

Faith Matters and Marriage Matters

by Rev. Christine Leslie

On October 7, 1995, my partner, Martha Dyson, and I made a covenant to be each other's life-long companion in a wonderful Service of Commitment and Celebration at Church of the Redeemer Episcopal in Morristown, NJ. We were surrounded by 200 people that included most of our immediate families, and many, many wonderful friends. Asking The Holy One, and our friends and family, to be with us and bless us as we publicly promised to love and live with each other for the rest of our lives, helped me to understand just why straight people make such a big fuss about getting married. Yes, as I stood on those sanctuary steps that day, I realized there are some amazing benefits that come from crossing the threshold of public commitment with one's beloved in the presence of family, friends, and The Holy One.

Now given I have officiated at many commitment ceremonies, straight and gay, throughout my 20 years in the ministry, I found all of this somewhat ironic. Prior to my own experience, I supported many a couple's decision to commit publicly to one another, and officiated at their services. However, I just didn't know personally about the depth and breadth of meaning, tenderness, fun, and holiness possible in my love for Martha until I publicly committed to her and she to me.

Thank goodness we are making headway in our culture in general with the rising acceptance of gay and lesbian people as people, so that such ceremonies of covenanting and commitment can, and do, take place for gay and lesbian couples who want them. Many gay and lesbian people believe, as do Martha and I, that the benefits of such public covenanting are real even though gay and lesbian couples cannot yet access the 352 legal and economic benefits available to straight couples who marry.

In fact, the growing number of gay and lesbian couples who want to have services of commitment under the present circumstances attests to the benefits that are emotional/mental, social, and spiritual in nature. These are the benefits that infuse our public vow making with much of what makes them matter so much to us anyway. (This is not to say that the refusal to grant gay and lesbian couples the legal and economic benefits available to straight couples at this time is acceptable or just and not worth fighting for. They are!)

When gay and lesbian couples publicly promise to love and live together for the rest of their lives, the emotional and mental benefits can blossom and grow. It begins with the outpouring of love and support from people in attendance who love us and who believe in the rightness and goodness of our relationships. Their presence, love and support mirrors and validates our own thoughts and feelings about the rightness and goodness of our relationships, and of ourselves as gay and lesbian people. For instance, when Martha and I entered that beautiful sanctuary, and saw so many of the people we now and love there with us, our love and regard for each other, and our own belief in the rightness and goodness of our relationship was widened, deepened, and strengthened. What an amazing gift to us on which we have continued to build our life and love together. What a loss for us had we not had such a wonderful commitment service!

When gay and lesbian couples publicly promise to love and live together for the rest of their lives, the social benefits become evident, too. Every time a gay or lesbian couple chooses to commit publicly to one another, we are helping our straight friends and family, as well as ourselves, to experience a wider, healthier understanding of human sexuality, love, and commitment. We are also chipping away at society's homophobia one commitment service at a time. Most of all, we are helping to free

others and ourselves from narrow and oppressive definitions of marriage that limit its purpose, power, function, and benefits and only serve to diminish us all.

When it comes to gay and lesbian people being open and honest about our lives, I believe that "normal is as normal does," because that which is normative, and therefore normal, in any society only becomes so when the majority of people accept, support, and practice certain attitudes and actions (see Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary definition of "normative" - that which is "an acceptable standard, model, or pattern for a group, especially corresponding to the median or average of a large group"). It seems to me that the more gay and lesbian couples who marry publicly, the less our relationships will be thought unacceptable, abnormal, and perverted regardless of the laws of this land. In fact, I wish I had a \$100 for every one who told me how touched and moved they were to have attended our commitment service. (We could have gone on a honeymoon!) And these were supportive and on-board people who, I am sure, went on from there to tell their friends and co-workers about this amazing lesbian wedding they attended. The ripple effect of good news worth telling is how we are going to help many straight people change their hearts and minds about us. It was especially meaningful to me that my two youngest brothers brought their spouses and all of their children to our service, none of the children having ever attended any kind of wedding or commitment service prior to ours. I will cherish forever the joy of dancing with my 10 year old nephew, Kevin, who asked "Are all weddings this much fun, Aunt Chris?" I told him the ones that have dancing at the party afterwards are, and he just beamed.

I also believe the more we do this the more likely we will prevail in getting the marriage laws changed in our country. Can you imagine what could happen in this country, and to our legal system, and ultimately to our marriage laws, if thousands upon thousands of gay and lesbian couples began requesting marriage licenses and suing when refused? We could have a grass roots legal revolution the likes of which this country has never seen. The powers that be might just change the laws to get us off their backs! What a delightful thought!

When gay and lesbian couples publicly promise to love and live together for the rest of their lives, spiritual benefits, or those things that stretch, deepen, and strengthen our experience of The Holy One, flourish too. Experiencing The Holy One's presence in our services of commitment is important to our healing and well-being because of all of the negative, hateful, homophobic teachings of many faith traditions that have told gay and lesbian people we are abominations in the sight of God. It was very meaningful and comforting to Martha and me to realize and acknowledge that The Holy One was with us reassuring us every step of the way that were not alone in this service or in our day-to-day lives.

When invited to be present, The Holy One is with us: supporting, loving, blessing guiding, and believing in us, and the goodness and rightness of our relationships. If this were not so, where on earth would we get the strength and courage to love one another much less have such public ceremonies in a world filled with ignorant, hateful homophobes? Surely The Holy One cannot be about such hatred and bigotry. Its just not in Her makeup. However, it is in the makeup of many people who make God in their own image. These are the very same people who would not have us be firm in our faith in ourselves or our belief in The Holy One who made us in Her image for loving and being loved.

It is no small accomplishment for gay and lesbian couples to make public covenants in services of commitment and celebration. For each time another gay or lesbian couple vows to have and to hold, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health - to love, honor, and cherish their beloved until death parts them, our faith in ourselves, each other, and The Holy One matters just a bit more and so does marriage.



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