

## Wendell Berry and the Sacrament of Marriage

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Lovers must not, like usurers, live for themselves alone. They must finally turn from their gaze at one another back toward the community. If they had only themselves to consider, lovers would not need to marry, but they must think of others and of other things. They say their vows to the community as much as to one another, and the community gathers around them to hear and to wish them well, on their behalf and its own. It gathers around them because it understands how necessary, how joyful, and how fearful this joining is. These lovers, pledging themselves to one another ‘until death,’ are giving themselves away, and they are joined by this as no law or contract could ever join them. Lovers, then, ‘die’ into their union with one another as a soul ‘dies’ into its union with God. And so here, at the very heart of community life, we find not something to sell as in the public market but this momentous giving. If the community cannot protect this giving, it can protect nothing—and our time is proving that this is so.”<sup>1</sup>

A more elegant and profound defense of traditional marriage and its sanctity would be hard to find. “Our time” is perhaps proving this to be even truer now, when the very definition of marriage is a matter of hotly debated public policy, than when Berry last published this bit of wisdom over twenty-one years ago. Then the prospect of same-sex “marriage” was not even imagined by gay activists, much less the rest of American society. The immediate threats to marriage that Berry had in mind were primarily the doom of the family farm, divorce, and to a lesser extent feminism. Notice how carefully he insists that true marriage cannot be reduced to a mere “law or contract” as if it were simply a private and provisional affair concerning personal rights or desires. What Berry is keen to emphasize is that a real marriage entails a genuine and unavoidable sacrifice which speaks both to its broader communal and civic function as well as its more profound religious potential. Berry words his argument carefully here to emphasize that his view on traditional marriage is neither uniquely American nor Christian and is far older than our country and Christianity. Berry rests the moral and ethical force of his argument on what C.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 137-8.

Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* refers to as the Tao—the Way, or simply the natural order of things. But appeals to a Law of Nature that appear immutable and irrevocable only appeal to a certain kind of audience and certainly not the post-modern left.

Naturally, it is precisely this family-values aspect (though he would no doubt prefer the term agrarian virtues) of Berry's career as an essayist on matters cultural and agricultural over the past forty years that has won him many fans from the Right. To fans of his non-fiction he comes across as modern-day Thoreau, who speaks with an old-fashioned moral clarity and precision that is as winsome as it is insightful. His prose is often lyrically moving and his ethics always practical. In the public square he is openly admired by all who claim to be on the side of the gentle and good. Where the rubber meets the road politically, Berry manages to inspire and irritate both the left and the right at times, but regarding the family, marriage, and abortion he has been consistently and literally "conservative."

Which brings me to the occasion of this essay (and I mean essay and not thesis because I am trying, literally "essaying," to figure out what is happening to marriage both in Berry's reckoning and in our culture)—Berry's recent endorsement of gay marriage. I trust that I have painted a clear enough picture of Berry that the shockwave caused by this apparent about-face among his readers and fans on the right and left who share his traditional morality is understandable. Rod Dreher of *The American Conservative* was "shocked" and "bewildered" as were the editors of *National Review* who termed it a "reversal" for Berry. Some have speculated that Berry was trying too hard to triangulate himself between the less desirable positions of no marriage at all and of government regulation of sexuality. Clearly he is distancing himself from religious bigotry. But some have also wondered if this apparent shift is a sign that Berry, who

turns eighty years old this year, has entered his dotage. Even more cynically, others suspect that with all his recent public acclamation, he is pandering shamelessly to the Left.

This latter suspicion could only be countenanced by those who have either never met Berry or not read much of his work. As if Jeremiah pandered to the Kings of Judah. His dotage is another matter but not likely: Though his travel and speaking have greatly reduced over the past decade or so, the last few years have seen renewed vigor on his part at podiums ranging from Europe to the White House to Georgia. And, though I too was shocked to hear of his “declaration” for gay marriage, I am not convinced that the manner of his support of gay marriage is quite a “reversal.” But neither can it be said that his statements on the topic—first in an interview with *National Review*, then in a speech given at Georgetown College—can be easily reconciled with his previous arguments about marriage. In his even larger body of fiction, for instance, Berry dramatizes the saga of generations of families and wayfarers that comprise the community of Port William, but nowhere in the span of stories set from the 1860s to the present can the reader find a homosexual or a gay couple. Berry literally cannot imagine a place for gay marriage in his fiction. That it is now possible in the real world perhaps verifies that truth is stranger than fiction.

