

Why Christian Marriage Needs Same-Sex Unions

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The program says that I will speak about issues of homosexuality in the Bible.

When originally asked to participate I had suggested the theme of how gay unions might save marriage and that is more or less what I will attempt to do. But I will have to modify that a bit..

First I will be talking about same sex unions generally, that is unions between male and male or between female and female. And I will be talking about this from the standpoint of a particular kind of reading of the Bible and Christian tradition that I have developed at some length in two of my more recent books. After saying something about the current discussion I will turn to the NT and ask about the relevance of some of the things that I learned from my study of the Gospels in **The Man Jesus Loved:**

Homoerotic Narrative in the New Testament. I will then turn to what most Christians still call the Old Testament to touch on some of the material that is to be found in **Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative from the Literature of Ancient Israel** and see how this picture is perhaps amplified in the Hebrew Bible. Some of what I say will seem to be suggesting that gay unions ought to be celebrated in the church. But I want to argue something a little stronger. The case I will be seeking to make is: that same sex unions are essential to the life of the community of faith; that they have already helped to transform what we call marriage from a patriarchal institution that Jesus' ministry deeply opposes into one that is rather more humane: that is: whatever is good about marriage is dependent already on models of same sex unions, and that therefore these unions are essential to the community of faith if we are to be able, honestly and evangelically to

celebrate heterosexual unions. Put another way: we can authentically celebrate heterosexual unions only if we also celebrate same sex unions. Our current policy is in direct and open conflict with the Gospel witness to the mission and ministry of Jesus.

But before getting into that I should say a word about the debate itself: In the 1990s there was a growing inclination on the part of progressive pastors to celebrate same sex unions or holy covenants between persons of the same sex. This was one way that was open to pastors to open an outreach to the gay and lesbian persons who often felt excluded from the church. This outreach was an attempt to begin repairing the enormous damage done by the church to gay and lesbian people. Let me just mention a couple of indices of that damage: in our society there is an alarming incidence of teen suicide. The sociological evidence is that suicide and attempted suicide among teens who are or think they might be gay makes up a disproportionate percentage of suicidal behavior. Teens get the message at home, in school and in church that it would be better to be dead than gay and seek to take their own lives. Another index: that of teenage homelessness. A very high percentage of kids on the streets of our cities is made up of teens who are or think they might be gay or lesbian. They find the streets of our cities are safer than their own homes, their schools or their churches. And those who survive “Christian “ homophobia bear the wounds of that homophobia their entire lives. Most of the pastors who engaged in this outreach and welcome to people who had been so scarred by the church were straight and felt strongly that the mainline churches needed to engage in outreach to, and affirmation of, gay and lesbian people in their area. In response there was a backlash from more conservative elements within these denominations that

succeeded in passing legislation prohibiting pastors from participating in such ceremonies of blessing and affirmation. As a consequence a number of pastors in mainline denominations, including my own United Methodist Church were the subject of disciplinary action. The case of Jimmy Creech in Nebraska, and of Greg Dell in Chicago were covered in the national press. (Ironically the cases of women pastors received far less attention in the press). In addition about 70 United Methodist pastors participated in the celebration of the holy union of two prominent church women in California. (I am proud to say that my wife was a participant in that ceremony). Basically what had happened is that the conservative groups had made illegal one of the last ways that progressives in the churches had found for reaching out to gay and lesbian parishioners.

These pastors however were not doing anything especially radical. They were simply giving congregational blessing to same sex relationships that were already being increasingly recognized by major corporations and by some civil jurisdictions.

More recently the struggle has moved to the courts and legislatures. There was considerable flurry of activity after Hawaii came close to permitting same sex marriages. The State of Vermont accepted same sex civil unions and then the Massachusetts Supreme Court ordered the State to permit same sex marriages. We are currently caught up in the aftermath of that struggle, a struggle that is basically about the question of civil rights. It is essentially the question of whether the non-recognition of same sex marriage deprives people of equal protection under the laws. In the last presidential campaign the fears of religious traditionalists were cynically inflamed and manipulated in order to produce a vote for tax cuts for the wealthy, benefit cuts for the most vulnerable and a

policy of unending war. This bait and switch duped millions of Christians into supporting policies that are totally at war with the Gospel and with Christian tradition.

In the current discussion then a number of issues come together.

