

Jeffrey S. Siker
Loyola Marymount University

NACDLGM, Palm Springs
September 26, 2003

“Hope in the Desert: The New Testament and Lesbian/Gay Ministry”

Good morning. Let me begin with a word of thanks to Steve Valenzuela, who had something to do with the invitation I received to be with you today. I was fortunate to have Steve in a class I taught at LMU. What a rich blessing he is to you. I also want to recognize two other individuals I have gotten to know in through my work at LMU whose ministry to those in the gay and lesbian community has also been inspiring to me: Bob Poehling, right here in Palm Springs, and Fran Ruth, who has been a leader in ministry to lesbian and gay Catholics in Los Angeles. As a straight white male, my own life has also been touched and blessed by the gracious ministries of these wonderful people.

I should begin with a brief story. Fifteen years ago I served on the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, the main committee for the regional Presbyterian Church overseeing the process leading towards ordination. A candidate was presented to us to evaluate at the end of a long 2 year process, and we were to vote to recommend ordination or not to the larger Presbytery. This particular candidate was an openly gay man. At the time I didn't know what I thought about this, so when I voted I abstained. The motion failed and the candidate was not advanced to ordination. I felt badly about the whole situation, and not a little embarrassed that as both a Presbyterian minister and as a biblical scholar I really didn't know what I thought about the matter. And so I decided to study and to learn so that next time I would have better informed view.

Fortunately, on the committee at the time was a man by the name of Chris Glaser, whom some of you may have heard of or know. Chris is an openly gay man who was also denied ordination. But in one of the great ironies of the church, though he was denied ordination because he was gay, they were happy to have him serve on the committee overseeing the ordination process for others! Chris had written a powerful book, *Uncommon Calling: A Gay Man's Struggle to Serve the Church*, which speaks of his painful experience in seeking ordination in the Presbyterian church. After much reflection, and many conversations with various gay and lesbian leaders in the local church scene, I was able to develop an informed view, which led me next time to change my vote to the affirmative. The candidate was still defeated, but it was then that I felt the first surge of responsibility as a straight man to help other straight people in the church see the injustice of the church's rejection of qualified lesbian and gay ministerial candidates. So that's how I got into the arena of gay and lesbian ministry. I hadn't planned to make this an area of study or writing, but apparently God had other ideas. And so here I am.

Let me add a few further words by way of introducing myself to you. Although I teach at a Roman Catholic university, I have to confess that I'm not Roman Catholic. And although I often speak and write on issues associated with the presence of gay and lesbian folks in the church, I'm not engaged in what you would call direct ministry to gay and lesbian people. So why the hell am I here? In terms of my personal religious background, my mother was raised in the Catholic tradition, and my father was raised in the Jewish tradition. I have a great aunt who was a mother superior of a Catholic religious order, and I have an uncle who was a conservative rabbi. Somehow, all of this

makes me a Presbyterian minister. What makes it even better is that I get to chair a department of Theological Studies at a Roman Catholic university, where as a New Testament scholar I teach about early Jewish/Christian relations. It all seems to work out somehow.

And although I am not engaged in direct ministry to the gay and lesbian community, I am in direct ministry to the majority heterosexual church, Protestant and Catholic, that all at the same time celebrates, fights, and struggles with the presence of gay and lesbian Christians in their midst. Ironically, and also tragically, the heterosexual church is far more comfortable listening to a white male biblical scholar calling for more open inclusion of lesbian and gay Christians in the church than it is hearing directly the voices of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters that the church all too often marginalizes and excludes. So I admit to feeling a little sheepish coming and talking to you who are engaged in the front lines, as it were, of ministry, while I try and address the homophobic voices that remain all too present and shrill in our churches and in our church leadership. I'm certainly glad that you've all come this morning, though I can't help but wonder if somehow you heard not that Jeff Siker was speaking, but that Jeff *Stryker* was going to be talking about the Bible, and *that* you had to hear!

