

Love has everything to do with it

Karen P. Oliveto Tuesday, March 16, 2004

Feb. 12 will forever be a watershed moment not only in the history of San Francisco, but also within the United States. On that day, when Mayor Gavin Newsom extended the right of legal marriage to same-sex couples, another chapter of civil rights history was written.

As a United Methodist pastor in San Francisco, I applaud Mayor Newsom for his courageous stand. I also celebrate the thousands of lesbian and gay couples who have been married in these past four weeks. Even though the courts have temporarily stopped further marriages, we have all been given a glimpse of a future that offers the rights and responsibilities of marriage to all loving and committed couples, regardless of sexual orientation.

As a religious leader, I cannot help looking at the same-sex marriage movement through theological and pastoral lens. Anyone who studies Judeo-Christian history will immediately note that marriage has evolved over the ages. It is difficult to derive a biblical norm for marriage. The primary function of marriage in biblical times was to bear sons to preserve the family lineage. The forms marriage took were varied: Polygamy was commonly practiced; a deceased man's brother was expected to marry his widow; parameters for choosing a marriage partner were defined by understandings of kinship groups and outsiders; the father of the groom often selected a bride for his son; St. Paul reluctantly affirmed marriage as a way to control lust, but ultimately advised the reader to remain celibate as he was.

Even with so many differing models for marriage, I believe that the theological understanding of marriage that has evolved -- that of covenant of love between two persons and God -- is the model which brings the deepest joy for the couple and the greatest good for the community. To have love as the basic building block of a society spills out into the rest of culture, creating a community that is not only committed to strengthening this basic unit of family, but holding up love, in all its forms and expressions, as the highest of human values.

Some claim that broadening the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples weakens the institution of marriage. With military metaphors, they speak of "defending" marriage and engaging in a "battle" against same-sex marriage. Of course, it is not the first time marriage has been "defended." In the course of our country's history, slaves were not permitted to marry, nor, until 1967, was it legal in every state for interracial couples to marry.

Yet, society learned that love is not the sole possession of one class or group of people. Love moves in remarkable and mysterious ways, to bring couples together who are convinced that their lives are richer and more meaningful together than they are apart. Defending marriage from love can be the only thing that ultimately weakens the institution of marriage. The love that gay men and lesbians bring to marriage can serve to strengthen all marriages, gay and straight.

Love breaks down that which weakens the fabric of our inter-relatedness: hate and fear. It is ironic that the very things that lesbian and gay couples are seeking through legal marriage -- a public commitment to love each other for life, a desire to deepen their love for each other and a strengthening of family -- are the exact same values held by those who espouse traditional family values.

I have been privileged to pastor my congregation through these days of great cultural change. My role, as a religious professional, is to help them see how God is at work in the world, and to encourage us all to faithfully follow this in-breaking of God's spirit.

The advent of same-sex marriage has filled this city with unparalleled unity and goodwill. The joy expressed at City Hall through the love of thousands of lesbian and gay couples has been palpable. If, as Christians believe, God is love, then God has been powerfully present in our lives in the last four weeks. Do we have the courage to follow in faith with this new thing God is doing in our very midst?

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