



# In the Flesh: Marriage and the State

Sunday, 27 May 2012 08:27 | *By Matthew Harwood, [Truthout](#) | Op-Ed*

The wedding was like any other. Sunlight flickered through the stained-glass windows. Family and friends sat pensively in the pews. Some awkwardly bent into the aisle with their iPhones to take pictures of the couple standing side by side on the altar. When the reverend asked those congregated whether they would promise to uphold the two in marriage, they shouted in unison: "We will." The couple kissed, a father sobbed in happiness, the pews erupted in applause. On the altar stood two men now wed in holy matrimony. When the assembled streamed out of the church, they found civilization hadn't gone anywhere.

This perfectly normal, almost boring, yet transcendent expression of love and commitment occurred just four days before [North Carolinians went to the polls to overwhelmingly reaffirm](#) and remind us all that gays and lesbians are still second-class citizens in America, [despite the punctuated equilibrium of President Obama's evolution](#) on one of the most important civil rights questions today: can one individual publicly affirm his love and commitment to another individual without state interference or discrimination?

The political landscape, however, wasn't far from the minds of those assembled that Saturday in Washington DC. During his homily, the openly gay and married rector of the All Souls Memorial Episcopal Church, Rev. John Beddingfield, gave his homily and described the absurdity and divisiveness of love in America today. When he remains within the 12-mile-square confines of the District of Columbia, the reverend told those assembled, he's a happily married man. Yet, when he steps into the Commonwealth of Virginia, his oath won't cross state lines. Nearly six years ago, Virginia determined that only two people of different sexes had the privilege to wed. So, in the future, when my two friends cross the Potomac to eat at my table, the great state of Virginia won't recognize them as two people committed to each other. Instead, they become simply friends with benefits in the most impoverished sense of that flippant arrangement.

Certainly this way of looking at them is decidedly better than it was even 100 years ago. It shouldn't be forgotten that a century ago, the vicious vigilantism of Southern white Christian justice could have ended up with my friend's husband dead three times over. When being black was reason enough to need eyes in the back of your head, it would have been positively suicidal to have the temerity to look at any white person, let alone a white man, lustfully and lovingly. Progress has certainly been made. That much is certain. Justice, however, still remains elusive, which is why President Obama's support for gay marriage is important, however overdue.

Only six states plus the District of Columbia allow their citizens the freedom to marry whomever they choose. But the writing is on the wall, and the narrative of freedom, love and equality will knock down those barriers one state at a time. President Obama's frustratingly drawn-out embrace of gay marriage is evidence of that. "In the future, when marriage equality is as accepted as racial and religious equality is now, the president's statement may be viewed as a political turning point in the struggle for gay rights," said Virginia American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) director Kent Willis on May 10. "Whatever the president believes in his heart, making this announcement at this time is an indication he and his advisers believe that voters across the nation are ready to embrace complete equality for gay men and lesbians."

Indeed, calculating the pros and cons, the administration determined that obeying principle was actually good politics. Some conservatives understand this. As Republican strategist Alex Castellanos said on CNN repeatedly, the GOP will become known as anti-love; a party that tries to police and legislate the most intimate realm of human consciousness, self-satirizing its small government principles in the process. It is, in its purest form, the total repudiation of the Tea Party's rock-hard stance against the nanny state. If libertarian-minded Tea Partiers had the courage of their convictions, they would stand with Cato Institute Chairman Robert A. Levy, who observes that, "The right answer to the same-sex marriage question is to remove government from the marriage business altogether." Indeed, but as long as the state is involved - as it has been in marriage throughout recorded history - those benefits must apply equally to all citizens.

Yet, it won't be long before a new generation of conservatives comes to the realization that gay marriage may be the savior of their most hallowed institution, because that public promise reaffirms what marriage is: two people proclaiming their love in hope that eventually it radiates outward and becomes manifest in others. And if anti-gay American Christians adhered to Jesus' doctrine of love, they would discover there is no greater crime than strangling one of the few human emotions that redeem us as time hurtles us all equally into the abyss.

"I think it sends a message to the rest of the country that marriage is between one man and one woman," Tami Fitzgerald, Vote FOR Marriage NC, told the Associated Press at a celebration in North Carolina when Amendment One passed. "The whole point is simply that you don't rewrite the nature of God's design based on the demands of a group of adults."

Fitzgerald's mindset is what makes what my friends did so important. There will always be religious conservatives who believe they know the mind of God and will never waver in their opposition to marriage equality. But I know what I saw, and that's why gays and lesbians who do have the right to marry openly show what their love looks like to as many people as possible. When others see the love of a gay couple in the flesh, pledged openly without shame, it will be harder and harder to reason abstractly, usually based on archaic interpretations of theology, that gay marriage is sacrilegious or an obscenity or an indicator of the end times.

Love may not conquer all, but it will conquer this.