So enough about introductions. Today we're talking about hope in the desert, and what a time of hope it is. Indeed, in many ways we are feeling something of an oasis right about now. Those who have been encouraging greater inclusion of gays and lesbians in our society, our legal codes, and our church have experienced this year three significant affirmations in culture, law, and church, all in quick succession. First, the Canadian courts have ruled to recognize same sex unions; second, the US Supreme Court

has struck down all sodomy laws; and, third, in church circles at least the biggest news has come in the form of the Episcopal Church's recent confirmation of the Rev. Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, to the office of Bishop. Who woulda thunk it? So right now the desert may be feeling like a more friendly place to gay and lesbian ministry. Still, some may wonder if this is more like the eye of a hurricane, a restful calm of significant gains before the backlash of the other side of the storm sets in. And there are surely signs of that as well. On the one hand we hold on with some hope to the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral "Always Our Children," and yet on the other hand we find a bitter pill in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's most recent document, "Considerations Regarding Proposals to give legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons," in which Cardinal Ratzinger reaffirms all too starkly the Magisterial teaching against homosexual persons, and certainly against same-sex unions.

So how do we respond to this cautiously optimistic situation in which we find ourselves? What are the sources of renewal and hope upon which we can draw as we seek to create a more inclusive church, a ministry with deeper vision? This morning I'm not going to talk about the notorious biblical passages that are used regularly to bash gay and lesbian persons and those who would welcome them in Christ. (I'll be saving that for a smaller session this afternoon.) Instead, I'd like to spend most of my time reflecting on the Scriptures with an eye towards some important themes that can help nurture a more welcoming church not only for gay and lesbian people, but a more supportive church for lesbian and gay ministries, ministries that can find rich grounding in the Word of God. In particular, I want to explore three crucial themes from the New Testament witness that

provide guidance and hope as we continue to engage in this important ministry. The three themes are: *inclusion, experience, and conflict*.

First, then, inclusion. One of the most powerful stories for affirming the church's inclusion of and outreach to lesbian and gay people, in my view, is the story of Cornelius and Peter from Acts 10. Listen to the first part of that story (Acts 10:1-16).

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa. About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

What has always struck me about this story is that it shows us how the church has had a steep learning curve right from the outset. From the very beginning the church has struggled with expanding its vision of who is included. The story of Acts 10 provides a wonderful illustration of the earliest church's struggle against the direction of God's

leading. Recall that the earliest Christians (Jewish Christians) did not conceive that Gentiles would become part of the Christian movement as Gentiles, namely, apart from essentially first converting to Judaism and abiding by the Jewish law (circumcision, Sabbath, food laws, and the like). Recall that in Peter's vision from Acts 10 he is scandalized at the notion of eating anything he considered impure and unclean, certainly a metaphor for inclusion of the Gentiles.

But remember what happened. Much to the shock of Peter and his associates, God had poured out the Spirit on Cornelius, indeed on Cornelius as a Gentile. "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even* on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God" (Acts 10:45-46). Peter and those with him bore witness to the outpouring of the Spirit upon the Gentiles, to their utter surprise. None had expected such a thing, such a scandalous thing. Indeed, the next thing Luke reports in Acts 11 is that when the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem heard that Peter and those with him had gone to Gentiles, "the circumcised believers criticized him, saying 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'" Peter told them about his experience, and their response was one of great surprise: "When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'" (Acts 11:18). There continued to be great opposition to the Gentile mission from a significant number of Jewish Christians who were convinced that Gentiles as Gentiles could never be included among God's people, as Acts 15 and Galatians 2 richly attest. Paul fought this fight throughout his ministry.

