

AS MY OWN SOUL

The Blessing of Same-Gender Marriage

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CHAPTER FOUR



The Sacred Source of Marriage

Holy Origins and Sacramental Dimensions

"It is not good that the man should be alone . . ."

God in Genesis 2:18

"What God has joined together, let no one separate."

Jesus in Matthew 19:6

I attended a talk and book signing by Jonathan Rauch, a correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*, a senior writer and columnist for the *National Journal*, and a writer in residence at the Brookings Institution. His book, *Gay Marriage*, referenced earlier, presents a tightly reasoned argument in favor of same-gender marriage that is secular in its approach. Those gathered for his presentation at Atlanta's Outwrite Bookstore were a mix of black and white patrons, primarily gay and lesbian, and all supportive of the concept of marriage, especially two men, active in the Episcopal church, who had recently celebrated their golden anniversary. During the question-and-answer period after his talk, Rauch was asked what, in his view, was the biggest obstacle to the acceptance of same-gender marriage. His opinion was that the greatest reservation

people have is marriage's association with a sacred source, with God, even among those who are not particularly religious.

This is as it should be. The taboo that must give us pause should not be a negative one relating to purity laws or human custom; it must be the positive taboo associated with what is sacred, holy, of God. Our contemporary beliefs have sometimes domesticated God, or boxed God into particular theological corners. If only we could return to the day when *theologia* meant active mystical communing with God in prayer rather than the systematization of God in religious doctrine and dogma! Perhaps then we could better be awed and inspired by the God who runs deeper than human imagination, experience, reason, and ability to either comprehend or name. Moderate and mainstream Christians tend toward a "gentleman God," as I once heard Carter Heyward describe him, a sometimes passionless but always polite deity, not willing, for example, to exclude LGBT people, but too dispassionate to stand up for our rights, perhaps even embarrassed by our sexual passion. Conservative Christians may emphasize a terrifying God of judgment. Progressive Christians may emphasize a God of Justice, which remarkably, can have the same edge of judgment as that of conservative Christians. Sentimentalist Christians may image God as a buddy, enjoying a self-assured "just-me-and-Jesus" spirituality. Evangelical Christians may emphasize a "good cop, bad cop" understanding of God, in which the God of judgment (bad cop) may be avoided by confession and conversion in the arms of Jesus, the "good cop." None of these views are necessarily incorrect, just perhaps incomplete.

It's when religious people get stuck on their particular metaphor for God, Joseph Campbell said, that problems arise. God must have shared the opinion, for the second commandment forbids graven images. God is behind, beyond, beneath any metaphor or image. Jack Rogers writes, "Calvin was bold to say we do not know God 'as he is in himself, but as he seems to us.' This attitude reflected Isaiah's reminder that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are God's ways our ways (Isaiah 55:8)."¹ Annie Dillard has written that she wonders if churchgoers would so easily and frequently invoke God if they truly understood how terrifying it would be to stand in the actual presence of the awesome Lord of the universe. And Reformed theologian Karl Barth

characterized the theologian's task as that of an artist trying to capture on canvas a bird in flight—by the time the painting is complete, the bird is elsewhere. A part of God's holiness is God's elusiveness, God's mystery. As mentioned earlier, "holy" means to be "set apart," and there is nothing more *set apart* than God—not in terms of distance, I believe, but in terms of uniqueness and expansiveness.

God as Taboo

The God of the Bible is at once an awesome and intimate God, one who cannot be known except through revelation and yet knows us completely from the moment we were knit together in our mother's womb, One who resides at the heart of the universe and yet within our own hearts as well, One who calls all into being through a Word of power and might and yet speaks to us in a still small voice. Moses, drawn to a bush that burned and yet was not consumed, was told to remove his sandals in reverence. Moses asked for God's name, which in the ancient view, would have given him a handle on God, a means of control. God answers evasively, "I am what I am" or "I will be what I will be," depending on translation, but, in either case, suggesting we can hold onto God no more than Mary Magdalene could cling to the risen Jesus. Consequently, Jewish tradition would not permit pronouncing Yahweh's name when scripture was read aloud, so *Adonai*, "Lord," was substituted.

After the exodus, Moses would lead his people back to Mount Sinai, where he had witnessed the burning bush. The mountain was taboo, holy, because God made God's presence known there. God demanded of Moses, "You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death' (Exodus 19:12). 'Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy' (19:23). 'There was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled' (Exodus 19:16). Only Moses and Aaron were invited to ascend the mountain, and when Moses asked to see God's face, God replied that no one could see God's face and live, but holding a hand in front of Moses' face as

he passed by, Moses was given the opportunity to see God's backside, a kind of afterglow, if you will. Nonetheless the glow on Moses' face from this brief encounter was so terrible the people prevailed upon him to veil his face until the glow subsided. The Ten Commandments would be carried in the Ark of the Covenant, which would also be taboo, untouchable, on pain of death.

Jesus revealed quite another face of God, a more vulnerable and accessible one, one who could be touched and would touch, but nonetheless awesome, as the Gospels claim: he spoke with authority; he addressed God with the familiar form of Father (and encouraged us to do so in the Lord's Prayer); God's voice called him the Beloved Son; he resisted temptation and the Tempter and did not sin; he healed the sick and raised the dead; he was born of a virgin, with signs in the heavens and the magi of a foreign religion coming to pay him homage; he spoke with Moses and Elijah on a mountaintop and glowed from the experience, again hearing God's voice of approval; he rebuked not only the wind and rain on the Sea of Galilee but also "the powers that be" in the temple and city of Jerusalem—the religious and political authorities; he staged an angry and dramatic protest in the temple; he voluntarily died an excruciating death to complete at-one-ment of God and humanity; God resurrected him; he ascended to God, and sent his disciples the power of the Holy Spirit as a paraclete, an advocate for victims. At his death the temple curtain veiling the Holy of Holies was torn in two from top to bottom, from heaven to earth, giving us access to the holy in a new way. We too glow from our encounter with Jesus, but, unlike Moses, we are to do so with unveiled faces, as Paul wrote, so we may, by looking to one another, grow from glory unto glory. A tiny fraction of a fraction of a single percentage point of the population of the Roman Empire, Jesus' followers grew to encompass that empire in only four centuries. Jesus was truly awesome, yet completely accessible, "God with us," God become human, God's Word made flesh, full of grace and truth.

