

Tears of joy, tears of sorrow, and little empathetic listening

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(RNS) In the wake of Friday's landmark 5-4 Supreme Court decision finding a constitutional right to same-sex marriage, two divergent streams of American cultural and religious life are as far apart as ever.

Claiming a major victory in a hard-fought civil rights battle, proponents of same-sex marriage are dancing in the streets. In some quarters, church bells are ringing in celebration.

At the same time, millions of traditionalist religious believers see the death of their cultural influence and political power. For them, today definitively begins a completely new way of understanding the relationship between orthodox Christianity and American life.

Today, tears of joy and tears of sorrow flow down the public face of American Christianity.

And while there seems to be no middle ground in this great debate, my deep love and abiding respect for faithful Christian clergy and lay people on both sides of this profound divide leads me to feelings of sympathy for both camps.

I was a young theology student in a liberal Boston seminary when same-sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts in 2003. I stood outside the Cambridge City Hall and erupted with joy as couples emerged with their marriage licenses.

I supported these strangers because I believed faithfulness to the gospel demanded it. I paid a price in terms of damaged relationships and lost friendships but, of course, it was nothing compared with the scorn and violence gay people had endured for so long.

My ambivalence about this historic day, then, is surprising. As pastors and presidents “evolved” on same-sex marriage, I evolved in the other direction, at least a little. Even when I did not fully share it, I came to sympathize with conservatives’ skepticism about redefining a bedrock social institution.

This is not to say I think the right has argued in good faith. Far from it. Traditionalists are worried about the decline of marriage culture: delayed marriage, astonishing rates of nonmarital childbearing, the collapse of marriage among the working class, etc.

But they were wrong to blame gays and lesbians for these social changes, some of which were exacerbated by (if not caused by) politically conservative economic policies.

Still, at least conservatives advanced actual arguments in their defense of marriage. They warned about further severing marriage from procreation. They asked whether marriage exists primarily to serve the needs of children and society or the emotional desires of adults. They asked about the grounds for denying legal recognitions to other kinds of consensual adult romantic relationships.

The left hoisted the banner of civil rights and carried it to victory. But LGBT advocates relied as much on emotional appeals as on concrete answers to legal and philosophical questions about the nature and purpose of marriage. Traditionalists claimed there was a secular argument against expanding the definition of marriage, but they found few people to advance it who were not conservative religious believers.

My friends who resisted this sweeping change raised sincere objections in good faith. I regret that they were painted as hate-filled bigots no better than the Ku Klux Klan.

Yet loved ones who are gay have taken great comfort and joy in having their relationships legally recognized. Without exception, they have overcome considerable adversity and hostility. They are devoted parents and generous friends.

Even with this historic decision, our legal, religious, and social institutions will experience more debates and changes.

Today's winners will need to decide how badly to punish the losers. Can victorious LGBT advocates continue the fight for civil rights while also affirming the religious liberty of their opponents? Will traditionalists be permitted to run their religious institutions in accordance with their belief that by nature marriage can only exist between a man and a woman?

Today, as ever, the middle is an unpopular place to be. But I suspect I am not the only one who does not believe that my gay friends are vile sinners or that my traditional religious friends are retrograde bigots.

I see wisdom in St. Paul's exhortation: "Rejoice with them that do rejoice and weep with them that weep" (Romans 12:15).

LGBT advocates believe the debate over marriage is now over. Traditionalists say this is the *Roe v. Wade* of marriage, and that the debate has only just begun. Whatever comes next, we need people who can empathetically hear and consider the arguments of citizens of good faith and goodwill on both sides.