

The ethics of monogamy

by Louie Crew

As a gay Christian soon to begin the 23rd year of marriage with another man, much of what I recognize as God's presence in my marriage does not square with the values of our culture.

Every state, for example, treats as grounds for a divorce the fact that a couple has not lived in the same residence for the past year. Thirty-eight allow less than a year to qualify. Ten states require only three months' separation to qualify (Source: Gary N. Skoloff, Skoloff & Wolfe, Livingston, NJ).

Yet I count it as one of the most important achievements in our marriage that for justice's sake we were able to sustain, with God's help, the stress of living 12 time zones apart for over a year at a time on three separate occasions. Without doing so, my spouse would never have had the opportunity to work at a life-enhancing job in China; nor would I, since our assignments in Asia did not synchronize.

It's important to account for our strange behavior in the few times of great stress which we have faced — times when one of us has not been kind or loving or responsible. Miraculously, each of us when offended has experienced a double portion of God's grace to love the other when he was least loveable.

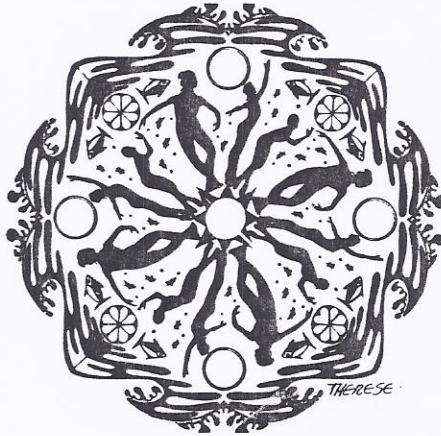
Though our marriage has been blessed almost all the time with much joy and kindness and with abundant material comfort, these do not mark a marriage as Christian. God values more what we have

Louie Crew, founder of Integrity and professor at Rutgers University, edited *A Book of Revelations: Lesbian and Gay Episcopalians Tell Their Own Stories*, Integrity, 1991. Artist **Therese Denham** is a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

given away than what we have consumed.

It's easy to look like good Christians, especially if you're a nice couple anyway. It's much harder to be good disciples. Many who call ourselves Christians live comfortably in mutually caring domiciles with little or no regard for the strangers outside our gates.

"If you love those who love you, what



Therese Denham

credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same" (Luke 6:32-33).

Lesbigays are no less prone to deceive ourselves about the virtue of our marriages than are our straight neighbors. Since fewer of us are parents, we often enjoy a great deal more "disposable income" than most straight couples working the same jobs.

"From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be

required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). I sicken when I see lesbigays, spurned by the church, turn and accept instead the invitation of moguls that we sell our souls for mammon.

Lesbigays need strong preaching to call us into the riches of living in full community with all those in need. Instead, we have 76 bishops lined up to try a bishop for heresy for daring to ordain one of us at all.

"One issue which concerns me is the nature of the relationship the church is asked to approve," wrote a priest to me recently out of the blue. I was disconcerted at suddenly becoming a specimen, but I had to admit that I too scrutinize any two people who bid for my blessing of their union. Integrity/NYC won't even consider sponsoring a service of union until the couple has been coming faithfully to the chapter's weekly eucharists for at least six months, nor until they have been to counseling with one of our priest associates.

"I have always assumed that the intention was life-long as the Prayer Book vows seem to imply," my importuner went on. "I know there is some 'cheating' in hetero-sexual relationships, but I just don't know anything about the gay and lesbian ones." Ah, yes, back at sex again.

I am in a commitment for life. It is a monogamous commitment. I'm distressed, however, that almost every conversation about marriage stresses sexual criteria first. It's as if we really buy into St. Paul's no-

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tion of marriage as essentially Lust Control. I disagree with Paul: We both see but through a dark glass, and each may be wrong. Through it I view sex as integral, but not definitive. Surely at least a dozen issues deserve higher priority if we want to evaluate the qualities of a good Christian marriage. Justice issues, for example. How will the couple spend its money or its time? What kind of equity will exist in deciding? How will the couple divvy up the messy chores? What will the couple do to assure the fullest realization of the talent of each partner and of any children that become their responsibility? How will the couple connect to the full community?

I question the integrity of some of the recent interest in getting lesbigays to marry. Too often what masquerades as concern for lesbigays' welfare, is merely self-interest: "Better they marry their own kind than have one of us risk marrying them!" There is wisdom there, yes, but wisdom devoid of good news, wisdom devoid of simple kindness.

I'd have more trust if I saw a concern for all lesbian persons, not just those who want to unite. Christian communities rightly encourage straight persons to date for years before they marry. Rarely do straights now talking about lesbian unions say a word about lesbian courtship, or lesbian dating. If straight youngsters need a long period of discernment about who they are and whom they would best connect with, should we expect less need for lesbian youngsters? Few couples come to priests for pre-marital counseling who have not already been involved intimately. It's important not to hold lesbigays' courtships to a separate standard.

I'd presume good will if I saw welcome for lesbigays committed to being single.

It is not a question for theology to answer, nor even an issue for Emily Post

or Amy Vanderbilt to arbitrate. We must be born again. We don't have to petition whether the servant is really a servant or maybe a boyfriend when the foreign out-

sider says, "Oh, I'm not worthy that you should'st come under my roof." We have only to speak but the loving word. Only then can we be healed. TKV

Rites for same-sex blessings

Blessings of relationships, same-sex unions, commitment ceremonies, lesbian/gay marriages — call them what you will, they have been around for a long time. Indeed, the late John Boswell said in his book, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, that such ceremonies began in the 8th Century and predate heterosexual marriages inside church buildings.

In the Episcopal Church, the history is varied. In the past, some couples simply used the marriage service from the Prayer Book without benefit of clergy (as did Louie Crew and his partner, Ernest Clay). Probably the most common "blessing" of lesbian and gay couples comes from using *The Book of Occasional Services'* form for a house blessing. In many areas of the country, the vast majority of Episcopalians who have their homes blessed are same-sex couples. *The Book of Occasional Services'* brief anniversary rite is also easily adapted to same-sex couples. (My partner, Scott Hesel, and I had our 10th anniversary celebrated at our parish's main Sunday service.)

Services approved by a diocesan date from 1975 when the Diocese of Rochester, under the leadership of Bishop Robert Spears, authorized Walter Szymanski (now in the Diocese of Pittsburgh) to conduct such ceremonies.

In 1987, both the Dioceses of California and Newark prepared reports supporting such ceremonies. Califor-

nia published a rite.

In 1993, an *ad hoc* group met at the Episcopal Divinity School to again look at this issue. They developed a proposed rite in early 1994 that celebrates life commitments by people of any orientation, but did not release it prior to General Convention that year. That convention approved a resolution (C-042a) directing the Standing Liturgical Commission and the Bishops' Theology Committee to present "a report addressing the theological foundations and pastoral considerations involved in blessing same-sex unions" to the 1997 convention. It went on to provide that the committees not develop a rite for such unions until authorized by a future convention. Some who oppose such rites contend that the ban applies to everyone in the church and severely attacked the EDS *ad hoc* group when it released its previously developed rite after the convention. [Copies of *An Illustration of a Rite for the Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together* can be obtained by sending \$5 to Charles Bennison at EDS, 101 Brattle St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.]

In 1990, Integrity conducted a survey which revealed that some form of service recognizing lesbian or gay couples had been performed by an Episcopal priest in every domestic diocese.

— Kim Byham. *Byham is publisher of The Voice of Integrity*