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GUEST COLUMN

The freedom to marry at the heart of Christianity

By Rev. Marvin M. Ellison

As a Christian theologian, I support marriage equality because I take the Bible seriously. More importantly, I take the God of the Bible seriously. The God I worship has a divine passion for justice that compels me to respect all neighbors and defend their human rights, including the freedom to marry regardless of the gender of the two people.

This freedom to marry is important because my religious tradition teaches that love — the call to love and be loved — is at the very heart of what it means to be human. Love is also holy ground. “Where there is love,” the tradition affirms, “there is God.”

Gay men and lesbians, like their heterosexual counterparts, fall in love, enter into committed partnerships, form families, and often raise children, as well as care for other family members. To deny gay couples the freedom to love and marry is morally wrong. It’s a denial of their fundamental humanity as people created in the image of God. To honor same-sex couples with the freedom to marry civilly is one way, and a very important way, to recognize that gay men and lesbians are fully human and can model the best of loving, commitment partnerships.

Because marriage equality is a deeply contested issue, our assumptions matter. I assume, first of all, that the institution of marriage has changed and will continue to change. Because of its checkered history, that’s good news. Many traditional marriage laws and practices have been oppressive. Slaves were denied the freedom to marry and form families. Historically, marriage has been far less about love and far more about property and progeny. That love sometimes flourished in these matches is nothing short of miraculous. That abuse, control and lovelessness often reigned is no surprise.

Second, I assume that marriage should change to fit our contemporary values of regard for women as co-equal with men and respect for the full humanity of gay men and lesbians.

Third, in honoring the Christian mandate to seek justice and compassion in all things, I assume that any marriage changes should be viewed through the lens of biblical justice. Biblical justice is about right relation: correcting wrongs and restoring people to full dignity in community. Forty years ago, the social wrong was a law prohibiting interracial couples from state-licensed marriage. Now the issue is whether same-sex couples should have equal access to state-licensed marriage and its benefits, protections, and responsibilities.

Christian support for marriage equality is based on the centrality of the biblical mandate for justice and compassion and on Jesus’ own example of including the marginalized into the beloved community. On the biblical

grounds of loving God and loving neighbor as self, including our gay and lesbian neighbors, it is a good thing to recognize the humanity of same-gender loving people and grant their right to civil marriage.

Out of fear and uncertainty, some are tempted to draw a picture of love that is much too small. Our opportunity today is to draw a larger picture of love, commitment, and family that includes same-sex couples. Drawing that bigger, more inclusive picture of love and justice in Maine is sacred work.

The Rev. Marvin M. Ellison, Ph.D., teaches Christian ethics at Bangor Theological Seminary, co-chairs the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry in Maine, and is author of "Same-Sex Marriage? A Christian Ethical Analysis" (Pilgrim, 2004).