I am not certain that Berry’s recent statements at this point can be reconciled with his earlier, coherent idea of marriage. My goal in this essay, therefore, is to puzzle out Berry’s thinking on marriage in general by starting with his recent comments on gay marriage and the conservative response to them and laying them alongside his view of marriage as seen in his greatest novel, *Jayber Crow*. I do not intend to find any simple explanation or to set forth a what-Berry-really-meant-was apologia. My hope with regard to Berry’s views is to establish whether the above epigraph with its sacrificing “lovers” that are not only “the very heart of community

life” but who somehow also reflect the soul’s “union with God” could actually still make sense if the marrying couple was homosexual. I do not think it can make sense, and I can only hope that Berry does not really think so either.

My hope is grounded on the realization that while Berry has recently come to some narrow conclusions about gay marriage, his long-held considerations on marriage are both broad and deep. The “country of marriage” he has written about (and lived with his wife Tanya) for over fifty years is a complex thing—fertile, fecund, life-giving in every way: physically, imaginatively, spiritually—and it all starts with a man and a woman. Our sex, male and female, means something. To simply interchange and replace male and female—prerequisite in order to make homosexual marriage possible—is to assume that “male” and “female” mean nothing. But they do mean something. Berry’s stories and life attest to this greater something: the sacrament of marriage. So the final question I hope to address is whether or not gay couples actually participate in the sacramental aspects of marriage.

First, it should be emphasized that marriage is one of those places, according to Berry, where government ought not belong. “I don’t think it ought to be the government’s business,”<sup>2</sup> he asserts. It is not simply that government did not invent marriage, but that marriage is truly a “great mystery” as the Apostle calls it. In one poem Berry likens marriage to an empty vessel, a brass bowl that “fills with light/that is Heaven’s and/ its own. It holds/ forever for a while.”<sup>3</sup> True marriage, therefore, transcends the couple itself and the state to encompass greater communal and spiritual realities that are as universally possible as they are fitfully realized or even comprehended. Such a union is indeed “fearful” and should not be entered into lightly nor can it

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<sup>2</sup> From an interview on Berry’s front porch, quoted in John J. Miller, “A Jeremiah for Everyone: Why Left and Right like Wendell Berry,” *National Review*, July 30, 2012. Also available at Heymiller Web site, [www.heymliller.com/2012/07/wendell-berry/](http://www.heymliller.com/2012/07/wendell-berry/).

<sup>3</sup> Berry, “A Brass Bowl,” *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (New York: Counterpoint, 1999), lines 8-11.

be easily torn asunder. This high view of marriage cannot be reduced to a simple matter of law or contract or a marketplace transaction.

But such a reduction has taken place already, and Berry insightfully blames both the Left and the Right for their farcical politics of sexuality. “Liberals” are “absurd” to seek protection of gay “rights and liberties” by trusting “a generous and parental government” to define and bestow them; while “conservatives” are “comic as well as absurd” for desiring a “small and noninterfering” federal government to somehow make heterosexual marriage constitutional.<sup>4</sup> The ideological contradictions on both sides of the aisle occasion a good punchline: perhaps “a small government bureau” could provide “a colorful tattoo, verifying government approval, on the rumps of lawfully copulating persons.”<sup>5</sup> While the good-humored Berry cannot fail to point out the folly of our politics of sexuality, the ever-practical Berry cannot avoid its consequences.

Berry’s endorsement of gay marriage begins, therefore, out a sense of practical compassion: “I’m in favor of it...because they’re being denied the benefits of inheritance and so on.”<sup>6</sup> In a speech given at Georgetown College in Kentucky, Berry elaborated, “Domestic partnerships in which people who live together and devote their lives to one another ought to receive the spousal rights, protections and privileges the government allows to heterosexual couples.”<sup>7</sup> This is the argument for basic civil rights and protections for homosexuals, which as far as I know, is actually not contested by anyone within the terms Berry uses here—notice his use of “domestic partnerships.” As long as one of these social and legal protections does not include requiring the churches to honor domestic partnerships as marriage, this kind of appeal for

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<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, “Caught in the Middle,” *Christian Century*, April 2013, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Berry, “Caught,” 29.

