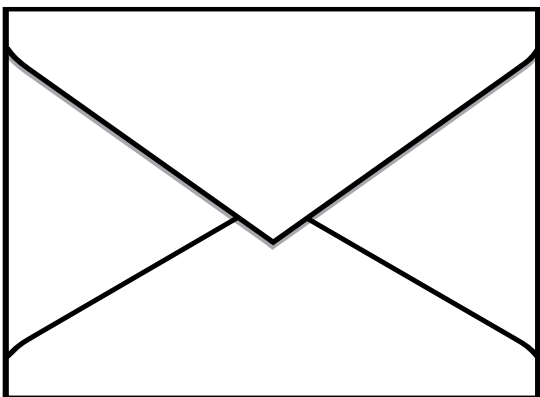


## LETTER TO A FRIEND ON A DIFFICULT ISSUE

*Rodney Juell*



Dear friend,  
Thank you for the copy of the book you wrote. Since I received it, I have been pondering your inscription: “Knowing that our hearts and minds may be in different places on these matters, but hopeful that our faith is strong enough to create a sanctuary where all can be heard.”

I suspect that our hearts, if not our minds, may be more in the same place than you suspect. I am, to be sure, nothing if not a traditional, orthodox Lutheran pastor. I have opposed, and will continue to oppose, the proposals of the revisionists in regard to gay marriage and gay ordination (but especially to the former). However, having said that up front, I will take second place to no one in my desire and effort to make our church a welcoming community for everyone.

How could I embrace any other position? For I really believe all this Lutheran stuff about grace and the all-sufficiency and sole sufficiency of Christ. There is no one who is not to be welcomed. I think you believe that, too. But I suspect we come to that same place from two very different perspectives. I come to my place from the sober reality of sin. We are all broken human beings, and no sinner can claim superiority to any other sinner, and in the ultimate sense no sin can be classified as worse than any other sin. Welcome all, the great unwashed mass of sinful humanity. Unwashed, that is, until we are washed together in Christ’s mass, in the church, in his blood. I suspect (correct me if I am wrong) that you arrive at the same place I do via a different way. I suspect that you (not necessarily you personally but many of those who advocate for the gay agenda) come to this place from the perspective that gay sex is just as “good” as heterosexual sex. I don’t think such a theology of glory helps anyone. I’m content to say that a heterosexual sinner has no advantage or bragging rights

over the gay sinner, and let it go at that. And then live by grace, all of us.

What I *can* do, and what I do all the time, is compromise with sin. I’ve had almost sixty years’ experience doing it and I’m pretty damn good at it (I say that with no pride, and using the word “damn” in its most proper theological sense.). What I *can* do is sometimes even “wink” at sin in the service of grace. Again, almost sixty years of experience makes one fairly proficient. What I *cannot* do is declare to be good what is clearly contrary to God’s intention for creation. To do so would be a pastoral care tragedy and a mockery of my ordination. As a pastoral care provider, I don’t invite anyone to rejoice in, for example, divorce, or addiction, or emitting greenhouse gases, or anything else that is clearly contrary to God’s intention. At the same time, I certainly don’t insist that they “clean themselves up” to be acceptable to God. Sometimes I even invite people to live with the ambiguity (I am a Lutheran and we are supposed to be good at that, right?) of sin. But while I may, however uncomfortably, live with sin or even tolerate it, I will not celebrate it. To do otherwise would make me utterly unfaithful.