One is the issue of what might be termed civil rights. Here it is a question of whether gay and lesbian people have the same rights before the law as their “straight” siblings. This question has been especially exacerbated by the experience of many during the height of the AIDs crisis who found that longstanding relationships simply had no standing when it came to things like hospital visitation rights, or decisions with respect to medical care or funeral arrangements and so on. It is this concrete experience that provides some of the emotional fuel for this debate on the part of gay men and their lesbian sisters (who were often enough the primary advocates for gay men in those days). To this is added the question of adoption rights and so on. (I should point out that my home state of Florida has the most discriminatory and indefensible policy with respect to adoption of any state in the Union). In a great many ways then the refusal of the rights that often go along with “marriage” in our society seems like an intolerable refusal of basic civil rights, like an irrational discrimination.

In addition to questions of legal rights or of rights and responsibilities before the law, there is also the question of the affirmation of relationships that is traditionally bestowed by marriage. If the first has to do with civil law, civil rights, civil responsibilities, then the second has to do with respect, with affirmation, with celebration; that is, with the symbolic or even religious celebration of the miracle of love.

Now it is remarkable that these two things have come to be linked up in this debate. But this linkage has a lot to do with the way in which they came to be linked in the last half of the “Christian era”.

For well over a thousand years Christianity in the West had nothing whatever to do with marriage or civil union. Christianity simply did not involve itself with an institution that seemed only to perpetuate the structures of the world. Of course people could enter into relationships (preferably monogamous ones) if they liked. But they did so without the blessing of the church. For the Church generally supposed that virginity was the preferred and favored option.

Only in the second millennium did the leadership of the church begin to cave in to the demand of lay people that their option for marriage be recognized, be legitimated, be celebrated alongside the still more prestigious option of celibacy. We should recall that celibacy was undertaken by far many more lay people than by clergy, that in fact only in the 6th century did celibacy become expected of clergy in the West (and seems to have been enforced only from the 11th century) and that it never became the norm in the East for clergy. That is, celibacy and marriage were options available in some way to all. But only celibacy or virginity was symbolically honored. There were no church weddings until the second millennium of Christian history. Only in the 13th century, in 1215, did the church declare marriage a sacrament and require the participation of clergy to officially bless the union of men and women. And only 300 years later, with the Reformation, did marriage begin to really become the preferred option, the symbolically sanctioned option, with the result that today many people think that Christianity is all

about marriage and family values, something utterly unimaginable for most of the history of Christianity.

All of this is simply to say that any official celebration of marriage in the Christian tradition, even for heterosexual couples, was a long time coming. For what is still most of church history the church did not officially participate in the celebration of cross-sex (or heterosexual, as we now say) unions.

Rather than going further into the question of precedents in the life and liturgy of the church however I want simply to point to what may be relevant to this discussion in the study that I have undertaken in **The Man Jesus Loved**.

This book has been characterized as maintaining that Jesus “was gay” or as even saying that: “Jesus had a gay lover”. There is no need to go into the many ways in which these assertions, while understandable, are nevertheless not accurate descriptions of the book itself or its argument. What I have suggested is: that Jesus seems to be depicted in the Gospel of John as being the lover of another man, the disciple Jesus loved, and that this relation could be construed as homoerotic, and that the Gospel of John does not seem to preclude the sexual expression of this sort of relationship; moreover that the Gospels seem to depict Jesus as accepting of same sex relationships, at least in the case of the centurion and his lad in Matthew 8. All of this may fairly raise the question about the affirmation of same sex relationships as this relates to the questions of civil unions or even “marriage”.

On the other hand a good deal of my argument in the book also shows that the traditions about Jesus that come to us from the Gospels indicate that Jesus was highly

critical of the institutions of marriage and family. The wonderful study of William Countryman **Dirt, Greed and Sex** accurately anticipates much of what I have also found in studying the Gospels. Thus, to the extent that the question of gay marriage is cast as assimilating gay and lesbian folk into these same institutions then it looks like the matter may not be quite so simple. As we shall see it is this very complexity that may prove most illuminating as we seek to understand how the church can be faithful today.

A. Jesus and the Man he loved

Let me first turn then to a discussion of the relevance of the relationship between Jesus and the man he loved for any discussion of holy unions and especially same sex covenants or unions. I will not repeat here the arguments concerning the erotic intimacy of the relationship between Jesus and the man he loved. Rather here I will underscore three aspects of this relationship that may be of particular interest for our discussion. They are: the apparently public or non-closeted character of the relationship; the apparent permanence of the relationship that not even death can end; and finally, the way in which the relationship restructures Jesus' "family relationships" in much the same way that something like marriage is thought to do.

