

If the church were Christian, it would care less about sex and more about love.

I hadn't been a pastor long when an elder in the meeting I was pastoring told me about an elderly couple living together who weren't married. He was very upset about their "living in sin" and asked me to speak to them and set them straight. Because I'd been taught that people living together should be married, I believed he was right and went to talk with this couple, then in their upper seventies.

The couple welcomed me into their home, ushered me to the nicest chair, then brought me something to eat and drink. They had each lost a longtime spouse to death, so showed me their pictures, along with pictures of their respective children and grandchildren. The man's wife had been mentally ill and placed in a state hospital. For many years, until she died, he would drive 250 miles each week to visit her. I hadn't known that. They apologized for living together, but they were lonely and poor and couldn't afford to have their Social Security benefits cut were they to marry. I couldn't find the words to say anything about their living arrangements, so I kept quiet and just enjoyed watching them together. It was obvious they'd found gold in one another.

The next day I went to visit the church elder. He asked me if I'd straightened them out. I told him I hadn't, but that I had an idea. If he offered to make up the Social Security money they would lose by getting married, I would happily conduct the service. He didn't agree to do that. While I was at the elder's house, I had the opportunity to watch he and his wife interact. He treated her poorly, with thinly veiled contempt. She was his servant. He was her master. He treated his children the same way. His family appeared emotionally beaten down.

If someone had asked me, "Which household best reflects God's hope for human relationship?", I wouldn't have hesitated to say the first one, who, though in violation of the church's rules, exemplified the love and grace of God.

That incident, and others like it, eventually caused me to question the church's priorities. It seemed to me the church spent too much time worrying whether or not people were following certain sexual codes and staying within the church's prescribed boundaries, and not enough time helping people understand what it meant to love someone else deeply, unselfishly, and faithfully.

This preoccupation continues still when the church contends that gay people can't possibly love as faithfully as straight people, when the church bars divorced people from the sacraments or refuses to marry them, when the church insists celibacy is a higher virtue than marriage, and when the church asserts that wives are subject to their husband. You know, Paul believed women should be subject to their husbands and guess how Paul ended up? Single. No woman wanted to marry him.

Several years ago, I was approached by a young couple asking if I could marry them. They'd lived together for a year, began attending a church in our town where they came under great pressure to get married. When they went to the pastor and told him they wanted to marry, the pastor refused to conduct the wedding because they'd been living together. "You're living in sin," he told them. They asked if I would marry them. I said, "Happily." I see them several times a month and their marriage is blossoming, but guess what, they want nothing to do with the church.

It is long past time the church redefined what it means to live in sin. Living in sin isn't about living together without being married. Living in sin is living together without dignity, without respect, without commitment, without compassion, without love. It is living with someone you promised to honor and cherish, then failing to do so.

As Quakers, we believe the inward commitment is more important than the outward ceremony. That's why we emphasize spiritual baptism over water baptism, and inward communion with God over outward communion with bread and water. It's why we believe that when it comes to relationships, the test of someone's commitment isn't necessarily demonstrated by a religious ceremony. Marriage isn't consecrated when two people stand before a pastor and repeat a vow. Marriage is made sacred when people, in the words of our *Faith and Practice*, "live a blended life, each seeking and promoting the joy, the comfort, the health, and the enrichment of the other."

What does that look like?

A few months after I went to visit the elderly couple in my meeting, the woman was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and given six months to live. The man fed her all her meals, and when she became too weak to care for herself he dressed and cleaned her. Never complained. Never left her side. When she went into the hospital, he stayed night after night. When she died six months later he was holding her right hand and wiping her brow and I was holding her left hand and thanking God I had gotten to know these two wonderful people. Now where they married? Not in the eyes of the church. But were they married in the eyes of God? You better know it.

Relationships aren't made holy by the church. Some people say, "I do," then don't. Don't love, don't cherish, don't honor. Relationships aren't made holy by the church, they are made holy by the doing.

Two Mondays ago, early in the morning, Joan and I were on our way out the door on a trip to celebrate our silver anniversary. We'd been planning the trip a long time and were really excited. The phone rang. It was the people at Ivy Trace, calling to tell us Joan's mom was sick. We drove over there and took her to the hospital where she lived for eight days before passing away. Joan was there around the clock, the whole time, caring for her mother, making her comfortable, until she died.

Someone said, "It's a shame you missed the chance to celebrate your marriage." But if the point of an anniversary trip was to strengthen our marriage, I can't think of anything that could have brought us closer. Watching Joan care for her mother, I saw a side of her I'd never seen. I got to see how she was facing the death of someone she loved. And she was wonderful. By the end of the eight days, I loved her more than I ever have. It almost made me want to get put in the hospital.

Marriages don't happen just because two people have stood in front of a pastor. Marriages happen when people love deeply, care for one another faithfully, when they live that blended life, which divides their sorrow and multiplies their joy.