<sup>6</sup> Berry in Miller, “Jeremiah.”

<sup>7</sup> Bob Allen, “Wendell Berry Expounds on Gay Marriage,” *Abpnews* Weblog, entry posted January 14, 2013, [www.abpnews.com](http://www.abpnews.com). But note that this post and Berry’s speech predate the Hobby Lobby legislation and other controversies involving homosexuality and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

civil justice has a broad range of religious support.<sup>8</sup> But for the state to dictate that a religious institution must acknowledge such a relationship as a “marriage” or risk reprisal by means of defamation or anti-discrimination legislation would be intolerable. This might seem a matter of semantics, but this is precisely how other countries have previously been able to successfully administer social benefits and maintain civil rights for gay couples while simultaneously leaving religious institutions to establish their doctrines and policies. Of course, as we are seeing, this gets messy: e.g. with regard to religious institutions as employers of gay employees. Berry is speaking, however, in the broadest of terms: What he does not want to see is for gays to become the next oppressed minority.

For Berry, categorization—to brand “the other” as “perverse” in this case—is often a preamble for discrimination, and according to him that is a proclivity of the Christian right. “Christians of a certain disposition have found several ways to categorize homosexuals as different as themselves, who are in the category of heterosexual and therefore normal and therefore good.”<sup>9</sup> Berry cites this track record to support his diffidence in Christian toleration:

When I consider the hostility of political churches to homosexuality and homosexual marriage, I do so remembering the history of Christian war, torture, terror, slavery and annihilation against Jews, Muslims, black Africans, American Indians and others. And more of the same by Catholics against Protestants, Protestants against Catholics, Catholics against Catholics, Protestants against Protestants, as if by law requiring the love

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<sup>8</sup> See the Rev. Fr. Thomas Hopko, *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction: Eastern Orthodox Reflections* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Allen, “Berry Expounds.”

of God to be balanced by hatred of some neighbor for the sin of being unlike some divinely preferred us.”<sup>10</sup>

I hesitate to quote this incendiary passage which inspired the brunt of Chris Roberts’s excellent and thorough rebuttal in the journal *First Things*.<sup>11</sup> As Roberts points out, Berry is guilty of the very kind of group demonization he accuses Christians of doing, and, what is worse, Berry cannot seem to imagine a Christian response toward homosexuality other than “torture” or “terror.” By the time of publication (both Roberts’ piece and Berry’s printed form of his “general declaration” for *The Christian Century* came out in April of last year) it seems that Berry had already caught his gross and ungrounded oversimplification from his speech and excised this section. In the printed essay Berry pares this down to the straightforwardly bland but still obnoxious “there is nothing more fearful than a religious mob overflowing with righteousness.”<sup>12</sup> This sentiment, while regrettable, is difficult to gainsay, but there are two important points that should still register.

First, Berry remains, even in his careful revision, entirely diffident if not dismissive of the Christian church with regard to homosexuality. That he cannot imagine a more positive or tolerant Christian response to the nexus of issues which homosexuality entails is quite bizarre, especially in light of so many mainline Protestant denominations recently endorsing either gay clergy or gay marriage or both or advocating for spousal benefits and other social benefits for “domestic partners” or “civil unions” or other non-marriage marriages. But I cannot fault Berry in rural Kentucky for not keeping up with the Lutherans or the PCUSA. What is stranger, and

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<sup>10</sup> Allen, “Berry Expounds.” To his credit Berry excised this curiously selective history of Christianity and civil rights from his printed essay in *The Christian Century*. He does not, however, sustain his helpful distinction between marriage and domestic partnerships. In fact, he extends to homosexual couples the same possibility of authentic “marriage” that heterosexual couples have.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher C. Roberts, “Wendell Berry’s Marriage Reversal,” *First Things* (April 2013). <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/03/what-wendell-berry-got-right-about-gay-marriage> (accessed June 15, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Berry, “Caught,” 30.

which I will explore more fully below, is that Berry fails to acknowledge the possibility of grace in the maintaining of traditional morality. For now I will simply point out the obvious—that it is good to turn a sinner from his ways that he may live; good for the sinner and good for the communities we share.

