

Regarding Marriage

The on-going pressure for same-sex marriage in New Jersey – Pennsylvania not far behind - prompts this offering of reflection on the topic. EAW

The quest to gain for people of the same gender living together in committed partnership a legal and societal status equal to those of opposite gender will engage, for the foreseeable future, the courtrooms and living rooms and bedrooms of the nation in proportion to the value we humans put on romance and love and sex – which is to say several notches above sports, politics and religion.

The ongoing discourse should have, as a bonus, the chance to get clear in our own minds exactly what ‘marriage’ really is – mostly because, until this age, we have never had to explain what was ‘obvious.’ We would talk about ‘good marriages,’ bad marriages,’ ‘sacramental or religious marriages,’ ‘civil’ or ‘common law’ marriages,’ ‘marriage for money’ or ‘celebrity,’ marriages between people too young to know what they are doing, marriages between people who found each other late in life, even ‘May-December’ marriages where the difference in ages is newsworthy. We would speak of ‘childless marriages’ or ‘child blessed’ marriages as more or less symbolic of happiness and success or unfulfilled and rather empty. There were marriages that were between people who could not or should not be married – serial monogamy – or people with addictions or violent personalities. But in all of it, marriage meant only one basic concept: a husband and a wife.

Now an accommodation is to be made in language and law for relationships between two men or two women. For now....but surely later: two men and a woman, two women and a man, and so on.... If one ‘given’ about marriage, “male-female,” no longer pertains, why should others?

Anthropology has something to say about this. Where did our ancient notion of male-female marriage come from? When did that time come for hominid primates when mating was not just an ingrained need to preserve the species and became the quest for personal well-being, happiness, fulfillment of self...love? *Animal Planet* and *Disney* features aside, even swans and such that mate for life do not come near the definition we have of committed love. They haven’t the soul for it...literally.

Offspring are the point.

I find it fascinating that one theory about why humans came to walk upright has far less to do with evolution down from the trees to the tundra than used to be taken for granted. Non-human female mammals, have you noticed, are not brought to estrus until their offspring are quite capable of leaving the ‘nest’ and striking out on their own. Humans evolved not only physiologically but emotionally to the point that the desire for intercourse, beyond the feel good urges that guarantee species preservation, had more and more to do with deep feelings and needs to belong to, be united with, the other. (A feeling that is not limited to male-female relationships alone, however uncooperative the biological makeup may be: male to male, female to female homosexual relationships share the same emotional/psychological yearnings because they are ‘human’ and independent of gender attraction issues.)

Lo and behold, mamma is with child and the former occupant of the womb is nowhere capable of leaving the nest...and won't be for a decade and a half. Humans take longer to adultify. Two hands, at least will be needed. One arm to hold the 'babe in arms,' another to hold hands with the 'toddler' who will need help for quite some time crossing the game trail. Behold, two hands *must* be off the ground. We became bipedal when we began to parent 'kids' who took their time leaving home...like 15 years.

More than that, as our present age is quite aware, single-parenting is not the best of all possible worlds. The parents of human offspring have a better chance for keeping the kids off the menu of predators if **both** remain together for the duration. And that has everything to do with the origins of marriage.

Clans and tribes provided security and sustenance for the group, but as those communal-living experiments of the '60's found, a set of parents male and female provide the best of possible circumstances for raising a human child. Something about a sense of 'belonging' not just to the clan but to **this set** of clan members who, themselves, belong to each other. Not that single parents can't – with often heroic efforts – achieve the goal. One does not wisely choose the more difficult path, though one can make the best of a given circumstance. The wonder and applause for such things is justified indeed.

[I'll pick up the rest next week. If you can't wait and want to see the whole thing, go to our parish website and click on the *Pastor's Notes*]

In the tens of thousands of years of our traceable history the 'practical' would become 'law' and ritual behavior would follow with symbols abounding – clothing, rings, doweries, banquets. Religion would play a critical role as in all things at the core of human behavior. And here is where, aside from the civil rights and other legal argumentation, the demand that 'same gender' partnerships are the equal of a the bond that evolution brought about as marriage is going to come to a brick wall.

Unless, of course, we are successful in divorcing sex from procreation. And that is where I see a great deal of prep work being done – hopefully without ultimate success. Procreation – from a utilitarian perspective - has become culturally incidental to sexual activity. The culture now promotes sex as primarily recreational: the expected conclusion to a 'night out.' No more significant than the choice of an amusement ride at Disney World. On a somewhat deeper level it answers the need to 'give and receive' love. But 'love' itself is a watered-down concept that is 'for now.' Maybe for the foreseeable future; not really possible for a lifetime....let alone the years it takes to raise children to adulthood. At any rate, it has become all about 'me' and not so much about 'the kids.'

Unable to unite their bodies as nature designed, same gender couples find other methods to achieve physical union...but are they not sadly lacking and mere substitutes for the 'real thing'? Unless the object is more masturbatory...which is an altogether different issue. The desire is there. It is sincere, painfully so if it is not just a casual thing (something altogether familiar to male-female sex as well). **But there is always going to be something missing...the conception that makes love incarnate.**

Substitutions abound. Adoption. Artificial conception. Sperm donation, egg donation.

However, suddenly there comes a third person in the mix who, arguably, has the right to be a child conceived and nurtured as nature has equipped, in a complementary way, mothered and fathered. And yes...sadly....this is not a guarantee that is realized for children in all those 'failed marriages' that are placed in evidence as testimony against preferring male-female marriage to same-gender arrangements. Arguing that choosing non-natural conception is the same as dealing with a bad circumstance (divorce, separation) when having to raise children to adults is illogical. All this has no bearing at all on the children themselves, who, no matter how conceived or in whichever circumstances of home life they find themselves, have the same absolute human value and dignity as any other.

So there it is. So far. Incomplete because the whole argument is hardly complete in the society at large. I keep trying to expand my understanding of the reality. But I am convinced it is important that all perspectives on this be seen and evaluated on the level that is most appropriate – which is not simply as 'civil rights' or 'personal privacy'. **Marriage, whatever one wants to make of it for the sake of personal choice, is the fundamental cultural glue without which society ceases to exist. Marriage has always been coextensive with procreation . One cannot argue from 'exception to the rule' to the very negation of the rule itself. Just because some marriages are childless doesn't lead to the conclusion that marriage itself has nothing to do with children.**

It is the (impossible?) task of those who argue in favor of same gender arrangements being called 'marriages' to work out some formula that gets a man to ovulate and gestate a child or a woman to inseminate her mate. I don't seek to be silly or flippant, but unless we want to go into the business of manufacturing and/or purchasing humans we had best continue with what nature has evolved in us — not just the emotion for romantic love but the body parts that make it possible.

And what of those who cannot do this? Love, understanding, support – of course. Condemnation or abuse or patronization – never! Legal status – unwise and a danger to the society itself! Here is truly the human aspect that needs as much attention as the societal. In the past we would mock or scorn or slay those who are attracted to their own sex. Now we struggle to find the word that embraces the concepts of 'not right' and 'not at fault' and 'entitled to love and be loved.' There has been some progress. The 'q' word - like the 'n' word - strikes me still as derogatory - even if adopted in 'pride' as a kind of 'in your face' challenge. **The struggle to understand what marriage is from nature and anthropology....let alone from theology [which references both] needs to be engaged on all sides of the debate.**

EAW