Comprehending the Sacred, Here and Now

It is through the life, teachings, and example of Jesus that Christians are to understand everything holy. The sacraments, whether the two of

Protestants or the seven of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, were believed instituted by Jesus during his lifetime. (The difference in number is because Protestants recognize only those specified by Jesus.) That the Eastern Orthodox churches termed them "mysteries" suggests their unknowable sacred dimension. At one time, Christians observed as many as 150 sacraments, observing the sacred in almost every human activity. Seven were chosen to represent the whole, seven serving as a holy number symbolizing completeness.

I believe that Celtic Christianity best represents this understanding of the intimate interweaving of the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material, body and spirit, sexuality and spirituality, heaven and earth, time and eternity—all symbolized by the interweaving threads of Celtic crosses and other Celtic symbols. Though they came to be primarily associated with the British Isles, the Celts once stretched across Europe to Asia Minor. The holy was understood as in our midst, much as Jesus proclaimed the commonwealth of God among us. Portals to heaven were everywhere, "thin places" where the earthly may glimpse the heavenly. As a result, "The Celtic Church neither totally separated the sexes nor displayed the fear of sexuality that was to dominate much of the Western Church. As in Eastern Orthodoxy there were married priests and celibate monks, but the ecclesiastic leadership of women . . . was peculiar to the Celtic Church."²

Church of Scotland minister J. Philip Newell has documented Celtic Christian history in several books, including *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*. The Celtic mission in Britain contrasted with that associated in Europe with the Bishop of Rome (not yet the pope), which took up Augustine of Hippo's concept of human depravity, adopted celibacy for priests, and widened the separation between God and humanity, heaven and earth, male and female, lay and clergy. The Celtic view did not distinguish as strongly between those with a religious vocation and laypeople, nor did it differentiate in a derogatory way between those inside or outside the church: all were made in the image of God. (Imagine how such an attitude would improve evangelism and mission, as well as international relations!) The Celtic view would have been the answer, or at least the balance, to James B. Nelson's pyramid of control presented earlier, if it had not

been superseded by the Roman mission at the Synod of Whitby in 664 and almost obliterated by the Scottish Reformation. The latter emphasized the Augustinian-Calvinistic notion of human depravity and led to further separation between spirit and matter, the sacred and the secular.

This "holier than thou" approach may limit our comprehension of the holy even within the sacraments themselves. As Henri Nouwen observed, "We will never fully understand the meaning of the sacramental signs of bread and wine when they do not make us realize that the whole of nature is a sacrament pointing to a reality far beyond itself. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist becomes a 'special problem' only when we have lost our sense of God's presence in all that is, grows, lives, and dies."³

Nature as a Sacred Source

Ironically, though the church might eschew nature as sacred, it nonetheless served as an *imagined* source of natural law. Today people who are not religious may rely on nature and the natural as a sacred source, the way things were meant to be "from time immemorial"—an incantation of a kind of natural deity of the status quo. Perhaps the Amish are the only segment of present American society who at least attempt to live that out, as few others live "according to nature" when they watch TV, ride in cars, fly in planes, eat packaged and processed food, utilize contraception or *in vitro* fertilization, use the Internet, etc.

Christians, too, use nature as a sacred reference point. Our physiology points to male-female compatibility, goes one argument. The survival of any species requires procreation, goes another argument, bolstered by God's admonition in Genesis, "Be fruitful and multiply." When the AIDS crisis began, a cartoonist offensively depicted Mother Nature pointing accusingly toward two emaciated men with AIDS in hospital beds, parodying a margarine commercial of the time, "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature!" Yet Christians should not feel beholden to a pagan God, *Natura*, borrowed as a literary device of the late Middle Ages.

In its best sense, nature should serve as an epiphany of God, not as a model of human behavior. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," Catholic priest and British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins celebrated, even as he practiced chastity, subordinating his homoerotic yearnings to his priestly work. Celtic Christianity held that Christ walked among us in two shoes, one being the Bible and the other being Creation. There are biblical antecedents to this way of thinking. Surely the wilderness in which the Israelites wandered shaped their understanding of God, as the wilderness in which Jesus fasted and prayed for forty days forged his earthly relationship with the Father. The Psalmists saw the wonder of God in nature, from our being "awesomely, wonderfully made" to the amazing wonders of the heavens, earth, and seas. Many of Jesus' spiritual metaphors came from nature, from the faith of a tiny mustard seed to the providence of God manifest in the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans discussed in an earlier chapter, thought Gentiles could have recognized the Creator in the creation, yet they acted "contrary to nature" in their exchange of "natural intercourse" for "shameless acts." In *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, John Boswell persuasively argues that Paul is simply speaking of them acting contrary to their personal natures. Acting "contrary to nature," is not of itself sinful or evil to Paul, Boswell argues, or he would not have used the exact same phrase (*para physin*) a few chapters later to describe God's action of grafting the Gentiles onto "the root of Jesse," the Jewish race. Indeed, the whole notion that Gentiles were now heirs of Abraham and Sarah is unnatural, i.e., not biologically or physiologically possible. Paul's basis for ethics was based on belonging to Christ, as will be discussed in the chapter that follows, not nature or the natural world.

