

## *CRIBB<S>NOTE – October 25, 2009*

Decriminalizing human beings and keeping families together really cut-to-the-chase when it comes to prioritizing our lives and ministry. Both focus on the primary issues affecting large segments of American society. Each has been overlooked for so long, many of us now believe it is normal and, perhaps, natural to put labels on people and separate them from the most primal relationships in their lives.

Since publicly announcing my decision not to perform any weddings in the State of California until Proposition 8, the initiative to ban same-sex marriage, is overturned, people have asked why I took that stand.

The answer is very simple. Proposition 8 effectively criminalizes same-sex couples who seek to enjoy the same constitutionally-guaranteed rights of married heterosexual couples. It discriminates against people who love each other and commit their lives in matrimony. Proposition 8 is a throwback to earlier times when it was illegal for interracial couples to marry. At least one justice of the peace in Louisiana still doesn't get it, and recently declared his refusal to marry a Black man and White woman regardless of the law or their rights.

The same principle applies to people who have been labeled "illegal" because they cross arbitrary borders without "proper papers" issued by the government. They are criminalized and denied the same protections and provisions available to all other persons who have been determined acceptable to live in this country. There is a disregard for their status as human beings or the conditions under which many immigrants had to leave behind their families and countries.

It is important for us to take the issue of decriminalizing human beings very seriously. The broad stroke of labeling people as 'undesirable' or 'unwanted' has touched many innocent lives, including students who attend schools that look like latent-designed prisons equipped with wired fences and security guards. Infants are born in areas designated as 'crime infested' and 'dangerous'. Babies and children are identified as potential criminals and treated in a manner that makes them feel less than fully human. There are many ways in which we criminalize the poor, unemployed, homeless, and unfamiliar faces in our midst. We are often conditioned to be afraid of people we do not know. Behavior that is judged "criminal" and worthy of imprisonment in one neighborhood is deemed a prank that requires mild reprimand in another part of town.

Our nation is harmed by the removal of potential contributors to society who have been criminalized, including urban dwellers, immigrants and migrant workers who are "undocumented." At the same time, there is plenty of talk about 'family values' and 'defending marriage'. But those institutions are severely threatened when parents are torn away from their children and primary care-givers are deported, leaving dependents without any means to survive. Such practices do not make our country more secure. In fact, we are weakened by compromising our core values and forcing people into desperation.

The family is our strongest social unit. Its configuration has changed and is more inclusive as we have become more enlightened. However, its function and ability to develop confident, productive people remains. A healthy family that forms a loving environment where children are nurtured and partners are respected provides an antidote to the de-humanizing behavior that often results in criminalizing others.

Decriminalizing human beings and unifying families require our diligence and vigilance at a time when certain people are de-valued and their home life is destroyed. We can begin by listening to the stories of persons who have journeyed in search of opportunities to support their families in other countries. We can examine schools where children are treated more like criminals rather than students. And, we can ask, "What else can we do to improve the quality of life for everyone who lives in the United States?"

It is a big job, but taking the first, faithful step together beyond our comfort zone is a good start.