1. The public character of the relationship.

One of the persistent features of the episodes that depict the relationship between Jesus and the man he loved in the Gospel of John is that the relationship is one that is witnessed, known about, accepted at least by the members of Jesus' inner circle. This is typically most dramatically clear in terms of Peter's relationship to the man Jesus loved.

In the first episode in which the reader encounters the man who is described as the one that Jesus loved, the scene at the last supper, the action suggests that Peter at least supposes that the physical intimacy of this man with Jesus would also entail that the beloved has a better understanding than Peter of Jesus' enigmatic reference to one who will betray him. There is much that is of importance in this episode but here I only underline that Peter takes the relationship for granted, that he supposes that the physical intimacy that all the disciples see is also one that can be understood as entailing a sort of intellectual or theological intimacy as well. In this it turns out that Peter is mistaken. The beloved is in no better position to understand Jesus than any other disciple. As a disciple he is on a par with the rest. The only thing that distinguishes him from the others is precisely the physical intimacy that seems to be seen and known by all.

This is further underscored in other episodes. For example Mary Magdalen finds Peter and the beloved together after the death of Jesus and tells them that Jesus has been raised. They race together to the tomb. This further suggests that Peter takes the relationship between Jesus and the beloved for granted and has turned to the beloved for consolation following the death that had been witnessed by the beloved.

In the last episode in which the beloved appears, Peter supposes that he is to take on responsibility for the man Jesus loved as part of his commission to "feed the sheep" that Jesus will be leaving behind. Now all of this suggests that the relationship between Jesus and the man he loved was not closeted but was recognized by Jesus' circle of friends and associates.

This is, of course, what many gay and lesbian couples seek when they speak about same sex marriage, holy unions or covenants. They seek ways in which their love for one

another can be recognized and affirmed by their friends. Thus what weddings often do is provide an occasion for such recognition and affirmation.

2. Beyond death

The last episode in the Gospel of John to which I have just referred is also one in which the permanence of the relationship between Jesus and his beloved is also affirmed. The risen Jesus has appeared on the beach as several of the disciples are out fishing. He is recognized by the beloved and there is then a reunion at the beach. There follows a long dialogue between Jesus and Peter with the beloved disciple as a silent witness. The dialogue has to do with Peter's responsibilities for the community of faith. Peter asks about the beloved and Jesus says that the beloved is Jesus' own concern; Peter need not concern himself with the beloved. That is, even after the death and resurrection of Jesus the personal relationship between Jesus and his beloved continues.

Indeed if, as is certainly possible, the beloved is Lazarus, then the relationship between Jesus and the beloved survives the death of each of them. In weddings we often say, "til death do us part". But here in the case of Jesus and his beloved it is clear that death does not end their relationship. Love is stronger than death.

One of the things that is at stake, I think, in the discussion of gay and lesbian marriage is precisely the insistence that popular stereotypes to the contrary notwithstanding not all gay and lesbian relationships are transitory, fleeting or ephemeral. The insight that the miracle of committed companionship throughout life, in a world in which everything is transient, and relationships fragile, ought to be welcomed and celebrated is one that holds regardless of the gender of the partners to love.

Here in the depiction of the relationship between Jesus and the man he loved, even death could not finally break the hold of that love. When we recall that much of the impetus for the recognition of gay relationships came precisely because of the problems encountered by lovers with the approach of death we see how important is the suggestion that the relational ties between lovers persist even in the face of death. This is why spouses are regarded as having a special claim to accompany the dying in their final hours and to have responsibility to care for the dead. What was so painful for many in the midst of the AIDs crisis was the denial of this most basic feature of committed relationship.

Restructuring family

It is the scene of Jesus' death that is perhaps the most dramatic portrayal of the relationship between Jesus and this man. He is the only man present among the women who are witnesses to Jesus' final hours. In this too, the love between Jesus and this man stands out from the relationships between Jesus and the other male characters in the narrative.

But our attention is drawn to his presence there in order to introduce the only word of Jesus directed toward those who are witnesses to his death: to the beloved he says: behold your mother; to his mother according to the flesh he says: behold your son.