Absent the evidence to the contrary of today's findings of cross-cultural researchers, late Roman thinkers considered that, across the laws of various nations, there were instinctual or natural laws, in other words, "the way things should be." But it was not until the High Middle Ages that people began to look to animals for cues on human behavior, partly caused by an increasingly urbanized population that idealized nature,

and by mistaken empirical zoological observations. The Christian reader might readily see the dangers and contradictions inherent in appealing to nature for any kind of moral law. For example, the humane treatment of animals is not "natural": we can easily cite the common example of a cat playing with a mouse. The celibacy and virginity that was so highly valued for so much of Christian history (and still is in Roman Catholicism) is not the way they do it on *Animal Planet*. And today, most Christians no longer consider masturbation as unnatural, just as we no longer believe the use of contraceptive devices that interfere with procreation, a natural purpose of human sexuality, are immoral (though the Vatican officially does, but those "who know so little about marriage" have not persuaded the majority of American Catholics). And we know now that homosexual behavior is observable in other species.

The pinnacle of natural law was reached in the thirteenth century in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, commanding an influence in Roman Catholic sexual ethics since. His *Summa Theologiae* shaped Catholic doctrine on all fronts. He reflected on homosexuality in a particularly homophobic period of history, and also a time when the church began to enforce conformity of belief and practice, and orthodox theologians were viewed as infallible exponents of Christian doctrine. "In the end Aquinas admits more or less frankly that his categorization of homosexual acts as 'unnatural' is a concession to popular sentiment," Boswell concludes a lengthy examination of the theologian's work. "Aquinas could bring to bear no argument against homosexual behavior which would make it more serious than overeating and admitted, moreover, that homosexual desire was the result of a 'natural' condition, which would logically have made behavior resulting from it not only inculpable but 'good'"⁴ in terms of Aquinas's own explication of natural law.

Ultimately, in appeals to nature, what was "natural" was determined by majority experience and opinion, a kind of "reason" that was nonetheless instinctual, and "a curious combination of utopian ideals and empirical observation, with little relation either to reality or Christian teaching."⁵ Today's expressions of natural law decry homosexuality, while allowing lending money at interest, in the eyes of the church a far more grievous, excommunicable, and unnatural act in medieval

times because the lender did nothing to earn it, and the money grew "unnaturally."⁶

Christian moral teaching is largely *counter* natural. Loving God, neighbor, and enemies is not something readily evident in the animal kingdom. Monogamy or mating for life is practiced by very few species. Mutuality in coupling or participation of both parents in child rearing is not common. Responsibility in mating is rare. Sin is unknown. Though nature may serve as a natural sacrament of the presence, wonder, and providence of God, it is not the source of Christian ethical behavior, nor necessary evidence of the sacred in marriage.

Marriage as a Sacrament

Roman Catholic tradition recognizes marriage as a sacrament, but generally Protestants, at least officially, do not. In a debate on the ordination of gay people in my own denomination, which does not recognize marriage as a sacrament, someone suggested we should first approve same-gender marriage. An audible gasp went through the room, as if marriage were more sacrosanct than ordination! Even in a tradition that does not officially view marriage as a sacrament, the *de facto* sentiment was present.

A sacrament is a ritual in which an unseen God reveals a visible and tangible presence to true believers, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.⁷ It may serve as an "instrument of sanctification."⁸ By their sensual nature, sacraments remind us that spirituality is not necessarily an out-of-body experience and that our bodies are sacred—temples in which God's Spirit is happy to dwell. The Word is made flesh once again, so to speak, not by us, but by God. At the wedding in Cana, an event in the life of Jesus which lends credence to considering marriage a sacrament, Jesus transforms ordinary water, mysteriously and mystically but no less materially, into wine—symbolic, I believe, of the holy transformation of matrimony. The ordinary becomes extraordinary in what Thomas Moore calls "the alchemy of marriage."⁹ Studies verify the miracle, revealing that married people live happier, healthier, and longer lives than single people and even couples who simply live together.¹⁰ Through the agency of the divine,

in this case, embodied in Jesus, a better wine is produced than we can produce ourselves, evidenced by the wine steward who commends the bridegroom for saving the best wine for last (John 2:10). That's what happens in *true lovemaking*, that is, *the making of love through caring and commitment as well as touch*. Ordinary sensations manifest divine realities, another Celtic "thin place" where heaven and earth touch. Children often mock older brothers and sisters when they kiss or have crushes or enjoy holding hands, because the younger siblings have not yet experienced the transformation that comes in these limited experiences of lovemaking. The sacramental qualities of lovemaking require participation to fully understand. There is a parallel: early Christians did not explain to converts the meaning of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist until after their first partaking because it was believed that one could only understand a sacrament after receiving its blessing. And just as we offer a prayer of thanksgiving after receiving the Eucharist, so our sighs in lovemaking may unconsciously give voice to our wonder and praise of God.

Often denied the sacraments, I believe that many faithful gay men and lesbians came to understand our lovemaking (the making of love through caring and commitment as well as touch) as a means of transcendent grace, an experience of the holy, a recognition of the image of God in the other as well as in ourselves, a manifestation of heaven on earth, God's holy gift to us. This is not to say that gay people, like straight people, did not trample on the holy, or participate in sexual encounters without discerning their sacred possibility. Nor does it mean we were always looking for God in such encounters; rather, as with all sacraments, God *was looking for us*. As a lesbian with no religious background explained her reason for attending a workshop I led on the church and homosexuality: "In making love with my lover, I got in touch with a spiritual realm I never before experienced. Since spirituality has to do with God, I came here to find out about God."

My first stirrings as a young boy were not explicitly sexual—they were to be with someone of my own gender for a lifetime, something I hardly thought possible. My first gay experience occurred in late high school and early college, when I fell in love with my best male friend. It was not and never became a sexual encounter. It was an emotional, soulful

passion. It was neither something I sought, nor learned, nor chose. Like so many things of God, it chose me. I loved this man "as my own soul," as Jonathan loved David. I chose chastity—the subordination of desire to responsibility—refusing to exploit the friendship by sexually fantasizing about him. Yet the feelings I had for him served as my first inkling that my sexuality was given to me for good, not for evil, to paraphrase Joseph's reconciling words to his brothers about the evil way they outcast him from the family. I believed at the time and believe still that all ability to love is ultimately a gift from God; thus I had to accept God's gift of my ability to love someone of my own gender. My years of pastoral experience within the lesbian and gay and bisexual and transgender community have confirmed that mine was not an uncommon experience.

