

August 3, 2008
UU Fellowship of Tuolumne County, Ca

Standing on the Side of Love

All over California this summer celebrations are taking place – celebrations of love! Gay and lesbian couples – many of them in partnerships going back decades – are finally getting to do what heterosexual couples have always been able to do. They are marrying partners they love! These celebrations are taking place because the California Supreme Court recently ruled that it violates the state Constitution to deny gay and lesbian couples the right to marry that is enjoyed by straight couples. But now, this decision is threatened by Proposition 8, which would amend the California Constitution to provide that only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California. If passed, Proposition 8 would, of course, override the Supreme Court's decision. So the struggle goes on for true marriage equality in California.

Personally, I believe that the campaign by the opponents to this Proposition 8 – which includes our UU Legislative Ministry as a very active partner – will defeat this measure. But – it's going to take many hours of work and many millions of dollars to do so. So, I want to urge all of us to be pro-active in opposing this measure – to talk it up with our friends and neighbors, to join rallies, to walk precincts, to contribute financially. In fact, I am going to urge that we as a congregation go on record as opposing Proposition 8. Because taking such a stand requires a congregational vote, after notice to all the members, I am proposing to our board that we hold such a vote immediately after our service on September 7th. That way, we can include notice of the vote in the September issue of our newsletter, The Catalyst.

This morning, I want to discuss with you some of the claims that are being made about the institution of marriage, and specifically about the right of gays and lesbians to marry. It's so easy to get caught up in legal and political arguments, and it's especially easy to begin to feel angry at what may seem like bigotry in our opponents. It's natural to feel angry at any group that wants to deny rights to a whole sector of our population. And we should feel angry when we encounter oppression of any group. But it's important, I would argue, not to let our anger distract us from our focus on the issue at stake in this debate – the right to marry the person we love, for every Californian.

So -- at the outset I want to be very clear what we are talking about – we are talking about LOVE. We are talking about the right of two people who love each other to join together in a celebration of their commitment. We are echoing the Apostle Paul, who famously said: “now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” We are echoing Jesus of Nazareth, who welcomed the children in a spirit of love; who welcomed all to join him at the table, out of love; who enjoined his followers to love even their enemies. And we're echoing the ancient Hebrews, who taught us to love our neighbors and even to love “the stranger in our midst.” One of the songs in our most recent UU songbook, “Singing the Journey,” is called “Standing on the Side of Love.” I would have loved to have sung it today, but it's a bit hard to sing, and I didn't see us attempting it, at least not without Janet Telford, our music director. Anyway, part of the chorus of the song goes like this:

We are standing on the side of love:
Hands joined together as hearts beat as one.
Emboldened by faith, we dare to proclaim,
We are standing on the side of love.

Yes – as we follow the competing campaigns leading up to the November election, let us remember that in opposing Proposition 8, we are standing on the side of love!

And in this context, I want to urge us to follow the teachings of leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The point of a struggle for social justice is not to defeat the opponent; it's not to humiliate the opponent; it's not to demonize the opponent. Nope – what we're trying to do here is to persuade; it's to win the opponent over to our point of view. And the way to do that is to maintain our own sense of purpose, our own moral clarity and integrity. It's to remain true to our purpose, which is to persuade the people of California that is right and proper to accord the right to marry to every loving couple, not just to those who happen to be heterosexual.

The institution of marriage is in crisis in America; the family, which has always been the foundation of our society, is in trouble. Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce; each year some 1.5 million women are assaulted by their current or former husbands or boyfriends; one in three children are born outside marriage. Family ties and relationships are growing weaker – with disastrous consequences, especially for children. Family breakdown figures into a wide range of social problems, such as poverty; delinquency and crime; sexual promiscuity; poor education and unemployment; physical, emotional, and mental ill-health, and spiritual alienation, to name just a few. So – shouldn't we rejoice when a sizable group in our society wants to get married; wants to enter into long-term commitments, based on love; wants to share a household together, and perhaps to begin a family?

