

Should We Abolish Marriage?
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Reading "Happy 'Unmarried and Single Americans Week'" Sept 22, 2014 *Washington Post*, Rev. Fritts

This week is "Unmarried and Single Americans Week," something that can now be celebrated by more Americans than ever.

There are 105 million unmarried people ages 18 and older in the U.S., according to 2013 data from the U.S. Census Bureau. That accounts for 44 percent of the adult population in the country. (If you include those ages 16 and older, as economist Edward Yardeni did in a report, that number increases to 50.2 percent, which makes sense since American 16- and 17-year-olds usually aren't married).

Single people are more likely to be female — there are 87 single men for every 100 single women in the country — and young — almost seven out of every 10 people aged 18 to 34 is single.

They're also everywhere. A breakdown by state shows that single people make up more than half the population all across the country; basically, everywhere outside Idaho and Utah at least is more than 45 percent single, and in many states, that figure is above 53 percent.

Single people made up 39 percent of the electorate in both the 2010 and 2012 elections. Some 26 percent of them have a bachelor's degree or higher, while 32 percent of them have a high school diploma or the equivalent as their highest level of education.

Anyways, Happy Unmarried and Single American Week!

Sermon

About marriage Mae West once said, "Marriage is a great institution . . . but I ain't ready for an institution yet." However, by not getting married, Mae West missed out on a bonanza of benefits provided by both government and business.

Most of us who are married take the legal advantages of marriage for granted. The Government has packed into marriage many special deals, from immigration and citizenship to military service, tax policy, and property rules. Legal marriage offers several specific economic benefits to marriage over living with someone.

For example, married couples can obtain family health, dental, and other insurance benefits. The exact rules on this vary but generally, if you are not married, it is much more difficult to obtain insurance through a partner's employment. Being able to obtain such insurance reduces the cost of insurance for both members of the household.

In addition, if your partner dies before you and you are married, you are likely to continue receiving some benefit from his retirement and Social Security. If you are unmarried, you do not get any of these benefits.

Marriage laws even help if you decide to get divorced. A married person has the right to receive property settlements and support if there is a divorce. If you are just living together and your partner's name is on the lease, you may suddenly find all of your stuff tossed out in the yard. Your options are limited. If you are relying on your partner to support you and he or she tells you to get out, you have few legal rights.

The belief that married people pay more in taxes because of a "marriage penalty" is only partially true. Dual income, high-earning marrieds sometime suffer the penalty, but for more than half of all spouses, particularly those with children, marriage slashes tax bills. In our society, laws transfer wealth to the married class. Laws impose an array of taxes on singles - no matter how many people they care for or are dependent on them.

A married couple pays much less toward basic living costs. For example, on average, only 9 percent of a couple's gross income goes for rent, compared with 23 percent for a single person. A couple pays less for food and utilities. Auto insurers place married people in a lower risk class, saving them money on car insurance.

One study estimates that unmarried people make an average 25 percent less than married colleagues for the same work. This is because of the marriage-centered structure of health care, retirement, and other benefits. School taxes and growing inequities in pensions between married and singles represent a big bonus for married couples. The unmarried are often subject to discrimination in housing and credit applications. Often gyms, country clubs, and hotel rooms provide discounts for couples but not singles. In some states, laws restrict unmarried people from taking on roommates to help pay the rent.

The many legal and financial rewards that come with being married are a part of the reason gay and lesbian couples have expressed an interest in same-sex marriages. They seek marriage for the same reasons ex-slaves wanted the right to marry after the Civil War. They want access to the basic civil rights. The exclusion of same-sex partners from the right to marry stigmatizes their relationship. The exclusion reinforces the supremacy of heterosexuals over homosexuals in the same way laws banning marriages across the color line reinforced white supremacy.

All my adult life I have watched this debate over marriage laws. By the 1970s, Unitarian Universalist clergy were openly officiating at same-sex marriages. Many such services took place, but the state did not recognize these religious services as legal marriages.

