

IN MY OPINION**Caroline Porter**

I wish "gay" still meant "happy"

I was in my early twenties before I knew the meaning of homosexuality. Going to high school and college in the 1950's, I had never heard of such a thing as people of the same sex being physically and romantically attracted to each other. Actually, it was in the cafeteria of Illinois Bell Telephone Company in Chicago where I sat with a group of other women from our office at lunchtime and heard my first clue. Someone was referring to two women as Lesbians. This small-town kid said, "They are thespians?"

After the laughter died down I had to ask them. "What is a lesbian?" That brought more gales of laughter and a hushed and giggly conversation about the meaning of the word. Over the years we have learned that homosexuality, instead of being a social choice that can be changed, is a physical condition probably established at birth.

The issue of homosexuality is really coming to the forefront with the movement of homosexuals wanting to have the legal benefits and protections of marriage. As much as the Bush administration would like to make an issue of this, the fact is that 38 states, including Illinois, have already passed laws stating that marriage is defined as a union between a man and a woman. I have no problem with that stance. But it certainly makes clear that we don't need a Constitutional amendment to address the issue.

And it is really up to individual religions and churches how they want to handle homosexual couples that want to have the religious rites of marriage performed. Many ministers now won't marry just anyone who happens to have a license. The minister wants to know the couple considers the marriage a moral and religious union and in most cases, is a member of that particular church.

But, what do we do about this situation? I feel no prejudice towards homosexuals. I don't know and really don't care about people's sexual preferences. The sexual acts and relationships of heterosexuals can be as violent and perverse as any we might imagine, so we really can't hold ourselves up as the epitome of gentle, kind, perfect sexual partners. And we heterosexuals certainly can't brag about a record of good marriages.

Arthur Farnsley, a columnist who writes about religious and social concerns for the Peoria Journal Star, says that we shouldn't be worrying about "gay" marriages, but worry about the institution of marriage, period. He says that in the 1960 census, 78 percent of U.S. households were composed of married couples. In 2000 only 52 percent were. He says "By 2010 we can reasonably assume that unmarried households will have displaced married ones as the domestic unit of choice."

Along with many other small-town Americans, I have been interested and surprised at the number of homosexual couples who have come forward to be married in San Francisco and other American cities. Many have been in committed relationships for years and have children. Mr. Farnsley suggests that we ought to envision marriage in two parts: First, as a civil union and second, as a moral and religious union. "Every couple composed of consenting adults who wishes to be joined could form a contractual bond," says he, "in which both parties assume fixed legal commitment to, and responsibility for, the other."

The State would recognize this legal contract as 'marriage' or just give it another name. Then if the couple wants to be married in a community of faith, they can do it.

Farnsley says that Americans are still operating on the premise that "there is some unanimity about a marriage's moral or religious meaning, refusing to acknowledge that any agreed-upon, enforceable linkage between the legal contract and sacred obligations broke down long ago."

He thinks President Bush and the rest of us should concentrate on providing children with stable homes and encourage adults to make lifelong commitments to one another and share responsibility for their children. Basically, the community of faith has somehow failed its followers. Instead of labeling homosexuality a "sin," maybe we should examine our own lives and the sins within.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg who can be reached at cporter@galesburg.net. Other columns are online at www.thezephyr.com.