Since seminary, I have officiated at dozens of marriage ceremonies, for gay couples and for straight couples. Through premarital counseling, I discouraged those who were looking to marriage as a magical "fix" for ills in their relationship or in their individual lives. I carefully explained that the ceremony would be simply one more step on the path of their relationship. Every ceremony I performed gave me a great deal of joy. But I never understood how transforming marriage could be until my partner urged me to have a ceremony with him. One hundred people crowded into our small neighborhood church in Atlanta for our "Ceremony of the Heart," celebrated by our pastor. We were exuberant as we confessed our love and covenant in the presence of family, friends, and our congregation, seeking their blessing and support. As we faced each other, exchanging vows, I was overwhelmed by the sacred nature of our commitment and the sacred nature of the man who stood before me. I became a different person, a better person. It was a kind of conversion experience—like being born again. I didn't even think "civil right." Rather, it felt like a holy responsibility, a sacred calling. Until I had such firsthand experience, I would never have known how transfiguring marriage could be. It was much more than "another step" in our relationship. We glowed like Moses coming down the mountaintop as we walked down the aisle after having had our covenant blessed.

At that moment, I would have taken issue with Martin Luther's view that marriage conferred "no sanctifying grace" as a sacrament

should.¹¹ Rather, I would have affirmed the Roman Catholic view that marriage transformed me as baptism had and that it transformed our relationship.¹² I would, however, have disagreed that it was our mere exchange of vows that made our marriage sacramental, the basis of early canon law.¹³ At heart I was too Calvinist for that, because I believed the moment was made holy not only by our exchange of vows and rings, but also by the affirmation of family, friends, and spiritual community surrounding us, the blessing and confirmation of the two ministers officiating, the holy liturgy of scriptures, sermon, prayers, ritual, hymns and sacred music, all in the sanctuary hallowed by our home congregation. The only thing missing was legal validation.

In John Calvin's more developed theology of marriage as a covenant among many, not just between the couple, "This involvement of parents, peers, ministers, and magistrates in the formation of marriage was not an idle or dispensable ceremony. These four parties represented different dimensions of God's involvement in the marriage covenant, and they were thus essential to the legitimacy of the marriage itself. To omit any such party in the formation of the marriage was, in effect, to omit God from the marriage covenant."¹⁴ Because of our value separating church and state, most Americans no longer view government validation (magistrates) as representative of God's participation. Yet most Americans still do not fully recognize a marriage without government validation.

Sacraments Require Believers

Sacraments require the participation of believers. Those gathered that day for our ceremony apparently believed, or at least practiced the will to believe. Believers each have a different experience of a sacramental event, both in level of intensity and in individual meaning, but they unite in their opinion that God is somehow manifestly present. Baptists and Catholics, for example, have a very different way of understanding the central Christian sacrament, even using different terms, Communion and Eucharist. They may not concelebrate, but at least in modern times, they don't go after each other for celebrating the sacrament differently and bringing different meanings to Christ's table.

In the ecumenical divinity school I attended, the Baptists once leading us in Communion substituted trays of grape juice in individual tiny glasses for our usual chalices of wine. One of the celebrants accidentally dropped the consecrated loaf, scattering bread crumbs all over the floor, picking it up and probably not giving it another thought, other than possibly the five-second rule about food dropped on the floor. But those from other liturgical traditions were on the floor after the service carefully picking up all the holy crumbs. Yet I would think true believers would consider that observance of the sacrament no less real and God no less present than in a more formal celebration.

Yet when it comes to the genders involved, marriage is a sacrament or near-sacrament that cannot similarly be "stretched" in some people's minds, which implies its holiness is greater than that of the Eucharist! When it comes to joining those of the same gender, marriage is "untouchable" and inflexible as Mt. Sinai. But when it comes to joining those of the opposite gender, marriage is quite accessible and malleable, as explained in the previous chapter. As difficult as an ecumenical observance of Holy Communion may be, the challenge pales in comparison to an observance of Holy Matrimony between same-gender partners for most Christians. As with any sacrament, "eyes of faith" are required. In the Eucharist, those who do not share our Christian faith will only see us consume bread and wine and may not recognize the body and blood of Christ or the participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ that it signifies. In similar fashion, those who do not believe in same-gender marriage may only see the sexual nature of the relationship, or its surface aspects, such as gender, not looking deeply enough to see an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace. Same-gender marriage challenges heterosexuals to equate homosexual partnering and their own, something that they may never have had to do before. On the other hand, gay people out of necessity are quite adept at equating heterosexual pairing and our own, as we have had to translate into our own experience almost every romance or marriage we've witnessed in real life as well as through the arts and the media. In other words, we have more experience with opposite-gender marriage than straight people have with same-gender marriage. As one elderly woman said to me upon seeing two men hug: "It's just that we're not used to it yet."

To paraphrase comedienne Robin Tyler, "When a straight couple reveal their relationship, it's called *sharing*. When a gay couple reveals their relationship, it's called *flaunting*." When our ceremony was announced in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, just like opposite-gender weddings, "nonbelievers" in our marriage challenged our pastor, the Rev. Peter Denlea, in a presbytery meeting, wanting him reprimanded and our blessing undone. Our pastor gave an impassioned speech about his own transformation as an Irish Catholic career Navy bomber pilot from Boston's tough Southie neighborhood who thought he knew what homosexuals were until, in retirement, he became a Presbyterian pastor serving a neighborhood which included lesbian and gay couples and singles. All the delegates to the meeting may not have agreed with him, but they gave him a prolonged ovation after his impassioned speech and took no action against him or the blessing.

