

Equality and Justice for All

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It was an unseasonably warm day last spring when I went to the steps of Legislative Hall in Dover. I was one of the first people to show up, which is something of an awkward position to be in. I wasn't sure if I was in the right spot. But slowly a group of people began to gather. Many of them wore rainbow buttons. Some wore pretty colorful hats that one could spot a half a mile away. Finally one fellow broke out a rainbow flag and began to wave it around.

I had been invited to the rally by my friend and colleague Rev. Lyn Oglesby, then the minister at the UU church in Dover. She asked me to participate in the rally which was sponsored by Equality Delaware, a group dedicated to seeing Delaware become the next state in the union to legally recognize same sex couples. It was on this occasion that the Governor announced that they were reintroducing legislation that would put into effect civil unions. There were many state legislators standing behind him at the time, including our own Brian Short I am happy to say. The Episcopalian priest gave a short reflection on, of all things,

Adam and Eve. So often that is a biblical passage used to argue against same sex unions, it was refreshing to hear it being used to support them. She was my inspiration for our Ancient Reading today.

The next day there was a forum at the UU Fellowship in Newark to discuss not only the new legislation, but also the fight to get same sex marriage recognized around the country. I remember when I first entered the ministry in 2000 it was the same year that Vermont passed a civil union law. In reaction against that law many states, including Nebraska where I lived, went so far as to add an amendment to their constitution to ensure that no such union would be recognized in middle America. Those were dark days for the cause. However just in the last year we have seen states like Iowa, which in general is more liberal than you might guess, make same sex marriage legal. Low and behold straight people remained marr

ied even after the gay people were allowed to do so too! All of the silly monsters under the bed that the religious right were trying to scare people with just don't have the power they once did. There are too many real life examples of these laws working.

In our Modern Reading this morning we heard Barack Obama's opinions on this issue. Many criticized the President for not acting sooner to abolish don't ask don't tell. I believe he waited to get other things passed first and was always going to get around to it eventually.

Politics is a messy game and the right thing doesn't always get done in a timely manner, but I believe it usually does work out. And thank goodness for his persistence! Perhaps you have seen the recent video of a woman serving in the navy coming off of her ship. She sees another woman, about her age, the two embrace, and in a moment reminiscent of the famous Life photograph, the two women kiss. It turns out that they were newlyweds, and their reunion was captured by a news crew. Finally their love was out in the open, and they expressed what a relief it was to finally be themselves.

I hope that is the feeling all across Delaware today. Today, the civil union bill that was passed last April is now in effect. I already have an appointment to sign my first civil union license for a couple who are members of the church and whose union ceremony I performed last fall. Last week Judge Crowell told me she too already had a list of couples she was going to unite in the new year. Finally we are on the road toward equality and justice in the state of Delaware for all people regardless of their sexual orientation or identity. The journey is not over, but it is off to a good start.

This morning I want to reflect with you on the nature of marriage. In the Catholic tradition, marriage is one of the church's seven sacraments, on par with taking holy office. What does it mean to us Unitarian Universalists? When same sex marriage was first legalized in Massachusetts some years back, one of my colleagues joked that the

new law meant that gays and lesbians are now free to be as miserable as the rest of married people. Reminds me of the old joke about a man who, after yet another of his marriages ended, told his friends, “You know instead of getting married again I think I will just find a woman I don’t like and buy her a house!” Marriage is not for the faint of heart, and as the old saying goes it is not to be entered into lightly. The first legal same sex marriage in Massachusetts, the couple who filed the case that went to the state Supreme Court and got the law overturned, were Unitarian Universalists. They were married by then UUA President Bill Sinkford at UUA Headquarters in Boston. They also became the first same sex couple to divorce.

Marriage has two necessary ingredients for it to work at any level. They are love and commitment. You can be in love and not be committed. You can be committed and not necessarily in love. But you are not married until you have both, and if either disappears then the marriage is soon to follow.

A few years back there was quite the brewhaha in Unitarian Universalism. A group of people based out of a church in Kentucky wanted the UUA to recognize them. They were UUs for polyamorous awareness. Polyamory, if you are unfamiliar with it, is the notion that one can be in a romantic relationship with more than one person. Thus instead of a couple you could have a triad or a quad relationship, involving three or four people respectively. The things you learn when

you go to General Assembly, I tell you. On the one hand they argued that Unitarian Universalists are open and accepting of everyone and their lifestyle choice should be accepted. On the other hand, we tried the open marriage/swinger thing back in the seventies in Unitarian Universalism, and every where that was done, it left a legacy of emotional woundedness in our congregations for decades. I met resistance in my former church in Omaha when I tried to start a young adult group. As it turned out, the older members of the church remembered some very inappropriate boundary crossing that happened in a similar group year before. The legacy of that hurt is very real.

As the debate raged through various quarters and conversations in our movement, I arranged to have a polyamory representative come to minister meeting. How he described it was very interesting. It seemed that people entered and left these multiple partner groups fairly regularly. When I asked why they left, he said well so and so got a job in California and they moved. Or she found a guy she really liked and decided to marry him. Oh well, there they go, no hard feelings.

