

## **SAME SEX MARRIAGE: A CIVIL RIGHT**

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Recent survey data indicate that the general public has, over the past thirty years, become much more positive about the civil rights of lesbians and gay men. These data suggest that an overwhelming majority of Americans now believe that lesbians and gay men deserve protection from discrimination in housing and employment. More of us than ever report that we are personally acquainted with a gay person, as a neighbor, co-worker, or even a family member. And while a majority of Americans do not agree with the notion that most lesbians and gay men experience homosexuality as a “choice”, what difference would it make if it were? We accord basic civil rights to any people espousing any number of identity and behavior “choices”, such as religious identification and expression.

It's not such a leap, then, to endorse lesbian and gay peoples' access to the rights accrued by marriage – were it not for the term “marriage” itself. The truth is that marital status confers well over a thousand rights and benefits – relating to all manner of important life considerations, including everything from medical care and legal status to property rights. These rights are not necessarily guaranteed by domestic partnership laws or civil unions, hence the need to craft legislation that puts them in place. If we indeed support the civil rights of gay men and lesbians, and the legitimacy of their relationships, then we need to take seriously the fact that being denied access to marriage automatically relegates these relationships to an inferior status. The emotional and physical stress associated with having “second class status” can be considerable and harmful, as is well documented in the scientific literature. Study after study shows that when lesbians and gay men live in places where their civil rights are diminished or denied, their mental and physical well-being suffer.

This is also important because marriage brings with it a whole host of positive, protective factors related to physical and mental health. This is why the major mental health and social science organizations take a positive stand regarding same-sex relationships. The Washington State Psychological Association and the American Psychological Association both support same-sex marriage due to its acknowledgement of the protective health factors associated with marriage, its longstanding opposition to any kind of discrimination based on sexual orientation, and the recognition that same-sex couples seeking to legally protect their relationships should have the right to do so. This position is founded on decades of research that shows there is nothing other than social stigma and prejudice necessarily differentiating the life experiences of heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals and their relationships. Our laws and social policies should be aimed at reducing stigma, not to diminish the lives of those who are victims of it.

Another important reason for supporting same-sex marriage has to do with gay families. In the past decade, an increasing number of same-sex couples have taken on parenting roles – through adoption, from former relationships, assisted reproduction, or surrogacy. Gay and lesbian parents have shown themselves, in study after study, to be as capable, loving and competent as their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, children of lesbian and gay parents show no significant differences in any number of variables: psychological adjustment, social development, or academic achievement. Often, it is lesbian and gay people who adopt the more difficult children to place: those who are older, and/or with special needs. The children of these relationships deserve the solid, committed bonds that derive from the legal marriage of their parents.

So what makes the term “marriage” so provocative? Is it uniquely the property of heterosexual people? On the one hand, there are those who would have us believe that gay men and lesbians are incapable of forming stable relationships;

on the other hand, it is often those same people who do not want to give LGB people the chance. It seems as though the main objection to same-sex marriage coming from social and religious extremists is that it will “destroy the traditional family” in some way. The argument is that “marriage” as a social construct will become so diluted, or so contaminated by gays, that it will no longer have meaning for anyone.

Come again? In the summer, my partner and I will celebrate thirty years together. In that time, we’ve known a number of heterosexual couples – two of whom, in fact, asked us to be the godparents of their children. Unfortunately, some of our heterosexual friends have split up; but none, at least as far as I know, has done so because my partner and I were together. This personal experience is borne out by the data: in the years since domestic partnership and same-sex marriage have been available in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium, the marital dissolution rates have remained constant. The same is true for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Same-sex couples cannot, and should not, be blamed for the heterosexual divorce rate.

Really, we all know what it comes down to: anti-gay prejudice, pure and simple. Heterosexual people who feel secure in their lives and in their families will not object to same-sex marriage, because it poses no threat to them; and presumably, they’d wish to see lesbian and gay people afforded the same rights they have. Heterosexual people who cleave to a prejudicial view of gay people and their relationships, on whatever basis, will never support marital equality for gay people. That’s unfortunate, but it is their right. Let’s just not create law and public policy based on personal prejudices – however they may be derived. The world in which we live needs more love, not less.