

It's the Privilege to Bless, Not the Privilege of Place

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Marilyn Robinson, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead*, and a member of the United Church of Christ, weaves a poignant and wise tale about three generations of pastors in rural Kansas and Iowa. Her narrator, John Ames, one of those pastors, shares this memory of childhood as he writes a long letter to his own son:

We were very pious children from pious households in a fairly pious town, and this affected our behavior considerably. Once, we baptized a litter of cats. . . . I myself moistened their brows, repeating the full Trinitarian formula. Their grim old crooked tailed mother found us baptizing away by the creek and began carrying her babies off by the names of their necks, one and then another. We lost track of which was which, but we were fairly sure that some of the creatures had been borne away still in the darkness of paganism, and that worried us a good deal. So finally I asked my father in the most off hand way imaginable what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it. He replied that the sacraments must always be treated and regarded with the greatest respect. That wasn't really an answer to my question. We did respect the sacraments, but we thought the whole world of those cats. I got his meaning, though, and I did no more baptizing until I was ordained. . . . I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is power in that.

It stays in the mind.

To be a pastor is to be given the privilege of blessing. Not that others of you don't bless as well. You do it all the time. But for the minister, the privilege is an act always on behalf of the church, and with the authority of the church. When we bless, we are not just acknowledging sacredness in our own eyes, we are saying that sacredness is being acknowledged by the whole church. It

stays in the mind, this privilege. And there's power in that. So much power that our exercise of the privilege of blessing becomes an awesome responsibility; our decision to bless, or to withhold blessing, is powerful, is not something to be done lightly.

Which brings us to the question of marriage, and the privilege of blessing. In the eyes of the state, marriage is a legal contract or covenant. It is a contract bestowing certain rights and privileges, as well as certain responsibilities. Marriage is a legal reality available to citizens of the commonwealth. A marriage certificate is one of the symbols of citizenship, like a social security card, a drivers' license, a voter card. These documents have power; think of a young person slipping her new social security card in her wallet as she embarks on the search for a job. Think of an older adult being told that he can no longer have a driver's license. Think of African Americans during segregation marching for the right to exercise their franchise. Think today of what it means to be "undocumented" in a society increasingly dependent upon, and hostile to new immigrants. To be without papers is to be "second class," vulnerable, unprotected. It's hard for me to see how, from a strictly legal point of view, we can deny some the right to a marriage certificate, simply because they are a same gender couple. It is about rights - R-I-G-H-T-S - civil rights, and just because we've mingled, and I think confused, this civil right with the religious rite - R-I-T-E - of marriage by having clergy serve as agents of the state, shouldn't be an excuse for denying the full rights of citizenship to all.

But, of course, marriage is more than just a legal right. It's also for the church a covenant in the sight of God marked by the blessing of the church. Listen to what our Book of Worship says about marriage:

The essence of marriage is a covenanted commitment that has its foundation in the faithfulness of God's love. The marriage ceremony is the glad occasion on which two people unite as husband and wife in the mutual exchange of covenant promises. The one presiding acts as an official representative of the church and gives the marriage the church's blessing.

In the announcement of the marriage, the pastor declares that "you are wife and husband with the blessing of Christ's church." Blessing. Acknowledging sacredness, and there's power in that. The blessing doesn't come as the church's judgment - we like you, or we don't like you or, in the language of today's Gospel lesson, "who is worthy to expect privilege of place at the heavenly banquet of God's new realm." It comes as an acknowledgment of the inherent, God-given sacredness in each person as they bear the image of God. And thus to withhold blessing is not to diminish sacredness, but more profoundly a failure to acknowledge its presence. And there's power in that, too, power to hurt and to destroy.

Part of the challenge today is that we belong to a church that sees its mission as the privilege to bless, while living in a world where privilege of place holds sway. We recognize James and John, don't we? And sometimes in ourselves, don't we? "Teacher, grant us the best seats in the house when you come in glory." The fact is that many of us have enjoyed privilege of place at the world's table of honor. We've been at the head of these tables for a long time, many of us, and pulling in new chairs and laying our additional place settings doesn't always come easy. There are lots of reasons to deny a place at the table, or even to set up a card table in the living room for those who aren't quite ready for the adult table. So the church consumes itself in the question of who is to be invited, who is to sit where, and who deserves not even privilege of place, but equality of place. Lord, let me sit, let us sit, at your right and at your left. Heterosexual couples have known for a long time that the table has places for them. Can we share that table with same gender couples? A table of welcome, a table of encouragement, a table of communion and conversation, a table of discipline and discipleship? Will they somehow spoil the party - wedding or otherwise? Must they sit at another table, an almost but not quite participation and sharing? Do you remember what it used to feel like at Thanksgiving to be relegated to "the children's table?" Ought we do that to precious couples today, good enough for holy unions, not quite good enough for marriage?

When the church says that all should be welcomed to the blessing of marriage, and that all should be surrounded by the church's encouragement and discipline for marriage, we are saying that our fundamental responsibility is the privilege of blessing, not guarding our privilege of place, the opportunity to acknowledge sacredness rather than sort out the seating charts. Here at this table all are welcomed for blessing, and here at this table all are challenged to live out the vows of fidelity. At this table of blessing, "spouses come to know one another with mutual care and companionship." Here spouses "share their new life with others as Jesus shared new wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee." Here at this table spouses "commit themselves to a life of loving faithfulness to one another." The language is from our church's liturgy and, yes, today it names spouses as husband and wife. But is there anything inherent in those phrases which preclude same gender couples from pledging that care and companionship, from sharing that life, from committing themselves to a life of loving faithfulness?"

None of this is easy. With the privilege to bless comes challenge - the cost of discipleship. The months since our Synod vote tell us nothing if they don't tell us that. Jesus speaks of it as our entry into his own baptism, a baptism that will be for the disciples and often for us a baptism of fire: controversy, struggle, conflict, suffering, even death. It is to the cross that we are called, not to comfort and congeniality. For Jesus, the privilege to bless means sharing the table, allowing

God to order the seating. It even means getting up from places of long-standing privilege to become servant and slave.

In the 17th century our Puritan forebears struggled over the question of who could be baptized. Were the children of baptized but not evidently converted church members eligible? They worried about offering the sacrament indiscriminantly to the children of elect and non-elect alike, not treating it with sufficient respect. They compromised in what has been known as the “half-way covenant,” a solution that satisfied for a while, but not for long. They learned, I think, that blessing is not to be denied or controlled. It is our vocation, not our possession.

It’s time for the half-way covenant of marriage we offer to gay and lesbian persons to end. Time to stop wondering whether they belong at their own marriage feast. Time to invite them to be able to say with others of us about our beloved, not just “my partner,” but “my husband, my wife, my spouse.” For far too long they have endured touch that is abusive, manipulative, both in the culture and sadly in our churches. Sorting our privilege of place is not what Jesus wants of us, not for James or John, not for you or me. Rather it is to give our lives in the service of a touch that is for the pure intention of blessing, acknowledging sacredness. This will stay in our minds. And there will be power in it!