Another pastor commented that undoing our blessing would be like undoing the ringing of a bell. In the first chapter of this book, I described Jacob wrestling with God. Earlier he had stolen his father's blessing from Esau. Though it was stolen, the blessing was his. No one disputed this. Even if those who opposed our marriage viewed us as somehow stealing their blessing, it was impossible to "unbless" us, just as the same-gender marriages performed to date cannot be undone by outside forces, spiritually speaking. "What God has joined together, let no one separate."

In Spirit and In Truth

Jews of Jesus' day viewed Samaritans with disgust because they were of mixed race, half Jew and half Arab, and worshiped in the wrong way and the wrong place. Even today, Samaritans are not held in high regard. Yet, to demonstrate what to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus held up as a model a "good" Samaritan, which biblical scholar James Sanders has said would be like holding up as a model to present-day Christians a homosexual communist! For the first woman evangelist, Jesus picked a Samaritan woman with a questionable sexual history and doubtful relationship. To her he revealed his true identity as Messiah after saying it didn't matter where or how one worshiped (form) but "true worshipers

will worship . . . in spirit and in truth" (content). In both stories, content is given priority over form.

That's because there's something magnanimous about Jesus, loving neighbors, outcasts, strangers, and enemies, and something magnanimous about the God he proclaimed, who blesses the righteous and unrighteous equally with sun and rain. They both look on the heart rather than the surface or category, just as God looked on the heart in choosing David as king (1 Samuel 16:1-13, especially verse 7). Our faith manifests wholeness; thus Jesus says in several instances, "Your faith has made you whole." Our motives are important. Our way of thinking, our attitude, our approach is spiritually vital. Why else would Jesus say that adultery begins with the lust of the heart, regardless of whether the act is committed? The Holy Spirit also proved magnanimous, as demonstrated in the Acts of the Apostles, empowering the disciples to proclaim the gospel in the languages of strangers at Pentecost (breaking down cultural boundaries), to pronounce all foods clean (the end of purity laws), and circumcision a matter of indifference (the end of discrimination against Gentiles). This seemingly nondiscriminating Spirit even poured itself out onto unclean, uncircumcised, unbaptized Gentiles. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," Peter declared of the unclean Cornelius in Acts 10:34, no longer defining Christianity by whom it excludes, but by what it expects: "But in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God]." In *Gay Marriage*, Rauch argues the same about marriage, that marriage would best be defined not by whom it excludes but by what it expects.¹⁵

This magnanimous approach was countercultural in Jesus' time. "Ancient cultures generally assumed a world of 'limited good,' not the expanding universe of modern capitalism," L. William Countryman writes, thus "they tended to define the fundamental offense against property as greed rather than, say, theft. Acquisition of new wealth could fall under this condemnation even when fully legal, if it were seen as gained at the expense of another."¹⁶ Yet Jesus contrarily said if someone asked for your coat, give your cloak as well; if a Roman soldier compelled you to carry his gear one mile, the legal limit, carry it twice as far.

At least some of the loudest opponents to same-gender marriage appear to be coming from a similar "world of limited good," as if there are only so many marriage licenses—if we give them to lesbians and gay men there won't be enough for us. Or, though we've defined marriage in so many ways ourselves, if we "redefine" it to include same gender couples, the term will lose its potency. Or, the institution of marriage is "set apart" for a man and a woman, defined by whom it excludes, and for the institution to become inclusive to same-gender couples who affirm its value is to diminish rather than expand its sacred worth. It's hard for some to hear that there is enough marriage for everyone, and that the institution will be strengthened rather than diminished by becoming inclusive of same-gender couples. Treating marriage as a private club instead of a public sacred trust is the problem.

The gospel that Jesus proclaimed and that the early church interpreted, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is of an inbreaking kingdom or spiritual commonwealth of God that overcomes a world of limited resources. Baptismal water is bountiful enough to baptize unclean Gentiles (and Ethiopian eunuchs) who have already been baptized with the Holy Spirit—there are plenty of baptismal certificates to go around, so to speak. Multiple and diverse religious traditions and denominations have laid claim to the name "Christian" and yet the term retains its potency. The institution of the church, the *ecclesia* or "called out" ones, is at its sacred best when it is evangelical and thus inclusive of the broadest spectrum of people who confess Christ as Lord. Christians grew as a movement as they realized there was enough water and Spirit to baptize the world, that being Christian called us to ecumenism and connectionalism among very different kinds of Christians, and to follow Christ required breaking out of human boundaries and customs to be inclusive. When the church or a particular congregation treats itself as a private club is when it is least effective in its Christian mission.

Short of the Passion itself, the most impressive illustrations of this expansive way of viewing the universe and overcoming a theology of scarcity are the stories of Jesus feeding multitudes with a few loaves and fishes. His disciples feared there would not be enough to go around, but Jesus knew that even limited resources, blessed by God through

prayer *and shared*, multiply. So, I believe, it is with marriage. It's a gift that keeps on giving, expansive in its ability to bless couples, no matter their gender.

Sacred Purpose of Marriage

The most ancient of the two creation stories in Genesis, found in its second chapter, reveals that God's purpose in "marriage" was that the first human creature not be alone. I place the term marriage in quotation marks because, as an institution or a word, it had not been socially constructed, though one could argue from the text, as Jesus did, that God intended the first couple to be one flesh. It was the first arranged marriage, and it was of two who were related, because Eve was taken from Adam's side, giving new meaning to "next of kin." They were vegetarians, given the task of tilling and caretaking the garden. They were naked and not ashamed, indicating that shame about our bodies and our sexuality came into the world not through God's initiative but through our own, as a result of succumbing to the temptation to be as God, an ongoing and pervasive human predilection. To those who have argued (strangely) that homosexuality is somehow a result of the Fall, the first human sin that caused expulsion from the garden, I like to point out that Adam and Eve did not sexually "know" one another until after the Fall, thus *heterosexual* expression is more directly the result! On a bad day with the kids, parents might even add *pro-creation* as some kind of divine retribution! Certainly, in the story, the pain of childbirth is the woman's punishment for disobedience, while that of the man is to be a breadwinner by the sweat of his brow. From this story, Protestantism has emphasized companionship as the sacred purpose of marriage.