Eleven years ago, things started to change. November 18, 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that same-sex couples have a right to marriage. Five of the seven couples involved in the court decision were Unitarian Universalists. This was the beginning of a trend. Today nineteen states and the District of Columbia legally recognize same-sex marriage.

Florida is not yet one of those states. Six years ago, November 4, 2008, Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and civil unions in this state. Passage required approval by 60 percent of the voters and 62 percent of voters did so. Nevertheless, in the last few months five Florida judges have overturned this ban. The judges have ruled that the same-sex marriage ban violates the Federal Constitution's 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law. The Florida Attorney General has filed appeals. So the debate continues.

One of the most interesting articles I have read on this topic was by the magazine, newspaper and online columnist, Michael Kinsley. In 2003, Kinsley wrote in Slate,

We can add gay marriage to the short list of controversies - abortion, affirmative action, the death penalty - that are so frozen and ritualistic that debates about them are more like performances than intellectual exercises. Or we can think outside the box. . . . The solution is to end marriage. . . . Let churches and other religious institutions continue to offer marriage ceremonies. . . . Let each organization decide for itself what kinds of couples it wants to offer marriage to. Let couples celebrate their union in any way they choose and consider themselves married whenever they want. Let others be free to consider them not married, under rules these others may prefer. . . . If marriage were an entirely private affair, all the disputes over gay marriage would become irrelevant. Gay marriage would not have the official sanction of government, but neither would straight marriage.

In response marriage supporters defended the current system by arguing that a wedding license is a legal contract that gives order to our society. Marriage declares that the state now recognizes two individuals as a unit to which rights and privileges are granted relating to property. This is a key ingredient in providing a stable and financially secure home for children. If one of the two parties should die, his or her survivor is automatically entitled to the deceased's property. Surviving spouses have custodial authority over any children. In these ways, state regulated marriages give structure to our community.

Nevertheless, through a process of individual choice, Americans are gradually moving away from these state approved marriages. Ironically, just as same-sex couples are gaining the right to have a legal marriage, more heterosexuals are choosing not to apply for a wedding license.

Wednesday a story appeared in a newspaper, interviewing some woman named Melissa Coppola.

Melissa is thirty-four and single. She never plans to marry. Or have children. She . . . is in a committed relationship. "But what's the point of spending all that money on a wedding?" she asked. She's doesn't like the idea of women changing their names or the "ownership" qualities associated with marriage. "My boyfriend and I are committed to each other. We just don't feel the need to get married."

Melissa Coppola, who works . . . in New Hampshire, and her boyfriend, Jack, live together, plan their finances and travel together, have talked about spending their lives together, and even planned for retirement together. The only way they would

consider marriage, she said, is if it someday made financial sense, for tax purposes, or in the event that one needed to care for the other and hospitals were sticklers about visitation rights. "I feel like a lot of people are getting married because it's an old tradition," Coppola said, "or because of guilt." (Washington Post, Sept 24, 2014)

Recent Census Bureau data shows that Melissa is an example of a trend. In 1976, 37 percent of Americans were single. Today more than half of the people in the United States are single. In Gainesville, Florida 62 percent of the population is single, making Gainesville the number one singles community in the United States.

We might call this change in the relation between marriage and the state the "disestablishment" of marriage. The term disestablishment comes from religious history. Historians call a national church supported by taxes the "established" religion. Disestablishment did not mean that religious institutions disappeared, when the government stopped collection of taxes to support religion. More often religious groups increased in number when the state did not support one religion. In the same way, I am suggesting that the particular model of marriage that was for so long the government-supported model now should be disestablished.

Of course, congress and the fifty state legislatures are unlikely to vote to disestablish marriage. Nevertheless, the disestablishment of marriage is happening in the United States in a process of unorganized, mass civil disobedience. Consider:

- In 1950, married couples represented 78 percent of households in the United States. Today married couples represent 48 percent of American households.
- Married couples with kids, which made up nearly every household a century ago, now total just 20 percent.
- In 1960, 5 percent of children were born to single moms. Today 40 percent of children are born to single moms.

