

Considering courage in the debate on same-sex marriage

Chase Nordengren | Oct. 25, 2012 Young Voices

The blessing of my fall has been the opportunity to volunteer on the Referendum 74 campaign in Washington state, which looks to ratify a decision by the state legislature and governor this year to legalize civil marriages among same-sex couples. The campaign has been an opportunity for me to meet members of my community -- gay and lesbian adults, parents of gay children, friends and allies -- who exude a spirit of compassion, good humor and love. They are also typified by another essential characteristic, a theological characteristic: courage.

Next month, three states -- Maine, Maryland and Washington -- will vote on referenda to allow same-sex marriage. In Minnesota, voters will decide whether to approve a constitutional amendment affirming a definition of marriage that excludes those couples. As well they should, these campaigns have focused on the practical issues and hardships faced by same-sex couples: hospital visitation rights, death benefits and a social inequality whose effects are hard to quantify yet still very real.

Christian opponents tend to argue marriage, for us, is something much deeper than these rights. They're right. The ability to get married is not just a matter of rights and protections, but of the chance to take a courageous step, one of trust in a plan and a person apart from ourselves. That courage, which I have witnessed, may even be a prerequisite to faith.

Central to the life of Christians, writes Paul Tillich, is "the courage to be," one's willingness to affirm one's essential nature regardless of, at times despite, social forces that reject that nature. The radical idea of faith, Tillich argues, rests in the practice of this essential skill, the skill to affirm all the parts of our identities God brought into being.

Much of Tillich's work centers on courage's opposite -- anxiety. Anxiety has no object, no focus: "therefore participation, struggle and love with respect to it are impossible." Anxiety is that which cripples our action.

Fortunately, Tillich writes, anxiety aspires to a different emotion: fear. Fear seems debilitating but, paradoxically, it exists only in a place where one is self-affirming, when one has something to lose and something to be afraid of. "The self is self only because it has a world, a structured universe, to which it belongs and from which it is separated at the same time." Courage is acting with knowledge of fear, overcoming fear.

Veterans of the gay rights movement that I have met have much to be fearful of: hateful speech, violence and denial of some of the qualities of a decent and free life. Their perseverance is a sign, to me at least, that fear has led to courage. The desire to affirm who one is, to be proud, to truly enter into community with an open heart pushes them onward.

The courage to be, Tillich writes, is an expression of our faith on earth. Courage is the somewhat challenging thought that despite one's own individual, obvious weaknesses, God affirms the centrality of who we are. It is, Tillich says, "the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience," someone transcending ordinary experience.

Marriage, too, is an act of courage, the faith in something that transcends ordinary experience. Growing in faith, growing in the courage to be, requires being part of a structured universe. It requires a world in which one is both part -- as in, part of the community of the committed -- and not a part -- as in, committed to someone else on a level all that much deeper. Making that courageous choice requires, demands our respect. It also demands our recognition.

Same-sex marriage is, and will continue to be, an issue that deeply divides the Christian community. I pray earnestly for the days when that divide closes. In the interim, however, the God of our faith asks us to stand with our brothers and sisters as they make the big leaps in their lives or, at the very least, step aside. As our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters continue on the journey of their lives, removing the legal barriers to their next step is not only an act of love, but also an act of affirming faith.

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