

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF SAINT MARY THE VIRGIN

Sermon preached by the Rev. William H. Marcus III
Sunday, October 22, 1978
San Francisco

"Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God, that which is God's."
Across 2000 years Jesus' searing confrontation with those who would ride to power by whatever expedient comes ringing to us. It raises very seriously the question of the relationship of church and state. I come to speak about just that.

The tension between where we usually find our lives and the ultimate Christian imperative to love and thus bring in God's kingdom is enormous. That tension has existed since Jesus' day. I know that tension and anguish personally. Forgive me, but I feel it morally imperative that I share part of my life with you, to help you have a broader perspective of the issues involved. I do so because I love you. I do so because I need to. As I have come to understand the life of Jesus, I see the Christ moving always to outcasts to stand with them. My own priesthood, my own humanity, ask me to do the same. I stand there this day. I have always stood for them.

Friends of mind have asked me: "Bill, we understand this, but when are you going to stop standing for them and stand honestly as one of us? Can we not see ultimate honesty in the church?" And so this day, my beloved people, I believe I am called by God Himself not only to stand up for them, but this time, now more honestly, to stand as one of them. I of course am speaking about gay people. I am gay.

I stand before you not in the cynicism or fear that motivates a John Briggs or that immobilizes other gay or straight persons from speaking out. I stand before you in love. I take upon myself the mantle of outcast. I must stand with my people, gay people. I must stand for their sake, for my soul's sake, and for your sake. And I must stand, too, with you. For you are all my people. If anyone would hurl the stones or the slander or the lies, then let them see very clearly all of us at whom they are hurled. Human rights for all people, all races, all classes, will never change for the better if we remain invisible. Nothing will ever improve if the eminently decent average man or woman of everyday life does not know that it is real human beings who know hurt, anguish of being different, and who are called by God from these to a victory over fear, from all that separates brother from brother. To set us all free together. To be affirmed by God. All together.

I love you. I shall always love you. It is that love that frees me to be utterly honest with you today. I speak for thousands of people who are gay whom the old myths and fears have kept locked in closets of terror. When friends have been beaten, fired, driven into despair, or have taken their lives, we have spoken in anger. But I tell you now that we stand in love. That is our ultimate statement. And we will stand. For we offer to the world more honesty and more hope by standing. We offer fuller life, living out God's own promise of affirmation and validation of all people. I am utterly persuaded that He stands with us now in this new age. I believe this is what the Gospel expects every Christian to do. This is what honesty and true moral responsibility require. How significant that Pope John Paul II's first proclamation was on behalf of all oppressed people and the misunderstandings concerning them. There is

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something very hopeful personally for me, and I know for us all, in the vision of a God who holds these values as His own.

Why am I taking this step now? First I believe nothing is more desperately needed in our world or country in these times than loving honesty and individual responsibility. I cannot ask either of the world or of those to whom I preach if I do not search out my own soul and do what I can to live that way myself. I spend much of my professional ministry in teaching, and so do many other loving responsible gay friends I know. We feel John Briggs' slander and lies deeply. But you need to see clearly who it is that is being slandered.

I spend much of my time studying God's word and hope and healing in this broken world. I believe God continues to unfold and affirm us as we are today and as we shall become, not merely as mankind was left at the end of the Old Testament period. I spend much time in the healing profession. I know that honesty lies at the very heart of all healing, every single time it happens, whether in this old world, or more importantly, in this new world.

Those of us who have heard the debates and read statements on the subject believe the bigotry and poison spread by John Briggs need speaking to not only by those studying the phenomena of homosexuality, but by those of us who can give you clear examples of who we are - we who will have to live with what a "yes" vote on Proposition 6 will mean. Jobs are at stake, yes, but far more importantly, lives are at stake. Countless numbers of lives and professional careers have already been destroyed and even taken in desperation. I mean, specifically, suicide. The witch-hunt has already started. Teachers in this state have already been irresponsibly charged with being homosexual, and some are very happily married people. The burden falls hideously upon them now just to prove their innocence. Their innocence of what, in the name of God? The witch-hunt cannot be allowed to continue. You can help by being willing morally to put yourself on the line, not after the fact, not after November 7th, but now.

If you are gay, let people know that clearly, now, as I do now, so that others can respond and decide on the basis of loving examples, not myths. Let me repeat that, so that there is no misunderstanding of what I say: If you are gay, let people know that clearly now. That is the only way they can respond fairly and decide on the basis of loving examples, not myths. If you are straight, for God's sake look at all of us now, not just at a handful of sad cases who have lost hope. Look at all of us, all of us, as clearly as you can. So that you can respond and decide for yourself, knowing you must do this before God.