This raises the question that perhaps should have been answered before getting thrown into this whole briar patch—does Berry consider homosexuality as a sin, as he confesses regarding abortion, does he continue to feel as a traditional moralist the “old aversion” for homosexuality?<sup>13</sup> Apparently, not so much. Berry seems to deliberately equivocate as if he has not made up his mind completely. On the one hand he readily lists fornication, adultery and homosexual acts as sins according to the Bible, but he does so to emphasize that Scripture has far more to say about the former two. He goes so far as to charge Christians with hypocrisy who ignore these two while publicly condemning homosexuality. “I really don’t understand how you can single out homosexuality for opprobrium and wink at fornication and adultery, which the Bible has a lot more to say about.”<sup>14</sup> Berry’s larger concern is that this shallow judgmentalism undermines communitarian virtues of charity and justice: “Jesus talked of hating your neighbor as tantamount to hating God, and yet some Christians hate their neighbors by policy and are busy hunting biblical justifications for doing so...are they not perverts in the fullest and fairest sense of that term?”<sup>15</sup> So, while homosexuality remains categorically sinful, it is lesser in frequency than, for instance, adultery and lesser in substance than any hypocritical failure to love thy neighbor.

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<sup>13</sup> “I am opposed to abortion...for I still feel strongly the old aversion. Unlike the proabortion side, I think that abortion is killing.” Berry, “Caught,” 25.

<sup>14</sup> Berry in Miller, “Jeremiah.”

<sup>15</sup> Allen, “Berry Expounds.”



But as some critics have noticed, Berry is dodging the question, Is homosexuality still a sin? Why would a Christian be a hypocrite if he merely acknowledged that adultery, fornication, and sodomy were alike sinful? Is Berry suggesting that rather than Christians (whoever they may be; there is a straw man at work here) condemning homosexuality while “winking” at fornication and adultery, should they, wink at sodomy as well? God forbid. Certainly Berry is no such libertine. But now the shoe is on the other foot: How can Berry continue to condemn fornication and adultery and wink at homosexuality? And that is what Berry is attempting when he dismisses the biblical notion that homosexuality is “unnatural” and “perverse.”

Berry makes three points regarding homosexuality and nature. First, whether homosexuals are born that way is moot because the whole nature/nurture debate is moot, according to Berry. “We will discover that, like all the rest of us, homosexuals are made what they are by their mothers, their fathers, their genes, their germs, their upbringing, and their education, by their friends and neighbors, their dwelling places, their time and its culture, by their economic and social status, their personal history, and by history itself.”<sup>16</sup> And Berry is entirely correct on this score as he is when he goes on to conclude that homosexuality cannot be “cured by any sort of therapy.”<sup>17</sup> So for Berry the reality of homosexuality is more complex than mere genetics can account for, but it nevertheless amounts to an essentially immutable orientation. This implies, though Berry does not go this far, that even if it is perceived a sin—as even some homosexuals from a religious background continue to insist—it is difficult to successfully repent of the condition. Even Christian conversion therapists would agree. But on two other aspects of homosexuality and nature, Berry’s reasoning is flawed.

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<sup>16</sup> Berry, “Caught,” 29.

<sup>17</sup> Berry is in-line with my Grove City College colleague, psychologist Warren Throckmorton’s reassessment of gay-to-straight conversion therapy at <http://www.drthrockmorton.com/idoexist.asp>. I certainly have neither the expertise nor the space here to wade into this controversy.

