

## “Same Gender Marriage”

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Today’s sermon is not specifically grounded in the lectionary readings, though Isaiah speaks about God doing a new thing, which is relevant to our topic. Most of you know that I am an advocate for gay rights. It’s something that is important to me. It is something that was important to the PNC that brought me here. You also probably know that the Session is in the process of studying the issue of the same gender marriage. The discussions that are resulting from this study are helping me enormously and at the very least helping crystallize in my own mind exactly what I believe marriage to be. At its core marriage is about a promise two people make to love each other and share a common life until death and then the honoring of those promises. I honestly don’t believe two people need either the State or the Church to sanction or witness that promise for it to be effective and real.

I know a couple that is living together now. It is a man and a woman. They have both been divorced, but now they have found each other and are living together in what could only describe as bliss. I asked the woman once, if they ever talked about getting married. She said, “We are married in our heart. We are married before God. But, we don’t want to do anything public. We’ve both been through that before and it ended badly.” Then she said, “This is the most successful relationship either of us has ever had and we don’t want to do anything to screw it up.” So, obviously, they felt that a public ceremony would actually add something to the relationship that would make it more difficult for them to honor their implicit promises of lifelong fidelity to each other. But, I agree with her. What makes them married is not the ceremony. It is the promise whether explicit or implicit to share their life in the context of love. They do not need sanction from the church or state to make it a marriage. What makes a marriage is the mutual promise and the honoring of that promise.

However, many people do want to add layers of meaning and ritual to the promise and that is usually very helpful. For many people the promise is made more binding and more intense and more real when it is done publicly. It might be done before family and friends. It might be done before a faith

community. Making these promises to each other publicly does add something to them. At the very least the couple is acknowledging that they will need the support of their family and community in order to honor the enormous promises they are making.

Some people want the sanction of the institutional church. It is one thing to make the promises in the presence of God. If you think about it every promise is in the presence of God because God is omnipresent. But, if there is a minister or priest or rabbi or whatever involved it brings the church itself into the equation. So it is not just in the presence of God, but God as expressed through the human institution of the church. That is very important for some people. But, still the heart of the marriage is not the church building or the minister it is the promises and the honoring of those promises.

Many people want the State to sanction their marriage. This gives a great deal of legal status and benefits to the people. It is a very practical matter. State sanction gives everything from tax benefits to legal status as parents to hospital visitation rights to insurance and government benefits. State sanction is very important. But, still the core of the marriage is not a certificate. It is the promises made and the honoring of those promises.

So that is where I am on marriage. Now what about homosexuality? The central question for me when deliberating any moral question is the issue of harm or in the case of homosexuality, lack thereof. Are two people in a loving homosexual relationship harming anyone by being in the relationship? Are they harming each other? Are they harming the children they may be parenting? Are they harming society? And as best I can tell the answer to every one of those questions is clearly “no.” On the contrary they seem to making a positive contribution to society and everyone involved seems to benefit. Regarding harm or lack thereof to children, the organization Maryland Equality documents that every respectable, accredited organization of pediatricians, social workers, psychiatrist and child welfare experts in this country agree that children raised by same gender couples fare just as well as children raised by heterosexual couples. From my own experience, the children of gay couples often seem to be thriving and well adjusted, as much if not more than my own children. Regarding harm or lack thereof to themselves, every gay person I know that has come to terms with their sexual orientation and found a loving relationship has only been helped by that relationship. They seem to be

happier, more at peace and more successful. Regarding harm or lack thereof to society, again in my limited experience gay couples only contribute to society and its stabilization and prosperity by caring for each other, caring for children, caring for aging parents, caring for the needy of society. They are contributing to their churches, schools, neighborhood and charitable organizations.

