

Message: Working for the Right to Marry is an Expression of Our UU Principles

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Good morning.

It's good to be with you this morning. As a member of the Board of a statewide LGBT advocacy organization [Equality Maryland]¹ and a resident of Montgomery County, it's good to be doing this work here in my home county. And as a UU, it's good to be here among fellow UUs—to be talking about marriage equality within my faith community.

My reading this morning comes from one of my favorite theologians and sermonizers—someone well known to all of us here. This short excerpt is from Dr. Martin Luther King's last presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in August 1967. It was entitled "Where do we go from here?"²

"Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change.... There is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly.... one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites—so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love....

"Now, we've got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that **power without love is reckless and abusive**, and **love without power is sentimental and anemic**. **Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice**, and **justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love**. And this is what we must see as we move on...."

Our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to “move on”—to act in the world for Justice. The 7 principles of Unitarian Universalism compel us to do so. This morning, I will share some of my thoughts about how our principles—our UU values—call us to work for marriage equality in particular, and how that work is an indeed an expression of our faith.

Our principles speak to us—they are no creed, but they are demanding calls to action. They call us to “give life the shape of justice” as we sang this morning.³ They do not call us to sit by and watch. They do not call us to quibble with one another over tactics—something many of us love to do. And we answer that call to act—we do act for Justice. On some social justice issues, UUs lead the way among people of faith. Marriage equality is a strong example of this—the UUA⁴ has consistently been up front and center in the lesbian and gay civil rights movement, especially in the current fight for marriage rights. The lead plaintiffs in the marriage equality lawsuit in Massachusetts were UUs,⁵ and some of the plaintiffs here in the Maryland lawsuit are UUs.⁶ Some of you here recently lobbied in Annapolis. For this, we should be rightly proud. I, among others, am also grateful. But we must continue this work—now, more than ever. And I believe that while doing this work, we are most effective and indeed, ultimately unstoppable, when we recognize this as political work fueled by our deepest spiritual convictions. Our religious beliefs—our faith.

There is only one word that appears twice in our principles—aside from the “of’s” and “the’s”, the “affirms” and “promotes”: that word is Justice.

There is another word that curiously and notably appears not at all: that word is Love.

Yet it was undoubtedly with Love that our principles were written. Love in the way described by Dr. King—as power “implementing the demands of justice.” For we UUs hold in our hearts a deep Love for Justice combined with an abiding sense of the sacredness of Love itself and our damaged world’s deep need for Love.

Our 1st principle “affirms and promotes the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” UU minister Rev. Marilyn Sewell interprets its call this way: she says “we are called to create justice where justice now does not exist.”⁷ She goes on: “because of this radical respect for others and their choices”—radical respect—“UUs are able to act as advocates for certain oppressed groups when other denominations would find such action politically impossible.”⁸ Such is clearly the case in advocating for marriage equality. This struggle needs our active presence, and continuing leadership, not just because of our commitment to justice where it “now does not exist,” but also because of “the theological grounding of our first principle.”⁹ Again, Rev. Sewell describes that foundation this way: “because we believe that our God is one God, one and the same spirit of love uniting all people, then all are brothers and sisters.”¹⁰

It is simply not acceptable for our government to actively, willfully withhold rights and privileges from some of our siblings. In fact, by doing so, our government promotes a definition of marriage upheld only by some faith traditions, but not by ours. In doing so, the government erodes the separation of church and state, and promotes one religion over another—in clear violation of the constitution. That’s why state constitutions around the country are now being amended—because our opponents recognize that their narrow definition of marriage IS unconstitutional—so they are rewriting constitutions—changing the rules to keep some out. As a religious minority in

this country, that should give us pause. And as proponents of religious freedom and freedom of conscience—as our 5th principle affirms—we should recognize that the battle for marriage equality is a fight over many of our core values, our most deeply held beliefs.

Our 2nd principle “affirms and promotes justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” Current laws banning same sex marriage codify injustice in human relations—except for Massachusetts, all U.S. marriage laws elevate one form of love over another. We UUs are called by our faith to change this; to rectify this inequity. The world needs our active presence in this struggle. Of the 2nd principle, UU minister Rev. Richard Gilbert names it another call to action, saying “there is, then, in Unitarian Universalism a seamless garment of spirituality and social action.... **To refuse to act in life is to abdicate our role as spiritual and moral beings.**”¹¹

Each of our principles in turn demands that we work to change the world as it is—to create a “Beloved Community” here on earth. Now—for all of us. The 3rd principle “affirms and promotes acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” This underscores that we must engage with one another and support that which each of us holds most deeply. And what do any of us hold more deeply than Love? Particularly covenantal Love? Some even say that God is Love. Again, we can not sit idly by when Love is under attack, when the recognition of Love is restricted as it is through unequal marriage laws.