His first flaw is to oversimplify the role of procreation as the proof of homosexuality's violation of the natural order. The natural order is, of course, sexual reproduction of homo sapiens as a mammal. Gay couples cannot between the two of them make babies. "Go forth and multiply," God commands Adam and Eve in the beginning. Child-rearing is a natural function of heterosexual marriage. "If it is argued that homosexual marriage cannot be reproductive, and is therefore, unnatural and should be forbidden, must we not argue that any childless marriage is unnatural and should be annulled?" Berry asks.<sup>18</sup> Berry oversimplifies much that needs untangling here. First, Berry presupposes that the defense of traditional marriage as natural rests on procreation as its sole purpose. While entire schools of Christian apologists have blundered into this assertion, it simply is not the best argument Christian tradition offers. The definitive case that engages our current politics of sexuality is the magisterial and breathtaking work on this issue put out by Catholic moral philosopher-extraordinaire, Robert George.<sup>19</sup> The biological fact is that the periodic infertility of the human female makes most marital sexual acts non-reproductive, but this in no way mitigates the "interpersonal communion" that husbands and wives experience.<sup>20</sup> And this interpersonal communion, not procreation, is the primary purpose, the true "marital quality of spousal intercourse." As the Lord puts it, "It is not good that he should be alone," and "the two shall be one." Man and woman complete one another and can only complete one another. So to Berry's conclusion that any childless marriage would be unnatural is false because it is a non sequitur once marriage's primary function is understood.

But the Bible, whether it's Leviticus in the Old or St. Paul to the Romans in the New Testament, specifically describes homosexual acts as not merely sinful (as with fornication or

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<sup>18</sup> Barry, "Caught," 29.

<sup>19</sup> Gerald V. Bradley and Robert P. George, "Marriage and the Liberal Imagination," *Scholarly Works Paper 878* (accessed July 9, 2014). [http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/law\\_faculty\\_scholarship/878](http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/law_faculty_scholarship/878). George and Bradley are part of the so-called "new school of natural law."

<sup>20</sup> Bradley and George, "Marriage," 302 fn.4.

adultery) but as unnatural. And while many defenders of homosexuality simply dismiss this characterization of their behavior as by-gone cultural prejudice, Berry, it should be remembered, takes the Bible too literally and too seriously to do so. His reasoning about “the sexual practices of homosexuals” is curious: They may be considered “unattractive or displeasing and therefore unnatural. But anything that can be done in that line by homosexuals can be done, and is done, by heterosexuals.”<sup>21</sup> Berry actually is saying that since heterosexuals can do what homosexuals do, that that justifies it. In the good humor of Berry himself allow me to put this delicately: He’s got the argument from nature here bass-ackwards. Certainly as a farmer who has bred sheep he knows better. The unnaturalness of gay sex that the Bible has in mind is quite simply—they cannot do what heterosexuals can do. And because their sexual activity is different, the significance of their sex differs as well.

That is, the interpersonal communion of husband and wife through sexual activity derives from the union of their complementary sex organs. Maleness and femaleness pertain to the body most obviously but to the soul as well; they complete one another. Because what homosexuals do is not the same biologically, their sexual practices do not enable the partners to participate in and enjoy the deeper moral and spiritual aspects of marital sex. Bradley and George clarify this: “in choosing to perform nonmarital orgasmic acts, including sodomitical acts—irrespective of whether the persons performing such acts are of the same or opposite sexes (and even if those persons are validly married to each other)—persons necessarily treat their bodies and those of their sexual partners (if any) as *means* or *instruments* in ways that damage their personal (and interpersonal) integrity.”<sup>22</sup> What we have here is the biological basis for two-in-one-flesh

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<sup>21</sup> Berry, “Caught,” 29.

<sup>22</sup> Bradley and George, “Marriage,” 302. This is so because since homosexual sex precludes any hope of procreation their sexual ethics reduces the value of sex to that of pleasure.

communion that is the basic good of marriage itself.<sup>23</sup> This is the intrinsic virtue of what St. John Chrysostom terms “the sacrament of love,” which as a sacrament enables the married couple to reflect not only Christ the Bridegroom’s love for the Church his bride but to also participate in the union of persons in a shared nature that is the holy Trinity. It is the grace shed by this sacramental participation that enables the long love unto death and beyond which the marriage’s sacrifice entails.

