

## One Family's Story

*Bishop Paul Wennes Egertson*



Paul Egertson attended Pepperdine College and Luther Seminary and earned a Ph.D. in theology and culture at the Claremont School of Theology in California. He served as director of the Center for Theological Study in Thousand Oaks, California, from 1979 to 1992. While an assistant professor of religion at California Lutheran University, he shared time as pastor of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in North Hollywood. From 1995 to the present he has been bishop of the ELCA, Southern California West Synod. He and his wife, Shirley, have been married for more than forty years. They have six sons and five grandchildren. His sermons have been published in *Open Hands* (1996), *Augsburg Sermons: Series A Gospels* (1983), and *Augsburg Sermons: Minor Festivals* (1977). He has received several awards of distinction, including one for excellence in teaching in the adult degree evening program at California Lutheran University, and one as World's Greatest Dad on Father's Day 1986, from six boys with short memories.



What do you say after someone you love says, "I'm gay"? That's the question our family faced in 1978 when the oldest of our six sons told his mother and me that he is gay. That's the question Christian church families now face as more and more of our lesbian and gay members muster the courage to publicly share what they have privately known to be true for years.

My wife, Shirley, and I share our family story here, not because it is unique, but because it is a typical account of one way parents respond to the news that a child they love and admire is gay. We offer it with the prayer that it may help other families and our church family as we seek to

understand a reality that will not go away. Looking back now, we can see seven periods of creative development in the transformation we have experienced.

#### DAY 1: DENY IT

Upon hearing the news our son brought us, our first reaction was to deny it. Admittedly, we knew very little about homosexuality at that time. After all, what was there to know? God created people male and female for the purpose of reproducing the human race and provided marriage as the proper setting for it. Sexual activity between people of the same sex was obviously a distortion of nature prohibited by both Scripture and common sense. What more does one need to know than that?

While we knew very little about homosexuality, we knew a great deal about our son. He didn't fit the image we had of a homosexual at all. He had been a delightful child to raise: bright as a whip and multitalented, self-directed and self-disciplined, honest and ethical to a fault, helpful and caring toward others. He graduated from high school with honors and from California Lutheran University with highest honors. Beyond that, he was a devoutly Christian young man, planning to enter the ordained ministry of the Lutheran Church like his grandfather and father before him, not from any pressure to maintain a family tradition, but out of a deep inner sense of call. In other words, he was as ideal a child as Christian parents could hope for in a world where nobody is perfect. We thought, "If he thinks he is gay, he must just be going through a phase of some kind, and when the right girl comes along he will resolve it. In the meantime, let's all keep our heads and not panic!"

The fact that he had not sexual relations with another man was a comfort to us and lent support to our denial of the conclusion to which he had come. But with the passing of time it became as clear to us as it was to him that this denial could not be maintained.

## DAY 2: EXPLAIN IT

When we could no longer deny it, we sought to *explain it*. How had such a fine young man become gay? What caused it? Our state of ignorance was such that only two options seemed possible. Either he had chosen a style of life in contradiction to nature and the will of God, or his mother and I, in our parenting, had unknowingly contributed to a distorted development of his sexuality. Since we could not convince ourselves that this highly ethical boy had suddenly chosen a deviant way of being, the fault must have been our inadequacy as parents. Either his mother had emasculated him by smother love, or I had been a weak and/or too much absent father. We explored that explanation for a while but, self-serving as the conclusion was, we could not realistically see where that had been true in our case. So we went in search of other explanations, and it was here that our education began.

We learned there are several theories on the causes of homosexuality, that they stand in conflict with each other, that none of them can be sufficiently established to produce a consensus, and that the only certain truth at this point in time is that *nobody really knows*. The fact is that across time, nations, classes, races, and cultures, a consistent percentage of people in all populations are homosexual and the fault cannot be laid at anyone's feet. We learned that nobody knows what causes heterosexuality, either.

## DAY 3: FIX IT

When we could neither deny it nor explain it, we sought to *fix it*. There were two options open: divine intervention and psychological therapy. As a devout Christian who knew from early childhood that something was very different about him and who suspected from adolescence that this difference was something unacceptable to God, our son had devoted himself to prayer and trust in the grace and power of God. Preachers said God loved all people unconditionally and could change persons who came with a broken and contrite heart. So for years, night after night in the

privacy of his closet, he took his broken and contrite heart to the throne of grace, praying for God to change him. But God did not change him. Did that mean he was so defective that even a gracious God did not love him? What else is a teenage mind to conclude?

Since divine intervention did not occur, we pursued psychological therapy, only to discover that most psychiatrists and psychologists had long since come to the conclusion that homosexuality is not an illness and that no known system of treatment can change it. Homosexual *behavior* can be changed by conditioning people to be celibate or even to function heterosexually. *But the inner affectional orientation of constitutional homosexuals does not change.* And that was the issue for us, because sexual activity was not the problem. In short, there was no known way to fix it. The best that therapy can do is help gay and lesbian persons accept the reality of their being before the socially imposed shame and the personal pain drive them to despair, drink, drugs, or death by suicide, all of which it does daily to numerous persons in our world.

#### DAY 4: MOURN IT

When you can't deny it, explain it, or fix it, the only thing left is to *mourn it*. Parents have two choices at this point, both of which involve some form of death. On the one hand, you can choose the death of rejection and separation from your child. You can say, *If that's the way you are, you are no son of mine!* You can cut off relations as though the child never lived or as though the child has died. That's an option many parents have taken and an option congregations have regularly chosen in response to their lesbian and gay members. But quite frankly, that was never even an option for us, because we could not believe this son we knew so well was in any sense a perverted person.

