

SABBATH WEEKEND TO VOICE PUBLIC SUPPORT
FOR MARRIAGE FOR SAME-SEX COUPLES

September 14 – 16, 2012

With activities continuing until November 6, 2012

"This packet is meant to be a resource for Clergy and Faith Leaders as you *seek* to provide leadership within your congregation, community and denomination to address questions about supporting ...Question One on election day.

The goal is simple: to *encourage persons of faith who may be supportive or conflicted to endorse* Question One by providing a faith-based context to their questions and concerns.

RCAD urges faith leaders to take action by:

- **Participating in the Sabbath Weekend, September 14 – 16**
- by delivering a sermon, hosting a forum, writing a letter to your local newspaper, or engaging other clergy in your community to address Question One;
- **Having at least one Courageous Conversation about why you support Same-sex Marriage with someone in your faith community every day;**
“This is where I stand, tell me where you are on this issue”
- **Delivering a sermon speaking to your own faith journey**
OR RCAD will provide a moderator (clergy or laity) who will be the catalyst for discussion, allowing you to take a more neutral role (if needed);
- **SHARING** your sermon with RCAD supporters by sending it to us.
- * **Making sure people know where they can sign up to help**
with the campaign between now and November 6th.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Sample sermons
 - Interfaith
 - Episcopal
 - United Methodist
 - Lutheran (ELCA)
 - Presbyterian
 - United Church of Christ
 - Judaism
 - Unitarian Universalist
- 2-A. Sample Letters to the Editor and Opinion Editorials (Op-Eds)
- 2-B. A PDF file of an Open Letter to Religious Leaders
3. Other resources available from RCAD
 - * How to talk to conflicted people of faith
 - * Facts about the difference between Marriage & Civil Unions
 - Other resources available: info@rcadmaine.org
4. Information about how to get involved in the state-wide campaign

INTERFAITH

A Salute to the United Church of Christ by Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong
July, 2012

Sometimes, as one goes about the normal duties of one's professional life, a pattern of activity slowly becomes visible until one wonders why this had not been seen before. When that happens, it is good to stop, to notice, to put the pieces together, to seek to understand and then to formulate the new insight so that it can become common knowledge.

This was my experience in the first part of this year when I was invited to a number of churches in what might be called the heartland of America. In every incidence, the church to which I was asked to deliver lectures stood out in its community like a beacon of light. It was always the church in that community that engaged the issues of the day. It was the congregation in that community that encouraged people to think and to study. It was a church more interested in genuine education than it was in ecclesiastical propaganda. It was a congregation willing to be controversial, willing to stand up for truth in the public marketplace. It was a church that did not require that the brains of its people be checked at the door prior to worship. It was a congregation whose members cared about their world, their community, themselves and their pastor. These churches also projected vitality and they were all growing. The revelation that ultimately emerged, however, was that each one of these congregations was a part the United Church of Christ-Congregational denomination. This fact was so consistent that I concluded it could not be just a coincidence and that something about the United Church of Christ must be at least in part responsible and so my appreciation for this denomination soared.

Perhaps, I thought, this church can be the one Christian denomination that will inspire, bring about and participate in the necessary reformation required to break the Christian faith out of its dying patterns, its no longer believable theological understandings and its medieval worship practices. Maybe this can be the church that will break the traditional Christian paradigm based on human depravity and transform it to a paradigm based on human wholeness. Until these aspects of Christianity are faced, engaged and changed, there is, I believe, little realistic hope for a Christian future.

Let me briefly tell you, my readers, the story of these four individual UCC congregations:

The first one was the Plymouth United Church of Christ in Wichita, Kansas. Under the enlightened and competent leadership of its senior pastor, Donald Olsen, and his able staff, Plymouth Church has gathered to itself a group of members who are individually and corporately stepping beyond traditional religious formulas to build a church for tomorrow. Gifted young adults, well-educated and in positions of local and national authority, are finding the integrity of a new religious dimension for themselves by their participation in this church's life. No one is fighting yesterday's wars against Darwin, the equality of women or the oppression of gay and lesbian people. The Bible is not seen as a cudgel to be used in debate to shore up the conclusions of a long dead past. They appear to enjoy their life together and, during the time I was there to deliver these lectures, they also brought in a spectacular a Capella male singing group named Cantu for the joy and entertainment of those attending the lecture series. Cantu was magnificent and the combination of lectures and entertainment was a memorable experience for me and for that congregation.

The second one was the First Congregational-United Church of Christ in Greeley, Colorado. This small Colorado city, founded by Horace Greeley in the 19th century, is the home of a community college that has grown into being the University of Northern Colorado and is now the third or fourth largest university in the state of Colorado. In a state where Colorado Springs has become the national headquarters for many right wing fundamentalist groups such as James Dobson's "Focus on the Family," this church in Greeley has accepted the vocation of speaking to this university with an understanding of the Christian faith that is well informed and not dedicated to the perpetuation of biblical ignorance. Its senior pastor, Nathan Miller, is respected as a leader in the entire community and one of this church's most active members is the recently retired president of the University of Northern Colorado.

The third church was in Norman, Oklahoma, the location of the University of Oklahoma, where former Democratic Governor and Senator, David Boren, is now the highly-regarded president. A small group of people led by an urologist formed a new Congregational Church to fill a vacuum in Norman, where fundamentalists and evangelical Protestants are the overwhelming majority. They were assisted in this birth by the UCC pastor at the Mayflower Church in Oklahoma City, Robin Meyers, who is one of America's brilliant new religious leaders. They contracted with a retired UCC minister on a part time basis to lead this new congregation, which has no more than twenty-five members. Undaunted by their newness and their smallness, they organized a public lecture on progressive Christianity to be held in the University of Oklahoma's Museum of Natural History. This was their way of announcing their presence in the city. I was invited to deliver that lecture and also to speak to the members of this congregation at their regular meeting place on Saturday morning. The public lecture attracted over 400 people. It was also the first time I have ever spoken with a mastodon on display immediately behind me! In their own worship space on Saturday, which seated less than seventy people, the two lecture seminar was sold out and every available chair was filled. This new congregation is dedicated to finding ways to serve the larger community and even the world. One program, organized by the urologist and including his two sons, both of whom are planning careers in medicine, has them volunteering for medical missionary duty in some of the deprived parts of the world. Vitality and the hope of good things to come mark this congregation.

Finally, there was the First Congregational-UCC Church of Hendersonville, North Carolina, served so ably by its senior pastor, Richard Weidler. Hendersonville is a small town in the mountains of Western North Carolina, about 30 minutes south of Asheville. Calls to repent, invitations to be saved and warnings to prepare to meet your God are painted on signs on almost every nearby highway. Three crosses adorn the countryside in more than one field. A visit on the radio dial will reveal a steady diet of evangelical preaching, punctuated only by the ranting of Rush Limbaugh. Yet because of Hendersonville's wonderful summer climate, it has attracted many retirees to that area who are left looking mostly in vain for a church if they do not want fundamentalism. Into that vacuum, this church has moved led by its former, now retired, pastor, David Kelly. About a decade ago a layman, named Walter Ashley, taught an adult Bible class in that church and it had been an erudite and transformative experience for many. A "Classics Scholar" with a degree from Oxford University in the UK, he had opened that congregation to a whole new way of being a Christian. They became the one church in town that was a haven for thinking Christians. When Walter died, his widow Jo Ann, an attorney well into her eighties, endowed a lectureship in memory of her husband. Twice each year, a well-known Christian scholar is invited to

do the Ashley Lectures in this church in Western North Carolina. John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Amy-Jill Levine and I have all been among those visiting lecturers. The event attracts people from miles away and has helped to identify this church as something quite different.

Recently in North Carolina, there was a statewide referendum to ban gay marriage by a constitutional amendment. It seemed like every preacher in the state from Billy Graham on down came out in support of this amendment, identifying it with the Bible and the will of God. This was not true, however, of the First Congregational-United Church of Christ in Hendersonville. Instead they bought and ran a large advertisement in the local newspaper every other day for a period of time prior to that vote stating their opposition to North Carolina's "Marriage Amendment." In this ad they stated first the historical tradition of the United Church of Christ as a supporter of social justice and civil rights. They reminded readers that their forebears were Pilgrims who came to this country in 1620 seeking freedom from restrictions imposed in Europe. They recalled the history of their denomination, telling the newspaper's readers that in 1785 the UCC ordained Lemuel Haynes, America's first African-American pastor; in 1853 the UCC ordained Antoinette Brown, America's first female pastor; in 1972 the UCC ordained Bill Johnson, America's first openly-gay pastor. Now this church, representing this denomination, called on all to reject this prejudiced marriage amendment. This ad dramatically lifted this church into public awareness causing them to be attacked and ridiculed by almost every other church in the area, but it also caused the religiously disenfranchised to discover a new possibility for their religious lives. So, new people began to show up at their doors on Sunday Mornings.

These four churches I have described so briefly had several things in common. They each had a well-trained and well-educated senior pastor. Each was linked to a national denomination that encouraged them to press the edges. Each had drunk deeply of that denomination's courage in the public arena on the right side of the cultural issues of our day.

If the United Church of Christ is represented locally by the churches I have encountered in Wichita, Greeley, Norman and Hendersonville, they must be doing something right.

So to these churches and to the leadership of the National United Church of Christ, I first raise my hand in salute for your courage and your dedication. Second, I stand before you in awe for what you have meant in my life and in the life of Christianity itself. Third, I bow my head and my heart in thanksgiving for your witness to the Truth.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong

EPISCOPAL

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh
St. Luke's Episcopal Cathedral, Portland April 29, 2012

Easter 4B: [Acts 4:5-12](#); [Psalm 23](#); [1 John 3:16-24](#); [John 10:11-18](#)

This week I went to a conference put on by the Religious Coalition Against Discrimination (RCAD) called “Making a Joyful noise, Claiming our Faith voices for Marriage Equality.” I went for two main reasons, first because as one of the panelists they gave me a free lunch and second because, having spent much of this winter trying to get people to tell their stories, I thought I should practice what I preach and learn how to tell my story a little better. I expected to hear good presentations. I also expected that we would be asked to partner with someone we did not know to practice. I did not expect that it would be as personal, as profound and as moving as it became.