This kind of theologizing about marriage is not beyond Berry because he has waxed lyrical about his own marriage along similar thought-lines in his poetry; he has dramatized the outlines of this sacramental reality or its failures in the stories of various marriages throughout the body of his fiction in dozens of short stories and several novels, and he has lived it with his wife Tanya for over fifty years now. A more specific proof of his grasp of traditional marriage and its greater significances is in the passage I used as my opening epigraph, where he pictures young lovers giving themselves to one another and their community who, in turn, embrace their sacrifice: “Lovers must not, like usurers, live for themselves alone,” he had said. The temptation to self-isolation is exactly what gay sexuality cannot resist, according to Bradley and George. But more important is Berry’s curious simile “like usurers.” Usury is the charging of excessive interest so it would seem to denote here a desire for selfish gain. And his larger point, clearly, is that marriage involves a continual self-emptying and a mutual giving. This makes sense. But Berry is also alluding to Dante’s *Inferno* in a way that suggests a careful distinction between marriage and homosexuality.

In the various rings of Hell where each sin is appropriately punished and carefully distinguished in dozens of categories, Dante does not classify homosexuality (“sodomites” was the politically correct term that medieval Christians preferred) as a species of lust. It is not a

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<sup>23</sup> Bradley and George, “Marriage,” 305.

matter of sexual desire for the wrong person, such as adultery or fornication. For Dante the spiritual truth about homosexuality is that it is not a function of eros at all. It is rather a kind of violence, a violence committed not against one's fellow man but against God. It is a violation of the natural order or natural law. Sodomites are being punished for their violation of the natural order along with blasphemers and usurers.<sup>24</sup> Blasphemers are at once the most obviously violent against God—as creatures they have forgotten their place and openly despised their Creator by taking his name in vain—but also the least like the other two. Usurers have exchanged the proper relationship between work (goods and services) and wages; the one begets the other, with a false begetting, charging interest as a means by which money begets money. Likewise, sodomites establish a false means for satisfying pleasure contrary to the created order of things. Berry's simile, therefore, as a warning to lovers not to follow usurers is at least an acknowledgement of a natural order of things and perhaps even an implicit allusion to the deep spiritual difference between homosexual and heterosexual love. But Berry in his current sympathy toward the plight of gay couples imagines a different reality.

Berry has apparently dispensed with any distinction between “domestic partnership” and marriage, claiming for gay couples the same dignity and capacity for marriage that a heterosexual couple enjoys. Marriage as he defines it is a matter of making vows and keeping them. “A homosexual couple is perfectly free to make [such vows]. The government cannot forbid them to do so, nor can any church.” Neither government nor church can prevent such a marriage, and neither institution can make one by fiat. “No church can make a homosexual marriage, because it cannot make any marriage, nor can it withhold any degree of blessedness or sanctity from any pledged couple striving day by day to be at one.”<sup>25</sup> Marriage does not depend,

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<sup>24</sup> Dante, *Divine Comedy: Inferno*, Canto 11, ll. 49-51.

<sup>25</sup> Barry, “Caught,” 30.

it would seem, on sexual difference. On this score, Berry does appear to have reversed his earlier position.

In his earlier essays Berry quite clearly asserts that marriage “cannot be altered to suit convenience or circumstance.”<sup>26</sup> But now Berry would have us alter marriage to include same-sex couples, or perhaps if we press him on it, he might insist that marriage was always a matter of love-vows and fidelity between two cohabitants. It was only that he had never imagined that possibility before. As I mentioned in my introduction, Berry’s vast fictional world fails to include a single homosexual, much less a gay couple. And while it is theoretically possible for Berry’s creative and prolific imagination to find a place in Port William for one, I do not think he will. That is not the way his muse for fiction is inspired. More importantly, I do not think the new Berry needs to create such a story because the old Berry with his typical compassionate, imaginative genius for narrative studies of comparative humanity already has. In a powerful way he has successfully dramatized a compelling picture of a person who reconciles a long-kept vow of love that no state agency or church would or could acknowledge (not unlike Berry imagines as possible for gay couples) with deep respect for and harmony with the heteronormative reality of his much beloved community.

Berry is adamant that above all else homosexuals are part of our communities and as such are neighbors worthy to be loved as the Gospel demands. Berry expounds on the virtue of true “kindness” to bring this point home.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Berry on the issue of homosexuality falls in line with many in the Anabaptist tradition whose commitment to peace and communitarianism trumps in this case, traditional moral categories. For those of us who desire to maintain traditional morality, Berry clearly goes too far in winking at the sexual practices of

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<sup>26</sup> Roberts, *Reversal*. The phrase is Berry’s but Roberts does not cite a specific text.