This is a startling scene. As I have shown in my book, if Jesus had said to Mary of Magdala: behold your mother and then to his mother: behold your daughter, we would irresistibly conclude that the Magdalene was the beloved, the betrothed, the "wife" of Jesus. That is it would sound for all the world as if Jesus was commending his beloved to his mother and his mother to his beloved. Henceforth they are to care for one another as

the one who was son to one and lover to the other dies. Isn't that indeed what happens or ought to happen in those relationships we call "in-laws"? Isn't it the case that the relationship between lovers means that the beloved becomes as we say "part of the family"?

But of course the one to whom Jesus first addresses himself is not Mary of Magdala, it is not a woman at all: it is his (male) beloved, the man he loved. And because of the love that binds Jesus and this man therefore this man becomes "son" to Jesus' mother and Jesus' mother becomes mother to Jesus' beloved.

One of the ways of distinguishing a relationship that is called "marriage" from a relationship that is simply that of lovers is that the marriage relationship is one that restructures the family of origin, that has implications for that family, that should be acknowledged by the family of origin and that imposes new roles and responsibilities upon family members. It is precisely that which seems to take place in this scene at the cross. Because of Jesus' love for this man he becomes son to Jesus' mother, and because of that same love she becomes mother to her son's beloved.

Whatever may be the case with the various legal implications of civil unions, my sense is that when people talk about gay and lesbian marriage one of the things they are talking about is precisely this sort of acknowledgement.

This quick review of some of the episodes in the Gospel of John concerning Jesus and the man Jesus loved suggests that this narrative offers a certain authorization for the aspirations of many same sex lovers to have their relationships celebrated and affirmed by family and friends within the community of faith. Certainly if Jesus' presence at the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee in this same Gospel could be taken as warrant for

Christian celebration of cross sex relationships then it is hard to see why the much greater place given to the relationship between Jesus and the man he loved should not be taken to warrant the Christian celebration of same sex relationships that exhibit features of permanent commitment and shared responsibility.

B. Aelred

In this discussion I have not said that Jesus and his beloved were married any more than I have maintained that they were “gay”. What I have said is that the way the relationship was depicted in the Gospel of John lends itself to encouragement for those who seek to have their loving commitments recognized and celebrated by their friends and family and affirmed by the followers of Jesus in the community of Jesus. Whether this is called “marriage” or something else is another matter about which I can imagine some appropriate disagreement.

The magnificent Yale historian, John Boswell, in his last book addressed this question and brought forward considerable evidence to suggest that same sex relationships of deep and passionate (and possibly sexually mediated or expressed) friendship were no less honored in early and medieval Europe.¹ The various liturgies that John Boswell translates and discusses in his book would be quite relevant to this discussion and to the transformation of our ecclesiastical practices.

There is as well another piece of evidence that Boswell drew to our attention 25 years ago in another book, his ground-breaking work on **Christianity, Homosexuality**

¹ John Boswell **Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe** (Villard Books 1994, New York). Mark Jordan provides a sympathetic but critical reading of Boswell’s interpretation of the liturgical evidence in Mark D. Jordan **Blessing Same-Sex Unions** (Chicago, The University of Chicago press, 2005)

and Social Tolerance². What I especially have in mind here is his discussion of the texts of Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth century theologian of love and friendship (1110-1167). In my book I devote a chapter to the ways in which readers of the Gospel of John across the ages have also discerned in that narrative a relationship that might properly be termed homoerotic and there I also discuss Aelred of Rievaulx, several of whose books have in the meantime been published in translation and thus made available to a wider audience than was true at the time Boswell first introduced this discussion.

What is remarkable for our present discussion is that not only did Aelred understand the relationship between Jesus and the beloved as something like a “marriage” but he also supposed that this kind of relationship should actually serve as a model not only for same sex relationships but also for what we would call heterosexual marriage. Let’s take these in turn.

1. The “marriage” of Jesus and “Saint John”

Aelred was the foremost interpreter of love and friendship in his day. Books like **The Mirror of Charity** and **On Spiritual Friendship** became the definitive mediaeval reflections on the themes of love and friendship. And in these reflections he has occasion to turn to interpretations of the relationship between Jesus and John and to describe this relationship as a kind of marriage. Aelred writes of this relationship as exuding “the fragrant secrets of the heavenly bridal chamber”.³

Now this is especially remarkable when we recall that marriage, what we call heterosexual marriage, was not yet recognized as something that was a sacrament of the church. We are still nearly a century away from marriage being defined as a sacrament.

² John Boswell **Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality** (Chicago, The University of Chicago press, 1980).

