

A Christian Defense of Marriage Equality

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Genesis 16: 1-4a

I Corinthians 7: 1-9

Mark 3: 31-35

These days, marriage is in the air. It's summertime, so it's time for outdoor weddings. But marriage is also in the air because, as you well know, in early November Maine voters will go to the polls to decide whether to allow same-sex couples the freedom to marry civilly. So marriage will also be "in the air" in the days ahead in television ads, letters to the editor, and in our conversations at the dinner table, with co-workers at the water cooler, and with our neighbors over the fence.

About marriage, good, responsible people, including good, responsible people of faith differ and sometimes differ strongly, so conflict is also in the air.

This morning, I'm not expecting to settle those differences. After all, I have members of my own family who take a radically different stance than I do. My dear brother Bob and his wife Janet, a lovely couple, live in North Carolina and voted for Amendment One this spring, which defines marriage as exclusively heterosexual – one man, one woman -- and places that definition in the NC state constitution. Perhaps you too have family members whom you both love and disagree with about this and other issues. Perhaps you or they are still "evolving" as President Obama has been evolving. Perhaps you know where you stand, but lack the language to express it, especially to express your stance in a faith framework.

This morning, I want to offer a Christian case for marriage equality. Not "the" case, but one Christian's framing of the question, and then I invite you to share your views with each other in the days and weeks ahead. And please call me if you wish. Mandy has my contact information.

Now, public interest in same-gender marriage has increased steadily after Vermont first created the option of civil unions for same-sex couples in 1999. In 2003 Massachusetts went further by making civil marriage available to same-sex couples. Since then, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Iowa (Iowa, of all places!), Vermont, New York, Maryland, Washington State, and the District of Columbia have followed suit. In 2009 the Maine legislature passed, and then Governor Baldacci signed, a civil marriage law, but it was overturned by a referendum campaign later that year. Another pivotal moment was when the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in 2005 adopted a pronouncement in support of marriage equality and encouraged congregations to study this issue prayerfully.

Opponents of same-sex marriage – let's call them marriage traditionalists – express disbelief that we're even discussing this issue. They hold on firmly to two assumptions. First, marriage, in order to be marriage, requires gender difference. They ask, isn't marriage by definition the union of a man and a woman? And, second, they know that same-sex intimacy is immoral and shouldn't be encouraged, especially by the state.

Typically, traditionalists turn to the Bible and – well, yes -- to tradition to make the case for keeping marriage exclusively heterosexual. Some traditionalists also argue that excluding some people from marriage is the right thing to do. Robert Knight of the Family Research Council puts the matter this way: "All societies must have intact families to survive," but he writes, "Societies do not need any homosexual relationships in order to flourish." In addition, he argues that there's no

real discrimination or marriage “inequality” because gay men and lesbian women can already exercise the freedom to marry -- so long as gay men marry women and lesbian women marry men.

Proponents of same-sex marriage, myself included – let’s call them marriage advocates – point out that in every religious tradition, there’s a long-overdue rethinking underway about marriage, gender, sexuality, and family. They challenge the presumption that marriage requires gender difference, especially because the call for gender difference often turns out to mean gender inequality -- with a dominant male and subordinate female locked into rigidly prescribed social roles.

Advocates for marriage equality believe that the core of marriage isn’t a particular mix of genders, but rather about intimate friendship between two erotically attracted partners. Marriage is the covenanted love between two soul-mates, who seek God’s blessing and the community’s support for their life together. Marriage is morally good whenever it promotes companionship and mutual love between partners, encourages economic and other kinds of sharing, and provides for the nurturing of children. And aren’t these the very same values that are important for same-sex couples, many of whom are parenting children and taking care of elders and other family members? Because these couples are already living together and acting as if married, it’s really only a short step to acknowledge, and even celebrate, their lived reality as covenanted partners.

