

Love and the Christian imagination

Robert A. Rees, Ph.D.

(Keynote Devotional, Affirmation National Conference
Seattle, Washington, 21 October 2012)

Part of what it means to be a Christian is that through the grace of Christ we have the capacity to imagine what it is like to suffer as another person suffers. It is impossible to do this if we have anger, hatred or revulsion for the other. Such imaginative projection is possible only within the context of love. Thus, those who revile and persecute homosexuals, who treat them as if they are flawed or have some kind of sinister agenda, cannot possibly take on their suffering, cannot possibly hope to feel what they feel, but those whose compassion is inspired by Christ, can feel, at least to some degree, what it must be like to be anathema to society. We can imagine what it must feel like to be taught to hate our own bodies, to be condemned for feeling what we naturally feel, to be denied normal fellowship within Christ's kingdom, and to want to blot out our deep soul suffering through suicide.

Reviewing the sad history of homosexuality among the Mormons, I conclude that where we are today as a Church and as a people, though in many ways advanced from where we have been, can best be described as a failure—a failure of faith, a failure of courage, a failure of imagination, and most of all a failure of love.

I want to talk about two aspects of that failure today—the failure of imagination and the failure of love. I don't think one can have a truly mature faith that isn't to some degree graced by imagination. We don't often speak of imagination and Christ in the same breath, but I read the gospels as the product of a great and fecund imagination. It isn't just the inventive language, the subtle irony and humor, and the fresh narratives that flowed from his expansive heart and mind that make Jesus of Nazareth such a great imaginer, but especially his capacity to imagine each of us caught in the snares of sin, lost in the tangled wood of mortality, each uniquely in need of love, mercy and grace. Beyond this was his god-like capacity to imagine each of us as glorified beings, each of our futures a reflection of his present. Only such an imagination, I am convinced, could have emboldened him to descend into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and ascend to Calvary the following Friday.

If we share some of Christ's imaginative gifts, as I believe we all have the capacity to do when we take on us his name, then we can use such gifts to

expand his work in the world. We can imagine not only that, but how, we can be better disciples than we are and the Church a better institution than it is. The Church I imagine, like Joseph Smith's view of God, can be "more liberal in [its] views and more boundless in [its] mercies than we are ready to believe."

The way in which I believe we have failed you our LGBT brothers and sisters is that we have not used our Christian imagination to try and understand your experience or to understand our stewardship in relation to you. Instead of seeing you as Latter-day Saints who have made heroic efforts to conform to Church requirements, we have instead characterized you as rebellious and unrepentant.

Instead of seeing you as exercising faith in promises made by Church leaders and therapists that if you were only sufficiently faithful, you could change your core identity, we have tended to see you as willfully disobedient and unfaithful.

Instead of honoring the often heroic efforts you have made to prove to God and the Church that you were worthy of such a miraculous promise of change, we have accused you of not being sufficiently righteous.

Instead of applauding you for spending years and in some instances decades in therapy trying to deal with your depression, despair, and existential angst over your identity, we have accused you of not being sufficiently valiant.

Instead of seeing you as people who have made amazing sacrifices to fit in with your family, friends and congregations, we have stereotyped you as lustful, narcissistic Sybarites bent on indulging in and celebrating a "life style" that we have labeled outrageous, deviant, and predatory.

Instead of seeing you as desiring the Mormon ideal of fidelity in marriage, we have characterized you as desiring something unnatural and uncivilized.

In short, instead of seeing you as fully human, we have tended to see you as alien and other.

We have failed to imagine what it must have been like for you as children or adolescents when you first recognized that you were different from your peers and the societal norm you were expected to conform to and how frightened you were of telling anyone about your feelings. According to the

recent survey of 1,600 Latter-day Saint homosexuals conducted by Dr. William Bradshaw and his colleagues, on average, participants report a ten-year gap between the time they first realized their romantic or erotic attraction to those of the same sex (around age 12) and their first disclosure of this to another person (around age 22). We have failed to imagine the exquisite fear and loneliness you must have experienced during that long, lonely decade—or how painful it was when you did finally muster the courage to tell someone, only to discover that they rejected you, driving you deeper into your loneliness, despair and alienation.