The chronologically later creation story found in the first chapter of Genesis depicts God repeatedly declaring everything created "good," which is an important basis on which to assert that created diversity is good and that all of creation is sacred. Finally God created humankind in the image of God, male and female, and God blessed them and told them to "be fruitful and multiply." They were to have dominion over creation in the sense of being God's representatives and thus stewards

of all living things, and all animals, including the human beings, were given plants to eat. From this story, Roman Catholicism has emphasized procreation as the sacred purpose of marriage.

Both Christian traditions acknowledge the importance of both marital purposes; it's a matter of emphasis, though Catholic tradition only in recent decades set aside canon law that, on paper at least, invalidated a marriage in which one party was sterile. Interestingly, neither tradition calls us to be vegetarian, nor do the most literalist of readers of the Bible, some of whom nonetheless read into the stories' silence on homosexuality a prohibition. I like to point out that the Garden of Eden story is also silent on urban dwellers and factory workers, but they are no less created in the image of God!

Countryman provides helpful observations of Jesus' treatment of these creation stories in the text regarding divorce discussed earlier in Chapter Two, Matthew 19:3–12. In response to a question about the law permitting men to divorce wives, Jesus appeals to both creation stories in significant ways. Countryman explains:

Jesus, relying on the first creation account in Genesis (1:27), argued that the female was as human as the male: "from the beginning He made them male and female." Male and female, therefore, participate equally in the image of God. Again, relying on the second creation narrative (Genesis 2:24), he held that the man and woman (or husband and wife) become "one flesh" in marriage.¹⁷

In effect, the allowance for men—because of their "hardness of heart"—to divorce their wives abrogated God's concept of one flesh, and the inequity of men being allowed to do so but not women conflicted with God's creation of male and female as equals made in the image of God. Jesus then proceeds to redefine adultery as divorce and remarriage, in effect, giving the woman equal sexual property rights over the man.¹⁸

In defense of marriage Jesus outlaws divorce, appealing, in a sense, to a higher law, that of God making a couple one flesh. I note an interesting parallel with many of the civil servants and church ministers who

have themselves appealed to a higher law in state and church settings related to same-gender marriage: in the case of civil servants, the higher law is the equality of all citizens that renders anti-gay marriage laws contrary to state and federal constitutions; and, in the case of ministers, the higher law of God's equitable justice and abundant mercy that requires, as Pope John Paul II declared, "a preferential option for the poor"—in this instance, those who have few rights and no marital rights at all.

In "defense of marriage," the legislature of the state of Georgia, where I have lived for sixteen years, passed an amendment to the state constitution for voter approval in 2004 that forbids the recognition of same-gender marriages. A suggestion to outlaw divorce as well was not seriously considered. What's wrong with this picture? Jesus put it bluntly: "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye" (Matthew 7:5).

Scapegoating Same-Gender Marriage

This brings me to perhaps our greatest spiritual danger, that of scapegoating. When things go wrong, we look for someone to blame—someone *other* than ourselves, of course—especially when things are already tough. I see this in myself. If I'm tired and crabby and feeling badly about myself, I am far less tolerant of others, less open to change, less welcoming of ideas, far more cynical, more likely to find fault and apply blame, looking for external reasons for my anguish. In *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, M. Scott Peck defines evil, in part, as the "unquestioned self," the individual or institution unable or unwilling to look at himself, herself, or itself critically, *especially pronounced when perceived as being threatened*.¹⁹ He recounts his experience of such corporate evil when he was one of the Army psychiatrists assigned to evaluate what went wrong at My Lai during the Vietnam War, where American troops massacred innocent villagers. His commission found the U.S. government *collectively* to blame, beginning at the top: a presidential administration with an unquestioned policy of communist containment based on a bankrupt domino theory. Needless to say, the report got buried.

It's easier to look critically at another culture. Nazi Germany is a prime example, both of the unquestioned self and the scapegoat mechanism. Still smarting from its defeat and resulting losses of World War I and a suffering economy, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis compiled a list of scapegoat populations to blame. Jews were the largest category, but gays were also on the list and among those sent to concentration camps and murdered by the German state, and, deplorably, the only category which was not liberated by the Allies who moved homosexuals from concentration camps to regular prisons. At the beginning of one of his lectures for the Lazarus Project, John Boswell told the story of a British gentleman and a German Nazi forced to share overnight accommodations. The German was railing about Jews, how all the world's problems were caused by them. The British gentleman egged him on until, at the end of the "dialogue," the Britisher concluded, "Yes, all the world's problems are caused by Jews and bicycle riders!" The German looked astonished. "Why bicycle riders?" he asked, incredulous. The British gentleman parried, "Why Jews?"

Boswell's life's work was studying the treatment of minorities by majority cultures. During a lecture at the University of California, Los Angeles, he began by saying he would be describing a dominant culture's attitudes, fears, and myths about a minority in medieval Europe and the task of the audience was to decide whether he was depicting Jews or gay people. As an example, the one myth I remember most clearly was that of snatching Christian children. Boswell revealed at the end of his talk that the whole time he had been describing the attitude toward *both* groups! Indeed, what he discovered in his research as a medievalist was that the lot of Jews, women, and gay people in European culture paralleled one another: when one group was more tolerated, the other groups were too; but when one group fell into disfavor, all shared a similar fate. A part of his work was trying to understand the economic, historical, social, religious, and cultural factors that prompted the scapegoating of these groups. Of special concern to him was the rise of a virulent anti-gay agenda toward the conclusion of the Middle Ages, referenced in our earlier discussion of Thomas Aquinas. In *Same-Sex Unions*, Boswell admitted he was unsatisfied with his own explanation for this rise of homophobia in his earlier tome, *Christianity*,

Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality. Other scholars have confessed they also cannot adequately explain it.

