

“Gay Rites, Civil Rights”

Presented by Rev. Martin Woulfe

February 22, 2004

There is a song -- actually several songs -- that bear the title, “Everything Old is New Again.” And those lyrics came to mind this week, while I was reviewing the events related to gay marriage in San Francisco and elsewhere but also as I looked at some political cartoons. And you can learn a lot from political cartoons.

I have a collection here: some depict the constitution as being gutted. Others depict the president as a good-natured imbecile. Some charge that the government lies, and our troops are dying in an unjust and pointless war. Some describe the horrors of terrorism. Others express fear that India and Pakistan are once again at each other’s throats. Some dismiss the UN as a farce; others express outrage that the environment is being devastated. Some deal with the primaries and say how weary the people are already with all of the Democratic contenders. Some say that the Supreme Court is a right-wing conspiracy that has run amok. Others say that the peace process in the Middle East is stalled, if not dead.

“The issue of gay rights is splitting the nation.” Sound familiar? Well, everything old is new again. This collection is from the 1970’s. There’s even a cartoon in there about a certain Donald Rumsfeld.

As I mentioned last week, my topic for today has changed because circumstances in this nation have changed, and I believe a shift to be warranted. So instead of speaking on Lent, per se, I will specifically speak on the issue of gay marriage.

I will say right now: I am in favor of gay and lesbian marriage rights, what we call *full-equality marriage for all*. Now this is not a new issue. And as I mentioned, there are political cartoons from thirty years ago that anticipated this moment in history. They anticipated the divide, the arguments, the hostility and the exhilaration felt by different factions. It’s been a long time coming. But in recent weeks and months, we have seen how things have escalated rather quickly.

You will recall that there was a Texas case a few months ago, that redefined and basically decriminalized sexual behavior, attributed by many exclusively to homosexuals, but not necessarily. And it was hailed as a breakthrough. More recently, the High Court in Massachusetts directed their legislature to rewrite their laws so that all citizens may marry. A little more than a week ago, the mayor of San Francisco really created a tempest – did he not? – when he gave a Valentine’s Day present to the gay and lesbian community. And three thousand couples from across the world converged on San Francisco, and were issued marriage licenses, and the civil authority gave their blessing.

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If you have been reading the papers, if you have been watching the news, you know that this is not a tame issue. A lot of people have very strong opinions on this. But you cannot deny that the issue of gay marriage is, perhaps in a way it's never been before, out of the closet and in the open.

Now, many of us have become familiar with a lot of gay and lesbian people in our lives. Some we have known at a personal level; some have been broadcast to us or brought to us through the entertainment media. There was Ellen De Generes, Rock Hudson, k.d. lang, and more recently the hit series, "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy".

And now the level of consciousness has been raised even further, and the stakes have also been raised. It's also true that when Mayor Newsom gave his blessing; when the County Clerk in Sandoval, New Mexico issued fifty marriage licenses; when his honor, the mayor of Chicago said he had "no problem", it signaled that there had been a profound shift in the mainstream.

And yet it seems that the issue of marriage is really part and parcel, if you will, of what we as a larger society are struggling with. You are aware, for example, that President Bush, in his State of the Union Address, declared that he was pledged to commit 1.5 billion (dollars) for the protection and promotion of marriage. But it's an exclusive protection of marriage: marriage for heterosexuals.

Now the divide as we have experienced it, as I have analyzed it, is that there are different factions pro and con on this issue. There are those who are for it now: nothing less than the immediate full granting of full civil rights. There are others who favor gay marriage, but are a bit reluctant of the timing because they're afraid. They're afraid that there will be a backlash, and so they would promote gay marriage, but on a much more gradual basis. There are those who are not comfortable with giving the term 'marriage' to the union of two gay men or two lesbian women. And so they would prefer to keep something akin to 'separate and equal' – just call it by a different name. And then there are those who are opposed to gay marriage, and their stance is, "Not now; not ever!"

I haven't seen much middle ground: you're either for it or against it. If you're for it, the question is when and how? If you're against, you're against it now and forever. One commentator that I read recently compared the issue to that of abortion. And the writer predicted that gay marriage is coming, and that it will be legally sanctioned someday, but that, just like the issue of abortion, that will not necessarily resolve the differences or the tension in society.

Wouldn't it be really convenient if everyone in each faction took a side and we could distinguish them like characters in fiction, characters in novels, characters in movies? Wouldn't it be really convenient, if life were something like the "Lord of the Rings"? Where you have people ranged on opposing sides, dressed differently – even better if they're of different species. And just by looking at a person you can tell

which side of an issue they're on. One grand battle, hash it all out, kill everyone that you disagree with, and then you can settle it amongst yourselves! But life is not so easy.