It happened with the first question we were asked, “Why are you here?” We were challenged not to respond with a simple surface answer but to go deeper and respond with a story. After some coaching, I ended up telling a stranger a story I have not told you – the story of my coming to St. Luke's. It's funny because people at RCAD events see me as an advocate, an ally, and even an activist for marriage equality and assume that I have always been there. They hear me use words like about “the Radical Welcome of the Kingdom of God” and “the inclusion of Jesus” and assume that those have always been my themes. They don't know that my previous congregation in Maryland was rather traditional on these things... and that, whether in Africa, at Diocesan Convention, and other places, the theme of my work was Jesus' prayer that we would all be one, and my role was as a bridge builder between conservatives and progressives in the church.

Whether it was schools or water supplies or refugees or feeding the hungry, I sought common ground by focusing on outreach – not just to serve God through serving others but hoping that in doing so we would find that what united us ¹ was more than what pulled us apart. It wasn't that I didn't believe in inclusion, I just didn't want to offend anyone or cause anyone to leave. I also was afraid for my career, recognizing that any actions in this area would mark me in future search processes and that by performing an act of civil disobedience such as blessing a gay union, I was putting my livelihood, my ministry, and my ability to support my family at risk. Because of these things, I, in the very liberal diocese of Washington, I was seen as a conservative – and was initially thought by Bishop Knudsen to be too conservative to come to St. Luke's.

In fact, when she saw me hesitate she told me that if I was to come she hoped my mind would be open to change and that if I could not bless the union of two people I would call an assistant to work with me who would. (Interestingly, St. Luke's was equally reticent about the topic. Though GLBT people were fully accepted here and the vestry and bishop had approved the blessing of unions in the Cathedral, the profile and search committee talked only euphemistically about “celebrating our great diversity” – which for someone from Washington DC meant diversity of race and ethnic background, something not much evident in Maine at that time.)

¹ Credit goes to Dr. David Shambaugh, with advice given to my twin brother and me over Thanksgiving dinner not long after we began our careers and proclaimed ourselves as open to all people and points of view. <http://elliott.gwu.edu/faculty/shambaugh.cfm>

When I told my conference partner this story, she said, “So what changed?” I told her how I had been inspired by a relative told me “you can’t always stay in the middle but need to take a position,” a friend who once counseling me saying “You can't please everyone. If someone isn't made at you, you aren't working hard enough,” and the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman who wrote about the need for self-differentiation and taught that the job of a leader was to take a stand and stand there.² Then I told her about meeting the people in this place, how profoundly moving it was to get to know and love gay couples who had been together longer than I have been alive and to hear their stories and humbly realize that they are better Christians and more spiritual, and otherwise more grounded people than I will ever be.

I told her of what it was like to talk with people who had been hurt and wounded by the church but had found a church home here and how with all this I had come to a place where I realized that I needed to have integrity – not the group but the character trait – between what I believe in my head and have come to know in my heart.

In other words, I realized that I needed to match my actions with my belief in what the scriptures taught³ and in what the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed looked like. I had come to the point of First John where he says, “Let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action.” I had come to the point of laying down my life – at least my career -- for my friends, deciding that it was better to take a stance for truth and for the gospel than compromising my character for a unity that wasn't there in the first place.

The same, by the way happened in the Episcopal Church. As I prepare for General Convention, I am aware that over the last decade membership has left in droves, a decline that many blame on “Bishop Robinson” by which they mean the full welcome of gay and lesbian people. To its credit, the Episcopal Church has stood firm, willing to sacrifice itself to maintain its integrity – not with liberalism but, as Peter proclaimed in our reading from Acts, with “the Name of Jesus of Nazareth... This Jesus is the stone rejected the builders that has become the cornerstone.”

This is a story about the Episcopal Church and St Luke’s that is not being told – I think that if it was people would come pouring in. What I am trying to say is that my real answer to the question “Why are you here?” was Jesus... and the people who make up his body in his place.

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Friedman I was part of a Friedman-centered Colleague Group for ten years in the diocese of Washington. Truly profound thinking, his ideas are embodied in his books *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985) and *A Failure of Servant-leadership in the age of the quick fix* (New York: Seabury, 1997) published in after his death.

³ Contrary to popular opinion neither the Bible nor Jesus himself say anything against marriage equality. I believe that taken as a whole both would be in favor. For a good scholarly review that shows the “anti-homosexual passages” in the Bible aren't talking about what we are talking about today and excellent exegesis to answer those who argue “But the Bible Says...”, see Daniel Helminiak's *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*. (Alamo Square Press, 2000) or his website, <http://www.visionsofdaniel.net/book3WBRS.htm>

What about you? Are you here today because of Jesus? Are you here today because of the people who make up his body in this place? In a few minutes, we will renew our baptismal covenant, saying what we believe and promising to live it out. In the baptismal covenant, we promise to live our lives with integrity, to have our actions match our words by not only following Jesus but also by being Jesus doing what Jesus did and would do. I am not asking that we agree. At St. Luke's we honor a diversity of opinion as well as people and I recognize that your story, your passions, your positions and concerns may be completely different from mine. My hope and prayer is that the foundation, the cornerstone we share is the same.

The theme of today's readings is Jesus as the good shepherd. Pictures of Jesus surrounded by sheep with a lamb on his shoulder have made us think of the shepherd in a rather as a bucolic or romantic role. We forget that a good shepherd did not just to feed and care for the sheep, but also protected them from wolves and other wild animals, even to the point of sacrificing his life. This is what Jesus the Good Shepherd has done for us. Would we, could we, do it for others in his name? Would we, could we, follow Peter's example and do good works, explaining when challenged that we are doing what we are doing because of Jesus? Our baptismal vows remind us for our own spiritual health we need to come out as Christians. As we seek to love, not in word or speech but in action, our passions, our ministries, our missions might be different but I pray that our foundation might be the same. When someone asks you "Why are you here?" what story would you tell? Would you skate on the surface or go deeper? On this day of baptism, our baptismal vows challenge us to take the plunge.

EPISCOPAL

Sermon by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh, St. Luke's Episcopal Cathedral, Portland

(Just after returning from the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church)

July 15, 2012: Proper 10B: [2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19](#); [Ephesians 1:3-14](#); [Mark 6:14-29](#)

Wow what a story, worthy of an HBO miniseries: Herod is mad at John the Baptist who has accused him of adultery but is afraid to do anything about it. At a party he publicly promises to give his daughter anything she wants. Manipulated by her mother, she surprises everyone by asking for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod doesn't want to do it but is trapped. John the Baptist is killed and the platter is delivered. In trying to figure this out, remember that this is a story about Jesus, not about John the Baptist. The point is that when the very worst happens, God still prevails. Even while John the Baptist was being killed, the one whose way he prepared was already transforming the world. Herod's actions were too little, too late, to stop a movement already in progress. Herod's kingdom and the effects of his wife and daughter's scheming are long gone. The Kingdom Jesus proclaimed continues to grow to this very day, even right here and right now. In our reading from Samuel we see that even though David had his detractors, he danced with joy before the ark of the Lord. David had his challenges, yet he could still celebrate Good News and rejoice in the presence of God.

As you know, I have spent the last two weeks at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, a once every three year gathering of Episcopalians from every diocese – not just from the United States but from around the world. It was an honor to represent you and the Diocese and State of Maine there. As leader of the Maine deputation, I can tell you that the four lay, four clergy, two alternates, diocesan staff and of course diocesan bishop were all leaders whose voices were heard and whose actions made a difference. Thank you for the privilege. Thank you for the gift of time away to help make that happen. The word "Convention" is a bit of a misnomer. It is a legislative session, essentially like trying to do all of the work of congress in ten days using the largest bicameral legislative body in the world. It is a model of empowerment and enlightenment, where lay people and clergy have equal voice, where the people in the pew truly participate in the doctrine discipline and decisions of the church. In order to allow input from every person there, each of the hundreds of resolutions proposed required a public hearing, needed to be perfected or revised in committee, and then approved by both the house of bishops and house of deputies, both of which often revised the material, sent it back to committee, which began the whole thing over again. Especially on my committee – prayer book, liturgy and music – where the resolutions involved entire (and not uncontroversial) worship services, that process was intense. For almost two weeks, our work began at 7:30 am and often went through 11:30 pm. Because committees needed to do work outside of legislative sessions, for several days in a row there was hardly time to eat.

Convention began in a dark mood. Everyone there was aware of a church in decline, fraught with dividing lines over homosexuality, our place in the Anglican Communion, our position on Palestine and other issues, and disagreement over how to reform our structure and create a budget that would help us fulfill God's mission in a new way. For me, as a member of the committee that was working on the service for the blessing of same-sex unions, this was extremely hard. Our committee heard hours of passionate

and painful testimony both pro and con and the committee itself had extremely strong conservative and often harsh and accusatory voices that continued almost non-stop. For a while it felt like John the Baptist's head was being served on a platter. It was so bad that one morning after a particularly hard meeting I was so shaken that I had to leave worship. I went for a walk, called Shari and couldn't stop crying. I spent an hour talking to her in tears.

At the same time, however, an incredible dance before God had begun. Daily worship with over 1000 people -- featuring a multitude of languages, prayers from Native American, Caribbean, New Zealand and other cultures, amazing preachers and music from Taizé to steel drums to choirs and organ to trumpets and brass -- drew us all together. The integrity Eucharist was so amazing, so enthusiastic and so moving that people cried there too, only with tears of joy. One of the sermons was from Stephanie Spellers from the crossing in Boston who spoke about St Benedict's rule and the Benedictine process of "stabilitas," "obediencia," and "conversio" - Stability (being grounded in worship and community), "holy listening" to God in (prayer, in scripture and in others) and "conversion" (action, change, or amendment of life resulting from the first two). The second, "obediencia" or "Holy Listening" was both the most difficult and meaningful part about General Convention for me. Most of you know that I like to talk in meetings and am not shy about approaching a microphone. At previous general conventions, I have spent much time testifying for one item or another. Because I was on a legislative committee, this time my task was to listen, not to speak. While the deputation from Maine participated much in the debate, I only had one substantive comment on the floor of the house. Instead, I spent most of the convention time listening -- both to people and to God. Once again I realized that that the diversity of our church means that many people -- in some cases even the majority of people -- don't think like I do! (I know the same is true right here -- and that's OK, in fact, more than OK. As was said often in convention, it is important that "all" means "all.") There was an active and vocal youth presence, a large, well-organized and well-spoken conservative evangelical presence, and an active international presence from Latin and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa and the Pacific. Each spoke. Each shared their story, their perspective, and their position. Each expressed their faith, their struggles, their dreams and their love of God and of the church. Each talked not just about what Jesus would do but what Jesus did, what Jesus meant in their lives, and what it meant to bring and be Jesus to others. To all this, I listened. As I listened both to them and to God in them, I found myself beginning to follow David's example and dance. In doing this, I found myself transformed, participating at the convention at a level I never had before.