³ **Mirror of Charity** III.39.110 (Cistercian Publications Kalamazoo, Michigan 1990) p. 299

Indeed there are still rather strong misgivings about marriage among the increasingly celibate clergy and adherents of monastic orders. And Aelred was the abbot of such an order.

Thus when Aelred describes this relationship as a kind of marriage he is not saying that it is “just as good as marriage”. Actually the argument works the other way. Since this relationship is a kind of marriage then maybe marriage is ok. Pointing to the relationship between Jesus and John as a kind of marriage will make it possible for the church to think about blessing heterosexual or cross sex relationships. It is really perhaps because of the value of same sex relationships that the Christians like Aelred accept heterosexual marriages at all. This is obviously the very reverse of what we experience today when churches routinely bless cross sex relationships but forbid the celebration of same sex relationships. We have indeed lost our way.

2. The Transformation of Marriage

For Aelred the model relationships were same sex relationships. The models were David and Jonathan and Jesus and John. He could have mentioned Ruth and Naomi, but alas did not. What was it about same sex relationships that made them an appropriate model for and even a legitimation of cross sex marriage?

In Aelred’s day heterosexual marriage was definitely a mixed bag. In addition to the many ways leading voices in Christendom had become deeply suspicious of any form of sexuality, there was also the problem that many of these relationships were simply marriages of convenience. This would be true in the aristocratic circles in which Aelred had moved before leaving the secular world to devote himself to God.

Marriage was also a relationship of subordination in which the male simply owned the rights to the female.

In contrast same sex friendship was a relationship of free mutuality in which the partners were drawn to one another and committed themselves to one another as equals.

This was what made it possible to suggest that these relationships could and should be the model for heterosexual marriage. Thus Aelred remarks concerning the relation between male and female: “How beautiful it is that the second human being was taken from the side of the first, so that nature might teach that human beings are equal and, as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs neither a superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of true friendship.”⁴

Now if we were to pursue this into our own day we might say that the celebration of same sex unions would be a very important way to make clear that marriage is not a property relationship but a partnership relationship⁵. That is, the affirmation of same sex unions serves the important purpose of transforming heterosexual relationships, of abolishing the relationship of domination and possession. Put another way, if we want heterosexual relationships to be relationships of genuine commitment and lifelong partnerships between equals then the best way to foster that is by blessing same sex relationships.

And one is, I think, entitled to wonder whether the fervent opposition to same sex unions in some segments of traditional Christianity does not arise precisely from a fear

⁴ **Spiritual Friendship** I. 57 (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan 1977) p. 63

⁵ For a fine discussion of the transformation of wedding ceremonies in Judaism from property to partnership covenants see Rachel Adler **Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics** (Boston, Beacon, 1998) pp. 169-208.

that heterosexual marriage will not be able to continue precisely as a relationship of ownership or of masculine domination. I will return to these questions below.

C. Questions and Implications

In order to address some of these questions, it is necessary to turn to the other side of of the issue that I indicated at the beginning. So far I have drawn out some of the potentially favorable implications of the study of the Gospels for the celebration of same sex unions. But as I mentioned at the beginning, there are a number of ways in which these same Gospels call into question what we think of as marriage and family values so I also want to draw attention to some of the issues that this dimension of my study may raise for our contemporary discussion.

No marriage in heaven

One of the many texts from the Gospels that may be cited to illumine the relation between the Jesus tradition and what may be termed the institution of marriage is one that comes from Jesus' series of confrontations with the power brokers of first century Judea in the last day of his life. A version of this confrontation occurs in all three synoptic Gospels with some significant variations. I will begin with Mark's version. Jesus has already disposed of the priests and elders with respect to the question of authority; showing them up for lacking the authority to even ask him about his own authorization for the march on Jerusalem and the blockade of the temple. He has similarly disposed of the Herodians and Pharisees who sought to trap him with a question about taxes, showing them up as bumbling collaborators in the politico-economic system of empire. Now it is

the turn of the Sadducees: those who find the meaning of life in the inheritance of property and the production of progeny from the bodies of women and thus have no use or need for the strange hope for the resurrection from the dead. They believe they have an unanswerable dilemma for those who do hope for the resurrection of the dead, that is for a resurrection of the bodies of the dead. It comes from the custom of Levirate marriage in which the death of a brother without progeny entails that another brother will seek to produce progeny from the body of the woman who had belonged to his deceased brother.