[PAUSE]

Now, there are many who base their claims against marriage equality on scripture – on the Bible and religious teachings based on it. It seems to me there are two responses to that. The first is that this country was founded on the notion of religious freedom, which clearly includes the freedom not to be religious; and congruent with that is the notion there should be no established religious; i.e., no recognized state religion. So, the great majority of Americans would reject scripture or religious belief as normative – as a basis for creating legal prohibitions.

The second response is that the Bible isn't so clear on issues of sexuality and marriage. As the reading from Mary Tolbert indicates, we can find authority for almost any position in the Bible if we try hard enough. But there are some grand overriding themes that we need to pay attention to, including loving our neighbor, practicing compassion, working for justice, loving mercy, speaking and walking with humility, and so on.

So, I want to take some time this morning to address some of the arguments being made from the Bible. As we do so, we need to remember that the words of the Bible – however divinely inspired, at least in places -- consist of the work of human beings who were writing in a particular historical, social, and cultural setting. So, we need to consider sexual mores and patterns that prevailed in the ancient Middle Eastern world. In the ancient Hebrew and early Christian cultures, sexual relations were clearly

not about love and intimacy between two equals. First and foremost, sex was an expression of the power of one person over another. A few elite males were at the top of the heap: royalty, priests, soldiers, a few scribes. Otherwise, the population consisted mostly of peasants and a sizable number of slaves. Even the wives and daughters of the elite males were considered to be property of these males. Because a wife was property, for example, only a woman could be guilty of committing adultery. Sex was almost always a matter of relations between a more powerful and a less powerful person: man and woman, royalty and slave, and so forth.

Within this system of sex based on power, homosexuality appears in the Bible, not as a matter of loving relationship, but as another aspect of power over another, as a way of humiliating one's enemies. Thus, a conquering army might rape and abuse the defeated soldiers. A popular way to insult another man, a stranger or visitor perhaps, was to force him to take the female role in the sex act. Attitudes toward both women and homosexuality are illustrated horrifyingly in the familiar story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which appears in the Book of Genesis. Lot was Abraham's nephew, and he settled with his family in the plains near the city of Sodom. Now one day, two angels appeared at Lot's house, and he invited them to spend the night. That night, all the men of Sodom came to the house, young and old alike, and they surrounded the house. And they called to Lot – "where are those two men who came to visit you? Bring them out so that we may know them." (And "to know" in this context, of course, meant to use them sexually). Well, because of the humiliation this would entail, Lot went to the door, and he urged the crowd to do nothing to the male angels. But, to appease the crowd, he said "look, I have two daughters who are virgins, and I will send them out, and you can do to them as you please."

After the destruction of Sodom, and after Lot's wife was turned to a pillar of salt, Lot and his daughters went to live in a cave in the hills. And his daughters were afraid that they would never be able to marry, so they plotted to get Lot drunk on successive nights so that they could "lie with him." The resulting incestuous pregnancies led to the founding of the kingdoms of Moabites and the Ammonites. So, the story that is so often used to prove that the Bible condemns homosexuality, in fact approves Lot's offer of his virgin daughters to satisfy the demands of an angry crowd. And it approves of incest as a legitimate way of impregnating women. And then there's the issue of gang rape. Lot seemed to think that homosexual gang rape was wrong because it violated existing laws of hospitality, but he saw nothing wrong with offering up his daughters for gang rape. Can gang rape – whether heterosexual or homosexual – ever be acceptable? And is this the kind of text we want to rely as a basis for modern cultural mores?