That happened in part because beyond worship, beyond communion with God, there was a great celebration of community with one another. From an evening with cathedral deans -- including a dinner with the deans from cathedrals in Iowa, Sacramento, Honolulu, as well as Africa, South America - to a dinner with seminary faculty and alumni, to informal late night sessions with friends from my doctoral program, chats with people from Haiti and people from around the globe, General Convention was for me a great reunion of the family of the church. I saw people literally from everywhere I have lived and served. There was an Arapaho Indian man who Shari and I had worked with when he was a boy on the reservation in Wyoming, a woman from Paris who remembered the day my son was born, the man responsible for my discernment process before I went to seminary, the rector of my former church in Maryland, the former

rector of the first church I served, and a man who had been sponsored for ordination from the church where I grew up. I met many many people who had come to Maine and visited the cathedral. I even had a young man approach me who said “Dean Shambaugh?” and told me that he had been part of a group who had spent a weekend retreat at St. Luke's and that my words to them that night were why he was a priest today.

Through Holy Listening, through communion and community, the whole convention began a dance before the Lord. Now, when you dance sometimes you lead, sometimes you go backwards, sometimes you spin or twirl around, and sometimes you step on your partner's feet or bump into others on the floor. All those things happened. In the midst of everything, votes were taken, the legislation was completed, and your church made courageous decisions and took prophetic positions, all the while offering compassion, care, and comprehensiveness for those who disagreed. For some we went too far, for others not far enough. In it all a deep respect for diversity of people and opinion prevailed. This happened because everything was saturated in prayer and grounded in community. This also happened because from the budget to resolutions to liturgies, everything was focused through mission, specifically the five marks of mission of the Anglican Communion: to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, to teach, baptize and nurture new believers, to respond to human need by loving service, to seek to transform unjust structures of society, and to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. With these five marks of mission before us, we followed David's example and danced. This is not just a metaphor. On the last day of the convention, as they played music during a break, we were literally dancing on the floor. When I arrived at convention, I experienced a sense of gloom, of a church split over issues, struggling with declining membership and resources, and fearful of change. What I discovered was a vibrant, mission-focused, wonderfully diverse body of Christ – a church of amazing, gifted people, which like our Lord Jesus is alive and eager to adapt itself for the future God has in mind. Remember that John's story was really the story of Jesus. It looked bad for John the Baptist but the truth was that God was very much at work, the seeds he had planted had born fruit and the one whose way he had prepared and whose kingdom he had proclaimed was very much alive.

What is interesting is that in many ways, St. Luke's and the Diocese of Maine are one step ahead of the national church. Because of struggles with the economy and small churches around the state, we have already begun to be creative and to dance with the Lord. Both St Luke's and the diocese of Maine recognize the need for change are actively seeking God's vision for the future. Grounding ourselves in worship and holy listening, we have already begun the process of adapting ourselves to God's mission and God's future in this place. Once again it seems, the slogan, “as Maine goes, so goes the nation” is true. But what about you? Is yours the story of Benedict or the Baptist? Do you find stability and listening lead to conversion in your life or do you feel like a head is being handed to you on a platter? Is it hard to see the Good News? Remember, that the gospel isn't the story of John but of Jesus. Jesus' story is breaking in all over the place: in this great and amazing Episcopal Church, in this great and amazing this place we call St Luke's, and in the great and amazing people who fill our pews. Have you come here today with a sense of gloom? If that is true, I pray that you will listen – listen to others and listen to God -- and hear the news that the future, God's future is good indeed. Today I invite you to join in the dance before the Lord. Join in the dance that your joy, like mine, may be full.

UNITED METHODIST

Sermon on Marriage Equality The Rev. Donald Rudalevige, Ret. UMC

Text: selections from I John 3 and 4. Using the Epistle's references to God as love.

Grace be yours and peace from Jesus Christ our Lord.

I. Along with Sally Poland, Jim Young, Bishop Cliff Ives and about 100 others, I am part of the New England Conference's Retired Reconciling Clergy. We are committed to bring about the full inclusion of homosexuals in the United Methodist Church, the Christian community and our society in general.

My position is essentially based on scripture and I will try to respond to those who emphasize different scriptures, particularly Leviticus, but I want to begin in the same place that scripture begins: with stories.

1. My friend Harry is someone I have known since Seminary days. He is a gifted church musician and composer – several of his hymn tunes are in the UM Hymnal and other Hymnals. One night, during our Seminary time, he came to my room to tell me about his being gay. He said that as a teen he came to that self-understanding and he took the step of telling his family. Their response was to take him to a psychologist to “change him”. The psychologist used aversion therapy – subjecting Harry to images of homosexual acts accompanied by shock treatments. The idea was to give him an aversion to homosexuality or homosexual acts.

Instead, his aversion was to his parents and extended family. They have never fully reconciled, though some truce has occurred.

Why do we do this to people? Is this reflective of a God of Love? A God of inclusion? Is this what the God of Jesus Christ wants from us?

2. Jeff was one of my Interns while I was serving in Watertown, Mass. He was talented and led the youth groups. Jeff was from the West Ohio Conference and a student at BU. He was engaged, but his conversation about that was more about the fact that West Ohio demanded that a Pastor be married in order to be Ordained.

I knew about such restrictions as my own Bishop in Philadelphia had the same requirement, even sending unmarried clergy to churches with lots of eligible women! Something that is prohibited now.

Jeff completed his year with us, graduated and went back to West Ohio. But instead of getting married and Ordained, he broke his engagement, left the Conference and went to San Francisco to minister to AIDS patients. I met Jeff recently at a funeral where we were co-officiating. He is still active in AIDS ministry, happily partnered – but lost to the UMC. God is using his skills, but at what cost to the Church?

3. Kenny was one of my finest Interns, also at Watertown; second only to Elaine Stanovsky, and she is a Bishop now. His ministry was with Young Adults. He was open with me about his sexuality, but said that he could live with UM rules, which basically require a gay or lesbian Pastor to be quiet about it.

After his graduation, he went back to Baltimore-Washington Conference as a Probationary Elder. He was assigned a small church outside Silver Spring. Within 3 years, it was one of the fastest growing churches in the Conference and Ken was ready for Ordination as an Elder.

He withdrew instead.

He found he had to be honest with himself and live his life in a committed relationship, something the UMC would not permit.

Is this God's will or Church law?

4. Finally, Jane. A delightful young girl in our congregation in Somerset, Mass. She grew into a fine young woman, head of the Social Justice Committee of the Church and active throughout Church life. But in her 20's she put on lots of weight and began cutting herself. Clearly depressed.

Finally, at about 30, she met someone and discovered her own sexuality. Today, they are married and living together in Colorado, where they have adopted two severely disabled children, providing a wonderful home for them. And no one else was likely to do so.

She no longer attends the UMC.

II. I believe our sexuality is on a continuum, all of us on a line from strongly heterosexual to strongly homosexual, with most somewhere in between. It is a genetic given, a gift of the God who creates us all.

But as I say this, I know that I must respond to the critics who point to Biblical injunctions against homosexuality.

First, Scripture knows nothing of homosexuality as part of our nature. For the writers 3,000 plus years ago, homosexuality was always an aberration, a perverse act by someone who is otherwise heterosexual in violation of their own nature.

Not only that, they were also acting promiscuously, since the requirement was that everyone be married.

And the New Testament adds the sin of idolatry, because Paul in at least one instance is clearly referring to temple prostitution.

So, homosexuality for Biblical writers was **always** contrary to nature, promiscuous and often idolatrous. We would all be against these.

But add to this the threat for people 3,500 years ago to their very survival. All sex had to be about procreation. Villages were a handful of people; even major cities were a few thousand at most. Forget the numbers bandied about in Scripture, they are for effect and do not reflect the sparseness of the population. Thus, polygamy is sanctioned for Abraham, Jacob. Thus, Lot is not condemned for impregnating his two daughters. But Onan is executed for “spilling his seed”.

This is not the cultural understanding of our own day and generation.

III. I believe in a God of inclusion, who calls all people into relationship: relationship with God, with the community and as a deepest experience of that relationship, intimate monogamous partnership, heterosexual or homosexual.

Now I understand that others disagree – and they will point to scripture. I get that. But why such vitriol, such hatred, such venom spewed out by those who oppose inclusiveness?

I had trouble working that out until I had the chance to be at the Legislative hearings on Marriage Equality in Augusta, where I had the privilege of testifying. There, as I listened to the opposition, and their increasing anger, I began to draw some conclusions – of course imputing motivation to anyone else is always dangerous and must be tentative, but I believe I am justified by what I heard there.

My conclusion is this: Homosexual unions threaten the ancient concept of the superiority of the male. Throughout Christian history – and Islamic as well – we have been taught that men are superior. It was even written into the U.S. Constitution: who was allowed to vote? White men of property. It is only in the 20th century that women are allowed to vote in this country; if you know someone who is 90, they have been alive longer than women have been permitted to vote.

Indeed, a woman was considered property in Scripture, belonging first to her father, then husband or brother. Adultery could not be committed against a woman – it was a property crime against another man!

Even now, it is the assumption that white male is the “norm” for the Supreme Court, as though to be white male is to be objective and without a biased background, the proper and appropriate choice for the Supremes. Anyone else is a “special case.” Nonsense when spoken aloud, but it is the unspoken bias.

We long referred to the male as head of the house, the decision maker. Anything else is “henpecked”; we wonder “who wears the pants in that family?”

Well, who wears the pants in a same sex relationship? I suggest to you that the issue is really not so much about homosexuality – though it is that in part – but about mutuality and equality; it is about overturning male hegemony. And that is why it is so emotional.

I believe God affirms mutual, loving, respectful relationships based on equality, whether hetero- or homo- sexual. That is the key, rather than the gender of the partners.

