful experience if their efforts to find fellowship among Mormons fail, Emily sought the help of several allies in finding a hospitable, welcoming bishop and congregation.

Through connections, I found several possibilities in the San Francisco Bay Area where I live and, let's say, where Emily and Rose live. Believing Emily and Rose would get a warm reception from a couple of bishops others had recommended, I suggested that Emily contact them. She did so for one and had an ally help contact the other one and reported the following:

The first bishop, a university professor, told Emily that she and Rose would be welcome in his ward but suggested that it would be better if Emily severed what he called their "common-law marriage." If she didn't do that, they could still attend the ward but he warned that he would have to "call her to repentance every week," and they could later sit down together and consider Church policies regarding excommunication.

The second bishop, according to a person from whom Emily solicited help, said that she and Rose would be welcome in his ward but that if they attended, he would be compelled to excommunicate Emily—but that she could still attend the ward after that. Emily was told by the ally that some members in this ward still have feelings about Prop 8 which they had experienced as their trial by fire similar to Mormon pioneers' journey across the plains.

After these experiences, Emily wrote, "Oh Bob, why is this so hard for the members of the church? I think it is partly explained by the fact that they do such a good job of keeping gays and lesbians away from the Church that they never have any substantial interaction with real ones; otherwise, they would see the pain that is caused by such misunderstanding and rejection. If they only took time to feel our spirits, hear our testimonies, and understand our hearts, they would see that we are just like them with the same hopes and desires, the same need for love and acceptance." She added, "Not long ago, when Rose and I attended a ward, the sisters in Relief Society actually thought we were visiting from the General Board of the Relief Society! Imagine how surprised they would have been if we had revealed that we were a same-sex couple." She added, "It's disheartening when I consider that if I want to attend church with Rose my options are: 1) divorce her, 2) get excommunicated, or 3) lie about my real name. To me, none of these options seems in accord with God's will." Emily wonders why if the Church now concedes that being gay is not a choice, it continues to believe that Heavenly Father's purpose for His gay children in this life is different from his purpose for his heterosexual children.

What's wrong with this picture? The Church has a problem until it figures out how to deal with people like Emily and Rose. It is hard to believe that people like them who have a sincere desire to worship the Lord and find fellowship with other Latter-day

Saints would not be welcomed in any Mormon congregation without fear of rejection or disciplinary action.

I can't help but feel that their experience (which is certainly not an unfamiliar one to anyone who has been involved in the long and tortuous relationship between the Church and its LGBT members) stems from several factors, all of which seem to me out of harmony with the spirit of the Christian gospel:

As Emily suggests, a basic ignorance among the general membership of the lived experiences of gays and lesbians, of the *normality* of their daily lives;

A plethora of cultural overlays that stereotype gay men and lesbians as perverted, deviant, broken and, most of all, deliberately sinful that many Mormons accept unquestioningly.

A failure to understand that Christ calls his followers to respond to others (including those whom we consider strangers or other) with generosity, hospitality, openness and, ultimately, with love.

The failure of the Church to communicate to leaders and members alike the more loving and enlightened messages found on www.mormonsandgays.org.

The failure of the Church to articulate a clear policy for leaders and lay members alike as to how to accommodate people of good faith who enter into legal same-sex relationships.

Fortunately, not all leaders respond to gays and lesbians (whether legally married or not) as the two bishops described above have. A few bishops and stake presidents are taking an enlightened, flexible stance toward LGBT Latter-day Saints. One bishop in the Bay Area told me that when a lesbian asked if she could come back to church, he responded, "On two conditions: 1) that you bring your partner, and 2) that you accept a calling." I know another bishop who welcomes a gay friend of mine and his family to church where they are fully integrated into the congregation. A stake president of my acquaintance has created a welcoming spirit for gays and lesbians in all of the wards of his stake.

In his recent conference address, Elder Dallin Oaks reiterated the Church's position that outside the bonds of hetero-normative marriage all uses of our procreative powers are to one degree or another sinful. However, most sexual expression among humans, including among Latter-day Saints, does not focus on procreation but rather on physical, emotional and spiritual intimacy. To think of this complicated and even mysterious amalgam of expressions and emotions as primarily procreative is somehow to diminish their richness and complexity as well as their integral role in relationships based on

romantic and erotic attraction. Part of Joseph Smith's enlightened understand of our humanity is that our sexual powers, expressions and pleasures are gifts beyond procreation.

Elder Oaks was very clear, as is the church's website, as to what is currently acceptable in the eyes of the contemporary church regarding same-sex marriage. However, the rapidly changing landscape with regard to same-sex marriage (in which many states and nations increasingly either have or will be making them legal) may suggest that we are in a state of flux, especially, as with Emily and Rose, for those who are legally and lawfully married. Historically, church doctrine and practice relative to marriage have been quite elastic, with various forms (monogamy, polygyny, polyandry) being accepted under certain conditions. In the 19th century under the practice of polygamy there were many kinds of marital relationships, some of which were procreative and some that were not, some that were sexual and some that were not, and some of which were eternal and some of which were not. In the past in Catholic countries that didn't allow divorce, some Latter-day Saint marriages that were technically unlawful were recognized as legitimate by the Church. At one time, at least, common-law marriages were seen as acceptable, if not ideal.

We also have the matter of non-legal heterosexual cohabitation that is common in many wards and branches. Non-married members who fit this category generally not only do not face disciplinary action, they are assigned home and visiting teachers, are welcomed at church services and activities, are sometimes given callings, and are warmly fellowshiped—whether they eventually marry or not. For gay and lesbian couples, especially if they are legally married, this represents a double standard.

What I sense most gays and lesbians want the Church to recognize is that from their earliest years the Church itself teaches all children (whether they turn out to be gay, bi or straight) to desire, plan, and prepare themselves for that deep intimate bonding with another person who ultimately completes and fulfills them. This is taught at their parents' knees, in primary, in Sunday school, in young women's and young men's programs, in seminary—everywhere. No one can grow up in the Church without understanding that his or her crowning achievement in life is to find that special someone and create an earthly and eternal nuclear family unit. To devote one's life to that objective, as has Emily, and then be told that it is not a possibility, at least in this life, causes a profound existential crisis, one that can unravel all prior teachings and obliterate future promises. It is in a sense like growing up in a family in which every child is promised an abundant Christmas, only to awaken on Christmas morning to find that all of the other children in the family have multiple Christmas gifts and surprises, but there are none for you.

Thus, something that is absolutely given in every normal human being to desire and that the Church itself emphasizes as the ultimate human relationship is denied to a significant group of people. Until the Church figures out how to accommodate people like Emily and Rose, I hope that as leaders, congregations, families and individual members we will err on the side of kindness, generosity, and patience, seeking the Lord's direction and praying for a way forward that includes fellowship with our gay brothers and lesbian sisters.

In a recent e-mail, Emily wrote the following: "My relationship with Rose is one that I've sincerely fasted, prayed, and asked Heavenly Father about with an open and willing heart to do His will. I try to stay close to my Heavenly Father because that is the one place that I've always felt safe. This is why I pray fervently, listen closely, and have endured incredibly hard things in order to follow the will of God for my life. I keep trying to come back to the Church because the gospel and the Church are a huge part of my identity. I have hope that one day leaders and members will pray, fast, and be willing to open their hearts to God's answer on this matter even if it may be different from the one they hoped or thought it would be."

In the middle of the night following this conversation, I awoke with a certain spiritual confirmation that Emily 's story not only is true but that she is an extraordinary Latter-day Saint.

Who would not want such a person and her family in their congregation?