

Reflections on Love and Marriage

Deuteronomy 25: 5-10, 1 Corinthians 13, Matthew 22: 23-40

June 29, 2008 – Pride Sunday

I want to extend my congratulations to our newly married couples today – to Katie and Caleb and to Drew and Alan. Both of these couples were united in marriage in the last couple of weeks. As a child I remember still my first reflections on marriage: “Love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage.” That was a song played back in the sixties and sung by Frank Sinatra. The other less than poetic memory I have as a child was the teasing lines we would say to our first friends who were “going together:” “first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes (insert the line of one of them) with a baby carriage.” Who’s old enough to remember either of those? How young and naive I was! On this Pride Sunday, as things are really beginning to change all around us, I choose to follow the advice of the apostle Paul and put away the childish things of the past. Instead I’d like to peep through this misty glass of reality that we live in to see if we can see a glimpse of God face-to-face. For the California Supreme Court has cleared the path to full marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples. With no residency requirement, that has allowed Drew and Alan to get married. And it has made possible for anyone in our nation to get married in a way that has not previously been possible. That is historic. The newspapers and media of all sorts are overflowing with debate on this topic of marriage. A couple of comments I made to the press on another question of social change for GLBT folk has been requoted several times in the Houston Chronicle and may reappear in this context of same-sex

marriage any day now. So it is fair and appropriate that I preach on love and marriage, so that you can know my stance on the question, “is marriage for all?”

There are many definitions for marriage, but my starting point today is the definition of marriage as ***a contractually committed partnership, including sexual love, cohabitation, shared economy/property and mutual childrearing.*** What makes this topic so interesting and complex is the strange alchemy of religious/spiritual, affairs of the state, and social elements. Doing theology in these complex matters is always about stirring the pot. What makes the scriptures come alive, what allows the Spirit to move among us, is to always relate sacred scripture to what’s going on in society and in our culture. That process is not to subordinate scripture in any way. Scripture is one source and I believe the most important source. But if everything in all creation is of God, then let’s honor God by admitting that God created it all, including the questions, the answers, the certainty and the uncertainty. That’s what Job did and that’s what we should do every time we come together. If we don’t we become merely dogmatic. We cease to be relevant in the world and we risk becoming religious zealots.

Marriage has religio-spiritual, social and state elements. For that reason I have chosen special Bible texts that intertwine these three elements. Our text from Deuteronomy involves what is called Levirate marriage law. This law intertwines all three elements, but especially social and state concerns. What this law called for, in the event of the husband’s death without children in his marriage, is for the husband’s brother to marry his widow and to name the first child in the deceased’s

name. Now if the brother refused, the widow was to publicly untie his sandal and to spit "in his face." I have to tell you that I consulted two rabbis for interpretation of this law. My two questions were: why was this law given and what is the symbolism of the widow's acts, if refused. The reasons for this law were to care for the widow, to preserve the man's wealth within the family tribe and to perpetuate the life of the deceased. For there were no probate courts, no IRS, and no welfare system. There was also no common belief in an afterlife. So it was through children alone that the memory, the very life of the deceased was continued. A refusal by the brother brought great shame upon him and it was a violation of social contracts. So the untying of the sandal was symbolic of freeing him of that social contract; the spitting in his presence was to underscore his public shame. Now obviously this law is no longer binding on the community of faith. I have an older brother with no children. If he were to die, I would not be required to marry my sister-in-law. In fact the bigamy laws would probably be enforced if I tried, even if I cited this passage. We have a little clan in West Texas who are dealing with similar issues right now.

Now the Sadducees in our gospel text on marriage were the Temple police. They were the priests who watched over religious law. They also followed all Torah (Mosaic law) with literal fervor. If it was in the Hebrew Scriptures, they believed it; if it wasn't they didn't believe it. So there was no mention of resurrection in their Bible. They didn't believe it. There was no mention of angels; they didn't believe in them. They tried to create a hypothetical situation in which they could trip up Jesus around this question of marriage law. This widow goes through seven dead

husbands all in the same family. They ask, "In your resurrection, Jesus, who is she married to?" He says first of all in heaven there is no marriage. He says we're like angels (that they also don't believe in) and don't have earthly bodies. And he supports resurrection by pointing out that the patriarchs of Israel are alive in heaven with God. So what happened to the Sadducees? They disappeared in the first and second centuries. When the Romans destroyed the Temple they did not adapt to the changing conditions. They stayed fundamentalist in their beliefs and it is generally believed that they disappeared into other Jewish sects such as the Essenes. They ceased to be relevant in their society.