Our 6th principle calls us to promote freedom: “we affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.” This principle specifically says Justice for all, not Justice for some. And yet our state’s and nation’s current marriage

laws promote injustice by limiting marriage to heterosexual couples only. These laws sanction enormous and damaging inequity, causing undue pain and suffering, exacting a high price from loving same sex couples.

A few examples: should I require emergency medical treatment, my partner of over a dozen years would have no legal right to be with me in the hospital or to consult with my doctors or consent to my treatment. Even with a power of attorney, all the appropriate legal paperwork, in Maryland the only thing that would guarantee us that right would be a marriage license. I am putting her through medical school, and yet, should anything happen to her in the future, I would not receive any survivor benefits. My gay and lesbian friends with children have to undergo a second parent adoption to ensure that both parents have legal rights to protect and raise their own children. They have to go through two adoptions—of their own children. All because we cannot legally wed.¹²

There are smaller, daily indignities as well. I have a co-worker who refers to my wife of over a dozen years as my “friend”, not my partner or wife. Yet she enthusiastically asks after the newly wedded “wives” and “husbands” of my heterosexual coworkers. I routinely fill out forms that ask about “marital status.” There is no box for me; I am not single. But neither am I legally wed. Being categorized as legally single denies the life I live, and the Love in my life. That Love is made invisible. Yet I know that Love to be one of the most sustaining forces in my life—one of the holiest. I ask you to imagine how you’d feel, how you’d suffer, if the person you were committed to—the person you’d pledged yourself to and shared your life with—whether

for 5, 10, 15 or 50 years—was not recognized as your spouse by the state and social networks? If they were rendered invisible?

Our last principle affirms and promotes “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” It reminds us that injustice to one is injustice to all. Even the so-called protectors of traditional marriage, when they argue that marriage equality will somehow harm their own marriages, even they recognize our interconnectivity. But they get it backwards: the institution of marriage is not degraded by allowing same sex couples to wed. Rather, the institution of marriage is degraded by the narrow and exclusive definition of and unequal access to marriage now codified by law.

I call it blasphemy¹³ on their parts—not a word you often hear from a UU pulpit, blasphemy. It is blasphemy against Love. It’s blasphemy when they insist on treating Love as a force that must be contained and confined, withheld and restricted, as if it were finite—a precious resource that only some deserve—one that must be safeguarded against unholy hearts.

In working for marriage equality, we acknowledge Love as the abundant, renewing and sacred force that it is. We recognize Love as an infinite, precious power that all deserve. Like our Universalist forebears, we do not believe that only some are worthy—we hold that all are worthy, that all our welcome. We demand that our government recognize same sex marriages. We work for marriage equality so as to strengthen the power of Love in this world—a power sorely needed in this damaged world. By granting equal legal access to marriage, all Love is strengthened. Love is a

force that multiplies and lifts us all with its grace and beauty and muscle. When Love is allowed to flourish, we all benefit.

Dr. Martin Luther King was right when he said: “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”¹⁴

I’m here today to ask you to join me in standing on the side of Love. Our country’s current marriage laws need correcting. Our state’s current marriage law needs correcting. Let us correct those laws that stand against Love.

In closing, I offer a prayer from Rev. Bill Sinkford, President of the UUA:

“We offer up our gratitude for all of the love which has sustained us throughout our lives—the love of family and friends, teachers and mentors, the love of this church community. Those of us who have found one other person to whom we have pledged enduring commitment offer up particular gratitude for that covenant, which has sustained us and challenged us and ultimately reshaped our very being....

“May every relationship, whatever the gender of its members, be supported and accepted by the larger community.

“May our elected officials turn their attention to policies which strengthen the wellbeing of all of us, rather than tearing us apart by labeling some love as holy and other as profane.

“And, someday, may every couple equally know the protection and support not only of a loving faith community, but also of a larger civil society.

“May we support and protect one another, even as we continually seek to extend our common understanding of who we mean when we say ‘we the people.’

“And let the people say, Amen.”¹⁵

¹ Equality Maryland is Maryland's statewide lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights and advocacy organization. For more information visit the website: www.equalitymaryland.org.