Nowhere has our imagination failed us more than in our refusal to place ourselves in your lives, in your hearts, your minds, and your bodies, to imagine how we would feel and act if we were asked to do what we have asked you to do—forego all romantic love, intimate affection, erotic expression, marital companionship and parent-child relationships for the duration of your mortal lives. Failing to consider the complexity of same-sex orientation and identity, we have encouraged (and even pressured) some of you to bind yourself to another person for whom you have no such desires or hope of any. We have also failed to imagine how it must be for you to suffer opprobrium, denigration of character, and alienation from the families, friends and congregations you most want to be a part of. We have failed to imagine how you feel on Sunday mornings when you want to be worshipping with your fellow saints and singing the songs of Zion.

Finally, we have failed to imagine the despair, the hopelessness that has led so many of you to take or attempt to take your own lives.

In a talk I gave over twenty-five years ago when I was bishop of the Los Angeles Singles' Ward—addressed to the heterosexual members of the ward—I cited Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," in which Hopkins says that each of us

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—[that is,]
Christ. For [he says] Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

What Hopkins means is that Christ as our advocate takes our part, acts on our behalf before the Father, letting his light shine through our features and faces so that the Father may see us as Christ sees us—

lovely in limbs and eyes (that is, body and soul), in spite of our weaknesses, limitations, and sinfulness.

Since we have the light of Christ within us, since we take on his character when we are born anew through him, thus becoming his children of light, then beyond expressing who and what we are, we also express who he is. Christ justifies us to God, and it is through His grace that when we act before the Father, in a sense we become Christ, because his light shines through us. Christ plays in ten thousand places and through many times ten thousand faces which he makes lovely to the Father through his grace. Those faces Christ plays through are both heterosexual and homosexual. He would bring us all to God.

The Gospel of St. Matthew shows us that Christ intends for us as his disciples to imitate him in this way—that is, that we are to see one another as he sees us, to consciously engage our imaginations as he employed his so that we, like him, can see the very essence of one another's being, in Latter-day Saint terms, see the light of Christ in one another's faces. When we do this, our only response is to love one another with as pure a love as we are capable of manifesting. As the novelist, Francisco Goldman says, "The great metaphor at the heart of the Gospel According to Saint Matthew is that those who suffer and those who show love for those who suffer are joined through suffering and grace to Jesus Christ."

I concluded my remarks to members of the Los Angeles First ward with these words:

I pray the Lord will bless us as brothers and sisters in the Kingdom of God, as those who have taken upon us His name, that we will let Christ's light shine through our faces, that we will make of our community a wholeness, that we will seek that common ground of peace of which Paul speaks, and that we will learn how to love and serve the Lord by celebrating who we are, his heterosexual and homosexual sons and daughters. Because we are all his creatures, we are all born with his light. I pray that we may let that light shine among us, that it might grow, that we ourselves might be its beacon, and that, as a Church and as individuals, we not only will pray to the Lord for greater light and understanding, but that we will turn our

hearts with greater charity, love and acceptance of all of those whom we might consider strangers.

In Matthew 25 Christ puts Himself in the place of the stranger--of the homosexual, if you will, saying in effect, "Inasmuch as you have done it or not done it unto the least of one of these my homosexual brothers or sisters, you have done it or not done it unto me" (25:40).

What does this mean for you, my homosexual brothers and sisters? I wish I could say that you just have to be patient with us, your unimaginative, incomplete and wounded fellow saints, that you just have to continue to endure our spiritual immaturity as we strive to become more enlightened and more loving, but the fact is, you too have this role to play—you must also see us, those who have despised and rejected you, who have belittled and banished you, who have failed to find you in our imaginations—you must see us in the same way Christ calls us to see you. That is, even as we continue to cause you to suffer, you are called to imagine our lives--our fears, ignorance and prejudice that characterize our un-Christian treatment of you. That above all is what it means to be a follower of Christ. With him, we are to replace, ignorance with knowledge, error with truth, injustice with justice and, most of all, hate with love.

I know it is not just for you to have to respond in this way to an institution and individuals who have treated you in unkind, unjust and, yes, un-Christian ways, but if we are to find our way out of the labyrinth we are in, which I think we must do together, it is incumbent upon us all to do what Christ calls us to do. It is through this work that we reform both ourselves and our Church. It is in this constant reforming that we prevent both ourselves and the Church from becoming idols. Thus, in order for this to happen, we have to get out of our social and religious ghettos, see one another's real lives and try to understand one another's lived experiences.