We have a wonderful tale about this custom from Genesis, the story of Tamar, who had been passed from brother to brother without bearing progeny for the sons of Judah or rather grandchildren, and so a future, for Judah himself. She solves the problem by posing as a cultic sex-worker and thus bearing not grandsons but sons for Judah thereby becoming the rather shady ancestress of all Judeans.

The Sadducees concoct a rather more extreme version of this story by having the woman pass from hand to hand through 7 brothers. They then pose the question: in the resurrection of the dead to which of the brothers will she belong. Note that the question is a question about property, about the woman as private property, about the woman as the means of assuring a future for the dead by bearing them children in her not just borrowed but privately owned body.

Now this is a wonderful story for, as we have known since Claude Levi-Strauss' **Elementary Kinship Structures** the entire social order rests upon the exchange of women who are the very beginning of all private property. Men own women and trade

them to one another for the purpose of producing progeny who will continue the name and the proper(ty) of the father.

We perhaps have forgotten that the basis of marriage and family values is the expropriation of women as property for men who through women produce progeny, another kind of property, in order to produce and inherit still more property.

The Sadducees simply ask therefore to whom the woman will belong.

Jesus' answer is rather devastating in its effect: in God's reign inaugurated by the resurrection there will be no ownership of women. There will be no giving or taking in marriage; that is: Women will not be traded among men as private property.

Now it is one of the staggering facts of biblical blindness that interpreters have suggested that what Jesus means is that there will be no more sex in the resurrection. But that is not what the text says. It abolishes marriage as the ownership by men of women and their bodies and of course also their sexuality. But this doesn't mean the end of sex or more generally of the erotic. It merely means that it can no longer be restricted to the institution of the ownership of women's bodies and the instrumentalizing of their bodies for the production of progeny.

We may get a clearer sense of this if we recall that Jesus in these Synoptic traditions has also said something positive, if not about marriage then, about the union of desire and delight that brings people together in ties of gratitude and loyalty. For he is recalled as citing with approval (Mark 10:6-8) the saying in Genesis 2 that male and female are drawn to one another and cleave to one another and that this cleaving is of such force that the man even forsakes his family of origin in order to cleave to one with

whom he has become one flesh. This union of desire and delight is not itself questioned but rather affirmed by Jesus. Thus it is marriage as an institution and not the erotic attachment of people to one another that is abolished by the resurrection of the dead.

Perhaps this will also help us to see the sense in Jesus' attitudes toward adultery. On the one hand Jesus is quite non-chalant about adultery in the legal sense: refusing to condemn the woman caught in the act and shaming her accusers into ignoring the biblical command to stone her; or even commissioning the Samaritan adulteress in John to be the first apostle to the Samaritans. For adultery as legally defined depends on the ownership of a woman's body by her husband. Thus if another man encroaches upon the exclusive right of the husband to possess the woman's body then he is an adulterer and if the woman collaborates in this theft of her body from her husband then she is an adulteress. Without the ownership of women's bodies by men, adultery is simply an impossible legal concept. [It does not help to compound the difficulty by making ownership of one another's bodies mutually reciprocal since this merely disguises the structure of masculine domination while continuing to pervert relations between persons into relationships of property ownership.]

Indeed adultery can only have new meaning if we join the prophets in transposing the question of adultery into a context of freely chosen commitment. Then the abrogation of such a commitment is a betrayal of another who has come to rely upon the loyalty of the other. And it is precisely this that Jesus denounces when he denounces the ways in which men absolve themselves from their freely chosen commitments in order to take possession of another woman's body.

Thus in Matthew Jesus will redefine adultery as any attempt or even desire on the part of the male to take possession of a woman for his own uses: that is what looking at a woman lustfully means after all. It is the first stricture against what in modern times is called “sexual harassment”: treating others as objects of one’s own desire without mutuality or consent.

The Lucan version of the conflict between Jesus and the Sadducees appears more radical in keeping with Luke’s rather more draconian strictures against marriage and family values. It is in Luke after all that Jesus says: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26). What Jesus says to the Sadducees is: “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:34-35). Now the plain meaning of this saying is that anyone who has hope of entering into the reign of God avoids the institution of marriage entirely. This is a saying about what it means to live now as if one hoped to enter into the life to come, the reign of God, the resurrection from the dead. Astonishingly we are quite ready to ignore the clear teaching of Jesus on this matter while insisting on following isolated scraps from Leviticus as the literal law of the church. This is surely a staggering example of sheer bad faith.