To be a Gentile was, in the eyes of Jews and Jewish Christians alike, the same as being a sinner, since the Gentiles did not have the law, since they were by definition unclean, polluted, and idolatrous. They first had to repent, as it were, of being Gentiles and adopt the purifying and transforming practices of God's covenant people, the Jews, before they could become Christians. And yet the experiences of Peter and Paul led them, and eventually many others, to the realization that even as a Gentile one could come to know God, to worship God, and to receive and show the Spirit of God. To be a Gentile did not by definition mean to be a sinner. Gentiles didn't have to repent of being Gentiles.

Before I came to know various Christians who are also gay or lesbian in their sexual orientation, I was like the hard-nosed, doctrinaire, circumcised Jewish Christians who denied that Gentiles could receive the Spirit of Christ as Gentiles. But just as Peter's experience of Cornelius in Acts 10 led him to realize that Gentiles were also receiving God's Spirit, so my experience of various lesbian and gay Christians led me to realize that these Christians have received God's Spirit as gays and lesbians, and that the reception of the Spirit has nothing to do with sexual orientation. Indeed, the church has long honored as esteemed brothers and sisters in Christ many gays and lesbians who were simply never known as such.

I confess that I once thought of gays and lesbians as Peter and Paul once thought of "Gentile sinners." I still well remember my first encounter with an openly gay man some 30 years ago early in my college career. I don't remember his name – and how telling is that these many years later – but only that he was gay, called himself a Christian, and was unashamed. He was calling me to recognize him as a human being, as

a person, a fellow-Christian and not as some issue that could be settled by a few quick biblical references. But then I couldn't hear him. It was only over time that, with Peter and Paul, I realized that the sin was not his, but mine – for seeking to exclude the power of God's Spirit at work in his life and the lives of so many others. And who can ultimately resist the Spirit of God? And so with Peter I was compelled to ask, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47).

In my work I have, like you, often encountered strong resistance from many heterosexual Christians when they contemplate gay and lesbian relationships. But is that resistance and initial dissonance in essence much different from what the early Jewish Christians apparently felt when contemplating association with so-called impure and unclean (and perhaps "disordered") Gentile Christians? Was not their sense of betraying the longstanding and sacred truth of legal and ritual purity in the face of Gentile inclusion similar to the sense of some heterosexual Christians today that to welcome gays and lesbians into the church along with their sexual identity is to betray the longstanding tradition of heterosexuality as God's exclusive revealed truth? But it is one thing to understand such fears; it is another thing to condone them. Peter and Paul called the Jewish Christian church in their day to move beyond the marginal toleration of Gentile Christians and to welcome their full inclusion. Similarly, the heterosexual Christian church is being called by God to move beyond our marginal toleration of lesbian and gay Christians, and to welcome their full inclusion. This also means full support for ministries to gay and lesbian people.

The response of the institutional church to date, of course, has not moved in this direction – at least not at the official levels. The church at best struggles with the presence of lesbian and gay Christians in their midst, and this is to say nothing of the church’s further befuddlement at the presence of Christians who identify themselves as bisexual and transgendered. In its official statements the church continues to repeat its traditional appeals to scripture and tradition and to its understanding of the natural law tradition. It is important for us not to vilify those in the church who struggle openly and honestly, and in my view often honorably, with how best to respond pastorally to Christians identifying themselves as gays or lesbians, as other than heterosexual. We must articulate our faithful disagreement over such matters, but I believe we must do this in a way that invites further conversation, even if the church’s leadership does not respond in kind with such openness. In both Protestant and Catholic churches, in light of their reading of scripture and tradition, and lacking in their view any clear guidance to do otherwise, church leadership has ruled against accepting or blessing openly gay and lesbian relationships in the church. The Methodist biblical scholar, Richard Hays, a professor at Duke University, has well articulated the traditional position in an article from the journal *Sojourners*, and has done so with some sensitivity to the pastoral issues. Hays writes as follows:

“In view of the considerable uncertainty surrounding the scientific and experiential evidence, in view of our culture’s present swirling confusion about gender roles, in view of our propensity for self-deception, I think it prudent and necessary to let the univocal testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition order the life of the church on this painfully controversial matter. We must affirm that the New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God’s sexual creatures: Marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one

among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose." (*Sojourners*, July, 1991).

