

Gay Marriage

Sermon by Rev. Kent C. Matthies

For Valentine's Day we will reflect on love and the institution of marriage. We were the first American denomination to endorse same sex unions at the national level. Many of us believe it is time for us to bring all America along to this wise and spiritual decision. (February 15, 2004)

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Rites of passage are some of the most important experiences in religious community. When we celebrate the birth of a child, the marriage of a couple or the life of someone who has died, we are marking the holy. I am honored when a couple invites me into their lives to prepare and officiate their wedding. I am often quite pleased when a couple chooses the traditional reading: I Corinthians 13:4-8. This scripture is a portion of the letter Paul wrote to the people of Corinth with recommendations on how to live a faithful life. Many agree Paul wrote about the core of religious faith. Many agree that in this section Paul wrote about the core of a healthy marriage.

I thought this scriptural reading on love would be a good way to say happy Valentine's Day to everyone. I hope many of you have all kinds of Valentines in your weekend—romantic and otherwise. Our church children have celebrated Valentine's day by sending cards to some of our older folks who don't get around well. I love it when Valentine's day is celebrated by people in all directions—between lovers, friends and neighbors. I know lots of gay people who are, of course, celebrating Valentine's Day. Like all kinds of people, gay folks are going to the theatre, spending time with family and friends over a wonderful meal at the local restaurant, going skiing, making home improvements, looking for a job, catching up with family and old friends on the phone, planning vacations and of course doing email. What a great weekend to live out the message of love found in the scriptural reading from St. Paul. This would be a great weekend to express your love by making a proposal of marriage to your sweetheart. That is unless you are gay, because according to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania you can't get married.

In the last years and especially the last months, issues involving gay marriage and same sex unions are highly visible in the press and national dialogue. People are grappling with many questions. What is the original

meaning of marriage? Are people trying to completely redefine what marriage is? What will these issues mean to individuals, couples, families, and society? People with very good hearts, souls and brains oppose gay marriage. In the United States marriage is a legal institution, which resides in the jurisdiction of each state. One example of state's jurisdiction for marriage involves authorization to perform weddings. As a minister I must be authorized within each state to perform a wedding. If I were invited to Kentucky to perform a wedding I would call a UU clergy colleague in that state to ask for help in gaining authorization from that state. The same state level decision-making authority pertains to gay unions and marriages. Over the last fifteen years these issues have been debated state-by-state. In many states, including Hawaii, Vermont, Massachusetts and Idaho the questions have volleyed back and forth between the legislative and judicial branches.

Demonstrating a depth of commitment many people are talking about taking this out of the states' jurisdiction. The President—who on many other issues has strongly opposes legal activism and federal imposition on states rights—is talking about making a change to the US constitution. This type of change would mandate that states could not institute gay marriage. We must be clear, however, that this is not a partisan issue. People in both major parties hold a wide variety of opinions on issues of same sex union and marriage. The presumed Democratic Nominee for President, John Kerry, opposes gay marriage, but supports same sex unions.

Opinion polls suggest that our nation is quite divided over these issues. In October of 2003 the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a poll of over 1,500 Americans. A 55% majority believes it is a sin to engage in homosexual behavior, and that view is much more prevalent among those who have a high level of religious commitment (76%). About half of all Americans have an unfavorable opinion of gay men (50%) and lesbians (48%), but highly religious people are much more likely to hold negative views of gays.

Religiosity is clearly a factor in the recent rise in opposition to gay marriage. Overall, nearly six-in-ten Americans (59%) oppose gay marriage, up from 53% in July. But of those with a high level of religious commitment 80% now oppose gay marriage. The public is somewhat more supportive of legal agreements for gays that provide some of the same benefits of marriage; still, a 51% majority also opposes this step. Many who oppose gay marriage declare they want to preserve the sanctity of marriage.¹ What

¹ Pew Charitable Trust Website.

do people mean when they say the sanctity of marriage? Many who oppose gay marriage say sanctity is found only in the combination of one man and one woman. I disagree. I think the sanctity of marriage is found in the scriptural readings used by people of many faith traditions: that sanctity is love and commitment. I know with great certainty that gay couples can love as well as straight couples.

In the early 1980s the Unitarian Universalist Association became a leader at the national religious level by passing a resolution stating that UU minister's could officiate same sex union ceremonies. At that time this congregation went through a process of discernment with Rev. Bill Gardner about performing same sex unions here in our sanctuary. The congregation affirmed gay marriage and for approximately 20 years we have done so. During this time many other religions in America have been struggling to determine their own positions. At the national level, the large majority of American religious bodies do not recognize gay unions.

Battles over these issues are also taking place from state to state. The state of Massachusetts may very well end up at the same place the state of Vermont ended: with same sex unions. By accomplishing same sex unions I believe these states have achieved more justice than the other 48. Some state rights and work benefits are given to gays by same sex unions. But I also believe same sex unions are not enough. When gay couples cannot enter into the institution of marriage, our legal and social systems interrupt and inhibit them from having loving, caring, committed, life long partnerships.