IV. Now, I may be wrong. I may be wrong about the ideology; I may be wrong about God and God's inclusive love.

However, I would rather be wrong on the side of inclusion, mutuality and relationship, than be on the side of exclusion and judgmentalism.

The God I worship does not exclude and calls on me to be inclusive, accepting and loving of God's children, acknowledging their full humanity regardless of sexuality. It is not gender that matters but a willingness to live in committed relationship. Thus, I must act with my colleagues to witness to that commitment and it is why I am part of the Reconciling Clergy. And I pray that the United Methodist Church will come to this position and allow its pastors and members to live as I believe God means us to live. Amen.

LUTHERAN (ELCA)

One Lutheran pastor's thoughts on the question of inclusivity in the faith community

The Reverend Elaine Hewes
Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, Maine

“It’s about relationship,” I say to the people in our small Lutheran congregation. “Authentic faith is grounded in, springs from, and blossoms into relationship. Relationship that has a particular shape to it....this shape,” I say, making the sign of the cross. “Relationship that is first and foremost a deep engagement with others, represented in this sign by the vertical line. + It is the willingness to enter into a fullness of relationship that promises commitment, accompanying love, and the deepest and most authentic kind of knowing. Just like the deep love and authentic knowing God incarnates in the person of Jesus.

“Look at how deep this love goes,” I say, repeating the downward movement of the vertical line of the cross. “It goes deep into the everyday. Deep into the complexities and ambiguities and the messy stuff of our lives. It is love that is not afraid to get muddy or worn out or to suffer with the beloved. It is real and true, particular, concrete and visceral.

“And,” I say, extending both arms in a broad reach both to the left and the right, “it is also radically and wildly inclusive. The relationship in which our faith is grounded, from which it springs, and into which it blossoms is radically and wildly inclusive. That’s what the horizontal line on the cross signifies. Look how far God stretches God’s self to open up the possibilities of relationship with us. It is the same stretch love asks of us in our lives; a stretch that has no conditions, no exclusions, no holding back. Just like the stretch of love modeled by Jesus.

It’s about relationship. True, deep, incarnate, earthy, gutsy, committed relationship, extended without condition, without regard to race, gender, class, age, religion, or sexual orientation. It’s about living into such a stance of relational openness. It’s about honoring and celebrating any and all relationships that model (dare) such commitment and openness. It’s about protecting such relationships in a society that has a diminished understanding of the gift of relationship.

Which means, in regards to the LGBT community, that we are called as Christians not only to intentionally and publicly extend the most authentic welcome possible, but to work for justice on behalf of those who are denied many of the legal and social protections that insure the fullest measure of relational living. To do any less is to live a diminished faith.

God grant us the courage, the resolve and the grace to commit ourselves to such work, in the spirit of humility, accompanying love, gratitude and joy. For in the work of extending welcome and “doing” justice we will be blessed with relationships that open for us new horizons, as well as granting us a clearer understanding of that deepest kind of knowing we call love.

LUTHERAN (ELCA)

My Spiritual Journey by Pastor Peter Boehringer
Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Manchester, NH

In a previous blog I shared that the congregation I serve is a caring and loving place that accepts all people as they are, and that I, as a pastor, and as a person, would rather err on the side of grace. Shortly after I wrote that piece and posted it, my words were put to the test. A gay couple who have been vital members of the congregation for years asked me to preside at their wedding here in New Hampshire (a gay marriage state). I responded immediately by saying that indeed, I would perform their wedding.

My decision is the end result of many years of reading scripture, meditation, prayer, and conversation with trusted friends, family, and colleagues. My decision was certainly not immediate. As little as two years ago, I did not see myself ever presiding at a gay wedding. I was one who advocated that prior to sanctioning LGBT weddings, the Church should revisit the Doctrine of Creation, and clearly espouse a justification for reinterpreting a long held doctrine. Even though the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America opened the door to LGBT pastors in committed relationships, and the possibility of weddings in 2009, to date, no rite exists as for such a practice, so that those of us who choose to do such a wedding are largely on our own (and could face discipline).

I have come to the conclusion (as many others before me I suppose) that much of our visceral reaction to homosexuality has to do with its threat to patriarchal society in general, and to male dignity in particular. Despite a few passages in the Levitical code found in Exodus and a few sentences written by St. Paul, which we take largely out of context, the Scriptures do not create hostility to homosexuality. It has been hostility to homosexuality that has all too often prompted Christians to eisogete into the Scriptures our own fundamental prejudice and fear. Let's be clear; Christians have long since banished most of the Levitical code with the understanding that the code's concerns (for example the ban on eating shellfish which had more to do with the order of creation than sin or cleanliness) are not concerns that can be carried into the modern world. In most areas of our lives, my Lutheran brothers and sisters have moved beyond biblical literalism. No one is suggesting we turn the clock back to accept slavery, and most of us long ago acknowledged the tremendous contributions to the life of the church brought about by the ordination of women. Yet, the prohibitions against homosexual activity have remained.

One can certainly understand ancient Israel's prohibition of homosexual activity. The twelve tribes were infinitesimally small in comparison with the nations that surrounded them. Every body, every birth counted. Having children was a sacred national duty, and failure to participate was a treasonous abomination. Thus, barren women were much to be pitied and held in contempt, and homosexual activity was proscribed.

For me it has come down to this: I have come to realize that it is no longer my task as a person or a pastor to try any longer to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages that condemn it (that work has been more than accomplished by more worthy

scholars), but how to reconcile the continuing persecution, punishment and rejection of LGBT people with the love of Christ, and the Doctrine of Justification. More and more I have lived through it and realized the disconnect. I have written of the Westboro church on a previous occasion, but their hatred and hostility toward the LGBT community further clarified a moral dilemma. How can a church, or an individual, bear witness to the ever widening circle of Christ's love as witnessed by the Gospels, Acts, and the letters of Peter, John and Paul (even considering Paul's prohibition of unnatural relations) and espouse such hatred for any group of people? The two positions are irreconcilable. We're left with discerning what the norm is for Christian life. In order to do this, we move beyond visceral reactions, we move beyond what is "natural" or acceptable, we look beyond the law that condemns us, to the heart of faith: the love of God in the Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ that saves. The Gospel.

Everyone is fond of quoting John 3: 16, "For God so loved the world..." but alongside this we can lay 1 John 4:17-21, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from Jesus is this; those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." The church has not always carried out this commandment, and while we can find fault with some on the Christian right (as it is known), the wider church throughout history has sown the seeds of disrespect and hatred for LGBT people, in such a way, that it should hardly surprise anyone that some people have chosen to use church teaching as the foundation to legitimize violence and hatred. I must admit, that over the past several years, I have found myself wondering how much responsibility the church must bear; how much responsibility I must bear for the epidemic of young gay and lesbian people who have committed suicide. We have, all too often, by our silence, given tacit approval to a heinous injustice. I have also, along with many of you heard the mantra that God "hates the sin" but "loves the sinner." Unfortunately, those who have been beaten, abused and even murdered, did not receive the ministrations of individuals acting in the name of a loving God.

In the end, I have come to the conclusion that if my ministry is going to have any integrity, if I am going to be any kind of vessel of the faith of the church, if I am going to exhibit any of the qualities in my life that do honor to the love of Christ that has been poured out so gracefully to me, --someone's sexual orientation cannot matter. Our relationships should be judged by their inner worth, by their spiritual breadth and depth, and not by the accidents (in the theological sense) of sexuality. There is nothing in Scripture that confines love; live giving and life affirming love, to the heterosexual community. It is God's own possession bestowed on all.

As intimated above, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the church in which I am ordained moved beyond biblical literalism a long time ago (a discussion of literalism must be reserved for another day). Is there anyone eschewing pork these days? Historically, this church has played a significant role in the anti slavery movement, and we moved far beyond literalism with the ordination of women. It is, in my humble estimation, long past time that we did so for the LGBT community.

"And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice..." (Micah 6:8)
Walter Brueggemann wrote, "Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them."

Justice redefines the world. To do justice is to intervene in the workings of the powers and principalities of the world as Moses did with Pharaoh when he insisted on freedom for the Hebrew slaves. Justice is Nathan standing before King David and protesting David's murder of Uriah the Hittite. Justice is Elijah calling out Ahab and Jezebel for killing Naboth to steal his vineyard. Justice is Jesus welcoming to the table tax collectors and sinners. Justice is Jesus at the well of Sychar welcoming a lost child of God back into the community. Justice may be our realization that Scripture does not create hostility to homosexuality, but that our hostility to homosexuals has been projected onto Scripture. Justice is saying that we cannot qualify the love of Christ poured into the human heart. Justice may be recognizing again, for another group of people, that what God has made clean, we may not call unclean. Justice may be saying to these people as well, "what God has joined together let no one put asunder."

I will be sharing more as time goes on.

Peace,

Pastor Peter Boehringer

PRESBYTERIAN

A Christian Defense of Marriage Equality
Rev. Marvin M. Ellison, Ph.D.
Willard Bass Professor of Christian Ethics
Bangor Theological Seminary

Genesis 16: 1-4a
I Corinthians 7: 1-9
Mark 3: 31-35

These days, marriage is in the air. It's summertime, so it's time for outdoor weddings. But marriage is also in the air because, as you well know, in early November Maine voters will go to the polls to decide whether to allow same-sex couples the freedom to marry civilly. So marriage will also be "in the air" in the days ahead in television ads, letters to the editor, and in our conversations at the dinner table, with co-workers at the water cooler, and with our neighbors over the fence.

About marriage, good, responsible people, including good, responsible people of faith differ and sometimes differ strongly, so conflict is also in the air.

This morning, I'm not expecting to settle those differences. After all, I have members of my own family who take a radically different stance than I do. My dear brother Bob and his wife Janet, a lovely couple, live in North Carolina and voted for Amendment One this spring, which defines marriage as exclusively heterosexual – one man, one woman -- and places that definition in the NC state constitution. Perhaps you too have family members whom you both love and disagree with about this and other issues. Perhaps you or they are still "evolving" as President Obama has been evolving. Perhaps you know where you stand, but lack the language to express it, especially to express your stance in a faith framework.

This morning, I want to offer a Christian case for marriage equality. Not "the" case, but one Christian's framing of the question, and then I invite you to share your views with each other in the days and weeks ahead. And please call me if you wish. Mandy has my contact information.