And it's not an issue that is clearly divided between black and white, male/female. It's not even necessarily a liberal/conservative divide, or a democrat/republican divide. The religious communities themselves are split. I have known some Unitarian Universalists who were afraid that their church would become tainted with the stigma that theirs was a 'gay church', even though theirs was a welcoming congregation. I have read that some conservatives support gay marriage and they oppose any constitutional amendment against it. They are pro-marriage, on principle, for all.

But we are dealing with a great dis-ease in our society. Some of our words reflect that: the words we use for a couple. There the gender specific terms: there is 'the husband'; there is 'the wife'. There is the generic: 'spouse', plural 'spice'! There is the euphemism 'significant other'. And I am told that there is a new euphemism, 'spartners', combining the best of 'spouse' and 'partner'.

But our language and the semantics we use reflect our dis-ease with this issue. And it very much reflects the notion of "don't ask; don't tell", made popular in the military discussions during the Clinton administration, but reflected in many of our own private lives, I think. And that notion of "don't ask, don't tell" really reflects how ill at ease we are about talking about others' sexuality. Certainly in my upbringing, I never talked about my own, let alone anyone else's, contrary to the popular perception of men. But there is a perceived idea that the majority is uncomfortable with this issue, and there have been many, many polls.

Now, since it is perceived to be a taboo, the issue, as I said for some, is the timing. And you can hear their words of caution: advocates for gay marriage are all in favor of gay marriage, but say, you cannot rush this. If you do it too fast, too soon, you will offend the majority and there will be a terrific backlash.

I saw this idea in some of the literature from the Rainbow Riders. These are two lesbian grandmothers who will be riding across the country in the summer and they will be here in Springfield this June. They have asked for our help and our support. And one of the catch phrases in their literature is this campaign is to "get all the ducks in a row". They are in favor of marriage equality, but they are leery about pushing too fast, too far.

It's a scary issue for a lot of people. And there's a lot of fear involved in this issue that I'll address. But I want to share several stories from my family's history. Some of you have heard me tell the story that my brother is gay. I also have an aunt who is gay. I did not find out that my aunt was gay until my mother was on the point of death in the hospital and the family converged and a lot of old scars were healed, and a lot of old pains were addressed and there was much healing, both in terms of

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our family, spiritual and psychically. And that was the first time – this was about ten years ago; my mother was in a coma, expected to die – that it was finally shared with the rest of the family that her sister was gay. My question at the time, was, “Why did you wait so long to tell us?”

On the other hand, you may have also heard me tell the story about one of my younger brothers who came out to the family about six years ago. It was a very interesting situation. Years before, my siblings and I used to get together and process the events of our childhood, just to make sure that our parents really hadn't screwed up our upbringing. It was very therapeutic and we actually gained a strong sense of resolution at those dinners. On one such evening, I asked my sister – and I had been wondering about this, but again, in our family, and in particular for me, you don't talk politics, you don't talk Cubs or Sox, you don't talk about a person's sexuality. But I asked my sister, and it was a bold question for me. “Is my brother gay?” And my sister said, “You should ask him.” OK. So much for triangulation!

Well, within a week, I was on the phone with my brother, and I was trying to pick the right way to broach the subject because it was such a sensitive issue in our family. There was no question that if he had come out years before, he certainly would have been disowned by my parents... So, I began to tell him about a wedding I had just conducted for two gay women – a ceremony that I would have called it a ‘civil union’ at the time. And that opened the door and he began to feel free to exchange stories about some of the conversations he had with people in Hollywood, actors and producers who were gay, and films that dealt with the issue, and at the end of the conversation, he was able to tell me that he himself was gay.

I also learned that my mother and my sisters had found out “his secret” years before, but that my brother could not share that news with the men in the family. No doubt because of fear, fear that he would be rejected, cut off. It was also fear of my dad. Well, within a week, he came out to my brothers and my dad. And it was probably the bravest thing he has done in his life. I found that out when I received a call from my dad. I was at the church as an intern. And I picked up the phone and it was my dad, and he cut to the chase, “You heard the news about your brother?” Yes, I'd had, I replied – I was waiting to see which way this was going to go. And then my dad spoke, “Well, don't let it change the way you feel about him.”

(Voice in the congregation: “Wow.”)

That was my first reaction: Wow! I was very proud, but I had a brief moment where I remembered “The Invasion of the Body Snatchers”! But it truly was my dad and it was proof positive for me that someone really could change, someone whom I know had once been firmly hostile to homosexuals and lesbians, and now he was accepting. And next he told me, “Don't let it change the way you feel about him.” And my response was, “Well, don't worry, Dad. We were distant before; we're distant still.”