Marriage and Civil Union have intentionally been constructed as different institutions and they are not equal. Consider a few of the many legal issues at hand. Within the work world, many employers offer the partners of married people the option to come into a health insurance program for the employees. In a gay partnership this option is not always available. In a marriage between a man and a woman, upon the death of one spouse the other receives Social Security payments, which are due to the dead person. This money is not available to a gay partner upon death. The same inconsistency is found with passing along financial benefits such as pension, an estate or inheritance. In federal tax law spouses in marriage may give large portions of estates. These gifts are exempt from taxation. The first \$675,000 of the net estate and gift value is exempt from tax (this exemption rises to \$1,000,000 by 2006). Gay partners—even in civil unions—pay taxes on every penny of inheritance from their partner.

In most states adoption and legal parenthood are easier for married couples than for non-married couples. Consider this story found in the book *Civil Wars: A Battle for Gay Marriage*, by David Moats. I am telling this story using the adults last names, because both women are named Susan, which can complicate storytelling. Two Susan's with the last names of Bellemare and Hamilton were in a committed relationship of ten years in Vermont. Of course they did not have the option to marry. But they did raise a child, Collin. One fateful day in May of 1989, Hamilton was driving with the little boy Collin in the backseat. Their car was hit head-on by a driver coming into their lane. Hamilton died soon after. Thank heavens the boy survived. Quickly after the tragedy the parents of the woman who died filed a court order to take possession of their grandson. Because the parents were not married, Bellemare, the survivor, lost the initial court dispute. Young Collin was taken into the custody of his grandparents and kept away from his living mother. The grandparents used the legal argument that if Collin was raised by Bellemare he would suffer "irreparable harm." In years past this probably would have been sufficient argument to take this child away from his mother. It wasn't enough for Judge Cain who gave custody to Bellemare. This story is one tiny view into the struggles gay parents have been through over the last decades to enlarge definitions of parenthood.²

Coretta Scott King speaks out against "separate but equal" for gays just as she did for people of all races in the Civil Rights movement. In 1998 Mrs. King said "I still hear people say that I should not be talking about the rights of lesbian and gay people and I should stick to the issue of racial justice. . . . But I hasten to remind them that Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream to make room at the table of brother- and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people." (Reuters, March 31, 1998.)

The Pew poll from October indicates that ministers in opposition to gay marriage are speaking out much more prominently than those whose theology supports gay marriage. Many of those speaking out against, base arguments upon theological beliefs in the inherent sinfulness of homosexuality. Fortunately Unitarian Universalists, ministers and laity, are speaking out for our theological believe in the inherent dignity and worth of all people—no matter who they. We are working to make room at the table of brother and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people. The core of our faith is

² *Civil Wars*, David Moat, p. 85

love. The words of Carter Heyward express our faith that, “Love is active, effective, a matter of making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one’s friends and enemies. Love creates righteousness, or justice, here on earth. To make love is to make justice. As advocates and activists for justice know, loving involves struggle, resistance, risk.”

It is not always easy to talk about issues of sexual orientation. One reason is that a piece of this conversation involves sex itself. But the stigmas and social awkwardness go much farther than sex. I believe that tensions around gay issues often fall into “Don’t ask. Don’t tell.” “Don’t ask. Don’t tell” is a failed policy implemented during the Clinton administration, which states that no person in the military can ask another person in the military if they are gay. At the same time, no person can be openly gay and serve in the military, so people in the military can’t tell anyone if they are gay. This policy lacks common sense, I think it is unconstitutional and it has led to more problems and violence against gays than it has stopped. But I think “Don’t ask. Don’t tell” is more than a failed military policy. In many settings, “Don’t ask. Don’t tell” is an unspoken social norm. Explicitly and implicitly, society tells gay people “I don’t care what you do in your private life, but I am not going to ask you about it and I don’t want you to tell me about it.”

Consider the story of the lesbian couple, Nina Beck and Stacy Jolles who were having a baby. When she was in labor, Nina was being rolled on a gurney to the delivery room. Working quickly, one of the nurses turned to Stacy and said, “Who are you?” Stacy said, “I am her partner” and then showed the nurse legal papers they had signed in advance, giving Stacy permission to attend the birth. But that question hurt Stacy to the core of her soul and she has never forgotten. If she had been a man, the nurse might have assumed her to be the husband and spoken to her in an entirely different manner.³ Stacy felt the assumption was made that she couldn’t be or talk openly about being the other parent.

The fact that we commit to love as the spirit of our church does not mean it is easy. There is no guarantee that this religion will make us comfortable all the time. At times we become too comfortable and in order to grow spiritually—as individuals and as a society—we must go through some discomfort. If you are sitting in this house of worship today and can honestly say that your extended family has never experienced any stress or pain around dealing with the existence of a gay family member, I believe

³ *Civil Wars*, David Moat, p. 95

that you are in the minority. In all of our human encounters we have a great window of opportunity to talk and listen to one another.

I believe that some day our society will achieve Gay Marriage, or some legal institution, which will give gay couples all of the same legal benefits which currently are allowed to married couples. I believe that in the future, history books will be written on this topic and UU congregations and people of faith will be sprinkled through the pages working on behalf of love. I believe that in the future, one piece of this history we are writing, of which we will be most proud is that we knew we didn't all agree. But in our journey towards wholeness we talked and listened to each other. No matter what we believe on this issue we will have treated each other with a patient and kind love. We will not have been rude or quick-tempered. In the future we will be proud that we rejoiced in the truth that love never fails.

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