Now, public interest in same-gender marriage has increased steadily after Vermont first created the option of civil unions for same-sex couples in 1999. In 2003 Massachusetts went further by making civil marriage available to same-sex couples. Since then, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Iowa (Iowa, of all places!), Vermont, New York, Maryland, Washington State, and the District of Columbia have followed suit. In 2009 the Maine legislature passed, and then Governor Baldacci signed, a civil marriage law, but it was overturned by a referendum campaign later that year. Another pivotal moment was when the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in 2005 adopted a pronouncement in support of marriage equality and encouraged congregations to study this issue prayerfully.

Opponents of same-sex marriage – let’s call them marriage traditionalists – express disbelief that we’re even discussing this issue. They hold on firmly to two assumptions. First, marriage, in order to be marriage, requires gender difference. They ask, isn’t marriage by definition the union of a man and a woman? And, second, they know that same-sex intimacy is immoral and shouldn’t be encouraged, especially by the state.

Typically, traditionalists turn to the Bible and – well, yes -- to tradition to make the case for keeping marriage exclusively heterosexual. Some traditionalists also argue that excluding some people from marriage is the right thing to do. Robert Knight of the Family Research Council puts the matter this way: “All societies must have intact families to survive,” but he writes, “Societies do not need any homosexual relationships in order to flourish.” In addition, he argues that there’s no real discrimination or marriage “inequality” because gay men and lesbian women can already exercise the freedom to marry -- so long as gay men marry women and lesbian women marry men.

Proponents of same-sex marriage, myself included – let’s call them marriage advocates – point out that in every religious tradition, there’s a long-overdue rethinking underway about marriage, gender, sexuality, and family. They challenge the presumption that marriage requires gender difference, especially because the call for gender difference often turns out to mean gender inequality -- with a dominant male and subordinate female locked into rigidly prescribed social roles.

Advocates for marriage equality believe that the core of marriage isn’t a particular mix of genders, but rather about intimate friendship between two erotically attracted partners. Marriage is the covenanted love between two soul-mates, who seek God’s blessing and the community’s support for their life together. Marriage is morally good whenever it promotes companionship and mutual love between partners, encourages economic and other kinds of sharing, and provides for the nurturing of children. And aren’t these the very same values that are important for same-sex couples, many of whom are parenting children and taking care of elders and other family members? Because these couples are already living together and acting as if married, it’s really only a short step to acknowledge, and even celebrate, their lived reality as covenanted partners.

But what about the Bible? As we heard in the readings this morning, the Bible refuses to raise up only one model of human relationship to the exclusion of all others. Rather the Bible displays diverse patterns -- from one-man/one-woman marriages to polygamous marriages. Both Jesus and Paul preferred no-marriage, that is, celibacy. In fact, over the centuries most Christians regarded marriage as second-rate at best -- and as a problematic route to discipleship because marriage, they believed, is always morally tainted by the sinfulness of sex. More recently, however, the Christian tradition has been updating its thinking in more sex-positive, women-friendly, and gay-friendly directions.

When it comes to Christian tradition, in the fourth century Augustine tried his best to defend what he called the “good of marriage,” but in developing a case in favor of marriage, he had to turn around and explain why, if marriage was so good, Christians shouldn’t be encouraged to practice plural marriages. After all, if a union of two is good, wouldn’t a union involving more than two be even better? Moreover, wasn’t it a biblical

practice for Abraham and other patriarchs to have multiple wives and numerous concubines? A somewhat frustrated Augustine countered, “That was then, this is now.”

With Augustine we, too, can say that times change, and so must the church’s ethical response change in order to deal with new realities. Remember how, less than a century and a half ago, the church was embroiled in a bitterly divisive marriage controversy, this time about whether women should be regarded as their husband’s property when they married – the “two shall become one flesh,” and that one person was the man. Many good Christians argued against treating women as co-equals in marriage, out of fear that Western civilization would not survive the change. So, heads up! Conflict about marriage is nothing new, and too often we Christians have been on the wrong side of the question!

I support the freedom of same-sex couples to marry because I take the Bible seriously. Even more, I take the God of the Bible seriously. God’s passion is for justice and compassion in all things. At the core of the Christian tradition is an insistent call to love God and neighbor as self. To love one’s neighbor means to advocate for the neighbor, which, if it means anything, means advocating for the neighbor’s well-being, safety and security, and for the neighbor’s human rights. As the U.S. Supreme Court has recognized, there is no more fundamental right than the freedom to enter into intimate association with another person of one’s own choosing who thereby becomes one’s “next of kin.” In the mid-1980s, the Court was asked whether incarcerated prisoners on death row retained the freedom to marry, and the Court said yes, even though those marriages might never be consummated. Why? Because this precious freedom to enter into covenanted relationship with another person defines our very humanness.

In religious language, we say that persons are created in love and for love. Our human vocation is to love and be loved. Relationship is at the heart of all that is good and life-giving. Denying the right to enter into intimate partnership or refusing to recognize family as family is deeply dehumanizing. In fact, one of the most degrading, painful, and morally objectionable aspects of chattel slavery in U.S. history was the denial of the right of the enslaved to marry and form secure families, recognized and protected by the entire community. Similarly, in our time, to deny or discredit the love of two men or two women in their committed partnership is painfully oppressive and harmful to human dignity.

Some say that supporting marriage equality requires us to toss aside, even reject the Christian tradition, but I see it differently. The core values of justice and compassion at the very heart of the tradition encourage me to support marriage equality for all couples, gay and straight. At its best, our tradition affirms that wherever there is love, there is God. Same-sex love is a good and holy love, morally comparable to heterosexual love. That’s something that many clergy, myself included, have noticed whenever we’ve performed covenant services for same-sex couples. Granted, two men or two women exchanging vows and rings may look different from a heterosexual couple “getting married,” but they’re engaged in the identical practice of making promises, seeking a blessing, and receiving the support of their community.

The Christian community will likely be debating this question for some time. My hope is that the conversation will take a decisive turn -- away from focusing on the gender of the partners in question and toward emphasizing what truly matters, the character of their relationship. The church's focus, our focus, should be on helping each other – gay and non-gay alike – to learn together how to live a life-affirming, holy love and become a blessing to one another.

The God-given opportunity before us is to draw a larger picture of love, commitment, and family, one that intentionally includes same-sex couples. However, we should remember that enlarging human freedom is often an unsettling moment, something that both Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr., understood well. While such a moment is exhilarating for some, it's deeply troubling for others. Let us pray that God be with us all as we struggle to find our way forward.

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

We're in Good Company

Posted on June 24, 2012

Message by John B. McCall, D. Min.

First Congregational Church, UCC-South Portland, ME

Matthew 21:33-46

There was a time you could speak of the Christian Church and everyone knew what you meant. Those days are behind us. You can't really say "Christian" without needing to add some adjective, some qualifier. I think that's healthy... I'm a Congregationalist.

Christians are Roman Catholic and Orthodox, Anglican and Episcopalian, all stripes of Protestant, evangelical and fundamentalist, Pentecostal and charismatic. There are strict Christians who claim they're right and everyone else is wrong; there are liturgical Christians who emphasize worship and the sacraments, very concerned that everything be done in the Right Way using the Right Words.

There are Christians who believe they belong to an exclusive club for which potential members must study and pass muster; and other Christians who believe that church should be like a feast with an invitation that says "y'all come!"

Last weekend some churches passed the offering plate a second time to raise money for the political action group "No Special Rights" which intends to defeat the same-sex marriage referendum next November; and other churches whose members marched in the Pride parade carrying a rainbow banner that says "God is still speaking."

No one kind of church suits everyone. Each denomination, each individual congregation has its own personality. You may have to look for the place that's right for you, and when you find it, it's like a homecoming.

Our church is not unique but it's unusual. The United Church of Christ, and this – the First Congregational Church – are not the right church for everyone, but we're a place and a people where many have found their spiritual home.

I was reminded of that as I looked through my notebook from previous Maine Conference Annual meetings and found my notes from a few years back when our keynote speaker was Leonard Pitts, a syndicated columnist for the Miami Herald who appears twice a week in our Portland Press Herald. He was born and raised in Orange, California, as a Southern Baptist. He broke into newspaper work in 1991 as a music critic, and within three years was writing a regular column on popular culture. He's been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his commentaries.

Pitts is now based in Washington DC, and lives in suburban Maryland. And he's a member of a congregation of the United Church of Christ. He got into the UCC as an adult because of a young woman – a sixteen year old whom his son wanted to date.

On Sunday mornings his son was up and ready for a ride to church so he could sit next to his sweetheart. And dad was the chauffeur. As Pitts told it he hadn't been inclined toward church for a long time. He'd definitely stopped being Southern Baptist and hadn't really become anything else.

He told our conference gathering: "Finding a UCC church told me I'm not crazy... or at least if I am I'm in good company!"

I'd like to reflect on that with you this morning. Do you suppose that would work as our new church motto – maybe on a new banner out front: "if we're crazy, we're in good company?" Or "if you're crazy, you'll fit right in!"

The point, of course, is that we give our best and best feel the spirit when we have a sense of belonging – of being at home with others. I can't speak for you but I want to be more specific about some core convictions that place us in good company with our sisters and brothers right here on Meetinghouse Hill. See if these fit.

1) You're not crazy – you're in good company – if you believe "God is still speaking." The Bible has two kinds of narratives. One is a particular history of a particular people at a particular time in covenant with God. That part is specific to the culture and knowledge thousands of years ago. The other kind of narrative in the Bible is universal principles that are always true. But the Bible doesn't always tell us which is which. We have to figure that out. So, we're rooted in scripture and the ancient story of what God has done. At the same time we believe that God has more to say to us, to the human condition, and to the crying needs of the world. We have to be familiar with the Biblical story, then figure out what is changeless and what has evolved. This view isn't Christianity Lite – this is a faithful, hopeful way to live in harmony with God.

2) You're not crazy – you're in good company – if you believe God is more interested in how you live than in what words you use to express your faith. We don't use creeds or rules as tests of how good a Christian you really are. Instead, we're guided by covenant and community. We talk to each other and listen to God, and we always submit our own ideas and convictions to others. So, our worship isn't for the preacher or pope to tell you how you must believe. It's rather our time to acknowledge our humanity and our shortcomings and together to offer them up to God – and then to accept God's grace shown so clearly in Jesus Christ – then to offer our thanks.

