

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



The Long But Sure Path to Equality
– Dr. Stephen D. Jones*

Preached on the Day of the Supreme Court Decision upholding DOMA
Wednesday, July 26, 2006

I can agree with those on the far right of American politics and religion that marriage stands at a critical crossroads today. For so many in our society, marriage has lost integrity. Marriage has not kept pace with changing times. Contrary to some, I believe God is in many of these changes. Marriage has not kept pace with the Movement of God's Spirit of Equality.

Marriage has been a constantly changing, a constantly adapting social structure. This is the way marriage has remained relevant over the centuries. From days of patriarchy and male domination to days of equality between the sexes, marriage has changed. From days of concubines to days of monogamy, marriage has changed. From days of highly regimented roles, to freer gender expression, marriage has changed. From days of toleration of abuse and domestic violence, marriage has changed. From days of arranged marriages, to relationships of choice, marriage has changed. In order to remain a vital structure in our society, marriage cannot be held back to yesterday. If marriage is relevant only to life as it was even in the 1990's, then it is becoming irrelevant to the 21st century. We live in a new century, and God's Spirit of Equality is introducing 21st century changes to marriage.

The Supreme Court of Washington State has chosen status quo rather than equality, making this a day of postponement when we will not yet see the renewal that marriage needs in our society. As our awareness has expanded over the past decade, many of us have become aware that marriage has become a special privilege for some. This is not marriage at its best. Who wants to live in a society where marriage is a special or limited privilege? How can I enjoy my marriage with my wife while other couples are denied the same security, protection, and acceptance?

If marriage is a building block of society, then it must be a basic right available to all. It must stand strong for all couples. It cannot be a special privilege of the majority while a minority is locked out. If marriage continues to be exclusively for heterosexual couples then I predict that we will continue to see the demise of marriage in our society. Marriage will become old-fashioned and antiquated, falling behind the Spirit of Equality that is sweeping not only our land but the entire globe.

Young heterosexual couples are voting against marriage as they opt to live together without formalizing their vows or making legal their commitment. So many young heterosexual couples opt out of marriage because they themselves are the products of failed marriages, and because marriage feels dated and irrelevant to many of them.

Same sex couples have a new message to America: marriage is not dead; it isn't dated; it isn't irrelevant. Without judging those who choose other paths, marriage remains a dynamic way for couples to make lasting commitments throughout the seasons of life. Marriage outshines relationships of convenience. Marriage outlasts infatuation. Marriage is a dynamic environment for children to grow and mature.

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Of course, I am not saying that single persons and single parents are unequal or disadvantaged. All healthy lifestyles need to be affirmed. But today is a day to affirm an emerging vision of marriage in America, a vision that will be delayed as we wait in hope.

Many will assume that today the Supreme Court protected traditional marriage. But I have been married to my wife for 36 years, and I believe our marriage is stronger when what my wife and I share is not an exclusive privilege but an equal right available to all couples. In one decision, the State Supreme Court could have transformed marriage from narrow to broad, from sectarian to universal, from restrictive to open, from exclusive to inclusive. In one decision, justice has been delayed

America is always at its best when it is called back to its original ideals. No ideal is more noble in America than equality. And every time our judicial system has called America to equality, the pace has come faster than many would like and slower than others would like. It always comes with a struggle. But what makes America special is that equality eventually wins. Those desiring special privilege based on race, ethnicity, or gender, have lost their special privilege. Eventually, a majority has understood that America is a stronger place for everyone when everyone enjoys the same opportunities, rights and freedoms. Eventually, the courts will advocate equality. It happened for racial minorities, it happened for women, it will happen for same sex couples.

I want to say a word to those who likely aren't here in this church tonight and I hope somehow my words reach you. I have many relatives in my own family who would celebrate the decision announced this morning. They are not ready for marriage to change. The great divide over marriage saddens me. To many, today's decision feels morally right and fair. They may even feel vindicated.

Our hearts go out to those who honestly stand on the other side, those who wish no ill-will or harm, but who respectfully disagree. Many will not want to shout back at us, but enter into dialogue in an attempt to try to understand why we see tonight as a sign of the demise of marriage, not its renewal.

The courts can decide the legality of marriage, but for marriage to truly be equal requires an accepting and affirming society. The courts cannot mandate that. We give thanks that many of America's corporations and schools already grant equal rights to all couples. We give thanks for changing values, as more people come to realize the virtue of equality for all couples.

What happened today is that we lost the only opportunity we had for a quick victory. But even a positive Supreme Court decision would have launched a flurry of opposition and the battle would continue. Now, we know there won't be a quick Court victory. The decision to introduce equality into our marriages in this State cannot be only a legislative issue, though clearly there is legislative work to do. We will win this victory through conversations in your extended family, with your work colleagues, within your friendship circle, and with your neighbors. More and more people are recognizing marriage equality, but we don't yet have a comfortable plurality. When we do, the legislation will pass. Until we do, we will continue the struggle.

All we can say tonight is that the vision we have of marriage is too important to leave behind, that the cause of equality and romance is too crucial for us to feel fatigue. I want to see a resurgence of marriage in our society. I want to see, in Washington State, new doors of opportunity, new doors of protection, new doors to freedom available to all couples. Regardless of today's decision, I Praise God, Praise the Holy One, Praise Yahweh, Praise Allah, Praise the Un-namable

One, Praise the Holy Presence, for the Spirit of Equality sweeping this land. Equality and Justice cannot be stopped. It can be delayed, but never stopped.

A fellow died one day and found himself waiting in heaven in the long line of judgment. As he stood there, he noticed that some folks were allowed to march right through the Pearly Gates into Heaven. Others, unfortunately, were led over to Satan, who threw them into a burning pit. But every so often, instead of hurling a poor soul into the fire, Satan would toss a few off to one side into a small pile. After watching this happen this several times, the man's curiosity got the best of him. So he strolled over and asked Satan what he was doing.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm waiting over there for judgment, but I couldn't help wondering why you are tossing those people aside instead of flinging them into the fire with the others?"

"Ah, those," sighed Satan. "They're all from Washington State. They're too wet to burn."

Well, my friends, we may be fairly wet here in Washington State, but tonight, we remain on fire, and it's a good kind of fire, the fire, not of judgment or damnation, but the fire of righteousness and justice, the fire of equality. And I say, let it burn, let the fire of equality burn!

This was not the day for which we have worked and prayed. But this isn't the last day either; the last chapter will never be written on marriage. Marriage is constantly changing regardless of the laws of the land. We perform weddings here and we celebrate same sex marriages here, and so do many other progressive congregations. We do not wait upon the Courts, the President, the Congress, or the Legislature to define marriage for us.

The most important aspect of marriage is the blessing of God which is already available to all couples. The second most important aspect of marriage is the acceptance of a supportive community of family and friends. Many gay couples already have this or are creating it. The third most important aspect is acceptance in the workplace and in the public environment, and we have seen huge progress in this area. Only the fourth important aspect is legal protection. There is nothing to hold back same sex couples from building mutual and effective relationships. Praise God it is already happening all around us. There really is nothing the State or government could do to prevent this.

This surely is a night of some discouragement, a night of postponed hope, but let us not be discouraged. There will be another day, another time: Justice is coming! Attitudes are changing. Just as we won a long-delayed victory in January and June with Washington's new anti-discrimination law, so will marriage equality eventually become another victory. This is but one day in the long road to equality for all couples. This is the road to which we are committed. Let us walk the Road to Equality together. Amen.