In response to this kind of an argument, I again think the early Christian debate about Gentile inclusion is instructive. Did not the law-observant Jewish Christian opponents of Paul say these same kinds of things when dealing with the question of Gentile inclusion apart from the law? Could they not appeal to God's covenant with Abraham and point to circumcision and the full conversion to Judaism as normative for the inclusion of Gentiles within the covenant people of God, as it had always been? Could they not appeal to the sayings of Jesus himself to show that the Jewish law had not been and could not be abrogated (Mt 5)? Could they not complain that Paul was betraying the faith and was simply giving in to Gentile culture and making a mockery of the standards of Christian faith and practice? Could not these faithful, law-observant Jewish Christians appeal to the preponderance of the testimony of scripture and tradition, in response to these Gentiles who seemed to have the Spirit of God, and say that they were welcome into the Christian community once they abstained from their former sinful Gentile practices of eating non-kosher food, not observing the Sabbath, not being circumcised?

Various law-observant Jewish Christians could do this – and did do this. And if Paul's letter to the Galatians is any indication, not a few Gentiles were themselves receptive to this message. But Paul saw things differently. Acts tells us that Peter saw things differently. Gentiles were not by definition sinners, for God's Spirit had been poured out on them apart from whatever scripture and tradition had held. The Spirit guided their lives, not the law. Just so, the only response to such traditional critique is

that the Spirit guides the lives of lesbian and gay Christians just as it does the lives of straight Christians.

All of this, of course, has to do with what it means to discern the leading of God's Spirit, and what do we do when different parts of the church say that God's Spirit is leading in different directions? This is where the second main theme of *experience* comes in, though it is clearly the experience of Peter in the Cornelius story that moved him to recognize God's Spirit at work in ways beyond his guarded imagination. The biblical witness provides helpful guidance on the need to pay attention to our experience. (Quadrilateral...) I'm especially reminded of Paul's letter to the Galatians. When Paul wrote to the Gentile Christians in Galatia, he was addressing a significant problem that had arisen when rival law-observant Jewish Christian missionaries had come to town and told the Galatians that they had to keep the Jewish law if they wanted to be part of the church. Some of the Galatians apparently went along with this idea – after all, these rival teachers had scripture and tradition on their side! Paul's response, however, is direct and instructive. Paul states: "You foolish Galatians! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? ... Does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?" Paul calls upon them – and us – to pay attention to the experience of the Spirit.

This call to listen to our experience is crucial. In calling attention to experience Paul is picking up on the Wisdom traditions so central to the scriptures. So here we actually have biblical warrant to pay heed to our experience as Christians. Did the Galatian Gentile Christians recognize the Spirit through a doctrinal orthodoxy and

practice now being pushed by these teachers who insisted that the only good Gentile Christian was a “Jewish-Gentile Christian”? Or did the Galatians recognize the Spirit through their faith? And so today we are called to ask an analogous question: Despite our experience, does the church insist that gay and lesbian Christians can have the Spirit of God only if they are “Heterosexual Homosexual Christians”? Or with Peter and Paul, are we up to challenging the church to recognize, perhaps with surprise and with humility, that lesbian and gay Christians, as gays and lesbians and not as sinners, have received the Spirit in faith? We need to challenge and encourage the church in all of its tradition to welcome these brothers and sisters in Christ, and to get on with the tasks to which God has called us all.

