

Witnessing a Catholic same-sex wedding

Jamie Manson | Jul. 27, 2011 | Grace on the Margins

The stroke of midnight this past Sunday morning ushered in a new era in human rights for gay and lesbian New Yorkers. From Niagara Falls to the southern shore of Long Island, same sex couples, many of them already in committed relationships for decades, were awarded hundreds of legal rights they had long been denied.

At Gracie Mansion, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg officiated at the wedding of two of his staffers. Jonathan Mintz and John Feinblatt affirmed legally what they had shared for the past 19 years. Perhaps the only two people more excited than Mintz and Feinblatt were their two daughters, ages six and eight, whom they have raised from birth.

Outside the New York City Marriage Bureau, Phyllis Siegel, 77, and Connie Kopelov, 85, became the first same-sex couple in the City to be legally married. Together for nearly a quarter of century, the couple remarked that they were breathless and shedding tears at the realization that they were finally receiving equal rights.

In Washington Square Park, in the heart of Greenwich Village, I had the honor of participating in a same-sex wedding of two women on Sunday afternoon. The couple, who have been together for 19 years, first exchanged vows and rings 17 years ago. Today, at last, those words were legally binding.

The 20 people in attendance, whose ages ranged from 21 to well over 70, all shared two things in common with the couple. Every one of them is gay or lesbian, and every one of them is deeply committed to their Catholic faith.

After a moving exchange of vows and rings, we spent hours in the park, dining on pizza, Prosecco and strawberries. It was one of those moments that I have experienced rarely: a moment of genuine joy, peace, and deep communal friendship. It was at once very real, but also transcendent. Perhaps a foretaste of what eternity might be like.

The married couple first met at Mass two decades ago. And it was directly to Mass that they headed, with most of those who attended their wedding, after their ceremony and celebration in the park.

But for all of the special and spiritual aspects of the afternoon, I was struck most by how *ordinary* it all was. I wished that those who regard same-sex marriage with contempt, fear or condemnation could have watched this event.

What they would have witnessed would probably have borne a striking resemblance to the straight weddings they've attended: everyday people tearing up over a couple's vows, taking inordinate numbers of photos and videos and enjoying a great party. (I do admit, however, that this celebration lacked the drunkenness and pounding music that seem to accompany so many weddings in this country.)

Having been to more than one heterosexual wedding that I suspected was premature at best, fragile at worst, it was a pleasure to attend a ceremony where there was no doubt of the couple's faithfulness to one another and the

enduring bond of their devotion.

What was shared at this wedding transcended sexual orientation and truly elevated our common humanity. This historic and deeply personal event fostered genuine community by allowing us to find happiness in someone else's joy and to be present to one another through ritual and celebration.

For me, one of the ironies of the Catholic opposition to same-sex relationships is the appeal to natural law, specifically the notion that same-sex relationships violate nature because they are not capable of procreation.

Interpreting natural law in this way reduces human beings to their biological functions. It fails to appreciate human beings in their totality as emotional, spiritual and physical beings that God created us to be.

Seeing these two women still so completely in love after two decades together, one cannot deny how naturally they complement one another on every level. The only unnatural possibility would have been for them to *not* be together.

Though they are unable to procreate, one could hardly deny the fruitfulness of their relationship and personal and spiritual fulfillment they brought one another.

Their dedication to the church has brought a remarkable spectrum of gifts to the members of their faith community with whom they have worshiped for 20 years. The strength of their commitment to one another and to their faith are a lifeline for new generations of young Catholics who see this couple as an embodiment of the truth that one can be both in a same-sex relationship and a faithful Catholic.

It may take centuries before the Roman Catholic hierarchy recognizes that this marriage, and countless ones like it, is a holy union because of the love, faithfulness and mutual respect they shared. Lucky for those of us gathered in the park on that balmy, blessed, late afternoon, the presence of God is not subject to the limited, fallible men who make church law.

In their marriage, these women shared what most human beings, gay or straight, long for: a relationship that gives witness to the life-giving power of God's love in our world. What could be more natural, and sacramental, than this?

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