

Rev. Dr. Diana Lee Beach

I am The Rev. Dr. Diana Lee Beach, an Episcopal priest in Thomaston, Maine, and I write in support of LD 1020 and marriage equality for same sex couples for a host of reasons-- as a mother, as a priest and as a psychotherapist.

As a Mother

My primary and primordial reason has seared my heart for over 20 years. It has to do with my beloved stepson Johnny. John was a star always, and having been raised in the South chose a large southern university where he rose to be president of his fraternity, editor of the yearbook, and was voted one of the four most outstanding graduates. He was also gay, and the only option he felt he had then or in his subsequent distinguished career was to be deeply closeted. He went to a lot of weddings in the early years, more than once as best man as he was for his brother. The love of his own life was never invited. Indeed none of his straight friends, colleagues, or his southern family even knew of Neil's existence.

In the early 80's, they had contracted an STD that, unlike those of John's straight fraternity brothers, was not curable. Indeed AIDS was only beginning to be understood. Neil died one night in Johnny's arms, and he had to go to work the next day as if nothing had happened. When eventually he had to acknowledge his own illness at work, he was summarily escorted from the building. He died six months later, in a northern city, rejected by all of his friends, his colleagues, and most of his family.

A nurse at his southern funeral picked me out, perhaps as the only person there "with an accent". Although we had been forbidden to speak the truth of John's death, she wanted to tell me that she had been with him and Neill in Neil's last weeks and she had never seen such love and selfless devotion. Their lives were truly a tragic Love Story, but unlike Erich Segal's version, with a difference. They had to go through it alone, without all the myriad supports, understanding and legal rights that straight couples take for granted. It is tragic to lose a spouse; how much more so when no one knows you even had one.

NO ONE should ever have to go through this experience. Twenty years has made quite a difference in attitudes toward homosexuality; but there are still plenty of gay people right here in Maine who feel they have, by virtue of family, church, or employment, to stay hidden, consigned to a closeted half-life. Gay teenagers are killing themselves because they have suffered abuse at the hands of homophobic bullies, or cannot imagine the life they see in front of them. How in the present circumstances can they possibly see their way clear to the life that all straight people take for granted, one of love, of acceptance, to fall in love and get married and raise a family—that most basic right supposedly guaranteed to all our citizens, of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

There is no more potent assurance that our gay brothers and sisters, sons and daughters are full citizens entitled to all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities thereof, than to guarantee the equal right of marriage. For Johnny and Neill, and all the others who never had a chance, I urge you to pass this bill.

As a Priest

The separation of church and state wisely dictates that this legislative body will make its final decision based solely on the rule of law, on the full inclusion, civil rights, and equal protection for all citizens. Iran is a theocracy. The Taliban is a theocracy. The United States of America is not a theocracy.

But since so much of the opposition to marriage equality is coming from religious conservatives seeking to inflict their religious views on the population at large, it is important for this body to understand that there are thousands of people of faith in Maine from all traditions, and hundreds of clergy, who support marriage equality **because of, not in spite of**, our faith. A fundamentalist reading of scripture has never been any but a minority view in Christendom, and my own Episcopal church in particular has always been based on a firm foundation of scripture, tradition, and reason. Our faith is ever evolving, and, as with the end of slavery, the full inclusion and eventual ordination of women, the increasing emphasis on the environmental issues of faithful stewardship of the earth, our faith agrees with what Canon Charles Ravens wrote in 1916, “The Holy Spirit of our Lord does not encourage us to believe that nothing should ever be done for the first time.”

As a Christian I know that there is nothing in the words of Jesus or in the gospels that leads one to exclusion or rejection of any human being, and Jesus was constantly outspoken in the defense of others whom his society had declared to be outcasts. Indeed his closest friends and followers were among them. I want to say to those who reject homosexuals, what part of ‘Love your neighbor’ didn’t you understand? The very essence of the Christian faith is Love, a love that casts out fear. And is there no greater “family value” than the witness of hundreds of thousands of gay couples whose most fervent desire is to pledge publically and in the sight of God their lifelong commitment to one another and their hope to raise children together? We straight couples who often take marriage and family so cavalierly should be humbled by their intensity against all the odds.

As to the notion that homosexuality is evil because it is a “lifestyle choice”, that is bad science, bad psychology, and bad theology. Sexual orientation in either direction is an innate as is left handedness or blue eyes and is a consistent percentage of human beings as it is more widely in nature. It says right on page one of the Bible that God made everything, and called the whole Creation good. It also declares that human beings are made in the image of God. We must therefore conclude that homosexuals are as much a good part of creation and as much bear the image of God as the rest of us. The “marriage is for procreation” argument taken out of context from Genesis also falls unless there is an equal movement to deny marriage to postmenopausal women, people

who are barren or impotent, and all couples who choose not to have children or to adopt. There are a myriad other ways to live a full and fruitful life.

Many learned volumes have addressed the scriptural and theological issues surrounding homosexuality and marriage in much greater detail. In conclusion let me simply affirm that I worship a God who has promised, "Behold I make all things new." I deeply and prayerfully believe that the Holy Spirit is in this movement for the full inclusion of gay people and fully equality in marriage, and as a Christian and as a priest I urge you to support this bill.

As a Psychotherapist

I have been in private practice in psychotherapy for over 30 years and have had many patients who were gay or lesbian, as well as having many friends and colleagues. My profession has long disavowed that homosexuality is a mental disorder; and my experience is that the struggles of gay people are just like those of straight people. I have also been privy to the joys, struggles and dissolution of many many marriages. My hat is off to all those couples, straight or gay, who still so fervently believe in the possibility of marriage and are willing to sign on. Straight couples don't actually have such a great track record, with a 50% divorce rate; perhaps gay couples can do better.

I do know however, about the extra hardships that gay couples presently face because of the lack of blessing and public acceptance of their relationships. They experience stresses and strains that perhaps only mixed-race straight couples in a racist society can understand. The psychological toll of such rejection and denial can be enormous and it is often only with extraordinary love and commitment that these couples can persevere. Their children too have an extra row to hoe as they face ignorance and discrimination in school. They shouldn't have to have it this hard.

I will close with one particular story, suitably amended for privacy. A woman came to me in the throes of a broken relationship, as many people have over the years. We all know, many of us firsthand, how painful and difficult divorce usually is. The difference here though is that her lesbian partner of almost 20 years told her one day to pack her bags and get out, claiming the house, the dog, and the majority of their joint possessions. My patient suddenly found herself homeless, impoverished, and with no legal recourse. Everything they had built together over a lifetime dissolved in an instant and her partner's larger income, which had allowed my patient to pursue a low-paying service profession, was completely beyond her reach. Because her partner had insisted on keeping their relationship hidden for her own professional reasons, none of my patient's colleagues or family knew what she was going through and couldn't understand why losing a roommate was such a big deal. She had almost no one to turn to. I know that the argument in favor of legal gay divorce may not be the most politic one to put forward in defense of gay marriage, but it brought home to me as nothing else could what gay couples are missing and why legal marriage is such an important and fundamental protection and right in our society.

For all the above reasons I urge you to extend that unalienable right to all the citizens of Maine and to pass LD1020 for Equality in Marriage. Thank you.