3) You're not crazy – you're in good company – if you embrace Jesus' assertion that everything in the scriptures is captured in two commandments: "love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself." Imagine our world if we all got response to the young lawyer who asked him what was the greatest commandment: "love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself." Imagine our world if we all got those two right! We get all tied up and bogged down in fancy words and concepts. Jesus knew that. He showed his holy impatience when he said there are only two things to remember: Love God, love your neighbor. Show it. Let God be the judge, the arbiter, the authority. And let us treat each and every person with the dignity, respect and love that we so deeply desire.

4) You're not crazy – you're in good company – if you feel that following Jesus isn't a burden or a test, but is more like a joyful response to God's invitation. Many of us were taught that God is like an angry father watching our every move; waiting to trap us when we inevitably do something stupid; waiting to spring the trap and convict us of our sin; waiting to pronounce condemnation.

There's another faithful way to see it and say it. Today's scripture deserves an entire sermon of its own, but simply tells us of the workers in the vineyard who first ignored, then killed, the messengers the land-owner sent. So the owner reasoned they'd listen to his son and sent him. They did the same, only worse. "How would you treat the tenants," Jesus asked his listeners? They answered quickly that they'd seize all the wretches and throw them to the wolves; then they said "wait a minute – he's talking about us!"

The parable punch line is simple: if you don't want to live like Jesus' joyful followers, God will extend the offer to someone else, someone who wants to live in tune with the spirit. In fact God is always offering the invitation – through others' lives, through the words of scripture, through bread and cup, and baptism... No matter how often God offers, we have to reach out to receive the gift. That's where the joy comes from. If we reject the invitation, God will call others.

I know what I've just said rings true for many of us, I think for most of us. I also know that for some it's a stretch. We're in good company when it comes to that, too.

Because here we know and love each other in Jesus' name. Here we do our very best to welcome others as we have been welcomed. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

JUDAISM

In preparation of the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we pause to consider the meaning of their relevance to the issue facing Maine in November: Freedom to Marry.

We are at the tail end of the last month of the Jewish year, Elul, which is traditionally a time of introspection and stocktaking—a time to review one’s deeds and spiritual progress over the past year, and prepare for the upcoming “Days of Awe” of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

As the month of divine mercy and forgiveness, Elul is a most opportune time for *teshuvah* (“return” to God), prayer, charity, and increased *ahavat Yisrael* (love for a fellow Jew), in the quest for self-improvement and coming closer to God. Chassidic master Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi likens the month of Elul to a time when “the king is in the field” and, in contrast to when he is in the royal palace, “everyone who so desires is permitted to meet him, and he receives them all with a cheerful countenance, showing a smiling face to them all.”

The only way to repair, or achieve self-improvement, is to strive to be authentic, the only way to do the work of Elul is to think of all the ways we are committed – to each other, and to the world. “I am beloved, and my beloved is mine”, humans with God, humans with each other, a connection to God, and with each other is crucial to our preparation for the High Holidays.

The first story of Rosh Hashanah is also believed to be the birth of the world, the power of creation. It emphasizes the special relationship between God and humanity: our dependence upon God as our creator and sustainer, and God’s dependence upon us as the ones who make God’s presence known and felt in the world.

The first thing we learn on earth is that we are not meant to be alone in the world. As we move in to Rosh Hashanah, we have the right to not be alone in this creation.

This is a great time to clear away things that are barriers to healing ourselves. We should be able to get to our collective, essential selves – the essence, the true self of honesty, truth, and clarity.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us of the magnitude of the world and how small we are in comparison to it. Our liturgy helps us remember that we have little control over how or when we will die or how or when we were born. So much of who we are is beyond our control. Each of us is as unique as our fingerprints. Rosh Hashanah is inherently connected to the concept of marriage. On Rosh Hashanah we formally begin the process of *teshuvah*, return to God. Our tradition teaches that when we received Torah at Sinai, the people of Israel wedded God with Mount Sinai as our chuppah, our wedding canopy, and Torah our *ketubah*, our marriage contract. On Rosh Hashanah, we renew our wedding vows, we return to our commitment, we reinvest in our relationship with God.

Scripture important to this time: Isaiah 58, 1-14.

JUDAISM

A Rabbinic View of Same Sex Marriage

Rabbi Susan Bulba Carvutto, Temple Beth El, Augusta, ME

What does Judaism have to say about homosexuality? What does Judaism have to say about marriage? How can we interpret these traditional concepts in light of today's reality in order to establish justice in our own Jewish community? Do we even care what the tradition says today?

I raised these issues with my colleagues at the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Israel, though in the middle of Jerusalem, in the shadow of both the Kotel and the separation barrier this issue was not officially on the table. (I will note however, that there are plenty of gay Jews in Israel and they are among those who have found a home in the growing Israeli Reform movement.)

Rabbi Marla Feldman, director of the Reform movement's Commission on Social Action, who sat with me on the flight to Israel, noted that advocacy on behalf of social justice issues has from the beginning been part of the Reform movement's *raison d'être*. No, we cannot advocate for specific political candidates. Yes we can- we must-advocate for issues of moral and ethical concern to us as Jews. That is what it means to be an *or legoyim*, a light to the nations. Our non profit status as a synagogue is in no way impacted by such advocacy.

I spoke also with Rabbi Yoel Kahn, a leading activist gay rabbi, on his take on the halachic (Jewish legal) aspects of the same sex marriage issue. "Don't dwell on the halacha," he said. "Focus instead on the broader ethical principles: 'Do not oppress the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt'... and the concept that each of us is made *B'Tzelem elohim*, in God's image.

With all due respect, while noting that in many cases where halacha violates one of these broader ethical principles, we Reform Jews err on the side of social justice, I think it is important that here in our synagogue we confront the halachic issues head on and understand what we are up against in this issue of where we stand on LD 1020, a bill introduced by Senator Damon of Bangor which will have a public hearing on April 24 at Cony High School.

For us as Jews, the major concern should not be what the fundamentalist Christians think. One of our board members expressed the idea that we should avoid public confrontation with right wing Christians since they are among the few non Jews who are open in support of Israel, and also because open Jewish support for gay marriage could increase anti-Semitism among Christians who oppose it. I think we need to take the fears of our members seriously, those who fear anti-Semitism and those who fear harassment and discrimination because of their sexual orientation.

Issues of justice require our attention even though we may disagree with non Jews and even with other Jews. Before the Civil War Rabbi David Einhorn lost his job as a rabbi in Baltimore because he spoke out against slavery. Another famous rabbi, Morris Raphall of B'nai Jeshurun in New York—BJ which is today a mecca for young Jews- became

famous for using the Torah to justify slavery. Natalie Jortner, who will celebrate her Bat Mitzvah here on May 16, is reading from the portion of Leviticus which outlines laws regulating slavery-not outlawing it—and is doing a mitzvah project which consists of redeeming a modern day slave-and we still have them!

On the other hand, we are not Unitarian-Universalists. We see ourselves as part of the greater Jewish family, as followers and interpreters of the Torah, the Talmud, the laws and customs of our people. We may as Reform Jews choose to ignore these laws. But it is my conviction that we should know what Jews have said and done in the past regarding all aspects of life before we change it, as often we should. We may follow Yoel Kahn's advice and use broad ethical principles to override specific laws and traditions-but let's know what these laws and traditions are before we decide to maintain, reinterpret or discard them.

So what about homosexuality? The biblical verse—Leviticus 18:23- quoted by the opponents of rights, including marriage, for gays is also from Leviticus, along with the laws on slavery, kashrut, and a host of other issues which Reform Jews ignore and which right wing Christians say that Jesus nullified.

V'et zachar lo tishkav mishkevey isha to'evah hee. "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence."

The new Reform Women's Torah commentary notes on this verse:

In the early 21st century, this is one of the most misinterpreted, abused and decontextualized verses in the Torah. This verse, ripped from its place in the system of levitical laws, is often mobilized to justify discriminatory legislation against homosexuals and their families... It has no place in judicial systems not governed by the total system of Leviticus." (p. 692 note 22 on verse 23)

Aside from the Women's Torah Commentary argument that this law is taken out of context this law has been interpreted in a number of ways. Elliot Dorff argued for the Conservative movement that it does not forbid all male homosexuality, only the specific practice of anal intercourse. Harold Schulweis, another well known Conservative rabbi argues that the word to'evah here, usually translated "abomination" refers specifically to the practice of cultic prostitution in the service of pagan gods. In a 1993 article in Svara (Journal of the Columbia University school of Law and Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, for which I thank Rabbi Alice Dubinsky) Schulweis argues:

"What is abominable for the homosexual is what is abominable for the heterosexual. Promiscuity, rape, sexual exploitation, infidelity, adultery. What is abominable for one gender is abominable for another, what is abominable for persons of all sexual orientation is the disrespect of the personhood of the other. The flaunting, exploitative use of sexuality is as ugly in heterosexuality as it is in homosexuality. It is behavior, character and conduct—not sexual orientation-that counts. p. 13)

My friend and colleague Rabbi Carolyn Braun of Temple Beth El in Portland points out that this verse says nothing at all about women homosexuals. The rabbis in general either ignore or are not aware of lesbians, or in some cases may feel that, like all women

they don't count. In halacha it is only men who are obligated to marry and to have children, minimally a boy and a girl. Women are supposed to be married only in order to avoid gossip. Traditionally men whose wives cannot bear children were meant to divorce them, or at least take another wife. Women have only one commandment in Leviticus 18 directed at them: not to have sex with an animal.

We don't learn a great deal about the basics of marriage from the Torah itself. Exodus 21 : 11 has been taken by the rabbis to mean that a wife has three basic rights: food, clothing and conjugal rights, that is sex either for procreation or pleasure. The context, however is talking about a daughter who is sold as a slave.

We do learn about what is called levirate marriage: the practice that if a man died without a child, his widow had to marry his brother. This is assumed in the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 and legislated in Deuteronomy 24 and 25. We also learn about the process of divorce, which has always been assumed as permissible in Judaism but is traditionally a one way event, in which the man gives a get to the woman. The process of divorce is assumed in Deuteronomy 22 and is illustrated in the story of Abraham sending away Hagar.