The situation today is similar to the way things were in 18th century America. Three hundred years ago, most people lived on farms. Getting access to an official who could legally perform a marriage was difficult. Therefore, before 1750, most people did not have a marriage ceremony with a minister or a justice of the peace, and there was no wedding. Couples lived together and declared to family and friends that they were married. The church, the state and friends and family accepted that they were validly married. We know from genealogical records that in colonial America more than 50 percent of the time the official marriage date was less than nine months before the birth of the first child. Pregnancy or childbirth was the signal for a couple to consider themselves married. In the seventeen hundreds, a minister in Maryland said, "if no marriage should be deemed valid that had not been registered in the parish book it would, I am persuaded, bastardize nine-tenths of the people in the County."

Before the American Civil War, each local community policed their own rules about marriage, allowing for some diversity in human relationships. However, one hundred and fifty years ago

the Civil War changed marriage in America. The war killed more Americans than any other war the nation has ever entered, an average of 182 deaths for every 10,000 people. World War II, in comparison caused thirty deaths per 10,000 people in the United States. On both sides of the War Between the States, husbands and fathers were dead. A generation of women became widows. During the war, Congress had authorized soldiers' pensions. These pensions for soldiers' widows became a major federal expenditure, taking 40 percent of the federal government's budget by 1893. Because many widows had no marriage license, officials gave credit to informal marriages. However, Americans realized that the government might not be so generous in the future. To protect the possibility of future military pension income for widows, after the civil war most couples obtained a marriage license from the local county Court House. When I hear people say they believe in "traditional" marriage I want to point out that the so-called "Traditional" marriage is only 150 years old.

Today more and more couples are reverting to the way our ancestors handled coupling in America before the Civil War. They are moving toward relationships without a license. They are foregoing the legal benefits of a marriage license, because they choose not to have the government involved in their private relationship.

Still I understand and support the desire to make same-sex marriage legal. Gay and lesbian couples should have the right to the legal benefits of marriage, if they wish to choose that route.

- I believe that marriage is a basic right that should not discriminate because of gender, even in Florida.
- I believe that the American values of liberty and the pursuit of happiness should apply to couples of the same sex, even in Florida.
- I see no threat to other families in allowing two adults of the same sex to make a legal commitment to each other, even in Florida.

Monday the United States Supreme Court will return from its summer recess. It has been a long time since a Unitarian was Chief Justice. Tomorrow in their private Supreme Court conference room, six practicing Roman Catholics and three practicing Jews will meet. They will discuss whether to consider appeals originating from same-sex couples in five states: Utah, Oklahoma, Virginia, Wisconsin and Indiana. The court hurried to schedule these appeals from the five states for its closed-door conference, even before the lawyers had filed all the legal briefs. This suggests that the justices are ready to add the issue to their docket. It takes only four justices to put such petitions on the docket, but five votes to make a decision. If they accept these petitions for review, they will likely hold oral arguments early next year, with a decision expected by late in June 2015. It is an interesting time to be alive in the United States.

Meanwhile, while we wait for the courts to rule about the definition of government-approved marriages, let us give thanks for the fact that we live in a time and in a place where we are free to join in relationships with whomever we wish, as long as we do not abuse each other.

Of course, whatever the legal status of our relationship, coupling is never easy. Consider the

story of a woman and a man who interrupted their honeymoon to go to the dentist. "I want a tooth pulled, and I don't want any Novocain, no pain killers, because I'm in a big hurry to get back to our honeymoon," the woman said. "Just extract the tooth as quickly as possible, and we'll be on our way." The dentist was quite impressed. "You're a courageous woman," he said. "Which tooth is it?" The woman turned to her husband and said, "Show him your tooth, dear."