A few years ago, during one of many discussions/debates in which I participated on what guidance Scripture and tradition does and does not give us regarding the current debate over gays and lesbians in the church, I vividly remember a closing exchange that I had with my counterpart. I was arguing for a more inclusive vision of lesbian and gay Christians. On the other side was a man by the name of Marty Soards, a professor of New Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, an honorable and faithful man. Each of us had our 30 minutes or so before the leadership of the national Presbyterian church. At the end we were asked if we had any questions for each other. Marty had ended his comments by saying what we’ve so often heard before, that at present in light of the testimony of scripture and tradition there is not sufficient evidence that the church should make any changes in its historic blanket rulings against including openly gay and lesbian people in the church and especially in the ordained ministry of the church. I remember that my question to Marty was as follows: “What would count as evidence for

such a change, and how would you recognize it if you saw it?" Marty's response astonished me. He said he wasn't sure exactly what would count as evidence, but that he was sure he would recognize it if he saw it. My response was that there were hundreds of openly lesbian and gay Christians in the Presbyterian church and in many other churches whose very lives were abundant testimony to and evidence of the presence of God's Spirit working through them, and that these saints were calling us as a church to recognize them, to see them, to welcome them, to embrace them in the common ministry of Christ. *God* had recognized them! Why couldn't *we*? In my view this still has to be our response to well meaning and faithful people in the pews and in church leadership who struggle with the presence of lesbian and gay Christians in the church of any denomination, of any Christian faith tradition.

I would say that for most straight Christians who, like me, have had a radical change of heart regarding the presence of lesbian and gay Christians in the church, our change of heart and mind came about through our experiences of gay and lesbian Christians. Like Peter, like Paul, like the wisdom literature, we believe that God's Spirit speaks to our spirits and to many others through the gracious ministries of so many of our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers. As I have gotten to know and love various gay and lesbian people in the church it has become clear to me that they want us to understand that, just like heterosexual persons, their sexual orientation is but one part of their identity as human beings and as Christians. That's something else we need to keep telling others in the church. Let's pay attention to our experience of the gifts of the Spirit that lesbian and gay people bring to the church, just like other people, and not make it all about sexual orientation.

We also need to keep telling the church something else we know from our experience. Seeing and recognizing the grace of God at work in the life of another person, be they straight or gay, does not mean that the grace of God is at work changing their gender identity. It does not mean that the conversion to Christ involves a complementary conversion from homosexuality to heterosexuality. Indeed, to suggest or to promote such a conversion is to encourage the repression and falsification of part of one's identity before God. It is to discount what the experiences of gay and lesbian people tell us about their lives.

Tragically, it is precisely this kind of conversion from gay to straight that the church basically commends to lesbian and gay Christians. The bottom line of the official teaching of the church essentially says, if you can't be straight, then at least act straight. It reminds me of the famous Seinfeld episode where Jerry and George are mistakenly identified as a gay couple. When they discover this misperception they say two things in quick succession: "We're not gay," they say, followed immediately by the disclaimer, "Not that there's anything wrong with it, if that's who you are!" Jerry laments "I was outed, and I wasn't even in!" -- again quickly adding, "not that there's anything wrong with it." Of course, the whole point, the entire subtext, is that there's everything wrong with being lesbian or gay. Such is too often the church's approach, saying on the one hand "we love you for who you are," immediately followed by "but don't you think you could change?"

In a remarkable book, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, James Alison comments on the experience of being gay in the Catholic church. He writes:

“The experience of many gay people is that the Church in some way or other, kills us. Typically in official discourse we are a ‘they’, dangerous people whose most notable characteristic is not a shared humanity, but a tendency to commit acts considered to be gravely objectively disordered. Typically our inclusion within the structures of church life comes at a very high price: that of agreeing not to speak honestly, of disguising our experience with a series of euphemisms, of having to maintain through a coded language shared with other ‘insiders’ within the system, a double life. The message is: you’re fine just so long as you don’t rock the boat through talking frankly, which is the same as saying: ‘You’re protected while you play the game our way.’ ... In this the non-explicit message of the ecclesiastical mechanism is exactly the reverse of the explicit message of the Church. The explicit message is: God loves you just as you are, and it is from where you are that you are invited to prepare with us the banquet of the kingdom. The latent message is: God loves you just so long as you hide what you are and deny yourself the search for the integrity and transparency of life and of virtues which it is your task to teach to others.” (p. 45).