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Now my brother works for the Fox Network in Chicago. One of his responsibilities, one of his initiatives has been to stage “weddings on ice.” If you’ve never seen that, you have a couple, they’re getting married. It’s Chicago, winter. They have a minister come out and they perform this elaborate ceremony to a young couple on the ice. There was a gay group that was agitating to have this ceremony expanded to include a civil union between either a gay or a lesbian couple. And they called my brother and tried to put pressure on him. My brother was very reluctant because he didn’t think the audience would swallow that. Again, he was afraid of the backlash. And so the gay press in Chicago dragged him over the coals because he had cold feet about this. And when I spoke to him about this, he said, “I’m gay. It’s not just the right time for this! And besides, no self-respecting gay couple would go for that sort of thing!” But the pressure did not subside and as far as I know, next year they probably will have a civil union on ice.

To address the question of timing: when is it the right time? I remembered a quote from Leon Trotsky, who was writing on the failure of 1916 Irish rebellion. And to paraphrase Mr. Trotsky: “You never know if a movement is premature or if it’s opportune until after it has been tried. Success or failure is the final determination of whether it was opportune.”

Now for people who are hostile to the notion of a gay marriage, there will never, ever be a convenient time to sanction that, either by the church or by the state. And this leads into six different notions that I’ll briefly mention, six stances that I have heard. There’s the issue of religious tradition. There is the issue of nature. There is the issue of nurture. Next, the slippery slope argument, as I like to call it. Number five: what’s in the constitution? And number six, the civil rights and social justice issue.

In terms of marriage, marriage exists on two levels: it is a civil event; it is often a religious event. It can be one or the other. When I officiate at a wedding or a civil union, I will generally say, “Religions may consecrate and the state may legalize such unions, but they can neither enforce nor destroy them. It can only be kept by the love that you bring for one another.”

You are probably aware that different religious traditions have wildly different notions about what constitutes a valid marriage. I have received phone calls from couples, and a timid voice will ask, do I perform mixed weddings? And by that, the caller is letting me know, they mean racially mixed. And then the caller will tell me that they have contacted other ministers who have refused to marry them because they are of mixed race. In 2004, folks. My normal response is “As far as I’m concerned, every marriage is a mixed marriage.”

There are some traditions that will not officiate at an interfaith wedding: Jewish-Christian, Jewish-Catholic, Protestant-Catholic. There are different combinations, but some priests, some ministers, some rabbis, will refuse to officiate at a union of two people, deeply in love, because they come from different faith traditions. I’m also aware, having been raised Roman Catholic, that officially, the

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Roman Catholic Church does not recognize my marriage to my wife, because I had been married once in a Catholic church, divorced, but the marriage was never annulled. And so, officially, from a Catholic perspective, my marriage is a sham, and my child Celeste is illegitimate. Their loss.

But different faith traditions will keep pushing the envelope, either for or against. I will wager that at least half of this congregation, back in December or in early January, received via email, an online poll. This was published by the American Family Association. This was a group hostile to gay marriage. And the intention of this poll was to survey their own members and then to present the results to Congress as proof positive that the majority of Americans, but in actuality only their own small cluster of people, were opposed to gay marriage. You may have seen the article that said this online poll made its way, via the Internet, to the general population. And what happened? Well it got into the hands of the wrong people. It got into the hands of people like us, who responded and forwarded it to our mailing lists. And as of January 19, sixty percent of the respondents were in favor of gay marriage. And an additional nine percent were in favor of civil unions with full benefits and recognition. Only thirty one percent were against the issue of gay marriage. And so the group, shocked as they were, annulled the poll. They will not submit it to Congress.

And the issue of religion creeps into most of the current discussions. I've read the governor's remarks. I've read a lot of remarks from a lot of different reporters, and certain words creep up. 'Marriage is a sacred institution.' You hear the word 'sacred' – something in religion is influencing their notions. There's a reverend whose opinion was published in the State Journal yesterday, who described marriage as "an institution whose very nature surpasses human invention," in other words, 'that which God hath ordained.'

Not everyone who speaks from a religious perspective is going to be gracious. I looked at the website for the Westborough Baptist Church to see what their stance was, even though, if you know them, you know what they're going to say. It's a group shepherded by the self-ordained Fred Phelps. Their website is godhatesfags.com. Their stance is that, "All nations must immediately outlaw homosexuality and impose the death penalty." That is the extreme.