The other choice is to suffer the death of your own misunderstandings, ignorance, and attitudes. Then you mourn the loss of a nice and tidy view of the world in which everything fits neatly into boxes of black or white, right or

wrong, true or false. And, as a Christian, you mourn the loss of security provided by a few biblical passages that can tell you which is which so you don't have to take any responsibility for making a judgment.

Along with those losses goes the death of your hopes and dreams of ordinary happiness for your child, particularly as that comes through the joys of marriage, children, and a life approved by family, friends, church, and society. In our son's case, there is also the probable death of any hope for ordination into the ministry to which he has always felt called by God, unless he is willing to sacrifice for it all experiences of love expressed through human affection and physical intimacy.

During the process of this mourning, Shirley and I came to realize how close we were to shifting the focus from our son's struggle to our own. The final form of death for parents is to recognize that their pain is secondary to their child's suffering and to take up their role as supporters of the life they brought into the world, the life their child has to live out in the world. When that happened for us, the question became, *How is he handling this in terms of his own life, faith, health, and happiness?* It is his problem, not ours. He doesn't need us to increase his struggle by making the problem our own and then asking him to resolve it for us.

#### DAY 5: ACCEPT IT

When our son came to the place where he could affirm the reality of his sexual orientation as given, we were able to open our minds and accept it. It was at this point we remembered the Serenity Prayer:

Lord give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed;  
the courage to change what can be changed;  
and the wisdom to know the difference.

For us that has come to mean the acceptance of something in the being of our son that neither we nor he would have chosen, something neither he nor we can change. More than that, it has come to mean seeking change in those things that can be changed, namely the attitudes toward

and understandings of homosexuality that remain dominant in both church and society. For we have come to realize *the biggest problem in being gay is not the gayness, but the reaction of heterosexuals to it*. We want to join our voices with those of others who seek the way of healing and wholeness at this point of pain in our world.

As parents, we want to publicly express our thankfulness to the pastors and members of St. Francis Lutheran Church in San Francisco, where our son experienced again the gospel of reconciliation in both word and action through which the Holy Spirit has kept him *united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith*. Our prayer is that every Christian parent of gay or lesbian children can someday be assured their children will find that same gospel acceptance in any congregation they may enter.

#### DAY 6: CELEBRATE IT

At this point in our transformation we have experienced a sixth stage of development: *celebrate it!* Is that even possible? It all depends on what you think homosexuality is. To what may it be rightly compared? Your answer to that question will finally determine the place you stand. At least four options are offered for your consideration.

First, you might say homosexuality is a conscious and defiant rebellion against the laws of God and nature. In that case, it is a problem of immoral behavior, like prostitution. If that is true, our only proper response is trial and punishment, on the one hand, and the announcement of God's judgment, the offer of grace, and a call for repentance, on the other. But is homosexuality rightly compared to prostitution?

A second option is to say that homosexuality is an illness in which certain behaviors bring the bondage of addiction that can be broken only by total abstinence. In that case, it is like alcoholism, where the problem is not the internal condition but the external behavior of drinking. If that's true, then celibacy is clearly a sufficient solution to the homosexual problem. But is homosexuality rightly compared to alcoholism?

A third option is to say that homosexuality is a tragedy in nature, something neither intended by God nor in harmony with God's will, but something that happens regularly in our world nonetheless. In that case, it is one of the tragic effects of the Fall, like infertility. That too is an unchangeable condition for which the victim is not responsible, but a condition we would never call good. If that's true, then shouldn't we treat homosexuals with the same compassion we grant to others who innocently suffer as victims of a fallen world? Shouldn't we make special rules for them so their lives can be as full as possible within the limits of their handicap?

When people have a physical disability and cannot walk, we don't conclude that God doesn't want them to move. Rather, we provide wheelchairs as substitute legs and set aside special parking spaces that are legal for them but illegal for others. When people are infertile, we don't conclude God doesn't want them to be parents. Rather, we arrange adoptions. Then shouldn't we provide gay and lesbian persons with a parallel structure to marriage that can allow them to experience the personal fulfillment produced by love expressed in approved relationships? But is homosexuality rightly compared to infertility?

The final option is to say that homosexuality is a variety in nature, one of those delightful differences that regularly appear in counterpoint to the ordinary norm. In that case, it is like left-handedness, a minority condition in a world where most people are right-handed and a few are ambidextrous, but a natural variation having its own contribution to make to the wholeness of the world.

There was a time when society considered left-handedness so deviant it had to be punished and changed. But in trying to force such change we discovered the same thing we're finding with gays and lesbians today: attempts to change them don't succeed but only cause more serious problems. Once that became clear in regard to left-handedness, we were freed to discover some positive benefits southpaws offer the world. Professional baseball teams, for

example, value them highly. You can't win a championship without some lefties. Is homosexuality rightly compared to *left-handedness*? If so, we can *celebrate it* as a gift of God.

Since there are no experts who can answer these questions beyond the shadow of doubt, all we can do is digest the best information available from the testimony of gay and lesbian people, the ongoing results of scientific research, and the insights of serious biblical scholarship, praying that the Holy Spirit will lead us into truth. In the meantime, we all walk by faith and run with risk. Each of us will place our own bet and take responsibility for the outcome. As for me and my house, we're putting our money on the *celebration* line. We would rather err on the side of helping hurting people than on the side of hurting helpless people. *Lord, have mercy upon us!*

DAY 7: REST