Thus, another aspect of reflecting on experience involves being honest about our experience, not pretending that it is in fact other than it is. This means being honest with the church leadership, which can be a risky thing indeed. I’m fully aware that it’s far easier for me as a straight man to say this than it is if I were gay. In fact, I can only imagine how difficult it must be to be honest with the church about the ways in which the church makes being a faithful Christian not easier, but harder, as it tacitly encourages lesbian and gay people to suppress their identity as something shameful rather than as part of one’s becoming aware of who they are before God, created in God’s image just as everyone else is.

This leads me to the third theme I’d like to stress: *conflict*. Our experience is one of tremendous conflict around the full inclusion of lesbian and gay Christians, as well as deep conflict about ecclesial support for ministry to this community. The Bible is full of

grand and enlightening stories of conflict within the community of faith. One biblical passage that I find especially instructive and wonderfully subversive in this regard comes from John 9, the story of the man born blind. Like the Gentile centurion who comes to faith in Acts 10, but is presumed to symbolize something sinful, so the man born blind who comes to faith in John 9 is first cast in the role of a sinner. Remember the question from Jesus' own disciples: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" He is other, so he must be a sinner somehow. Here sin is a kind of defect which excludes the man. Jesus, of course, protests such an easy assigning of sin. Nobody sinned, he says, rather here is an opportunity to see God working through this man, a blind man at that. Jesus proceeds to heal him, but in doing so Jesus becomes a sinner – he violates the Sabbath law. All of our notions of sin get turned on their heads. The man regains his sight, but that, of course, is somewhat beside the point for John, since the real story is his coming to deeper sight, coming to faith in Jesus. Not only that, but the story shows the true character of sin as well. The man is not the sinner, rather those who participate in the structures of exclusion are shown to be sinful. In the story it is the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, who pronounce both Jesus and the man to be sinners. They cast out the man. But Jesus finds him at the end of the story, and together the man born blind and Jesus, erstwhile sinners both, confront the religious leaders. "Jesus said, 'For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, 'Are we also blind?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains'" (John 9:39-41).

Now it is important that we don't too quickly identify ourselves with the blind man and Jesus. That would be letting ourselves off the hook too easily. It is indeed tempting to immediately cast certain church leaders into the role of the guilty Pharisees, blind leaders who fail to see what the blind man can see. But this in itself would be an act of exclusion on our part. As we engage with church leaders about the disagreements we have with them about their view and treatment of gay and lesbian people in the church, it is important that we don't simply reverse roles and exclude them in the process, all in the name of including the outcast. We need to remember that even those we struggle with in the church are in fact part of the church. We need to treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ (and Lord knows, siblings can fight!). In short, we need to love them even as we tell the truth about the pain we feel, even as we testify to our experience of God in Christ.

This leads to one more biblical story on handling deep conflict within the faith community, this time Jesus' parable about the wheat and the tares, or the wheat and the weeds, for it also speaks to the issue of toleration. This is a passage that I often use in addressing the heterosexual church in its struggle with including openly gay and lesbian Christians. How should the church proceed when there is such division? I would suggest that we pay careful attention to Jesus' parable in Matthew 13 of weeds among the wheat. Hear again the parable:

"He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him,

'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

This parable occurs in the context of a whole series of parables Jesus tells in Matthew 13 about the kingdom of God, or as Matthew puts it, the Kingdom of Heaven. What is the Kingdom of God like? How does God rule? In the parable of the wheat and the weeds we learn that patience and tolerance with one another in the church should be the order of the day.

We are quick to identify ourselves as wheat, faithful servants and others as noxious sinful weeds sprouting in our midst. And we are also quick to want to uproot the unwelcome growth, which in our view comes not from God but from the enemy. But we need to pay attention to the wishes of the householder: Should we try to pull out what we identify as weeds? "No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them" (13:29).