But there have been many interesting issues that have been debated by both religions and the civil authorities. And things which the theocratic societies condemned and would kill you for are no longer repressed or punished. There was a time when anyone who had premarital sex, who had children out of wedlock, who had a divorce, was a champion of democracy, who opposed slavery, who was in favor of the theater or in favor of birth control, in favor of abortion or opposed to corporal punishment, would be punished and in some instances even killed by the state and religious authorities.

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But many things that were once considered scandalous, many things that had a strong stigma, have had that stigma removed, but not by the churches, by the civil authority. And it occurs to me that many of the arguments against gay marriage are rooted in the notions of family that were common currency perhaps a half a century or more ago. It was once assumed that the common typical family consisted of one man, one woman, and their children; the man as the breadwinner, the woman as the mother and housekeeper. And as I mentioned almost a year ago, when I was a candidate for minister here, those statistics have changed dramatically in the past few decades. That kind of a household is no longer the norm; in fact, it is the minority of the actual American experience.

Nature. There are those who will say this is unnatural. Again, it's tied in with their religious beliefs. Well, not so fast. A book was published, I believe it was last year, by a gentleman named Bruce Bagemihl, entitled Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity. And in this long book - and I haven't read it, just the excerpts - four hundred fifty species of animals, both in the wild and in captivity, engage in homosexual activity. So, then, there is precedence in nature. I heard one estimate years ago, and I haven't found the original form, I think it was by the University of Wisconsin Madison that suggested ten percent of every animal species is homosexual.

There is the question of nurture. Can gay men and women be good parents? According to some studies, yes. They can be just as good - and just as bad - as a heterosexual couple.

There is the slippery slope argument: if you allow this, well then you have to sanction the unions between polygamous or polyamorous people - you can't call them couples - also between pedophiles, necrophiliacs, people and beasts, and so forth and so on. In short, the argument goes, if you broach this and if you extend the privilege of marriage, then you have to extend it to everyone. My reaction: one bridge at a time.

I'm also reminded of an incident that was told by Mark Twain. He was approached by a Mormon, arguing in favor of polygamy. And the polygamist challenged Mr. Twain to cite one piece of scripture against polygamy. Mr. Twain said, "Nothing could be easier. For it is written: 'No man shall serve two masters.'"

Tonight we're going to be showing a movie. It's by Michael Moore, called "Bowling for Columbine". And one of the themes of that film is just how infected our current society is with fear. Fear of our neighbors, fear of our government, fear of strangers, fear of our own insecurities.

And it occurs to me, that people who are gay or lesbian, have all the fears that others do - by others, I mean the heterosexuals. But they have additional fears compounding that. There are fears connected to their self-esteem. Fears of their family, that they are unnatural, that they will be ostracized, that they will be rejected.

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There are fears based on what they have heard in church. They are ashamed. There are fears of persecution, that physical harm may come to them, as it did to Matthew Shepard and others. Fears.

There *are* risks. There are risks of rejection. There's the risk of alienation from family, friends, salvation and protection from the laws of the state. And because of this fear, many gays and lesbians that I have known have been starved for acceptance, appreciation and affection. I first began to realize this when I was in my late teens, early twenties, when I discovered that three men had crushes on me. The first time was in Dubuque, Iowa. I was a student. I was an artist, a poet. I liked the French. I wore a beret. When I wasn't being sarcastic, I was usually quiet and sensitive. And also when people would come out to me, I didn't jump out of my skin. And in Dubuque, it all added up, well, he must be gay!

But, as I said, what I experienced in my conversations with many friends, many colleagues, who are gay and lesbian, is just how much stress they had in their lives, how much anxiety, how much fear of being rejected. And how appreciative they were just to be accepted as a normal human being. And that I think is what this church teaches.

And as I mentioned, coming out – either as a couple or an individual – requires tremendous courage. I had a classmate, on our first day of theological school, who had been a Lutheran minister's wife and studied to be a minister herself. When she came out as a lesbian, she was divorced and ex-communicated. And so she found herself in a Unitarian Universalist theological school looking for acceptance and when she introduced herself to us, her sexual orientation was one of the first things she had to share. And she was moved and relieved when we basically shrugged our shoulders and said, "Well, ok. But tell us more about what you believe, what you think and what you want to do with your life." And as I mentioned we had a similar situation with my brother and too many incidences to recount here.

But there's a lot of fear. There's fear for heterosexuals. My mother, God love her, is afraid I would go to jail for officiating at a union ceremony. I have felt fear when I have preached on the subject of gay rights, because sometimes when you publicize it, it attracts people who are going to jump up and disrupt the service. I know churches that have been picketed by anti-gay groups. As I mentioned, I know people, Unitarian Universalists, who are afraid that their church will gain the reputation as 'the Gay Church'. What they're really afraid of is that they'll have to watch a couple making out.

