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# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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## WITNESS FOR JUSTICE #0158

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### IN DEFENSE OF...

By Bernice Powell Jackson

All the hoopla about marriage these days has helped me to think about marriage and what it means to me. It's also made me think much more about what marriage means to others as well.

For instance, I've been thinking that probably the most dangerous threat to marriage these days is our society's lack of commitment to it. Half of those who get married will get divorced and I don't believe most of that can be attributed to gay people. Rather, it is due to lack of commitment by many of the men and women getting married. It is due to differing understandings about what marriage is and what it is not and about how it is lived out day by day. It is due to high rates of adultery. It is due to our society's failure to deal with domestic violence and with the roles of women and men in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is due to our society's lack of preparation of young people (and not-so-young people) for marriage, with little counseling about money and children and blended families and work and sex and faithfulness and ....

On the other hand, another threat to marriage is the false signal now being sent that marriage is *the* solution to every poor woman's dilemma of how to provide for her family. Thus, we hear conservatives in the administration and in society promoting legislation and funds to encourage poor women to get married. These funds might be better spent on training these women (and their men) for real jobs and providing child care funds and health care benefits or dollars to make sure they have transportation to jobs which no longer are found in

downtowns but now are often in suburbs without access to public transportation.

Another threat to marriage might be the rising number of American heterosexuals choosing to live together rather than to get married. This has increased several fold over the past two decades and statistics show us that while it is sometimes said that such living arrangements will help prepare the couple for marriage, in reality they do not.

Indeed, as I have watched a number of television reality shows matching men and women for television courtships and marriage, I have been struck at how much these popular shows tell us about our society's understanding of the sanctity of marriage. There is the show where a young woman has an really obnoxious fiancé, trying to trick her family into accepting him so that she can win a million dollars. What does that really tell us about marriage and family in our society? Then there are the shows where young men and young women put the opposite sex through very public hurdles and we watch them caress and more, again to win that million dollars. What do these very public courtships tell us about the sanctity of marriage in our society? There are also the shows in which the producers forgot to tell the prospective brides or grooms that the one they were vying for really wasn't a multi-millionaire or the show in which the potential grooms wore masks. What do they tell us about the role of truth in marriage?

All of this is to say that I believe that we need a conversation not about reality show called marriage, but about the every day realities of it. Most of all, I believe we need a conversation about what sanctity in a relationship really is and what it is not.

I believe that sanctity in a relationship is about respect, communication, truth and faithfulness. I think sanctity in marriage is about inviting God to be the third party in the commitment between two humans. I think sanctity in marriage is about including family and friends in the love and mutual support. But I don't think it much matters the sex of the two people involved.

I know that there are many who believe that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. Even some who support civil unions between gay and lesbian couples believe that "marriage" has a traditional meaning reserved for a union of a man and a woman. I know that there

are some who point to scriptures as a basis for their beliefs. But I also know that my Irish great grandmother Jennie was not allowed to marry my black great grandfather Dorsey because there were some who quoted scriptures and others who cited tradition.

I also know that there long has been confusion between the civil and the religious when it comes to the legal status of marriage. Many of those married today never go inside a church, a synagogue, or a mosque in order to do so. As one columnist in the Cleveland Plain Dealer said recently, "It's time to recognize that religion isn't a part of every marriage." Indeed, no clergyman is required to perform a marriage, even if the state gives a couple a wedding license.

I have watched as thousands of gay men and lesbian women have rushed to get married when it seemed that the opportunity was finally open for them. Some of them have been couples for decades. Some of them have wanted a clergyman to perform their ceremony, in an acknowledgment that God is a part of their lives. Others have turned to mayors, judges or the justices of the peace. Churches will have to grapple with whether they believe they can perform marriages or civil unions between gay men and lesbian women. It is appropriate that they do so, in their own time and their own way. But the state has a different responsibility – to provide equal rights for all Americans. Isn't it time we do so?