

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: WHO'S MAKING THE RULES?

By Gerald B. Kieschnick

With all the buildup of late, the news shouldn't have surprised me, but the headline gave me pause all the same: "Massachusetts to begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples." As of Monday, hundreds of pairs of people were flocking to Cambridge and other Bay State locales to obtain a legal blessing on what has been viewed since the dawn of time as abnormal, if not unheard of.

"And now I pronounce you man and man" (or "wife and wife"). Sounds odd, yes, but according to polls, Americans are starting to get used to the idea. As a group, no matter how averse we may be individually to same-sex marriage, no matter how supportive we may be of a Federal Marriage Amendment to protect traditional marriage, we seem to be shrugging our collective shoulders and saying, essentially, "We don't like it, but it seems the rules are changing."

Who exactly is changing the rules? Who is deciding what our nation's moral choices will be? How is it that the vast majority of the world's population throughout history would be aghast over same-sex marriage, and yet that's exactly what Belgium, the Netherlands, parts of Canada and now Massachusetts are doing? How is it that what used to be considered outrageous, sinful, taboo, unthinkable, is now shrugged off as some sort of social progress?

Who or what is behind this change in our moral values? Aren't there any constants, any universal truths telling us how to relate to one another? There were, once upon a time. Once it was a given, for ages upon ages, that marriage could only be the sacred union of one man and one woman. Suddenly--amazingly--that's no longer the case.

Now we have entered the strange new realm where public morality is formed by a relatively small group of people--academic, media and other secular elites; leftward-leaning religious leaders; and a handful of overstepping judges. Is it wrong to kill an unborn child? Most of us might think so, but since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, "we the people" have maintained that a woman has the right to decide that for herself. Is it wrong to end the life of a terminally ill patient whose quality of life just isn't there? Most of us might think so, but many Oregonians do not, and I predict others among us will share that thinking in the future.

Now comes same-sex marriage. Will this new twist on the timeless estate of holy matrimony spell the doom of heterosexual marriage? No, probably not, though it will do deep and lasting damage to the institution of marriage in general. Will it shake the foundations of our republic? No, not noticeably, at least not at first, but those foundations (as you probably have noticed) have been shaking for a while as it is.

The real question posed by the reality of same-sex marriage, and the controversy surrounding it, is this: To what source can we turn for a sure, guiding light of wisdom and unshakeable truth to help us through the tough moral questions we face? Are we left to ourselves and our own devices? Dear Lord, let's hope not!

There is one who claims not only to *reveal* the truth-including some very clear-cut views on what marriage is all about (and thus what it is *not* all about)-but actually to *be* the Truth, as well as the Way and the Life. Who is this? It is Jesus Christ.

The good news is that, at least for now, thanks to a highly popular movie, magazine cover stories and a controversial novel or two, Jesus is in vogue again. We can talk about him in polite society, at least a little. I am just one man among a few hundred million Americans who must grapple with the big social, moral and ethical issues of the day. Who will set my standards? Who will be my moral compass? Who will establish my values? Like you, I have to make a choice. As I survey the moral landscape of 21st century America and see where our collective wisdom is taking us, I believe I'll stick with Jesus.

The Rev. Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick is president of the 2.5 million-member Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, based in St. Louis.