What I have learned is that ethics reflect general regional customs, and are given to geographical variations. And it's my good luck to be married to someone who is from Spain. For when you travel to a different country and experience their culture, you begin to realize that what you assumed is the status quo, is not necessarily true for each and every community, each and every family. There's much

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divergence in terms of what is acceptable, in terms of violence and sex, marriage customs, marriage rights, from one society to another.

Now there are people who will tell us, "Well, that's all fine and good for the world, but let's talk about this country. Let's talk about our constitution. Let's talk about those damned activist judges!" Well, God bless those activist judges! The constitution that people would defend and would say does not allow this, is the same constitution that has sanctioned rape, mutilation, murder and exploitation of people of color under the guise of slavery. It is the same constitution that has denied women the right to vote and you will note, the ERA was never passed. So in principle, women do not have the same protections under the law as men.

Now you will also remember that several weeks ago I spoke on the notion of civil religion, in reference to Mr. Lincoln. And I mentioned that there are many components of the American civil religion which are supposed to guarantee civil rights for all human beings who by virtue of the accident of their birth can call themselves "Americans". And there is a prayer and it goes like this:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Now it wasn't so very long ago that the courts began to debate whether or not the phrase 'under God' should be allowed or not. And we saw the spectacle of a number of people, good intentioned I am sure, bellowing out the pledge on the Capitol steps of Congress and in civic halls and bars everywhere. And I cannot help but find it curious that so many people get so worked up about the phrase 'under God' and pay absolutely no attention to the real import of the pledge, which is 'with liberty and justice for all'. And that is the creed of the American civil religion.

There's disparity. Separate but not equal is not good. Since this is Black History Month, let me mention that the marriage rites for slaves used the phrase, 'until death or distance do you part', changing the familiar phrase 'until death do you part', because it was a recognition that these families could be split up and sold, and therefore they did not have the same protections as their white brothers and sisters.

People change, like my father, like me. Societies change. When I preached in Champaign-Urbana several weeks ago, two men got up during 'Joys and Concerns' and shared that they were celebrating their thirty-four year anniversary. The congregation cheered and the service leader spoke when they sat down, saying, "And just for the record, I want you to know: I don't feel that my marriage is threatened by you."

But a lot of people are threatened. And a lot of people are taking strong action, on both sides of the issue. A number of my colleagues are refusing to sign marriage licenses for any couple until the state and the Federal governments recognize that

gays and lesbians should have equal rights in marriage. It's an issue I have struggled with. I consider it symbolic, but I don't think that our numbers and our actual influence justify it.

I have also asked the question, what does it mean to take that stand when you are a married heterosexual and not to renounce your own privileges? And it's also good to remember that not every gay and lesbian couple wants to get married. There have been a lot of very funny jokes this last week about the institution of marriage. But there are people who are in love and do want to make a commitment to one another – a lifelong commitment. And that is what we would celebrate.

And the UU way for years and years and years has taken the position that we support the right to marry for same sex couples. A resolution was passed by the General Assembly in 1996, a Resolution of Immediate Witness in support of equal marriage. The UUA's President, Bill Sinkford, has written out time and time again that we support family values. And we define a family a little bit differently, but we value a family no less than anyone else. My position is anyone who is willing to commit themselves for a lifetime together because of love, the hope of companionship, children and to share property and benefits, they deserve to be married, whether they are straight or whether they are gay.

Last week we had a guest preacher here, Tamara, you might remember her. Not that it makes any difference, but she is a lesbian and she was here with her partner. She has a ring from their commitment ceremony from 1996. Inscribed on that ring are the words, in French – I'll translate it: "Unfaithful to none; faithful to one." I cannot think of anything better to say about what a committed love relationship is: unfaithful to none, but faithful to one. And when two people truly love each other, I believe that I, and my colleagues, should bless that relationship. To do anything else, is to take away their dignity, and to treat them as second class citizens or worse, as despicable. And that is not the charge of a Unitarian minister; that is not the charge of the people who walk in the congregation.

Let me end this on a religious note. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Micah wrote, "What does the Lord require of thee but to love justice, to practice mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?" That, to me, is the essence of what we are trying to do. It doesn't say that those who are gay cannot walk humbly with their god. It says all people should walk humbly with their god. Keep your religious views to yourself and do not impose them on other people. And be humble. We don't know everything. But love justice. And justice is justice for all, the universal measure. Practice mercy. Do not withhold from others what you would have for yourself. I think that if we can live up to this dictum, if we can be truly good people and honor other people's differences, then we will further the blessings of creation.