What should we do in situations where from our vantage we see sin making inroads among the faithful? (And this is especially addressed to the heterosexual church.) From the perspective of church tradition and traditional readings of Scripture, openly gay and lesbian Christians should not be tolerated and should be actively discouraged. From the perspective of many others, lesbian and gay Christians are not sinning by engaging in loving relationships; indeed, the sin lies in the homophobia and heterosexism of the mainstream church and its exclusive intolerance. So what should we do? We should follow the command of the householder and not seek to uproot what appears to us to be

weeds, lest in the process we also uproot the wheat that God has planted. What is wheat and what is weed? Ultimately that is for God to determine, for we are apt to mistake one for the other. What are we to do in the meantime? Be patient and be tolerant – on both sides. In short, the parable tells us to treat one another as wheat. When in doubt, assume wheat and not weeds.

Patience and tolerance? Hmmm. I think this is an especially difficult message for the lesbian and gay Christian community. And perhaps you're thinking, "Patience? That's easy for you to say as a straight male. You're not being persecuted. Tolerance? Should we tolerate the slanderous and hurtful rhetoric and actions of the church that claims to love us, but then treats us so poorly?" These points are well taken. Patience and tolerance have their limits. This is where it is particularly important for those engaged in ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics to provide strategies of support and persistence. Certainly this gathering is one fantastic demonstration of such strategies.

This talk of patience and tolerance reminds me of a good catholic friend I have, who shall remain nameless to protect his innocence on this score. He told me tongue in cheek that as a faithful and often frustrated catholic he at times had thought of forming a new religious order, the BFC's – the Bombardeers for Christ. (He came up with this before the current aura of terrorism was quite so pronounced.) In his vision the BFC's would take bricks and throw them through rectory windows with a simple note attached: "Renew or die. You have three days." I can only imagine that this is how gay and lesbian catholics feel at times about their church, about your church. You love the church, but it can be so damn frustrating to be faithful at times. Why does the church stand in God's way rather than mediate God's redeeming presence?

Gay and lesbian Christians are tired of being told they are either sinners or essentially objectively disordered. (It's a tough choice, really, isn't it? Sinner or essentially disordered – you choose!) The church has to stop treating lesbian and gay Christians as a “them,” as if somehow “they” are out there, and not in here sitting next to us singing the same hymn. The church has to stop treating “them,” treating *you*, as if you are not quite full human beings, not quite fully created in the image of God, not quite fully redeemed in Christ, not quite fully welcome at the feast of the kingdom of God.

To borrow yet another image from the gospels, the church too often treats lesbian and gay Christians like Gentile dogs, not quite worthy to receive the food set aside for the true children. But just as Jesus could learn a new trick from a Gentile dog in the form of the Syro-Phoenician woman, so can the church's vision be expanded by the faithfulness and persistence of gay and lesbian Christians, and the similar faithfulness and persistence of you who are engaged in such ministry.

In closing, in light of all that we've said, how can we persist and thrive in this ministry? What strategies of faithfulness might we employ as we reflect on inclusion, experience, and conflict? Out of my vast experience of not being involved in direct ministry to lesbian and gay Catholics, let me venture the following thoughts. First, and I say this as a good Protestant, it is important to network with other gay and lesbian Christians in other faith traditions. In various Protestant churches, from Episcopalians to Presbyterians to Methodists to Lutherans to the United Church of Christ, the presence and ministry of gay and lesbian Christians is significant and growing. Getting together and talking across denominational boundaries can be enriching and nurturing as we try to

envision new ways of providing support and persistence to those engaged in such ministries.

