

## CHAPTER 10

### The Amazing Grace of Same-Sex Blessings

Patrick S. Cheng

What is the strongest theological argument in favor of same-sex blessings? The answer, I contend, is that such relationships are *visible signs of God's grace*—an amazing kind of one-way love that is a pure gift and cannot be earned. I've come to this realization based upon over twenty years of being together with my husband, Michael, through our ups and downs, and for better or for worse.

Same-sex blessings are sacramental because they are a reflection of the larger grace-filled relationship between God and humanity. The classical theological definition of a sacrament—including baptism, Eucharist, and marriage—is that it is a visible and external sign of God's invisible grace. Same-sex blessings are holy because they are vehicles in which we can experience and gain a deeper understanding of God's unconditional love for us—a love that is, in the end, unmerited and unearned.

Michael and I have experienced a healthy dose of grace in our relationship over the last two decades. First of all, falling in love itself is an act of grace. As most of us have discovered, one simply

cannot force another person to fall in love with her or him (that is, outside of the world of Shakespearean comedies and magic love potions). Love—whether same-sex or opposite-sex—is a manifestation of God’s amazing grace precisely because it cannot be planned or earned. Love is not just a matter of works, but rather of grace.

I still marvel at the fact that Michael and I met through a personals ad in *Bay Windows*, the Boston-area lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) newspaper. What are the odds that this California-raised Chinese American man would find his Massachusetts-raised Irish American life partner in this way? Michael and I often say that we met, sight unseen, for a first date in Harvard Square over twenty years ago and never stopped talking. How could our relationship not be a matter of God’s grace?

When Michael and I celebrated our Holy Union in the summer of 2000 at the Church of Saint Luke in the Fields in Greenwich Village, New York City, it was a profound moment that bore witness to God’s amazing grace in our lives. Walking down the aisle with Michael in procession with the thurifer, crucifer, choir, and other ministers, I wasn’t sure what to expect. Looking back on that day, however, I now realize that Michael and I were irrevocably changed—some might say ontologically changed—by the act of giving thanks to God in the presence of our family members, friends, co-workers, and parishioners.

Second, and more importantly, my relationship with Michael has survived (and grown!) because of the grace, or unmerited gift, of forgiveness. Over the last two decades, we have both forgiven each other for transgressions big and small, despite the fact that the other might actually be at fault and not “deserve” to be forgiven. I believe these graced moments of forgiveness are a reflection of the

larger grace that marks the fundamental relationship between God and humanity.

Indeed, as Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther have reminded us, grace is the central theme of the Bible, and, for that matter, of Christian theology. The parable of the prodigal child—who is accepted unconditionally by his father with open arms, despite leaving home, squandering his inheritance, and living with pigs—is all about grace. Similarly, God's gift to us of making human flesh divine in the incarnation—despite our propensity to turn our backs on God, from the Garden of Eden to the present—is also about grace.

As a queer theologian, seminary professor, and ordained minister, I have witnessed the gift of God's amazing grace reflected in countless same-sex relationships over the years. These relationships—some of which have lasted decades longer than mine—are nothing short of miraculous in light of the hatred and rejection that many same-sex couples have experienced from their families, churches, work colleagues, and local communities.

I have also witnessed how God's amazing grace has changed many people—particularly from communities of color—who were at one time afraid of LGBT people and have since become our strong allies. When I first came out to my mother in the late 1980s, she was horrified. "What will our family and friends think?" she asked me. She begged me not to tell my father and grandmother out of a concern that they would suffer greatly from the news. For many years, my mom lived in a place of fear, isolation, and shame.

Over time, however, God's amazing grace has worked wonders in my mom's life. Not only did she proudly attend our Holy Union (as did my father, who has since passed away), but she has embraced

Michael as her son-in-law. Around fifteen years ago, my mom marched in her first LGBT Pride parade. Three years ago, she spoke at a press conference in New York City about the need for Chinese American communities to love and accept their LGBT members. And just last summer, my mom filmed a public-service announcement for Chinese American parents who are struggling to accept their LGBT children.

It's surprising to me that the leaders of the religious right—including Protestant fundamentalists, Roman Catholic bishops, and Mormon leaders—have overlooked (or ignored) the centrality of grace in their reflections upon same-sex relationships. Their view that such relationships are inherently sinful, based upon notions of procreation and the complementarity of sexual organs, is an insult to the larger Christian message about God's extravagant grace-filled relationship with humanity. By focusing so closely upon the trees, they lose sight of the larger forest that is God's amazing grace.

Ironically, by restricting blessings to opposite-sex couples, the religious right is acting just like the narrow-minded zealots who were condemned by St. Paul in his New Testament letters. (Such zealots insisted that Christians had to follow specific religious rules like circumcision in order to attain salvation.) The religious right is proclaiming a gospel of works and not of grace. Its myopic view of same-sex relationships is a failure of not only the theological imagination, but also the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

It is time that we challenge the false dichotomy that same-sex relationships can only be supported on the basis of secular rights-based arguments, and that they must be opposed on the basis of the Christian faith. In my view, the strongest argument in support of same-sex blessings is that it is a visible and external sign of God's

amazing grace—that is, a one-way love that is pure gift and cannot be earned—that flows extravagantly from God to humanity.



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