While this stoic attitude was lifted up as a virtue, I came to see what polyamory was all about. It was love without commitment. I am sure these people have very sincere feelings for each other. But in a marriage, if someone gets a job and moves to California, then everyone moves to California. There is a commitment to the other person that transcends convenience. That is why the Catholics put marriage in the

same sacramental category as becoming a priest. It takes that level of devotion and commitment to the institution of marriage. It is a spiritual discipline in the fullest sense of the word.

Marriage is a spiritual discipline. It is the lifelong study of another person. All of us have a backstage view of ourselves, how we think and how we act. Marriage, however, is the intimate study of another person; and it does take a lifetime. I am not a big stickler about the woman taking the man's name after marriage. My wife did, and in retrospect I am glad she did. Many people on my side think that she is a long-lost Snyder. Her sense of humor and personality fit us very well. When I was looking at places to go next in my career she enthusiastically lobbied for Wilmington Delaware despite the fact that both of us are born and bred Midwesterners. She lived in the Omaha area for her entire life before moving here. That is commitment and support. It doesn't come easily, but like most things that don't come easily, it is so worth it when it arrives.

In our Ancient Reading this morning Eve eats of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Her eyes are opened and she becomes aware of the fact that she is naked and tries to cover herself. Now most Christians, taking their cue from St. Paul, see this as the paradigmatic fall, the utter disaster of mankind in which sin becomes our primary way of operating. They get hung up on the legalism of technically breaking one of God's commandments. The subsequent punishment then gets

blown out of proportion. In fact this story is a metaphor. Human beings are not like other animals. We have culture and reason. We form relationships and have norms of behavior. All of that came flooding into Eve in that moment she ate of the fruit of the tree. It must have been like coming up from underwater; one second she is an instinct-driven animal, and the next second she can think and relate to others. No wonder she wanted Adam to share in the experience.

This is also a lesson about marriage. Go in with your eyes wide open. Yes it is good to be moved by love, but do not be blinded by it. Marriage is a spiritual discipline and like all disciplines it gets hard at times. Count on it. But love, love is what keeps that bond together and makes the whole journey worthwhile.

I am one of those who believes that God really wanted Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Come on, what is the first thing you say to somebody when you are trying to get them to do something: tell them NOT to do it! Classic reverse psychology. If humanity is to be in the image of God, then we must be aware, rational, and empathetic. I believe that if there is anything one could rightly call God in human experience it is the capacity for us to love. How else does one explain the desire to consider the needs and welfare of another person over our own? Animal instinct would have us seek self preservation. Yet there is inherent in all of us, yet far too underdeveloped in most of us, an urge to be of use to others; to see them

be happy; and to have them prosper. The ability to go beyond our own selfish self interest is our ability to love, and that love is divine. It may be that the only way that God can ever truly be made manifest in this world is through human compassion, understanding and love. Without us God does not exist. If we do not love, then the world becomes very cold and lonely indeed.

Seen from this perspective, then, same sex couples are simply another expression of love. I will not pretend that I know why some people are gay and others are not. No one knows the answer to that. Now if I can put my hat on as a Cultural Anthropology major, I will say that my time studying world culture was pretty interesting.

Anthropologists don't know any better than anyone else why some people are gay and some people are straight. However I can say that human sexuality is far more complex than our black and white view of the world would have us think. There are cultures where what we would call homosexuality is accepted as a part of who some people are, and in some cases even encouraged. Sexuality is a mysterious and powerful force within us and we would do well to be humble in our considerations of it. This is not to say that you or I or our culture should accept every form of sexual expression. There should be limits, as so many UU churches learned the hard way back in the day, but limits are good. Freedom has no meaning without limits—it's one of the paradoxes of life that we learn as we mature. But freedom does not come about all on

its own unless there are people willing to stand up and speak out and act out for equality and justice. That is what we celebrate today as well.

This month we will be talking about resistance. Resistance to hatred, to fear, to injustice are important things to reflect on in the month in which we observe the birthday of one of our nation's greatest prophets, Martin Luther King Jr. Resistance implies persistence. The first time the civil union bill was introduced to the legislature it was killed in committee. I heard a lot about that when I first came to this church. But time went by, we changed Governors and there was the sea-change of 2008 for the Democrats and the landscape shifted. The commitment had not wavered. Injustice was still there and cried out to be corrected. Thousands of gay, lesbian and transgendered people were still legally second class citizens until 12 AM last night. The thing is though, you can't give up. If the cause is just, then you can't give up. Even when they change your state's amendment, you have to believe that it can get changed back. Resistance is persistence. It means holding on to hope even when pure reason might dictate otherwise.

The problem of course is that we in our culture have such short attention spans. Back in the civil rights era they thought in terms of the work they were doing would be realized in the course of generations, not their lifetime. They hoped for something that their kids and grandkids could enjoy. They knew that the fight for justice and equality was a long

one with many battles, some won and some lost. Real resistance doesn't give up when done in service to the noble cause of love.

What is it that you are committed to this year? It might be a person, but aim higher. As we all reflect on new years resolutions I urge you to expand yourself. Most of us could lose a few pounds—that is a good goal to have. But what about others? What cause or higher purpose, either inside our church or beyond it, will you give yourself to in the new year? For you see even causes like same sex unions, which at one point seemed like a distant dream, can come into being. But the key is our commitment. Let it be steadfast this new year wherever more love is needed. Amen Blessed Be.