There are also some significant and instructive differences across the Protestant/Catholic divide. In the Protestant churches, virtually the entire discussion about inclusion of gays and lesbians revolves around the single issue of ordination. Since ordained clergy in the Protestant tradition are seen as modeling Christian faith and family, this is an especially heated issue for Protestant churches, which still officially refuse to ordain openly gay and lesbian ministers, though many have been ordained and serve the church faithfully. In the Roman Catholic tradition, of course, with ordination to the priesthood comes a vow of celibacy, so the whole question of clergy in same-sex unions ceases to be a question, at least officially. Of course, there are many gay priests serving the church faithfully. In the Catholic tradition the focus tends to be more on procreation as an essential component to the marriage relationship, and since same-sex relations cannot, as the church says, transmit new life, they are forbidden. (By the way, if you haven't seen it, I encourage you to look at Charlie Curran's recent piece in the NCR on the possibility of same-sex unions in the Catholic tradition.) In the Protestant world, since marriage is not sacramental, and since there's not the same emphasis on the need to be open to procreation in all sexuality, this is not really an issue in most Protestant debates.

Still, even with the important differences in how Protestants and Catholics approach the presence of gay and lesbian Christians, I think it would be very helpful to find out what Protestant churches in your community are more open to the inclusion of

lesbian and gay Christians. I think you would have some very helpful and constructive conversations across these lines. They could also learn a great deal from you.

A second step, I would argue, is for heterosexual Christians to imagine themselves as gay and lesbian both in the church and in the world. Taking on this kind of imagination struck me recently when I was flying from Oakland to Los Angeles. I was traveling alone and was reading Andrew Sullivan's excellent book, *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality*. I was in an aisle seat, and sitting next to me was a woman who occasionally glanced down at my book, then glanced at me. I knew she was wondering, "Hmmm, is he gay?" And I confess that it felt a little weird to know that I was being imaged by this complete stranger as a gay man. But there it was. I was being outed. Just as Jesus identified with those who were marginalized in his time, so must the heterosexual church identify with lesbian and gay people in our midst. I'm not talking here about getting everybody to watch "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." Rather, what I'm talking about is the need for heterosexual Christians to imagine themselves as lesbian or gay, and in doing so to accept oneself as a child of God as a gay or lesbian person. If we encourage people in the straight church to start imaging themselves as gay and lesbian, perhaps we heterosexuals will understand something more of what's going on. Perhaps we will hear better the stories of faith and struggle. Perhaps we will be better able to articulate the need for acceptance and change in our churches. Perhaps we will grow to be more faithful people. Perhaps we will learn to see in ways we hadn't seen before. Perhaps we will recognize the same Spirit of God at work. If you're heterosexual, imagine coming out to yourself as lesbian or gay. Imagine coming out to God as gay or

lesbian. Imagine coming out to your family and community as lesbian or gay. Imagine such solidarity with our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ.

A third step involves taking the bishops' pastoral "Always Our Children" to the next level, as it were. This is certainly the most positive official teaching on the acceptance of gay and lesbian people in the church, and it has a pastoral heart. But one potential problem is that if lesbian and gay Christians are indeed considered "always our children" a certain kind of paternalism can set in – where the church treats gay and lesbian Christians only as children, indeed as problematic children. This can result in a perhaps unintended condescension towards very adult and mature Christians who also happen to be lesbian or gay. In addition to implementing "Always Our Children," let me encourage you as people engaged in Catholic Diocesan lesbian and gay ministries to find ways in which the gay and lesbian Christians in your ministries and in your parishes can continue to use the considerable gifts they have in Christ as adult Christians with significant experience and important visions that can help the church to grow and flourish, and not just in the arena of gay and lesbian ministry.

So there we are. Inclusion, experience, and conflict. The Bible provides rich resources of faith, hope, and persistence as you continue in your important ministry. Of course, you are the real hope in the desert. You are the hope of God's church. You are the faithful saints of God seeking to bring full reconciliation to the church and to the world. You may not always be successful, but God calls us to faithfulness first and foremost, not to success. May God strengthen you in your faith and bless you deeply. Amen and amen.