Now marriage as an institution has survived for millennia but it has adapted to changing societal conditions and it will continue to adapt. What changes very little are the purposes for marriage. So what are the highest purposes of marriage for society and state and does gay marriage serve those purposes? Marriage is the primary means by which society perpetuates virtue from one generation to the next. Marriage is also the means by which the state allows for the orderly management and transfer of property from one generation to the next. I will deal with the religious and spiritual purposes of marriage in just a bit, but let me start with society and state. Virtues such as kindness, patience and tolerance are best transmitted in the nuclear family. There is an assumption that a law-abiding, peaceful society is best nurtured by one in which the family stays together. I think that is true. If divorce or broken families are common attributes of those incarcerated in our prisons, it seems that the divorce rate would be a key indicator, along with poverty, of how law-abiding a state's residents are. Any society that denies the right of every person to inculcate

those set of virtues in their family of choice is suspect; and those societies that assert that somehow denying those marriage rights to a minority population strengthens the marriages of those in the majority population is acting non-rationally and has not taken seriously the numbers I want to share. Some have said that allowing gay marriage will destroy the institution of marriage. Really? The only state that we have data on divorce rates since gay marriage has been in force is Massachusetts. Massachusetts has the lowest divorce rate nationally, 2.2 per thousand couples nationally, measured in 2004. The national average is 3.8. Texas, by the way, the Mecca of family values, is 4.1/1000. Since gay marriage was instituted the divorce rate in Massachusetts declined to 2.0 per thousand. Sounds like it might be strengthening family values! But I will give the conservatives the benefit of the doubt and say that gay marriage has had no affect on the divorce rate. Nevertheless, if virtue is communicated best through the wedded family, wouldn't affording that opportunity to everyone be a good idea?

How about the state view? Most of the statutory code centers around property rights. In marriage there is a presumption of community property around what the couple owns, if there is not clear and convincing evidence. If you want to know how the state views what's important in marriage, look at what is written down to anticipate the dissolution of marriage. Most of the statute has to do with either how to divide property or who gets custody of children. If marriage is a good means by the state to regulate the passing of property for the majority population, wouldn't it also be a good idea for the minority population of gays and lesbian couples?

So from the social and state perspectives gay marriage sounds like a good idea, right? But we are here in church, so how about a religio-spiritual view? We look to our leader, Jesus. Jesus speaks very little about marriage, except as sermon illustrations to describe what the kingdom of heaven is like. He does show up at a wedding at Cana in Galilee bringing really good wine. Jesus loved a good wedding reception! His oft-quoted reference to marriage between man and woman was in reference to divorce, which only involved one man and one woman. So where do we go? We go to those passages involving agape (unconditional) love. The best example of that kind of love comes from the apostle Paul in today's letter to the Corinthians. Paul is not talking about marriage here, even we though we often read this passage at weddings. The reason that we read this at weddings is because we believe as a community of faith that marriage has the possibility at its best of expressing all the forms of love, but especially agape love, "for better or worse" love. Six years ago, in a conference room at St. Luke's UMC, a group from our staff met with a psychologist to discuss the topic of ministering to gay and lesbian persons. Now we had one openly gay man on our staff. As he bravely took his turn at the end of that meeting to share his story, he spoke of his twenty-five year committed relationship with his partner. He knew each of us pretty well. He said, "As I look around this room, I challenge you to look at your own marriage history and tell me if any of you have remained in a committed relationship as long as we have." We had all been divorced. Some of us were working hard on new marriages. But it was quite humbling to reflect on his words regarding love and marriage. I would have to say that among those in the room his relationship with his partner was the model of

Christ's love for the church in self-giving, sacrificial love. And isn't that what Christ came to show us and model for us as well.

So now you know my stance on gay marriage. Now all of you know that I can't bless nor perform a gay wedding here at Bering. That's our church law and I must submit to it in my actions. But I believe there will be a time when we look back on this time as one in which the United Methodist Church imitated the Sadducees in its dogmatic approach. May God prevent us from disappearing like the Sadducees. May we remain faithful and relevant. May we always recognize that God's will emerges from the dialog between the wisdom of the Bible, the changing landscape of our society and a fresh breath of the Spirit moving within the body. And may God remove this dark set of glasses from our eyes so that we may see the handmaidens of faith and hope step aside to reveal the bride of Christ, fully adorned in inclusive, all-abiding, agape love.