² This reading is excerpted from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last annual presidential address at the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on August 16, 1967, in Atlanta, Georgia. A longer excerpt from his talk can be found at <http://www.afsc.org/pwork/0412/041216.htm>. The full speech is ©The Estate of Martin Luther King, Jr.

³ From "Spirit of Life," hymn 123.

⁴ For information on the UUA's many resolutions and actions, see: <http://www.uua.org/news/2004/freedomtomarry/>.

⁵ For information about the lead plaintiffs in *Goodridge v. the Massachusetts Dept. of Health*, see <http://www.uua.org/news/2004/040517c.html>.

⁶ For information about the Maryland lawsuit, *Deane and Polyak v. Conaway*, see <http://www.equalitymaryland.org/marriageequality.htm>.

⁷ Sewell, Rev. Marilyn, Essay on Principle #1: "The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person," in *With Purpose and Principle: Essays about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism*, edited by Edward A. Frost, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), p. 24.

⁸ Sewell, p. 26.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gilbert, Rev. Richard S., Essay on Principle #2: "Justice, Equity, and Compassion in Human Relations," in *With Purpose and Principle: Essays about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism*, edited by Edward A. Frost, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), p. 44.

¹² For details on the many legal rights denied to same sex couples because we can not legally marry, see <http://www.equalitymaryland.org/marriagerecog.htm>.

¹³ Blasphemy is defined as "an irreverent or impious act, attitude, or utterance in regard to something considered inviolable or sacrosanct" in the *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

¹⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., SCLC, August 16, 1967 (Atlanta, Georgia); see <http://www.afsc.org/pwork/0412/041216.htm>.

¹⁵ For Rev. Bill Sinkford's entire Marriage Equality Week Prayer, see http://www.uua.org/president/060210_ftm_prayer.html.

Message, Part II: Why is there opposition to allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry?

Lay Lead Service on March 5, 2006
Stephen Eckstrand

From the perspective of a religious liberal, it seems only fair that same-sex couples should have the right to marry. But make no mistake, there is a struggle going on. It is a struggle for respect and equality under the law. It is a struggle being waged by thousands of same-sex couples throughout Maryland, most prominently by the nine same-sex couples and a surviving gay partner who filed a suit in circuit court in Baltimore. Finally, it is a struggle that calls upon us to make a choice—a choice between equality and injustice, between caring and indifference.

Opponents of same-sex marriage make arguments that fall into three basic categories. The first category is about religious beliefs. A passage from the book *What's Wrong with Same-Sex Marriage?* by D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe is typical: “Before the state, before the church, God created the oldest institution on this planet, and that is the institution of marriage.”¹ A corollary to this is the belief that marriage is for procreation and that only a man and a woman can have children. The second category of arguments against same-sex marriage invokes tradition—that marriage must continue to conform to thousands of years of human history. The final category involves social issues—that same-sex marriage would pose a threat to heterosexual marriage and the institution of the family.

This issue of differing religious beliefs is a sensitive one, and our UU principles should lead us to accept others and their religious beliefs. However, the freedom to marry movement is not about changing religious beliefs—it is about the right to civil marriage regulated by the state. We read in the February 5 edition of the *Washington Post* about an Orthodox Jewish woman who obtained a civil divorce seven years ago but remains married under Jewish law. The same article also reminded us that civil divorce is not recognized by the Catholic Church. Thus, we currently accept differences between religious marriage and civil marriage. Thus, it is possible to leave the choice about entering into a civil

marriage up to individual adult couples, while leaving the choice about whether to perform or recognize religious marriages between same-sex couples up to individual denominations, churches and ministers.

The issue of procreation is really not relevant to this struggle. The simple fact is that same sex couples can and sometimes do have children, sometimes the biological children of one of the partners and sometimes adopted. Furthermore, having and raising children is only one of the reasons that people marry. Others include: love, a commitment to a long term relationship, societal recognition of that relationship, and the many legal and economic protections and benefits that accrue to married couples. Finally, opposite sex couples marry for reasons other than having children, and they are not asked about their reasons for getting married when they apply for a marriage license.

Far from remaining unchanged for thousands of years, marriage has, in fact, changed dramatically over time as the needs of society and individuals have evolved. In biblical times, marriages were often arranged to form financial or political alliances between families, and a husband could have more than one wife. Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David all had more than one wife. Furthermore, wives were considered to be the property of their husbands and were required to obey their husbands, both by law and custom. Marriage was very different then from the committed relationship of equal partners based on love, companionship, and shared responsibility that it is today.