John Briggs, seeking to ride into public office on your fears, says we are all predatory. A sickening lie. The very same maliciousness was used by the Nazis against the Jews. Hitler even had political cartoons showing Jews as child molesters. Check your history books. This is utterly true. In my own ministry I have personally seen when this very different illness was brought to my attention that it was dealt with very speedily by every process of law; and as the press reminds us this is a far more serious problem accompanying heterosexual orientation. Briggs speaks with lies coming from myths, fears, utter cynicism and total disregard for human lives. You are seeing predatory behavior, my people, truly. But it is John Briggs who is the predator, as clearly as it was Hitler in the 30's. Briggs speaks from conscious, knowing deceit. I speak from my life, my ministry, my conduct, my knowledge, my worth, my contributions, my hope, my manhood.

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Briggs says that we are sinful abominations. Prove it! The Levitical Codes he wants to judge people with come from the prejudices and ignorance of a people living 2000 to 3000 years before Christ. Jesus confronted those very same codes Himself, showing in His time that which is affirming and loving between persons is, in fact, from God. We always cripple ourselves when we try to define God for God. As a moral theologian and as a clear reader of history I tell you that is true.

Briggs says we are all promiscuous. Prove it! This is sheer fantasy, and possibly repressed wish fulfillment on his part. It is a deliberate lie. I know of thousands of cases of loving people affirming, sustaining, enduring for and caring for each other. I have known this personally, felt myself only the richer and more humane for the love that has been shared. Promiscuity comes, when it arrives, to all men and women, heterosexual and homosexual and all the variations in between, from loneliness and the need for love. It is a common problem every human heart has to wrestle with to know wholeness and salvation.

Briggs says that God stands in fiery judgement on others. Try to prove that! I can show you proof of a God seen most visibly in human form - a God for all men and women, of utter compassion, forgiveness and hope, who in both Old and New Testaments demands love and understanding for all people, particularly the oppressed. This is the whole prophetic tradition, culminating in the arrival of Emmanuel - God with us now, God incarnate. The Savior, my dear people, is the God of love who sets me free to share my utter being, my personhood with you this day, to prove by my example that the myths and lies are utterly false. It is God on the Cross who is always offering His life for His friends, showing across all the centuries past and the centuries to come that no one is ever abandoned by God. He stands, He hands there, with all. I thank God that that is who He is.

Many very loving and concerned friends have said that gay people ought to keep this whole area of their lives private. They say sexuality is a private matter. But in fact I do not know of any single heterosexual person who is private about his or her basic orientation when asked, about who he or she really is. The sad truth is that gay people remain secretive only when we are privately ashamed, humiliated, ridiculed, cast out.

My dear people, I am not ashamed. I want only to be a hopeful and living sign to others, with others, that no one need be ashamed any longer. Flaunting and irresponsible sexuality are not what we are talking about. We are talking about no longer hiding who we are. The best minds of our age show us clearly that homosexuality is not sickness, or sin, or evil. Freud proclaimed that from the beginning. It is simply one of the many variables in human orientation and experience. The important point is that the actual physical expression of any gay or straight person's sexuality ought to be a very private affair. And most importantly of all, the Gospel calls each of us to be responsible and to work that out in whatever set of givens we have each arrived with. Ultimately it is our humanity and the working out of that humanity which needs to be shared, to touch each others' lives - not our fears. We shall continue to be afraid only if we wear the masks which come from fear, needless shame, or misunderstanding. When these masks are taken off, we shall all breathe more freely, be mutually more accepting. For we shall see each other no longer as stereotypes but as real people, capable of infinite love and boundless hope for each other. We shall discover finally the true heart of the Gospel, that which is truly loving and affirming and outreaching, in the human isolation we each seek existentially to reach beyond.

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I proclaim that to you, as Christ preaches it squarely and confrontively from the beginning to the end of the Gospels. I must live the example I proclaim. I shall survive, and I intend to continue my ministry happily, and with God's might, truthfully. Wrestling from my own anguish and from my own triumph a triumph for your life, in whatever path you have to walk. Your love - abiding, continuing, developing, makes that possible. And my standing up and surviving this day will make it easier for one of you, one of your neighbors - perhaps your own child or grandchild. That is my vision. And I know that ultimately my standing up honestly will help to set the lies at rest far more than any other single action I can possibly ever take in my life.

When the Nazis overran Denmark, King Christian stood with the Jews of his country saying, "Today I am a Jew". And all of his fellow Danes, the entire country, stood with him, and with them. Everyone put on the armbands of that day's outcast. Oppression did not overtake the heart of that country. Valor did. Courage did. Caring did. I ask you to stand now with all of us and help bring in honesty and compassion and hope now. The evil again afoot in our land can only now be met by love. The dishonesty, with honesty. The slander, with responsible honor. I ask you, a parish which understands clearly that God calls us always to be a people moving into resurrection - and I ask you, who live in the city of San Francisco which attempts to be today for America what America has wanted to be for the world - I ask you to stand with us all.

I ask everyone to stand with us all.

For you, for all of you, I thank God.

Amen.