Prohibitions on male homosexuality appear twice in the Book of Leviticus, which is basically a set of codes for the priests. Because this prohibition is limited to male homosexuality, it may have had to do with the need of the Hebrew people to grow their population. The Israelites were a tiny, marginal, agrarian community, consisting almost entirely of small villages of shepherds living in the hills of Palestine. And, they were surrounded by large, well-established empires that were in the habit of overrunning the Israelites when they chose to do so. So it made some sense for the authors of Genesis and other Old Testament books to urge the people to procreate. In one of the Genesis creation stories, God creates men and women and he tells them to be fruitful and multiply. Later in Genesis, Yahweh condemns Onan to death for "spilling his seed," that

is, for refusing to fulfill his obligation under Hebrew law to father children with his dead brother's wife. The Israelites needed citizens and soldiers to establish themselves as a nation on the crossroads of the Mediterranean world. In the early years of Christianity as well, the community was tiny, fragmented, and marginalized. No wonder that the early church would seize on the "family" model of man, woman, and children as the only "natural" family.

Leviticus uses the word "abomination" to describe male homosexuality. But it also uses the term to describe, for example, a menstruating woman. In the modern world, though, we understand the natural role of menstruation in procreation, and we no longer feel duty-bound to isolate menstruating women. The Hebrew Bible is full of other instances of prohibitions that no longer make sense to us today. Leviticus supports capital punishment for such crimes as cursing, blasphemy, being a false prophet, worshipping a false god, and cursing or dishonoring one's parents. Even the most conservative Christians or Jews are unlikely to support execution for these crimes today.

Turning for a moment to the New Testament, we need to be perfectly clear that there is no record whatever of Jesus of Nazareth ever having said a word condemning homosexuality. Nor did he ever say a word about marriage being only between a man and a woman. Indeed, the four gospels are entirely silent on these questions. So, even though it is frequently used as a basis for condemning marriage equality, the Bible actually provides pretty scant authority for this position. It contains a few ambiguous passages on the topic out of thousands of pages and tens of thousands of verses. Compare these to the overriding messages about love and compassion, about seeking justice, about treating others as we would want to be treated, and so on. And when we put those passages into a historical context, we begin to gain some understanding of the differences between mores in the ancient world and modern culture.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that we might gain some insight into present-day fears about marriage equality, by noting how some of the ancient attitudes have continued. As we have seen, in the ancient world, marriage was an institution based on power and male domination, not on love and commitment. Marriage was a contractual arrangement; sexual relationships were about the power of a dominant male over another person, male or female. We look at marriage very differently today – we see it as a coming together of two equals to express their love and commitment publicly. As we consider stories such as that of Lot and his family at Sodom and Gomorrah, we see how different ideas about marriage and family were in those times, and how little they have to do with the modern view.

And yet, we see vestiges of those attitudes today – we see them in religions that refuse to give women an equal place at the table; that publicly state that women must be submissive; that insist that the role of women is to produce babies, as early as possible and to do the work of raising them. And this provides a clue, I believe as to why marriage equality remains so threatening to some people. If you see marriage as a male-dominated hierarchy, then a marriage of two people of the same sex breaks the mold. Who is to be dominant, and who is to be submissive, if two men or two women are married? Who is to play the male role, and who is to play the female role?

Well, fortunately attitudes are changing! Increasingly, this society is accepting the model of marriage as a meeting of equals, who unite out of love. Younger people I talk

to kind of wonder what all the fuss is about, because they have gay friends, they know families with two moms or two dad, and they see this as normal.

So, my hope, my prayer, my dream, is that the Biblical messages about compassion, love, justice, and mercy will prevail. My faith – our faith -- is not about purity; it is not about piety. It is about love – love for this marvelous universe of ours, and love for one another. Working for justice and spreading compassion and mercy are the natural outcomes of that love. The love that we – in this faith – believe in is a love that can drive out fear, fear of difference, fear of the unknown, fear of the other. If what your religion brings out of you is only hate and fear, it is not a religion worthy of the name -nor is it a religion worthy of the Bible.

Our faith calls us all to a future of justice, mercy, compassion, and most of all, Love.

Our faith calls us to stand on the side of Love – hands joined together; hearts beating as one – emboldened to proclaim our faith in the power of love.