

CAN MARRIAGE BE GAY? GOOD NEWS FOR US ALL

A Pride Sunday Sermon

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

June 24, 2007

Scripture: Genesis 2:19-25; Luke 20:27-36

Some years ago I read an article in defense of marriage written by the psychologist Laurence Shames. “Is there finally a good reason why people should get married?” he asks. He answers that there is.

Marriage is, among other things, the adoption of a passionate morality... It is the election of a profoundly respected partner to be the keeper of one’s character. It’s the setting up and sharing of standards, the taking on of a fierce vigilance that fends off shabbiness and snarls at the notion of settling for less... It is truly prizing something and taking the risk of trying with all one’s strength not to mess it up.

Is it difficult? It has its moments. But it offers grand rewards. It provides order and resonance to events. It links one day with the next. [Marriage] keeps us from squandering ourselves on petty things. It lets us use ourselves on things that matter, things that make a life.¹

A marriage begins when two strangers, for all that they know of each other and all that they do not, say brash and foolish and unmeasured words to each other; words, the meaning and the cost of which they will spend the rest of their lives contemplating; solemn vows to love and cherish each other... *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.*

About half the time it works, according to the statistics, and about half the time it doesn’t. Ironically, the stability of the human family is ordered by such commitments as these. The *Directory for Worship* of the **Book of Order** in the Presbyterian Church says that “Marriage is a gift God has given all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family.”² *Marriage is a gift*, it says.

It goes on to say, “For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship.”³ In other words, what’s love got to do with it?

The purpose of marriage in the Presbyterian understanding of it has to do with discipleship, and living in covenant relationship with another who will sustain and encourage and nurture that discipleship. *Marriage in service of discipleship*, now there’s a new twist on the theological lemon. And we thought marriage was about love and finding your soul mate and having babies and building financial security, and gaining social standing and having frequent sex. No, says the Book of Order, *marriage is about living a better life as a Christian in covenant relationship with another person.*

In the Genesis passage this morning, God decides that loneliness is not a good thing for the man. There is not a fit helper as his partner. The Hebrew word for helper is *ēzer*. And equality is implied in it, not subservience. The couple are friends and helpers to each other. Terry Fretheim the Old Testament scholar says that nothing about Eve’s

role as child bearer is implied either.⁴ The coupling of Adam and Eve is not, at the beginning, about procreation, that urging comes later. At the outset God in this story in Genesis, is simply trying to deal with the issue of the man's loneliness. The animals are not enough company. The earth doesn't do it for him, beautiful as it is, for what are the oceans or the mountains or the lakes without someone to share it? There is nothing in the creation that is as good for Adam, God concludes, as another human being. *Marriage as an antidote to loneliness*. Well, at least with Adam and Eve!

St. Paul had a utilitarian view of marriage. Since the second coming seemed immanent to him, he advised the fledgling Christians in Corinth that if they could not practice self-control it would be better to marry than to be aflame with passion. In other words, better wedding chapels than singles bars. Marriage for Paul, is a fallback position necessitated by the delay of the second coming. Now there's a back handed compliment to marriage. For Paul marriage is a compromise for humanity's lack of self-control, a holding pattern to keep sexual passion channeled.

In the passage from Luke today, Jesus is confronted with a question about marriage law that is barely comprehensible in modern terms. It was customary in Jewish levirate law if a man died, that his widow would be married to the deceased's oldest brother so that she might have children. In the set up question, the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection asked of Jesus an absurd puzzler in which a woman married a succession of seven brothers all of whom died and left her childless. "In the resurrection," they asked, tongue in cheek, "whose wife will she be?"

And Jesus answered that in the resurrection the dead are neither married nor given in marriage because in heaven there is no death. It is a peculiar teaching deserving of a sermon in itself. Those who have had violent, abusive, troubled marriages may hear in this declaration good news. But for those who have enjoyed lifelong intimacy and companionship in marriage, Jesus' words are unsettling. Suffice it to say that Jesus, points us sufficiently to this life and the challenges of living in harmony with another today, that the hypothetical of relationships in eternity don't seem to capture his imagination quite as fully.

Not everyone is cut out to be married. Some Christian communities consider marriage a vocation, a calling to which not everyone is called. And I would be quick to add that one need not be married to lead a fulfilled and complete life. If that were so, what might we say about Jesus, who never married? He outlived and out-loved us all.

Today the issue of marriage has been politicized to a point that one hardly recognizes the deeply personal and intimate nature of the thing. Marriage is, after all, the choosing of another human being with whom you share your life. It is making a promise to another person and trying with all your heart to keep it. It is deciding that of all the people that you might chose or desire as a partner and companion this one will be the focus of your constant attention and commitment.

And yes, Adam and Eve were the first of the human beings to be a couple as the Genesis story goes. But they were not married, except as God gave them to each other. In that sense, I suppose it was an arranged marriage, to alleviate the man's loneliness, remember?

Somehow in recent years, politicians have taken the intimate, private, and personal relationships of two people who love one another and who wish to make promises of fidelity to each other, and shaped them into a political agenda, a rallying point and funding source to their constituent base. In a time in which nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, frightened people settle for slick explanations of what is wrong with marriage, and latch onto unfounded ideas about how the promise of fidelity between two people of the same sex somehow endangers the durability and sacredness of the same promises made between two people of the opposite sex.

It used to be that race was the political hot button of marriage. Blacks were not permitted to marry whites in this country in many states and Biblical evidence was quoted to support this position. Even today families struggle with Asian, Caucasian, Latino, Black, and mixed race marriage. We want our son or daughter to marry “our own.”