So it's pretty clear to me that loving, committed gay relationships are contributing positively to our society. Not only are these relationships doing no harm but they benefit those involved and society as a whole just as long term monogamous heterosexual relationships benefit those involved and society as a whole. So then, all that's left as a church is to deal with the fact that the Bible calls it a sin. Actually, there is good biblical scholarship that demonstrates that most of the seven or so verses out of 66 books of the Bible that people use to condemn homosexuality are in fact not about homosexuality at least, not about loving, nurturing gay relationships. But, there are a couple verses that clearly have an anti-gay sentiment. Therefore, I have come to believe that the few verses against homosexuality reflect the prejudice and bias of the time in which the Bible was written and they are not God's will for us today. The Bible says a lot of things that we now interpret within their cultural context. The Bible says that a woman should be silent in church and obey her husband as if he were Christ (1 Cor. 14:34-35, Eph. 5:24). The Bible says slaves should obey their masters as they obey Christ (Ephesians 6:5). The Bible says women must not braid their hair (1 Tim. 2:9). The Bible says you should not wear clothing made of two different kinds of material (Lev. 19:19). There are just some things in the Bible that at best reflect the culture of the time and at worst reflect the prejudice and hatred of the writer. Given the facts we know about loving, homosexual relationships today it is reasonable to assume that the verses that condemn such relationships communicate the prejudice of the time and not God's Will for today.

What I do know personally about homosexuality comes principally through relationships I have with gay people and my own reading on the subject. Being gay is part of who you are. Coming to terms with your sexual identity is life affirming and healing. Finding a partner of the same gender to share your life with is joyful and wonderful. That's what I've been told by the gay people I know. So, either they are confused and sick, or they are speaking the truth. And, you know, if it were one person saying these things, maybe I would say it was sickness. If it were 10 people maybe they are

misguided. But, its millions of people, saying the same thing, sharing the same truth from their hearts, describing the same experience. Homosexuality is a reality across cultures and across time. It is who they were created to be and who God intends them to be.

So, then what about same gender marriage? Given that marriage is at its core a mutual promise of love and commitment between two people and given that homosexual couples provide a positive contribution to themselves, to their children and to society, then to keep two people of the same gender who want to promise to love each other and share a common life together until death, to keep them from being married by the State or by the Church is unjust. It is unfair. It is discrimination. I believe it is no less discrimination than if we were keeping two people from marriage based on the color of their skin. In fact, from an ethical stand point, I see very little difference between the State and the church denying interracial couples the right to marry and denying that right to gay couples. It is the same kind of discrimination. In both cases, the State and church deny the material and spiritual benefits of marriage based solely on social convention and tradition. Thank God we've stopped denying marriage to interracial couples. It's time we stop denying to same gender couples.

Marriage is a promise two people make to love each other and share a common life until death. Any two people can make that promise. They do not need the State or the church. But, if the State is going to give some couples a list of benefits and privileges, we should not deny those benefits to other couples for no good reason. And, tradition is not a good reason to deny people equal treatment. If the church is going to sanction marriage for some couples it should not deny that sanction to other couples for no good reason. And, tradition is not a good reason to deny equal treatment. To deny equal treatment is unjust and unfair discrimination.

So, as a Pastor in a denomination that discriminates in this way I am faced with three choices. I can participate in the discrimination by offering my services to officiate weddings for heterosexual couples while denying those services to homosexual couples. Or, I can marry any couple regardless of our denomination's prohibitions and risk being charged in the church courts. Or, I can refuse to marry anybody lest I participating in the prejudice and discrimination of this denomination. I am leaning toward the former solution and offering my assistance to any two people, gay or straight, for whatever kind of commitment service they would want, including marriage,

not just separate but unequal holy unions, but marriage for everyone. That will be my decision to make.

But, this church also has decisions to make. Does the church support gay marriage in our denomination? Will we work for change in the denomination's definition of marriage so that any two people can be married, man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, any two people married, not just holy unioned, but married? Will we offer our long term support for same gender marriage on the State and Federal level? Will we work for change?

This church is More Light. That means we have already committed to treating gay people equally in the ordination process in our denomination. How More Light are we? Will we work for change in the definition of marriage in the State and the church because that definition is discriminatory? Will we fight this kind of discrimination in our midst? Will we stand up? Will we speak out? We are More Light. How much Light do we want? I think, when it comes to facing the darkness of discrimination, we need all the light we can get.