Jewish concepts of marriage are developed further in the Mishnah and the Talmud. We learn there about the three essential components of Jewish marriage, which is now called kiddushin, from the root kadosh, to make separate or holy. The three components are a shtar, or document, which we know today as the ketubah; kesef or money: the ring or other object of value worth more than a prutah, which the man must give to the woman; and biah, sexual cohabitation, preserved in today's wedding ceremonies as yichud, the couple's private time after the ceremony. If any one of these three steps was taken between a man and a woman, then a bill of divorce or get was required for the woman to remarry. When the man gives the woman the ring—and this is a one way transaction—he says Harei at mekdueshet li betabbat zu kedat Moshe veyisrael: Behold you are set apart for me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel.

The Talmud uses the term lakach-to acquire—for what the man does to the woman. She is acquired by him and he then owns the right to reproduce through her. In Orthodox and some Conservative weddings today, this act of acquisition or kinyan is symbolized by the groom taking a handkerchief or other piece of cloth from the rabbi, lifting and returning it. The Hebrew term for husband, ba'al, literally master, reflects this patriarchal view of marriage; the parallel term for wife Be'ulah, means one who is owned. The Talmudic ceremony of kiddushin is still what we use today in the Jewish wedding. It is followed by the more mystical act of nesuin, the seven blessings, which signify the couple becoming one household under the chuppah.

My beloved and respected Talmud teacher, Mark Washofsky, was the author of the Reform responsum issued in 1996 just before the Central Conference of American rabbis debated the issue of same sex marriage in Greensboro NC. The Reform responsa committee issued a split decision at the time, the majority with my teacher opposing same sex marriage and a minority supporting it. Dr. Washofsky's principal argument, as I understand it, is that same sex marriage cannot be construed as kiddushin, using the traditional model of Jewish marriage.

Yet most of us Reform rabbis have altered this model from the beginning. To begin with, we make weddings egalitarian. I have never performed a wedding where only the groom gave the bride a ring and uttered the words Harei at. Very few Reform couples use the traditional form of the ketubah, where the groom promises the bride 400 zuz in case of divorce if she is a virgin, half that if she is not. If the bride chooses to circle the groom, then he circles her too. Often the bride breaks the glass as well as the groom-though the breaking of the glass has no halachic significance.

Dr. Rachel Adler, a professor at the University of Southern California and at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles and author of *Engendering Judaism* (1998 Beacon Press) offers a startling and brilliant solution to Washofsky's objection that same sex marriage cannot be kiddushin. Adler would agree- in fact she argues that the egalitarian modifications we make these days to the ceremony are not kiddushin either. Traditional Jewish marriage is an act of acquisition of the woman by the man. Adler says that altering the traditional form of kiddushin is pointless. She notes that in terms of halacha, a ceremony where the wife also gives a ring to the husband nullifies the whole contract, as if each participant had given the other a five dollar bill: their circumstances are precisely what they were before the transaction.. the problem with marital kinyan is not simply that it is unilateral, but that it commodifies human beings. The groom's commodification and acquisition of the bride is not rectified by the bride's retaliation in kind. P 191

Adler proposes an entirely new model for Jewish marriage, one that like the traditional model is based on Talmudic law. But for kinyan, the law of acquisition of property, Adler substitutes the law of shituf, business partnership. For the term kiddushin she substitutes the term Brit or covenant, and renames the ceremony Brit Ahuvim, a lover's covenant. Like a Talmudic business partnership this Brit Ahuvim has three components: a document, in the Talmud a partnership deed; here a shtar brit, a covenant document; second a verbal statement of personal undertaking by the partners; the third element in a business partnership is l'hatil b'kis a ritual where traditionally the partners "pool resources" by each putting money in a bag and lifting it up. Adler proposes that the marriage partners put significant objects to each of them in a bag and lift them up together to symbolize the pooling of resources. These objects can include rings but could also be other valued objects for each of the partners: a musical instrument, a book, a text from a teacher or parent.

The Brit Ahuvim ceremony would conclude with the traditional sheva brachot, the seven blessings. This ritual, suggests Adler, would be appropriate for straight or gay couples since it would imply no domination of one partner by the other. (see document)

At the Reform rabbis' conference in Greensboro, a location that had been the site of some of the first lunch counter demonstrations in the civil rights struggles of the 1960's, Reform rabbis struggled with how to provide equal sanctity and standing to the Jewish households headed by same sex couples. One of the most compelling discussions was over a proposed document which would define kedusha, holiness, in a consistent way for gay and straight relationships. I share this document with you, and point out that in one document the term kadosh is typified as one where the couple has undergone a marriage or commitment ceremony and conducts their sex lives in accordance with the ten reform Jewish sexual values.

Leaving aside for now the question of whether civil unions or domestic partnerships can provide equal financial, inheritance, health and other benefits as marriage—and as I understand it, they do not—we as Jews must ask ourselves whether we place any value on the religious ceremonies by which we mark the life cycle. For many years liberal rabbis struggled to create naming ceremonies for girls which were equivalent in power and gravity to the bris with which we welcome boys. Orthodox rabbis said: isn't it enough for the father to have an aliyah to the Torah the week after the baby is born? Our answer as Reform Jews has been a resounding no. Not until 1922 was the first girl, the daughter of Mordecai Kaplan, called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah. Yet most of us in this community now take it for granted that we will weep and kvell as our daughters are called to the Torah at age 13.

So when people say—wouldn't it be enough for gays and lesbians to acquire civil rights through governmental legislation for civil unions? Our answers as committed Jews must be no. If our religious ceremonies mean anything to us, then we must provide them equally to all couples seeking to set up Jewish households in which they may choose to raise Jewish children. It is only in the context of communal events that we establish our identities as Jews. I believe that the right to a communal sanctification, to a wedding, should extend to same sex couples in our community, under the same rules which apply to heterosexual couples.

More about the Jewish perspective of human dignity and the command to pursue justice

(taken from "Speaking from Faith for Marriage Equality: Resources for people of faith" Outfront Minnesota.)

As Jews, we know that the definition of marriage has continually changed. The Bible defines marriage as a union between one man and one or more women. When we pray, we recall the three patriarchs and the four matriarchs, after all. Classical rabbinic texts do not address same sex marriage. The Talmud teaches us that the value of human dignity is so great that it supersedes any negative commandment in the Torah. Deuteronomy teaches us *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* (Justice, justice shall you pursue). In giving the world the concept of justice, Torah gave the world equality: fair treatment of the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger. Time and time again, Torah commands us not to oppress the stranger, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt and we know the heart of the stranger. We are Israel and we know what it is to be labeled as different.

Empathy is a central virtue in Judaism. It demands that we see things from the point of view of the other.

Religious Jews who support same-sex marriage approach it with a sense that it is part of our obligation to pursue justice. In Genesis, we are given a vision of humanity that tells us every human being is created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God). Rabbi Max Shapiro taught that we have always been a people driven by a sense of justice. We Jews have been the victims of discrimination. We have had jobs, schools and neighborhoods withheld from us because of who we are. "We understand that the law is not enough. The law tells us not to injure. The law forbids us from denying others their rights. But religion goes beyond the law. It demands that we help! Judaism demands that we help the less fortunate, that we protect [their] liberties, that we enhance [their rights]."

The Talmud teaches us that God created all of humanity from one person to illustrate God's genius. The Psalmist teaches us, "How many are the things you have made, O God! You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of your creations!" (Psalm 104:24). Our diversity speaks to God's power. Each one of us has worth and value and dignity.

For Jews, freedom to marry is a religious issue. As Jews, we know what it is like to have our rights limited. Our experience demands that we care for those who are strangers even in the places they live, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. As Jews, our tradition demands that we recognize the image of God in each and every individual.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

A Sunday Kind of Love

A sermon by the Rev. Mark Worth, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Castine

READINGS:

1. From “Standing On the Side of Love,” a sermon by the Rev. Lisa Friedman, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato, Minnesota

If there is one thing that I appreciate about our Unitarian Universalist Association’s invitation to stand on the side of love in these current times, it is that the invitation invites love as an active force in our lives. So much of our understanding of love can be passive—we talk of “falling” in love, or of being “helplessly” in love, or we assume love’s automatic presence in a family or a home or a community and are shocked to learn otherwise. But I do believe that love is more than merely a power that claims us. It is also a power that we claim by choosing our response to the truths of our world....

Love is a choice. Love is a stand. Whether we are standing by the bedside of a loved one dying, or standing in support by the side of a stranger we have only just met. Whether we are standing side by side in a parade to help end discrimination, or standing up for our children by donating a day’s business profit to Kids Against Hunger. The love which inspires the courage and commitment of such choices is not a sweet or sentimental kind of love. Rather it is a love which recognizes the greater good and the bonds of kinship of which we are a part.

2. From “Standing On the Side of Love,” a sermon by the Rev. Fred Small, First Parish, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sept. 13, 2009:

By the way, did you hear that Massachusetts now has the lowest divorce rate in the country? In 2004, when same-sex marriage became legal here, the divorce rate was 2.2 per thousand. Since then it’s gone down to 2.0 per thousand—the lowest levels since before World War Two. Rachel Maddow says “It turns out gay marriage is a Defense of Marriage Act.” Who knew?

3. Lyrics from “A Sunday Kind of Love,” a popular song composed by Barbara Belle, Anita Leonard, Stan Rhodes, and Louis Prima, published in 1946 I want a Sunday kind of love, A love to last past Saturday night

I’d like to know it’s more than love at first sight I want a Sunday kind of love ... My arms need someone to enfold To keep me warm when Mondays and Tuesdays grow cold Love for all my life to have and to hold

I want a Sunday kind of love.

THE SERMON

In her powerful autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, poet, civil rights activist and professor Maya Angelou tells of listening to the song, “A Sunday Kind of Love” when she was a teenager in the 1940s and a young adult in the ‘50s. Telling of her childhood experiences of poverty, racial segregation, abuse and rape, Angelou says she had been lured into prostitution by a pimp who promised her love and romance, but sold her to other men. And she said that the song, “A Sunday Kind of Love,” – recorded by artists such as Claude Thornhill, Ella Fitzgerald, Jo Stafford, the Harptones and Etta James in the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s, and Reba McEntire in the ‘80s – was a source of hope for a better life for her, a kind of love that lasts “past Saturday night.”