When my brother Don, asked my sister-in-law Diana, to marry him my mother cried because Diana is Chinese. It seems so strange and out of synch with life now that she would have grieved that fact. But for my mother, growing up in an earlier era, she feared what she thought would be the discrimination that her grandchildren would suffer.

David Brooks, the conservative political columnist of the *New York Times* says, “Marriage joins two people in a sacred bond. It demands that they make an exclusive commitment to each other and thereby takes two discrete individuals and turns them into kin.”⁵

Two discrete individuals... we are, after all, born into families created by parents who once were strangers. We wander the earth in search of a friend, a companion, a mate, a helper, one with whom we may lead a better life than we might if we were to live it alone. We do not marry our kin, we create kinship by marriage.

The commitments of marriage touch the deepest place in our heart, the place where desire resides, and longing, and the need to know that we are not alone. Life, is after all, so much easier and so much more fulfilling when there is someone who will grab the other end of the sofa when you move it across the room, who stands on the other side of the bed and helps you smooth the sheets, who dices the celery while you run the vacuum. Someone who shares in the tasks of life and the pleasures too. Someone with whom you build a storehouse of memories, and save an album of pictures. Someone, who over the years, when you ask, “Do you remember,” does.

The Presbyterian Church’s Book of Order says that only a man and a woman together can have a marriage. But we know from our own experience, you and I, that commitments of love and faithfulness can be made between any two people who choose to live in covenant relationship to one another.

Call it what you will, though we Presbyterians may not call it marriage, the church protects the right of Sessions and clergy to mark such occasions of commitment between two human beings in worship, with prayer and thankfulness and blessing and the exchange of promises of abiding faithfulness. For all of the Presbyterian Church’s homophobia, it has not yet taken that away. Nor should it. If anything we should as a

church and as a faithful people be committed to supporting the promises of those who wish to make solemn vows of fidelity to one another.

We cannot on the one hand be so hypocritical as to condemn the sin of promiscuity among unmarried persons while at the same time denying the blessing of marriage. There is something profoundly, morally wrong with that.

David Brooks describes this contradiction in this way,

Marriage is in crisis because marriage, which relies on a culture of fidelity, is now asked to survive in a culture of contingency. Today, individual choice is held up as the highest value.... Freedom is a wonderful thing, but the culture of contingency means that the marriage bond, which is supposed to be a sacred vow till death do us part, is now more likely to be seen as an easily cancelled contract.

Men are more likely to trade up when a younger trophy wife comes along. Men and women are quicker to opt out of marriages, even marriages that are not fatally flawed, when their 'needs' don't seem to be met at that moment.

Brooks goes on,

Every human being in the United States has the chance to move from the path of contingency to the path of marital fidelity – except homosexuals. Gays and lesbians are banned from marriage and forbidden to enter into this powerful and ennobling institution.

You would think that faced with this marriage crisis, we conservatives would do everything in our power to move as many people as possible from the path of contingency to the path of fidelity. But instead many argue that gays must be banished from matrimony because gay marriage would weaken all marriage.

[This, however ignores] that we're moral creatures with souls, endowed with the ability to make covenants, such as the one Ruth made with Naomi: 'Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.'

It may seem counter intuitive to those who have been politicized by the thunder of partisan rhetoric, but as Christians, I think the high moral ground is not to prohibit the making of solemn promises and commitments of fidelity and constancy, but to insist on them, advocate for them, urge them on all who are called to live by such a covenant.

It is the sin of the church, I believe, that two people who love and honor each other with commitments of the heart are not encouraged to make those commitments with their lives, in words of promise and deeds of binding, humbly asking God's blessing and help in keeping their eyes fixed on one another and on the prize of the upward call of Christ Jesus.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met in Albuquerque, New Mexico eleven years ago, and went down in history as the Assembly which passed G-6.0106b and sent it to the presbyteries for approval, purporting to prohibit gays and lesbians from ordination. I was a commissioner at that Assembly and voted against that overture.

The debate was heated with angry exchanges back and forth, and enough political maneuvering to make even Karl Rove blush. Until finally a commissioner from this presbytery, New York City Presbytery, rose to speak to the assembly. He asked the Moderator, John Buchanan if he might read a few words that he had prepared before the Assembly voted on whether to approve that censorious overture.

And so Barrie Shepherd, former pastor of First Church and commissioner from New York City Presbytery began to read a poem entitled *Long View*.

Rest assured, Presbyterians,
[Barrie started in]
that whatever we do here, today,
this world will-somehow-manage
to survive; whatever of wisdom
or of folly we solemnly unleash
upon creation, lovers still
will lie abed, and infants,
persistent, will perish for want
of food, or caresses, of those
who will keep faith with that One
who turned water, toppled tables,
and touches one and all with
the lingering prospect of life.⁶

There isn't a lawyer I know who does not think that inevitably the civil protections of those who live as committed partners will not be assured by law, in time. And I suspect the Presbyterian Church will be more just and wise and faithful some day, and act less frightened and more like Christ would have us in this matter. But in the meantime, lovers will lie abed, parades of pride will go by, and commitments will be made before God and one another, whether the church or the law of the land recognizes it or not. Love, after all, never asks for permission, only for recognition. For the most powerful commitments on earth are utterly irretrievable, the ones made in the heart.

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¹ Laurence Shames, "Toward a Passionate Morality" Savvy Magazine, March, 1981.

² W-4.9001

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fretheim, **New Interpreter's Bible**. Nashville, Abingdon, 1995, Vol. I.

⁵ "The Power of Marriage" New York Times. The New York Times Company, November 22, 2003.

⁶ J. Barrie Shepherd. **Long View**. unpublished