I love the old Shaker hymn titled "More Love," which includes the following lyrics:

If ye love not each other in daily communion,
How can ye love God whom ye have not seen?
More love, more love;
The heaven's are blessing

The angels are calling
O Zion! More love.

If in the Church we can imagine change beyond policy and practice, beyond culture, perhaps even beyond currently accepted doctrine, we may become agents of change and thereby help transform the Church, perhaps liberate it from some of its less enlightened traditions, and even glorify it in new ways, thus demonstrating that we are indeed ready and anxious to receive on this subject new revelation regarding "great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God." As the humanist Ihab Hassan says, "Liberations come from some strange region where the imagination meets change. . . . We need to re-imagine change itself, else we labor to confirm all our errors." Or, as Saul Bellow's Henderson says, "All human accomplishment has this same origin, identically. Imagination is a force of nature. Is this not enough to make a person full of ecstasy? Imagination, imagination, imagination! It converts to actual. It sustains, it alters, it redeems!"

Twenty-one years ago I gave the keynote address at the Affirmation national conference in Palm Springs. In that address, I made an analogy between what was happening in the Church in relation to homosexuality and what had transpired in American and Mormon culture in relation to blacks. I quote from that address:

In his powerful essay, "Notes of a Native Son," James Baldwin speaks about the rage he felt as he went through a series of humiliating experiences as a young man living in New York [City]. He was refused service in a number of restaurants simply because he was black. Finally, the accumulation of humiliations caused him to react with a kind of unconscious violence I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do, but from the hatred I carried in my own heart."

Later in the same essay Baldwin concludes, "In order to really hate white people, one has to blot so much out of the mind--and the heart--that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose. But this does not mean, on the other hand, that love comes easily: the white world [and here one can substitute the straight world] is too powerful, too complacent, too ready with gratuitous humiliation, and above all, too ignorant and too innocent for that Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law."

In a letter to his nephew, James, written on the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Baldwin writes, "There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. . . . We cannot be free until they are free."

Have any of you ever considered that part of your work for humanity might be teaching heterosexuals how to love better? It may not be fair that you are asked to do this, but I believe that it is God's will that you do so because, like blacks and other hated groups, you have experienced the deprivation of love in a profound way, and that deprivation has given you a gift which, if you will use it, can bless your lives and the lives of others. Having been subject to rejection, ostracism, and even hatred, you may understand something about the importance of love which others do not. I believe that it is in rising through our suffering to such love that we attain holiness.

I would like to close with a story that illustrates this principle, Raymond Carver's "A Small Good Thing." In this story a couple, the Weisses, make preparations to celebrate the birthday of their only son, Scotty. They order a cake from the local bakery. On the day of the party the boy is hit by a car and lapses into a coma. The parents wait anxiously by the bedside day after day but their son never awakens and, after a short time, dies. The baker, unaware of the accident, continues to call the parents to come and pick up the cake. Grieving, they do not return his calls. He continues to call and leaves abusive, threatening messages on their answering machine. Finally, one night they go to the bakery to express their outrage at the Baker's behavior. When they tell him that their son is dead, he is embarrassed and ashamed. A simple man, he does the only thing he can think of—he offers them some of his fresh-baked bread. As they sit in the darkened bakery eating, he reveals his own life of loneliness, of being childless, of working sixteen hours a day baking thousands of wedding and birthday cakes and imagining the celebrations surrounding them, none of which ever touch his life personally.

Finally, he takes a fresh loaf of dark bread from the oven, breaks it open and offers some to them. "Smell this" he says, "It's a heavy bread but rich." Carver writes, "They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the florescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving."

This is a powerful story of loss, grief, death, forgiveness, and most of all of love. It is also a story of redemption. The association in the story of bread with light reminds us of Christ who is both the bread of life and the light of the world. Partaking of the bread of life each week, we too taste of his light. (Here I would add that if you do not feel comfortable partaking of the sacrament in a Latter-day Saint congregation, find one that welcomes you and partake of it there.) It is a small good thing we do and is akin to all of the other small acts of understanding, forgiveness and compassion we give to one another. Such acts of love, it seems to me, have their genesis in the light of Christ which is in every one of us. It is our sacred calling to magnify that light in our hearts and souls and to carry it to and receive it from one another as we receive the emblems of Christ's sacrifice, that is, with gratitude and hope.

More love, more love;
The heaven's are blessing
The angels are calling
O Zion! More love.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.