*I really believe all this Lutheran stuff about grace and the all-sufficiency and sole sufficiency of Christ. There is no one who is not to be welcomed. I think you believe that, too. But I suspect we come to that same place from two very different perspectives.*

Please listen to a story. We had a woman in the medical center awhile back, around forty years old, with a long history of drug and alcohol abuse and some behavioral health issues. In the course of our conversations she identified herself as a lesbian. At one point

she asked me what I thought about homosexuality. I asked her if she was sure she wanted to know, because she might not like what I had to say. She said she did. So I told her that I didn’t believe that God had created her to be a lesbian, that it was not God’s will for her. But I also told her that I did not believe that her lesbianism was something she had chosen (I think that might be changing for some people today, but that is a story for another time), that she was

not somehow individually culpable, and that in fact she was “in bondage to sin and cannot free herself.” I also told her that I believe Jesus was sent to die for her in her brokenness, and that she, like all of us, could live confidently in the mercy of God, even while living with and maybe even acting out the ambiguity of her sexuality, not unlike (without intending to flip about it) the fact that I’m gonna worsen global warming next weekend by taking my wife on a car trip. In short, her sexuality, and even her sexual behaviors, are part of the “nothing else in all creation” that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now her response to me was interesting. She cried. She told me I was the first clergy who had not told her either that 1) she was a condemned sinner on her way to hell, or that 2) gay is good and God made her that way so she should rejoice in it. This wise or at least very intuitive woman recognized that those were false alternatives. I can’t help but wonder how her life might have been different (and better) if, instead of hearing those versions of the law (and they are both law), she had heard the gospel.

Do I want the church to welcome everyone? You bet. If for no other reason than that I want it to welcome me, the chief of sinners (sorry, St. Paul, but I can one-up you on that). But I want the church to welcome everyone (including me), not because I’m such a good guy, but because we have all been welcomed by a good Lord in

the waters of baptism. We don’t welcome anyone because we justify them (or perhaps worse because they justify themselves). We welcome everyone because Christ justified the ungodly (welcome to the club, all ye miserable reprobates).

I have learned, both from bitter personal experience in all these years that have flown too quickly and from my pastoral care of others, that Christ welcomes the broken. My problem with the gay agenda, and my reason for opposing it, is primarily because its advocates appear, at least to me, to deny that they are really broken in their sexuality, or anything else! In my brokenness, they appear to be the “proud” whom God opposes. Gay is

*Tolerate the evil. Even  
make your peace with  
the evil and do the evil  
if there seems to be no  
alternative. But do not  
approve the evil.*

not good! Of course neither is lots of other stuff. Sigh! I guess I must confess to being an advocate of the much maligned double standard. Compromise with evil. Tolerate the evil. Even make your peace with the evil and do the evil if there seems to be no alternative. But do not approve the evil. Do

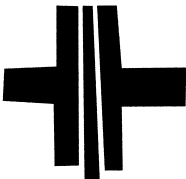
no rejoice in the wrong, but rejoice in the right.

May I please close with a challenge? You have spoken of “prejudices” regarding sexuality that once “infected” nearly all Christians. My challenge to you is this: what makes you certain that they (and not you) are the ones so infected? What I would love to hear you say is, “I can’t be certain.” Then, as Lutherans, we can live with the ambiguity, and in some ways even celebrate the paradox, having assigned the gay agenda question a value somewhere approaching adiaphora. And we will have elevated to central place the only thing that ultimately matters and from which the present question is the most tragic of distractions, namely, that we are sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ.

I do indeed hope, as you say in your inscription, that “our faith is strong enough to create a sanctuary where all can be heard.” Yet it is not even our faith that creates the sanctuary. It is Christ who does, and who welcomes sinners all.

I remain your brother in Christ. ✠

RODNEY JUELL, an ELCA pastor ordained in 1975, is the Director of Pastoral Care at Provena St. Joseph Medical Center and long-term interim Pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Joliet, Illinois. This letter was originally written to a beloved parishioner of years past.



LUTHERAN  
MONASTICISM

Discipleship of Jesus Christ in the monastic way of St. Benedict and within the Evangelical Catholic tradition. For information, please write to:  
ST. AUGUSTINE’S HOUSE, P.O. Box 125, Oxford, Michigan, 48371. [www.StAugustinesHouse.org](http://www.StAugustinesHouse.org)