What does scapegoating have to do with the sacredness of marriage? We get the term "scapegoat" based on a King James Version mistranslation of a word in Leviticus 16 that describes the practice of the ancient Hebrews sacrificing two goats during the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Before their sacrifice, the priests projected the sins of the people onto the animals. One was killed outright for the priests' sins and the other, for the people's sins, died by excommunication, sent off into the wilderness to die, bereft of the community's shelter, food, and water. The animals were not killed or excommunicated to placate an angry God, but rather to purify the people so they may continue to enjoy God's holy presence, as their sins died or were exiled with the animals. In a previous work, *Coming Out as Sacrament*, I've described how lesbians, gay men, and bisexual and transgender persons have suffered similar sacrifice and excommunication to preserve the peace, unity, and purity of the church—in other words, its holiness, wholeness, and distinctness.²⁰

I would observe that resistance to same-gender marriage is acting out of the same principle. In this view, to keep marriage holy, to ensure God's blessing, same-gender couples must be sacrificed and excommunicated from the marital estate. Otherwise marriage itself will be tainted with impurity, as challenged in Chapter Two, and "traditional" family values assailed, as challenged in Chapter Three. Yet the sins of divorce, adultery, abandonment, incest, and abuse that haunt marriage and family these days cannot really be projected onto gay and lesbian couples, and these acts are what defile, befoul, and profane the sacred nature of marriage, not additional couples willing to embrace its spiritual discipline. Heterosexuals must confess their own sins, not project them onto homosexuals. We have our own sins to confess, though homosexuality is not one of them.

Marriage and family have had rough times of late which can basically be summed up in a catch phrase of a recent presidential campaign, "It's the economy, stupid!" In an article for *Open Hands* magazine entitled "Sexual Ethics in an Overpopulated World: Pollution, Purity, Property, and Procreation," Christian social ethicist Carol Robb describes how

scapegoating obscures market and economic factors that have contributed to the destabilization of the family:

I believe the contemporary conservative obsession with matters pertaining to abortion and sexuality is a substitute for our deep concern about economic security. Ethicist Gerard Fourez finds an analogue in the nineteenth century's Victorian focus on sexual ethics, while industrialization was depriving people of basic economic security. At a time such as this, an obsession with sex diverts attention to peripheral elements rather than the central one of a society's structures and practices, making it possible to conceal problems these structures and practices have created.²¹

This is an example of "the unquestioned self," in this case, a society not willing to look at itself critically to determine the actual factors troubling its people. Robb explains how today globalization and economic dislocation separate marriage partners and family members, and yet, mentioning a then current controversy, the U.S. Surgeon General was fired for suggesting masturbation should be discussed in sex education programs, diverting the attention of many churchgoers from the larger economic issues that are subverting the family.

More than one political observer noted that the Georgia legislators to whom I earlier alluded spent so much time on the antigay marriage amendment, they couldn't address the issues that are truly plaguing the state, including ranking fiftieth in education! They had to return for a special session at enormous taxpayer expense to finish their other business. When we can't look critically at ourselves and solve the real problems with which marriages and families contend, it is so easy to point the finger at those who haven't even had a chance to fail at marriage.

Traditional Same-Sex Unions: A Love without Pretense

Yale scholar John Boswell's unearthing of liturgies for same-gender couples up through the Middle Ages and even beyond reads

like a mystery novel. After his book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* appeared in 1980, he received an "anonymous tip" to look at a certain page in an early book of liturgies. There he found a same-gender ceremony. He began researching every extant copy of the liturgy, spending summers in public and monastic libraries throughout Europe, including the Vatican, and his exacting scholarship delayed his publishing the book on *Same-Sex Unions* until 1994, shortly before his untimely death.

In the meanwhile, two friends of mine, also scholars, invited me to preside at their own Rite of Spiritual Brotherhood based on this ancient ceremony. A centerpiece of the liturgy is the invoking of the names, love, and martyrdom of two male saints, Serge and Bacchus, who share the same feast day of October 7. (Interestingly, Metropolitan Community Churches, an international denomination which largely embraces LGBT people and their families and friends, was founded on October 6, 1968.)

Serge and Bacchus were soldiers in the Roman army in the late third and early fourth century. Favorites of Emperor Maximian, they fell into disfavor when they refused to worship the emperor's idols (one of the reasons early Christians did not serve in the military, as emperor worship was required of Roman soldiers) and confessed their Christian faith. According to Boswell, the texts describing their relationship use a word which translates "lovers." This seems confirmed by their initial punishment, being ridiculed while paraded through city streets in women's clothing. As a sign of unity, they sang together Psalm 23, changing the "I" wording to "we." Tortured, Bacchus died, but appeared to Serge in a vision in prison. Radiant, Bacchus told Serge they were "bound together" forever and would be reunited, and that "your crown of justice is me, my crown of justice is you." (Crowning was a part of opposite-gender ceremonies of the time.) After additional torture, Serge was beheaded. One chronicler described them in this way: "They were as one in the love of Jesus Christ and inseparable as spiritual brothers. They were like stars shining joyously over the earth, radiating the light of profession of and faith in our savior and Lord Jesus Christ."²²

The rite that Boswell found in a number of sources included the Lord's Prayer, a sung Gloria, Prayers of the Faithful, scriptures, hymns,

a homily (in which Serge and Bacchus might be lifted up), prayers (one offered by the celebrant, the second by the congregation), the couple's joint recitation of Psalm 23 in first person plural form, followed by the couple kissing the Bible, and offering the Peace.

The following are the prayers as translated by one of the men who asked me to preside at their ceremony:

Let us pray to the Lord.