But what about the Bible? As we heard in the readings this morning, the Bible refuses to raise up only one model of human relationship to the exclusion of all others. Rather the Bible displays diverse patterns -- from one-man/one-woman marriages to polygamous marriages. Both Jesus and Paul preferred no-marriage, that is, celibacy. In fact, over the centuries most Christians regarded marriage as second-rate at best -- and as a problematic route to discipleship because marriage, they believed, is always morally tainted by the sinfulness of sex. More recently, however, the Christian tradition has been updating its thinking in more sex-positive, women-friendly, and gay-friendly directions.

When it comes to Christian tradition, in the fourth century Augustine tried his best to defend what he called the “good of marriage,” but in developing a case in favor of marriage, he had to turn around and explain why, if marriage was so good, Christians shouldn’t be encouraged to practice plural marriages. After all, if a union of two is good, wouldn’t a union involving more than two be even better? Moreover, wasn’t it a biblical practice for Abraham and other patriarchs to have multiple wives and numerous concubines? A somewhat frustrated Augustine countered, “That was then, this is now.”

With Augustine we, too, can say that times change, and so must the church’s ethical response change in order to deal with new realities. Remember how, less than a century and a half ago, the church was embroiled in a bitterly divisive marriage controversy, this time about whether women should be regarded as their husband’s property when they married – the “two shall become one flesh,” and that one person was the man. Many good Christians argued against treating women as co-equals in marriage, out of fear that Western civilization would not survive the change. So, heads up! Conflict about marriage is nothing new, and too often we Christians have been on the wrong side of the question!

I support the freedom of same-sex couples to marry because I take the Bible seriously. Even more, I take the God of the Bible seriously. God’s passion is for justice and compassion in all things. At the core of the Christian tradition is an insistent call to love God and neighbor as self. To love one’s neighbor means to advocate for the neighbor, which, if it means anything, means advocating

for the neighbor's well-being, safety and security, and for the neighbor's human rights. As the U.S. Supreme Court has recognized, there is no more fundamental right than the freedom to enter into intimate association with another person of one's own choosing who thereby becomes one's "next of kin." In the mid-1980s, the Court was asked whether incarcerated prisoners on death row retained the freedom to marry, and the Court said yes, even though those marriages might never be consummated. Why? Because this precious freedom to enter into covenanted relationship with another person defines our very humanness.

In religious language, we say that persons are created in love and for love. Our human vocation is to love and be loved. Relationship is at the heart of all that is good and life-giving. Denying the right to enter into intimate partnership or refusing to recognize family as family is deeply dehumanizing. In fact, one of the most degrading, painful, and morally objectionable aspects of chattel slavery in U.S. history was the denial of the right of the enslaved to marry and form secure families, recognized and protected by the entire community. Similarly, in our time, to deny or discredit the love of two men or two women in their committed partnership is painfully oppressive and harmful to human dignity.

Some say that supporting marriage equality requires us to toss aside, even reject the Christian tradition, but I see it differently. The core values of justice and compassion at the very heart of the tradition encourage me to support marriage equality for all couples, gay and straight. At its best, our tradition affirms that wherever there is love, there is God. Same-sex love is a good and holy love, morally comparable to heterosexual love. That's something that many clergy, myself included, have noticed whenever we've performed covenant services for same-sex couples. Granted, two men or two women exchanging vows and rings may look different from a heterosexual couple "getting married," but they're engaged in the identical practice of making promises, seeking a blessing, and receiving the support of their community.

The Christian community will likely be debating this question for some time. My hope is that the conversation will take a decisive turn -- away from focusing on the gender of the partners in question and toward emphasizing what truly matters, the character of their relationship. The church's focus, our focus, should be on helping each other – gay and non-gay alike – to learn together how to live a life-affirming, holy love and become a blessing to one another.

The God-given opportunity before us is to draw a larger picture of love, commitment, and family, one that intentionally includes same-sex couples. However, we should remember that enlarging human freedom is often an unsettling moment, something that both Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr., understood well. While such a moment is exhilarating for some, it's deeply troubling for others. Let us pray that God be with us all as we struggle to find our way forward.