

## 2012 Reflections on “Chicago values”



Recent comments by those who administer our city seem to assume that the city government can decide for everyone what are the “values” that must be held by citizens of Chicago. I was born and raised here, and my understanding of being a Chicagoan never included submitting my value system to the government for approval. Must those whose personal values do not conform to those of the government of the day move from the city? Is the City Council going to set up a “Council Committee on Un-Chicagoan Activities” and call those of us who are suspect to appear before it? I would have argued a few days ago that I believe such a move is, if I can borrow a phrase, “un-Chicagoan.”

The value in question is espousal of “gender-free marriage.” Approval of state-sponsored homosexual unions has very quickly become a litmus test for bigotry; and espousing the understanding of marriage that has prevailed among all peoples throughout human history is now, supposedly, outside the American consensus. Are Americans so exceptional that we are free to define “marriage” (or other institutions we did not invent) at will? What are we re-defining?

It might be good to put aside any religious teaching and any state laws and start from scratch, from nature itself, when talking about marriage. Marriage existed before Christ called together his first disciples two thousand years ago and well before the United States of America was formed two hundred and thirty six years ago. Neither Church nor state invented marriage, and neither can change its nature.

Marriage exists because human nature comes in two complementary sexes: male and female. The sexual union of a man and woman is called the marital act because the two become physically one in a way that is impossible between two men or two women. Whatever a homosexual union might be or represent, it is not physically marital. Gender is inextricably bound up with physical sexual identity; and “gender-free marriage” is a contradiction in terms, like a square circle. Both Church and state do, however, have an interest in regulating marriage. It is not that religious marriage is private and civil marriage public; rather, marriage is a public institution in both Church and state. The state regulates marriage to assure stability in society and for the proper protection and raising of the next generation of citizens. The state has a vested interest in knowing who is married and who is not and in fostering good marriages and strong families for the sake of society.

The Church, because Jesus raised the marital union to the level of symbolizing his own union with his Body the Church, has an interest in determining which marital unions are sacramental and which are not. The Church sees married life as a path to sanctity and as the means for raising children in the faith, as citizens of the universal kingdom of God. These are all legitimate interests of both Church and state, but they assume and do not create the nature of marriage. People who are not Christian or religious at all take for granted that marriage is the union of a man and a woman for the sake of family and, of its nature, for life. The laws of civilizations much older than ours assume this understanding of marriage. This is also what religious leaders of almost all faiths have taught throughout the ages. Jesus affirmed this understanding of marriage when he spoke of “two becoming one flesh” (Mt. 19: 4-6). Was Jesus a bigot? Could Jesus be accepted as a Chicagoan? Would Jesus be more “enlightened” if he had the privilege of living in our society? One is welcome to believe that, of course; but it should not become the official state religion, at least not in a land that still fancies itself free.

Surely there must be a way to properly respect people who are gay or lesbian without using civil law to undermine the nature of marriage. Surely we can find a way not to play off newly invented individual rights to “marriage” against constitutionally protected freedom of religious belief and religious practice. The State’s attempting to redefine marriage has become a defining moment not for marriage, which is what it is, but for our increasingly fragile “civil union” as citizens.

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## Chicago Values, Revisited: it's not about chicken!



Responses to my reflections last week on “Chicago values” fell into two camps. There were almost universal plaudits for recognizing that the government should be concerned about actions and not about thoughts and values. The media, of course, are in this camp, because they are concerned about the free speech that is at the heart of their profession.

More complicated, on the other hand, was the reaction to the “value” that was the case in point: same-sex “marriage.” Some who are comfortably in the first camp deserted the field of argument on gay marriage. An argument is always made in a context that determines what can be considered sensible, and it seems to me that some of us are arguing out of different contexts.

There are three contexts for discussing “gay marriage”: 1) the arena of individual rights and their protection in civil law, 2) the field of activities defined by nature and its laws, and 3) the realm of faith as a response to God’s self-revelation in history. Unfortunately, when the only permissible context for discussing public values is that of individual rights protected by civil law, then it is the government alone that determines how it is acceptable to act. Every public actor (including faith communities) then becomes the government’s agent. This is a formula for tyranny.

We can see how appeals to pluralism and toleration gradually become tyrannical in the development of how we are now expected to regard the killing of unborn children. When the individual civil right to abort a living child was discovered in the Constitution, its justification began as a “necessary evil” for the sake of a woman’s health; it was then applauded in nobler terms as a positive symbol of a woman’s freedom; it is now part of the value system of our society and everyone must be involved in paying for it, either through taxes or insurance. It is mainstream medicine and settled social policy. Its opponents are relegated to a quirky fringe, outside of the American consensus not only on what it is legal to do but also on what it is good to support. When the government, the media and the entertainment industries agree to agree on how to use words and shape the argument, society itself is deliberately transformed in ways that bring academics, judges, legislators, lawyers, law enforcement officers, newspaper editors, actors, psychiatrists, doctors and every other public professional into public agreement, all portraying themselves as original thinkers. Anyone opposed to the new consensus, no matter the reason, is dismissed as a throwback to an earlier age, to be tolerated, perhaps, but removed from public life and, eventually, punished. It’s a very old story.

Getting people to think outside the context of “civil rights” is difficult. It’s as if Americans were forbidden to think beyond politics. What is singularly peculiar about the “gay marriage” argument is the way its proponents dismiss the field of nature itself as in any way normative for human actions. We would think it odd if the government, in order to please those who desire to fly without an airplane, were to repeal the law of gravity. If nature gets in the way of a new civil right to “gay marriage,” however, that’s too bad for nature. This strikes me as bizarre.

Entering into the context of faith, the believer looks to how God has intervened in history through the calling of the Jewish people to a particular vocation, through inspiring the Hebrew prophets, by the incarnation of the eternal Son of God in Jesus of Nazareth, and the founding of the Church that speaks in Jesus’ name until he returns in glory. The God who created order in nature also reveals his plan for us in history; and the religious teaching on the nature of marriage is eminently clear. Those who dismiss any religiously based argument as simply private and therefore not publicly normative are at least consistent with the secularism that makes protection of individual “civil rights” entirely determinative of public life.

What is puzzling is the case of those who, while claiming to be believers, ignore the history of salvation and reduce God to a cosmic wimp who smiles and blesses whatever comes down the track, as if God were without intelligence or the ability to discern right from wrong. Jesus is certainly “inclusive” as the savior of the whole world who invites all to follow him. But Jesus calls us to convert to his ways, which are not ours. Among the sayings of Jesus, there are about as many that start “Woe to you...” as there are those that begin “Blessed are they...” A Jesus reduced to our wishful thinking is useless.

What remains a Gospel imperative, of course, is a respectful and loving concern for those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian, including them in the community of faith and accompanying them in their quest for holiness of life. The Archdiocese attempts this response, in part, through AGLO and Courage groups.

Thanks to all who responded to last week’s blog; apologies to anyone who feels unfairly judged. I’ve tried to keep it at the level of ideas and social trends that seem to me to be dangerous to us all, Chicagoans or others.

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