O Lord our God, you who have granted to us all things that tend toward our salvation, you who have also commanded us to love each other, and to forgive each other for our offenses, you yourself, compassionate Lord, since your servants have already been joined to one another in love, we ask you to grant them a faith unconfounded and a love without pretense. As you gave your peace to your holy disciples, so on them confer everything necessary for salvation and life eternal. This we pray through Jesus Christ, your son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you now and forever. Amen.

Let us pray to the Lord.

Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, you who have made humanity in your image and likeness, and have willed that your holy martyrs Serge and Bacchus be joined by a bond not of nature, but of faith and the Holy Spirit, we ask that you yourself Lord, having already sent your Holy Spirit over these your servants who come before you to receive your grace, that you grant them also a faith unconfounded and a love without pretense, to converse without bitterness and offense one against the other. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.²³

The contexts of this liturgy reinforce Boswell's argument that it is a form of same-gender marriage. The earliest Greek manuscript from eighth-century Italy includes four sacramental unions: heterosexual betrothal (the customary stage prior to marriage), two heterosexual marriage ceremonies, and a similar service joining two men.²⁴ By the

twelfth century, what had initially been a simple ceremony of prayers of blessing had developed, as had its heterosexual counterpart, into a full office, which included lit candles, placing hands on the Gospel, joining of their right hands (a common Roman marriage gesture), and binding them with the celebrant's stole, an initial litany, crowning (common in heterosexual marriages, though less frequent in same-sex ceremonies), recitation of the Lord's Prayer, Communion, a kiss, occasionally circling the altar, followed by a banquet for family and friends.²⁵ The ceremony, according to Boswell, occurred in a variety of contexts in liturgical collections, "but by far the most common context is marriage, usually in the following order: heterosexual betrothal, ceremony for a first heterosexual marriage, ceremony for a second heterosexual marriage (a different office, with less emphasis on procreation), office of same-sex union."²⁶ Boswell concludes, "According to the modern conception [of marriage]—i.e., a permanent emotional union acknowledged in some way by the community—it was unequivocally a marriage."²⁷

The Dominican Jacobus Goar published the ceremony in his collection of Greek liturgies most commonly referred to as *Euchologia* in Paris in 1647, conceding it as a matter of public record but as a ceremony that could no longer be performed legally, though there were no laws against it at the time. He labeled it as a rite of spiritual friendship or brotherhood, even though the word "spiritual" does not appear in the ceremony and love, not friendship or brotherhood, is celebrated in the text itself. As Boswell points out, it could not have been simply intended for friends or brotherhood or sisterhood or purely spiritual relationships, as it was expressly forbidden to monks who might be expected to have such spiritual relationships, and the rite was only celebrated for a pair, never for multiple "friends." In addition, as explained in Chapter Three, Christians already considered themselves brothers and sisters, so such a ceremony to celebrate brotherhood or sisterhood would have been redundant.

Of course there have been critics of Boswell's analysis, especially of premature reports of his research before he was satisfied enough to publish his results. As someone who knew him, I have never met nor read a more meticulous scholar or researcher. He was personally a man of

enormous integrity and honesty and grace, as well as intellectual capacity. He was also a thoroughly committed and passionate Christian, intentionally joining the Roman Catholic Church as a teenager with a Presbyterian upbringing. In the final analysis, what has not been questioned, and what is the most important result of his findings for me as well as for the purpose of this book, is that the kinship of same-gender couples found blessing in the church. As Boswell himself suggests, whether or not such marriages were sexually consummated is as little known as whether childless heterosexual marriages were. Marriage goes deeper than sex, as the final chapter will discuss.

Esau was the firstborn, yet Jacob received his father's blessing and God's blessing. Same-gender couples may not have been the firstborn of Eden, so to speak, yet received the church's blessing during a period when marriage and procreation were not high priorities for the church. In our present time, when being fruitful and multiplying is not a high priority for an overpopulated world, perhaps a middle ground could be found in which both straight and gay couples may enjoy the blessings of the church.

Notes

¹ Rogers, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions*, 29.

² J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 29.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry: Beyond Professionalism in Teaching, Preaching, Counseling, Organizing, and Celebrating* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 103.

⁴ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 328.

⁵ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 314.

⁶ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 330–332.

⁷ Augustine of Hippo described a sacrament as “a visible sign of an invisible grace” and Paul VI called it “a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God.”

⁸ Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 27.

⁹ Thomas Moore, *Soul Mates: Honoring the Mysteries of Love and Relationship* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), Chapter 3.

¹⁰ Rauch, *Gay Marriage*, 23.

¹¹ Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 5, 52.

¹² Witte, 27.

¹³ Witte, 28.

¹⁴ Witte, 95–96.

¹⁵ Rauch, *Gay Marriage*, 97.

¹⁶ Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, 148.

¹⁷ Countryman, 174. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 10th edition, 1994), 143.

¹⁸ Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, 175.

¹⁹ M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), especially Chapter 6.

²⁰ Glaser, *Coming Out as Sacrament*, Chapter Two, "Sacrifices and Scapegoats."

²¹ Carol Robb, "Sexual Ethics in an Overpopulated World: Pollution, Purity, Property, and Procreation," *Open Hands*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Spring 1998), 11. She references Gerard Fourez, *Liberation Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1982), 111. See also Carol Robb's *Equal Value: An Ethical Approach to Economics and Sex* (Beacon Press, 1995). The *Open Hands* article was adapted from a presentation to the Restoring Creation Conference, Ghost Ranch Conference Center, Abiquiu, New Mexico, June 24–28, 1996.

²² [Old] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 728, and Dr. John Boswell, Lazarus Lectures, West Hollywood Presbyterian Church.

²³ Prayers from the Greek *Euchologia*, ed. Jacobus Goar (Paris:1647), translated by Mark Infusino.

²⁴ Boswell, 178.

²⁵ Boswell, 185.

²⁶ Boswell, 186–187.

²⁷ Boswell, 190.