<sup>27</sup> Berry, “Caught,” 31.

homosexuals.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, his message of compassion and community is a bracing tonic. How are we to maintain traditional morality (as the old Berry would have us) and love our homosexual neighbor (as the new Berry would have us)? How shall our homosexual neighbor, then, live in our communities?

By way of conclusion let me provide a sketch of the title character and narrator of Berry's greatest novel, *Jayber Crow*, who despite being heterosexual nevertheless embodies a reconciliation of the old Berry and the new. Jayber is a chaste lover in a necessarily sexless "marriage" of his own choosing, who lives his commitment out with a fidelity that breeds grace and mercy. Jayber's love story is perhaps the most curious love triangle in all of literature: There's no adultery, no murder, and most miraculously no ultimately tragic unrequited love. It is a story of salvation for two who live out their vows faithfully and find grace and peace through even death, and of one who chooses his own self-destructive path. Jayber vows to himself to love as a true husband Mattie Chatham; problem is, she's married (to an adulterous lout). He chooses to keep his vow: In doing so, he never seeks her company, never confesses his love to her, and never, in fact, confides in another living soul about it. Jayber sums up his "way of love" like this:

I lived under the power of my vow, and I kept it. . . and I welcomed the sacrifice. But there were times too when I lived in a desert and felt no joy and saw no hope and could not remember my old feelings. Then I lived by faith alone, faith without hope. What good did I get from it? I got to have love in my heart. Was I fooling myself?...All I can answer is that I did love her all her life...I do love her all her life, and still, and always. That is my answer, but in fact love does not answer any argument. It answers all arguments... Maybe to have it in your heart all your life in this world, even while it fails here, is to succeed.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Berry thinks that our pattern to follow here is Jesus' reply to the woman caught in adultery: "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:11). The "sin no more" is taken ironically by Berry, an example of "Jesus' sense of humor:" "can we suppose he could have given [this good advice] without smiling, knowing as he did the vast repertory of sins and the endless human susceptibility." Berry, "Caught," 31.

<sup>29</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow, A Novel: the Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself*, (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 247-49.

As such a lover, Jayber models brilliantly the torturous yet life-giving cross, the dying-to-life sacrifice that is chaste marriage and charts a reliable course for the gay pilgrim.

If a gay man were to live out solemn vows in the manner Berry imagines and yet submit their sexual desires to the Judeo-Christian moral norms of their community by not engaging in homosexual practice, what would he suffer that Jayber does not? The sexual frustration, the loneliness, the angst of being on the margins of society, being part of a couple but not a couple. The dark side, the genuine suffering, is all there. But by choosing the path of moral virtue and ascetic discipline that leads him ultimately to a life of celibacy, Jayber at once acknowledges and accepts his sexuality as well as the sanctity of marriage and the traditional moral limits that it imposes. By following the way of love, Jayber finds the mercy and grace to sustain him. Ultimately he is able to transcend his jealousy and enmity toward Mattie's lawful husband and even befriend him. He finds astonishingly that he can live the Gospel in a way that he never imagined: He can love his enemy. Love begets love. And only because Jayber maintains his moral integrity.

With this moral integrity paramount, I will offer some practical application of Jayber's spiritual wisdom. First, it should be noted that his choices drive him into a lifestyle that society has not before acknowledged, a new category not imagined before. And isn't that we as a society are embarking on with considering granting the right to marry to homosexuals? No one knows if this is good or will turn out good because no one can. There is no historical precedent. Jayber experiences no little anxiety about this even though his choices are grounded in a solid morality. As it turns out for him—the platonic husband, I guess would be a suitable term—it works out well. Blessed, even.



How shall we then live with gays and gay couples in our midst who might be our siblings, our cousins, our children? As kin, says Berry, with kindness. But like Jayber we must insist on honoring the bright moral line. There simply is no basis for excusing homosexual sexual practices. So their lifestyle must follow Jayber's example and be celibate. It is a cross to bear, but whose marriage is not a cross?