

What Homosexuals Want

by Eve Tushnet

The same-sex marriage debate has focused on the question of what marriage is. But perhaps it's better to begin from a different angle: Why does society give marriage special honor? Because it's this honor that activists are really seeking. If homosexual couples could cobble together all the bureaucratic oddities and benefits (and penalties) that attend marriage but the law still refused to call their unions "marriages," no one can pretend the activists would be satisfied.

What they are seeking is not, or not primarily, the right to confer Social Security benefits on their partners upon their death or medical power of attorney. What homosexual activists seek is honor – a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. So we should start with the fact that our society exalts marriage over all other chosen relationships. Yet marriage is hardly the only important kind of relationship.

Many women will admit their best friends are closer to them than anyone else. (This fact has spawned a whole genre of "chick flicks," from beaches to *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*.) Many men will acknowledge they are more open with their friends than with their wives and that they are fiercely loyal to their friends. We rely on friends in familial, romantic, financial and medical crises.

Then there are siblings; uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews; beloved teachers; professional mentors; godparents; and models of faith. Most of us are blessed with at least one of these people in our lives – the person who was there for us, who believed in us, who guided us. We incur great debts to these people, and we live in loyalty to them. But we are not married to them, and no one is arguing that we should be. So clearly there is something more about marriage that merits our attention.

Marriage does more for society than the other kinds of loving, dedicated relationships. These other relationships do less to nurture children by giving each child a mother and a father; to corral the often destructive forces of sexual desire into loving and productive channels; to bring people from youth to adulthood; and to align the interests of parents and children rather than forcing tragic choices between the two. Marriage gets honor from society because it does all these things more than any institution does or could.

Marriage developed over centuries to meet several specific, fundamental needs: children's need for a father, a couple's need for a promise of fidelity (and consequences for breaking that promise), young people's need for a transition to manhood or womanhood and men's (and women's, but mostly men's) need for a fruitful rather than destructive channel for sexual desire – a way of uniting eros and responsibility. In other words, marriage developed to meet the needs of opposite sex couples.

At this point, the most common question that arises is, "So what? Okay, maybe marriage didn't develop in response to same-sex couples, but c'mon – how can Bob and Jim getting married really affect your marriage?" There are three basic reasons to think same-sex marriage will damage, perhaps fatally, the institution of marriage – maybe not in this generation, but in the one that grows up with same-sex marriage as the norm.

The first reason is simple: This is America. This nation is built on the idea that even minorities can shape the culture they enter. Racial and ethnic minorities have already done so; no honest author could write a history of American culture without noting how much of it began as black culture, Jewish culture, and Irish culture. And from TV shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* to subtler infusions of "camp" humor, homosexual culture is already affecting the majority culture.

The second reason is that homosexual activists are merely picking up on a trend begun by and for opposite-sex couples. Same-sex marriage is just the next step in the divorce culture. The belief that marriage is merely the way that our culture expresses its approval of atomistic adults' sexual and romantic partnerships isn't new – it's the same "me generation" worldview that produced "fatherless America."

And finally, unlike easy divorce, same-sex marriage would change the fundamental ideal of marriage. Even the most ardent defenders of divorce today view it as a necessary evil, a response to the tragedy of marriage failure. Same-sex marriage by contrast, would say that the ideal marriage is gender neutral – not a way for boys to become men by marrying and pledging to care for women. It would say that the ideal marriage includes children only when

they have been specially planned and chosen – children would become optional extras rather than the natural fruit and symbol of the spouses union. It would say that the ideal family need not include a father – a message that is especially pernicious in a country where one-third of births in 2000 were to unwed mothers. And it would say (because who can imagine that most homosexual couples would wed?) that marriage itself is optional, not the norm – that marriage is for heroes, and since you and I aren't heroic, we must not be called to marry. Any one of these changes would be destructive. Put together, they are a recipe for disaster, a recipe for revisiting and surpassing the harm done to families by the "sexual revolution."

Marriage has taken a beating. Americans cohabit, we divorce, we remarry, we split our resources between several sets of children. But we still have hope that we may recover the true meaning of marriage, because we still know the ideal: the lifelong, fruitful union that makes boys into husbands and fathers, and reconciles the "opposite sexes" to one another. Same-sex marriage would mean losing that ideal and losing our best hope for marriage renewal.

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