The concerns that same-sex marriage would harm society generally center on children. Those opposed to same-sex marriage often cite research by sociologists such as David Popenoe, who has stated “On the whole, two parents—a father and a mother—are better for a child than one parent.”² However, they fail to note that many other psychologists and sociologists have not found any significant difference between families with a mother and father and families with two mothers or two fathers.³ Thus, the fact that children do better when raised in stable, two-parent families is an argument in favor of allowing same-sex couples to marry, not against!

After reading articles by and listening to interviews with opponents of same-sex marriage, I have come to believe that it is necessary to look beyond their arguments about protecting traditional marriage to find the whole story. The fact that the arguments that they make are often inconsistent and even contradictory is particularly revealing. Consider the following passages from the recent book *Marriage on Trial: the Case against Same-Sex Marriage and Parenting* by Glenn T. Stanton and Bill Maier:

“Homosexuals do have the constitutional right to marry. But no one has the right to redefine marriage for themselves or for a whole society. No one has the right to say male and female, mothers and fathers, do not matter for society and the family. But that is what giving legal sanction to same-sex marriage would do... Many homosexuals have indeed married members of the opposite sex, and no homosexual has every charged the state or federal government with barring him or her from marrying because of their own sexual preference.”⁴

The authors then go on to note that there are some basic criteria than one must meet in order to get a marriage license; one

- can not already be married
- must be an adult and marry an adult
- can not marry a close relation, and
- must marry someone of the opposite sex

“Now if two people meeting all these criteria go to city hall to get a marriage license and the clerk asks them whether either are homosexual and denies them a marriage license based on an affirmative answer, that would be discriminatory. Current law does not keep homosexuals from marrying. It just keeps them—as well as heterosexuals—from marrying a person of the same sex. Our current marriage laws treat everyone equally.”⁵

Are they really suggesting that everyone would be well served if male homosexuals married women and female homosexuals married men? I am not sure that the authors have

thought this argument through very carefully. Note that in claiming that present civil marriage laws do not discriminate against homosexuals, they have ignored or negated many of the other arguments they made to support traditional marriage. There is no mention of love, procreation, religion, or long term commitment. Based on the criteria they cited, they would consider it acceptable for two atheists, who just met last week and who do not plan to have children, to marry in Las Vegas with an Elvis impersonator officiating. However, they contend that it would be harmful to society for two women or two men, who have been in a committed relationship for several years and who are raising children, to marry. This leads me to believe that what is behind many of the arguments in favor of “marriage protection” is either an unwillingness to recognize the diversity of families that exist today, ignorance about why same-sex couples want the right to marry and, perhaps, fear of change. In the final analysis, I hope that a majority of people will come to believe that civil marriage should be a union of two individuals based on love and commitment, and I am truly sad that same-sex marriage is being used as a “wedge issue” or a call to battle in a “culture war.”

The minister of the Methodist church that I attended as a teenager once preached that one of the greatest moral failures he could think of would be to live through a revolution and not fire a shot. In explaining his metaphor, he said that it is important for people to stand up for their values by taking action on the important moral questions of their time. Marriage equality is one of the important moral issues of our time. We can be proud that Rev. Bill Sinkford, president of the UUA, has stated that ensuring equal civil rights for gay and lesbian families is our moral duty. We can congratulate the UU Church of Arlington for voicing its support for marriage equality in Commonwealth of Virginia by unveiling of new signs affirming equal rights and marriage equality and holding a re-affirmation of vows for both gay and straight couples in its service on January 22. Finally, we can also be proud that a group from UUCR will traveled to Annapolis on February 13 to support marriage equality in Maryland. However (there is always a however), this will not be enough, so I leave you with one question: “What we, as religions liberals, going to do?”

1. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What's Wrong With Same-Sex Marriage?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), p. 15
2. David Popenoe, "Life without Father," Paper presented at the Annual conference of the NCFR (Arlington, VA, 1997), p. 5
 adapted from David Popenoe, *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (New York: Free Press, 1996)
3. Evan Wolfson, *Why Matters* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), p. 89
4. Glenn T. Stanton and Bill Maier, *Marriage on Trial: The Case Against Same-Sex Marriage and Parenting* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 32
5. *Ibid.*, p. 33