Now again let us recall that the problem is posed as one of possession or ownership and that marriage law is always and everywhere based upon and in service to property law. What is abolished by Jesus, at a minimum, is anything like traditional or conventional marriage. But does this mean that suspicion is cast upon the erotic or sexual

character of human existence: Of course not. For salvation is not a repudiation but a restoration of creation.

The Model

Our problem then is the following: we accept and celebrate the desire and delight that brings people together in love and mutual loyalty as an essential part of what makes us human. But we must reject the age old structure of marriage as the ownership of women by men. Is there a model for relationships of desire and delight that does not depend on the structures of ownership of one person by another, that does not make the erotic subservient to questions of progeny and property, that is not unilateral domination at heart?

In antiquity as even today the answer is that yes there is available such a model: it is the relationship between two persons of the same sex. In antiquity this was above all the relation between males, a relationship born of physical attraction and desire but which does not entail ownership of one by the other, or even of one another, nor does it aim at the use of sexual desire to create children as property or to assure the transmission of name and property. It is indeed what might rather be termed erotic friendship: producing lifelong companionship, loyalty and the encouragement to greater virtue and justice.

One of the ways one can see this taking shape is in the work of Plutarch. Like many other thinkers of the Hellenistic world he produced a dialogue on love comparing the merits of same sex vs. cross sex relationships. And as is generally the case the same sex relationships come out as superior in terms of equality and mutuality. But Plutarch takes this a step further than most in that he seeks then to re-order marriage to reflect the

values inherent in same sex relationships, making of marriage something that has nothing to do with masculine domination or property but rather the partnership of equals.

This is a subversion of marriage and family values as these were instantiated in the legal structures of antiquity but the humanization (one might almost say the homosexualization) of marriage between a male and a female.

Now is this not what Aelred of Rievault does as well when he attempts to make the paradigm of Jesus and his beloved, or David and Jonathan into a model for same sex relations, turning on its head the usual interpretation of Adam's rib to argue for the equality of the male and the female who then come together in mutual desire and delight? Of course Aelred could have even strengthened this argument by pointing to the biblical model of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. So compelling a love story is this that we sometimes use the words of Ruth in our wedding services:

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you

Where you go I will go

Where you lodge I will lodge

Your people shall be my people

And your God my God.

Where you die I will die, there will I be buried

May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well

If even death parts me from you. (Ruth 1:16-17)

But these words of commitment beyond death are spoken by one woman to another. Nor is the erotic element lacking for the narrator uses the same word that Genesis 2 uses for the coming together of male and female: Ruth "cleaves" to Naomi. To

be sure the women must struggle to protect their love under the conditions of patriarchy so they conspire to seduce old Boaz into providing shelter to Ruth and so also, to Naomi. But when a son is born the village women rejoice that Ruth has given a son, not to Boaz, but to Naomi! Ruth, who is recalled as the ancestress of David and in the Gospel of Matthew is listed along with Tamar, the cultic sex worker, and Rahab the prostitute and Bathsheba the adulteress as ancestors of Jesus.

In the book in which I consider a wide variety of homoerotic relationships in the OT (**Jacob's Wound**) I suggest that the relationship of Ruth and Naomi serves as a model for the more predominant male-male erotic and sexual attachments that proliferate in the literature of ancient Israel. Indeed I point out that the relationship between David and YHWH is also portrayed as a homoerotic romance ending in a sort of marriage that also includes the whole of David's people within the ambit of YHWH's steadfast love, a love that continues for the sake of YHWH's love for David. More clearly than most of the male-male relationships in this literature, the relationship between Ruth and Naomi heralds a new and more just way for human beings to structure their erotic and sexual attachments.

So I think it fair to say that if heterosexual marriage is somewhat more humane today than in antiquity it is precisely because of this homosexualization of marriage. That is to say that heterosexual marriage has already been positively transformed through the imitation of same sex relationships. It is indeed only because of precisely this transformation that one could dare to say an affirmative word about an institution so thoroughly rejected by the Jesus tradition.

This will further mean that the rejection of same sex unions is nothing other than an attempt to make marriage once again into the very institution repudiated by Jesus and the Gospels: it is an attempt to make women once again the private property of men, to make them to be the breeding cows of masculine pride and self perpetuation. It is of course no accident that those who are today incensed by gay and lesbian unions are also those who suppose that men and institutions controlled by men get to tell women how their bodies must be made to serve men's interests, that choices about reproduction are to be made by men and their institutions and not by women themselves. The same voices insist that biological parents own their children, that biology trumps love in disputes about a child's welfare. They even sometimes claim that sexual harassment legislation is a woman's conspiracy against men (as if men had an inherent right to impose their sexual advances and innuendos upon women).

