

How can people of faith draw on the Bible in our conversations about the proposed Anti-Marriage Amendment? Reflections by David Weiss (at an adult forum at St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church, 11.05.2011)

As long as I can remember, I've drawn purpose and inspiration for my life out of the stories in the Bible. For more than a decade I taught introductory college courses on the Bible, aiming to help students see that the Bible told a story that was captivating and relevant today.

Then, five or six years ago when I was teaching Sunday School here at SPR, I was determined to help my students understand more about God's love for them. One day, working on a project about the creed, one my students wrote about how her faith in God was strengthened by the love of her moms—plural. And it hit me, in my gut, that *she was learning the truth that we Christians value the most—that God loves us—and she was learning it from the type of parents whose love this proposed amendment will refuse to acknowledge.*

As a husband, a father, a Minnesotan citizen, and a Christian, I want better for her, for her parents, and for every same-sex couple who would choose marriage if it were an option. That's why I'm invested.

So, "How *do* we draw on the Bible around this amendment?"

First, we shouldn't let the conversation be framed by the handful of texts that have been so often misused to condemn homosexuality. These texts have *nothing* to do with committed same-sex relationships. The biblical writers *knew* about things like military rape, territorial rape, pederasty, and temple prostitution. In the ancient world—as still today—sex could be misused to terrorize others, to establish a pecking order, or to "sell" everything from a temple sacrifice to blue jeans, lite beer, or shampoo. These texts deal with the *misuse* of sex as raw power or false promise.

Marriage—whether between a straight couple or a same-sex couple—is *not* about using sex as raw power or false promise. *Those texts don't belong in this conversation.*

Second, while the story of Adam and Eve says *something* about God's intent for our life together, it doesn't say everything. Yes, we were created for relationship, and to care *for* creation. But while the Nazi's imagined Adam and Eve as been blond, blue-eyed, and fair-skinned, the Bible says not a word about that—and science says our most ancient ancestors were likely black-haired, brown-eyed, and dark-skinned. And while the teachers at the Lutheran Day School in 1915 were probably right in believing that Adam and Eve were both right-handed, they were *wrong* in tying my grandpa's left hand to the desk with twine so that he *couldn't* be left-handed.

Adam and Eve were almost certainly a straight couple—but to think that their straightness ... or their handedness or hair color, skin color, or eye color comes anywhere close to exhausting the diversity of creation's goodness? This is to limit God's imagination to human prejudice. We should know better by now.

Third, there are *some* models for "biblical marriage," and if our conversation partners insist on discussing "biblical marriage," if might be worthwhile to ask them *which* model of biblical marriage they endorse or follow:

- Were they two slaves assigned to marry each other by their owner—as in Exodus 21:4?
- Was the woman a spoil of war, claimed by a soldier—as in Numbers 31:1-18 & Deuteronomy 21:1-14?
- Was the wife forced to marry her husband because he raped her—as in Deuteronomy 22:28-29?

- Is the woman now married to her dead husband's brother because the original husband died without fathering a son—as in Genesis 38:6-10?
- Does the husband have multiple wives and/or concubines or—as was common throughout the Old Testament era?
- Does the husband have sex with both his wife and her slave girl—as in Genesis 16?
- Or do they, in fact, have the best *remembered* form of biblical marriage: where a man marries a woman who must be *subservient* to him, is typically chosen *for* him, cannot have a different faith *from* him, and who before the wedding must prove her virginity *or be stoned*?

You might have an engaging conversation if you asked them which of those very biblical models they think is best.

But I suggest that the best way to draw on the Bible in our conversations around this Anti-Marriage Amendment is simply to say that throughout the Bible we hear the story of a God who loves us and who promises to be there for us, for always. And that this notion of the holiness of a *loving commitment to be there for another person through thick and thin* is what we *know* makes a marriage. It's what we who are straight treasure about our marriages when they are healthy. And it's what we who are straight ache for when our marriages fail.

The Bible also tells stories like that of Ruth. Her love for Naomi was ethnically and culturally odd and her marriage to Boaz was religiously dubious, but thanks to her odd love and dubious marriage she became the great-grandmother of King David.

In the New Testament Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is filled with drama, peopled with a hapless victim, ruthless villains, worthless bystanders, and a heroic Samaritan. Except that for the 500 years leading up to Jesus' parable Samaritans have been the single most despised category of people in Jewish society. Like gay people who claim to be Christian, Samaritans were outcast because that they slept with the wrong type of people and therefore "couldn't" be Jews. But in this parable the Samaritan becomes Jesus' chosen image for the activity *of God* reigning as king.

While the Bible may not offer us a very useful model of biblical marriage in a direct sense, it is full of stories about a God who welcomes surprising people into God's family. Stories about heroes and heroines whose praiseworthiness lies in their promised faithfulness to another person. And stories about the God who promises to love us and to be there for us, for always.

These stories of love and promise should shape and inspire the best of our marriages. *And they do.* And from them we *know* that marriage is not really about replicating a biblical model or about tracking a couple's genitals. It's about honoring and supporting the love between them and the promises they make to one another. And for that reason we should muster our gifts and energy to defeat this amendment that would make human prejudice the measure of marriage. That's how we might effectively draw on the Bible in these conversations.

© 2011 – David R. Weiss is the author of *To the Tune of a Welcoming God: Lyrical reflections on sexuality, spirituality and the wideness of God's welcome* (2008, Langdon Street Press). A theologian, writer, poet and hymnist committed to doing "public theology" around issues of sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace, David lives in St. Paul, Minnesota and is a self-employed speaker and writer on the intersection of sexuality & spirituality. You can reach him at drw59@comcast.net and read more at <http://tothetune.wordpress.com>.