Tomorrow is Valentine’s day. Many of us grew up dreading Valentine’s Day in elementary school, because of the fear, perhaps even the certainty, that we would *not* get a valentine from that special someone, the person that we hoped and longed for. If we were fortunate, we found love, friendship and companionship as we grew up. Now many of us look toward children, grandchildren, and other friends and family members.

I think we all want that Sunday kind of love, a love that keeps us warm “when Mondays and Tuesdays grow cold,” as the song says.

The Rev. Lisa Friedman tells us, “Love is a choice. Love is a stand. Whether we are standing by the bedside of a loved one dying, or standing in support by the side of a stranger we have only just met. Whether we are standing side by side in a parade to help end discrimination, or standing up for our children by donating a day’s business profit to Kids Against Hunger.” In this imperfect world, full of human frailty and mortality, a world of disappointments, we choose to love. We choose to love one another, because in the final analysis, love is the world’s best hope.

Can we love our enemies?

In the New Testament, in Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus telling us to love our enemies, which most of us find terribly difficult.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you; if anyone takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again” (Luke 6:27-30). This is a very difficult teaching from Jesus. Is it really possible to be so loving, so selfless?

We find it much easier to be good to those who are good to us, not to those we find difficult or impossible. But Jesus goes on to say, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, and expect nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for God is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.”

Jesus is telling us to not imitate the difficult people, and not even to imitate our friends; but rather, imitate God – that sacred creativity that is the Ultimate Goodness at the heart of reality. For if we can do this, if we can learn to be like that Ultimate Goodness, that which we call “the Most High,” we can bring a bit of what Jesus called “the Kingdom of Heaven” here to this earth.

We hear a very similar message from the Buddha. “Hatreds do not cease in this world by hating, but by love; this is an eternal truth... Overcome anger by love, overcome evil by good. Overcome the miser by giving, overcome the liar by truth” said the Buddha (Dhammapada 1.5 and 17.3). Loving-kindness and compassion are central teachings in Buddhism.

Likewise, Muhammad taught, “The strong man is not the good wrestler. The strong man is only he who controls himself when he is angry” (Hadith of Bukhari 73:135).

Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, all teach the Golden Rule – to treat others the way we would like to be treated. Muhammad said, “None of you has faith unless he loves for his brother what he loves for himself” (Hadith of Bukhari 2:6). We all wish to be treated with respect, compassion, loving-kindness, and so we should do the same for our brothers and sisters – and that means everyone we encounter.

It may be helpful, I think, to understand that there are four Greek words that we translate into one English word. The English word is “love.” But the Greeks have four words for love. They are *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*.

Storge means “affection” in both ancient and modern Greek. It is natural affection, like parents feel for offspring. It’s rarely used in ancient texts. And *eros*, referring to sexual love, is not used in the New Testament. The Greek words for “love” that we do find in the writings of Paul (who spoke and wrote in Greek) and the writings *about* Jesus (who actually spoke Aramaic, and perhaps a smattering of Greek) are *philia* and *agape*. *Philia* means friendship in modern Greek. It is a virtuous love that includes loyalty and equality. In ancient texts, *philia* referred to love among family and friends as well as between lovers. *Agape* is the word we might use for deep affection or “true love,” rather than the sexual attraction suggested by *eros*. *Agape* is a Sunday kind of love. In the New Testament *agape* often refers to a sacrificial love, and this is the term Paul of Tarsus used in 1st Corinthians 13, where he says, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels but do not have love, I am [merely] a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or arrogant or boastful or rude.” Thank you Paul, but we find that a very hard maxim to live up to, don’t we? Paul challenges us to do that which is most difficult.

Love? Start with your sister.

In her book, *Marriage and Other Acts of Charity*, Unitarian Universalist minister and chaplain Kate Braestrup said that her son Peter told her that he could be loving toward anyone. Anyone at all. “Even an ax murderer,” he said.

“Start with your sister,” Kate told him. She goes on to say, “Start with your spouse. That’s what I had to do.” Kate tells of the time she and her husband, Drew, went to marriage counseling. She said that her attitude went like this: “The marriage is a mess,

add *it's not my fault*." She told the counselor that the issues were Drew's, and the responsibility was Drew's. "He has problems with aggression and anger," she said. She turned to Drew and said, "I have made a thorough and I think I can say *dispassionate* examination of our marriage, its structures, its sexual politics, and its relationship to the social order ... It is clear to me that the problem in our marriage is – not to put too fine a point on it – you."

"I know I'm hard to I've with," Drew said glumly.

Kate recalls that the counselor asked them whether they wanted to save the marriage, and they both replied affirmatively. And the counselor suggested to them that marriage is a spiritual discipline. They continued with counseling. Still, they were both terribly angry with one another, and Kate talked about divorce. Drew said, "I never thought I would lose you."

One evening, quite late, when Kate was in bed, Drew asked her to help him with the fish tank. He said, "It smells of Murphy's Oil Soap. One of the kids must have put Murphy's Oil Soap in the fish tank. Come downstairs. We have to save the fish."

She writes, "If our complicated marital history was anything to go by, the rest of the conversation should have gone like this: 'I'm tired. The fish will be fine.' 'The fish will die.' 'Let them die. We'll buy more tomorrow.' 'Oh, great. That's just great! What kind of lesson in pet ownership would that be for the kids, huh? What kind of lesson in planetary stewardship would it be?'"

You can see where this might lead. But that's not what happened. Instead, she said to herself, I love him, and nothing matters more than this. Kate got up and went downstairs. She helped him draw all thirty gallons out of the fish tank, one milk jug at a time. They rinsed the tank, and put thirty gallons of water back into the tank, one milk jug at a time. She writes, "My husband kept gazing at me, his eyes full of wonder; *What have the space aliens done with my real wife?*"

They put the fish back into the tank. The fish swam around, looking as happy as fish can look. And Drew and Kate? They were happy, too.

She says, "It took an hour and a half to do the whole job. ... Was Drew's happiness worth an hour and a half of my life? You want the simplest, truest answer? Yes."

That's part of Kate's story.

Sadly, Drew, who was a State Trooper, died in an automobile accident while trying to respond to a call. Kate has remarried Simon van der Ven, an artist. I saw Kate a couple of weeks ago at the annual Convocation at Bangor Theological Seminary. And I complimented her on the success of her three recent books, including the best-selling *Here If You Need Me*.

She said, "You know, Simon and I had a great conversation recently about all of the wonderful things that have happened in our lives and our relationship lately. We talked for along time. The next day, about half way through the day, I said to myself, 'Oh, and I've had three books published.'"

Success is not the most important thing. Love is. In fact, love is success.

Standing On the Side of Love ~

One last thought about love and marriage: You know that I'm a supporter of the freedom to marry. Our society allows most adults to marry, but the laws of Maine do not allow some adults to marry. Well, gays and lesbians *are* allowed to marry someone they *don't* love, someone they are *not* attracted to. But they are not allowed to marry the person they *do* love.

I'm a supporter of marriage. I believe marriage is good for society. It promotes family stability, loyalty, and fidelity. Marriage is about caring for families and for one another. Marriage is a good thing. When it works well, it's a Sunday kind of love. And if it is good for straight couples it's good for gay couples and lesbian couples as well. Marriage is good for society! I don't know why the Religious Right is afraid of marriage.

No one should have to marry, of course. I support the freedom to marry. Or to not marry. But we should all have the *same* freedoms, not better freedoms for me and lesser freedoms for other people. It's common sense. And so I don't understand why the folks on the Right are against the freedom to marry.

I believe in what the Declaration of Independence calls "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Surely marriage falls under the categories of liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The freedom to marry the adult person you love is part of our basic human rights and freedoms. Gays and lesbians aren't asking for anything odd. They're not asking for anything different. They're just asking for the same freedom I already have.

I don't understand those who say they want to protect marriage from people who want to get married. Huh? Do they think that after thirty-two years of marriage, Mickey and I would get divorced just because our neighbors or relatives were finally given the same freedom we have?

I think that those who say they want to "protect marriage" from people who want to get married really don't trust marriage. The fact is that Massachusetts, the state which has the longest experience with same-sex marriage, is also the state with the lowest divorce rate in the country. The sky did not fall. In fact, marriage is stronger in Massachusetts than in any other state.

Yes, there are some who make a biblical argument against same-sex marriage. Well, it depends what you go looking for in the Bible, doesn't it? The Bible says a lot more in favor of slavery than it says against homosexuality. And it tells us that King Solomon had 300 wives and 700 concubines. That's traditional family values for you.

Not long ago it was illegal for blacks and whites to marry each other. But we've redefined marriage since then, and maybe it's time to do it again.

You know that Jesus didn't go around preaching against sexual practices. He never said anything at all about homosexuality. But he did tell us to take the log out of our own eye before we try to take the speck out of our neighbor's eye.

A good man, a friend, recently told me he's all for letting gays and lesbians have civil unions, but not marriage. That's well-intentioned, but to me it smacks of second-class citizenship. We tried that with racial segregation. In 1896 the Supreme Court ruled that

Homer Plessey, who was three-quarters white and one-quarter black, could not ride in the same passenger train car as whites, because he was “colored.” The Court said that as long as the railroad provided a “separate but equal” car for coloreds, everything was fair. And so the American South descended into many hateful, hurtful decades of racial segregation. In 1954 the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision overturned the *Plessey* ruling. The *Brown* decision said that “separate but equal” isn’t equal at all. It is “inherently unequal” because it sets up one group as better and another group as inferior. And so I oppose a “separate but unequal” civil union law that is a kind of “second class marriage.” I didn’t ask Michelle to “civil union” me, I asked her to marry me. And we should all have the same *equal* freedom to marry.

Now, I know that we’re not going to get anywhere with Maine’s current governor and legislature. But I want you to know that I’m still standing for freedom. I’m not afraid of letting people get married, I still trust the value of marriage, and I’m still standing *for* marriage. I’m still standing on the side of love. And some day we will look back and say, like we now say about interracial marriage, “What was all the fuss about? Why was the Religious Right afraid of marriage?”

So you know I never preach political sermons. This is not a political issue to me. It is a justice issue. It’s about believing in people, our church members, friends, neighbors and relatives. It is about believing in marriage. It’s about believing in freedom.

And it’s about believing in love. Amen.