That people maintain these things is not surprising given the weight of traditions of male supremacy and domination. But that Christians lend their support to any of this can only be regarded as collective amnesia regarding the foundations of our faith in Christ. And this amnesia results in what may be termed apostasy from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It should be clear that these reflections on the Bible and on church tradition are relevant for the question of the celebration of same sex unions within the community of faith.

At the same time, the critique of the social institutions of marriage and family in the Gospels makes me rather dubious of the entanglement of these blessings, whether of "gay" or "straight" relations, in the legal structures of what the state recognizes as

marriage. Perhaps it is well past time for us to resolutely separate Christian marriage or union celebrations from the legal structures ordained and governed by the state.

Let me simply quickly indicate some of the cautions against an uncritical affirmation of same sex unions, cautions that are rightly raised within the gay and lesbian community itself:

First, some caution is necessary if we are not to so concentrate on the recognition of same sex unions that we make them simply mirror images of straight relationships. This would mean missing the opportunity for gay and lesbian relationships to offer a transformative model for other relationships. In so far as conventional marriage models ownership rather than friendship, or domination rather than equality these models require the transformation offered by the celebration of same sex relationships.

Moreover, there is a very real danger that the press for same sex unions may have the unintended consequence of marginalizing those, whether gay or lesbian, who are not in such long term committed relationships. It is already the case that the single are marginalized within congregations and society through the focus on family in the compulsory heterosexism of many of our institutions. It would be a bitter irony if the press for the recognition of same sex unions only made this marginalization more severe.

There is finally a real danger that focusing attention on the question of long term committed relationships will only serve to perpetuate the marginalization of other sexual styles within the gay and lesbian community. By trying to be equal to the heterosexual majority, it is quite possible that some gay and lesbian people, those who can successfully imitate heterosexual life-styles, will join in devaluing the sexual life-styles of other gay and lesbian people, indeed perhaps the majority of gay and lesbian people. A strategy of

assimilation may wind up amputating from the community the majority of gay and lesbian people. This will only perpetuate the marginalizing of people for the practice of gay and lesbian sexuality. The Jesus tradition to which I have attended in my book is remarkable for its refusal to condemn people because of unconventional sexuality. I fear that there is a real danger that the current struggle may find itself, even if successful, only echoing the sexual moralism of the church and society it wants to join.

It should be clear then that gay and lesbian people are divided over the question of marriage or holy unions, whether as a legal contract or as a religious celebration. One of my students, for example, who has been and continues to be in a long term committed relationship with her partner both of whom are also committed Christians has nonetheless written essays that strongly oppose the efforts of glbt people to normalize their relationships either through legal contract or through religious ceremony. I mention this to make clear on that this issue it is not a matter of straight versus gay but of finding ways in an ambiguous world to be faithful above all to the Gospel of God's redeeming and liberating love.

In a broken and fragmented world there is every reason to celebrate the love that people find growing between them. The Jesus tradition that invites us to such a celebration also warns us against making our celebrations into a cause of suffering for those who are left out or excluded. And to oppose ties that bind people into destructive structures of domination and division. The challenge that faces us then is to find appropriate ways of celebrating love without erecting new walls of division and domination.

Let me then end with some fairly simple and I trust by now obvious theses for discussion:

1. The traditions concerning Jesus as well as some of their antecedents in the literature of ancient Israel make it clear that there is a much stronger case for celebrating same sex unions than exists for the celebration of traditional heterosexual unions.

2. That marriage as an institution of ownership and domination is abolished by the Jesus traditions

3. That the only way we could possibly affirm what is called marriage between a man and a woman is by also celebrating same sex unions that model mutuality and freedom

4. That our refusal to celebrate same sex unions while continuing to celebrate traditional marriage is a direct and open repudiation of the Gospel.

5. That the celebration of unions between lovers in the community of faith must be rigorously separated from the legal institutions of marriage.

6. That any such celebration should take care not to marginalize either those who are not in such relationships, or those whose sexuality does not fit into this mold. That is, the celebration of love and loyalty must not become a new tool of oppression and division within the church that seeks to be faithful to Jesus.

With these rather simple and I hope obvious transformations in our practices we may yet become a more faithful reflection of the mission and ministry of Jesus that makes love rather than law the measure of right relationship.