

# Why the Religious Right is Wrong

## About Same-Sex Marriage

a sermon by the Rev. Mark Worth

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Castine

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### READINGS:

1. From the Rev. William Sloane Coffin (1924-2006), Presbyterian clergyman, in his book Credo, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004:

"It is not Scripture that creates hostility to homosexuality, but rather hostility to homosexuals that prompts some Christians to recite a few sentences from Paul and retain passages from an otherwise discarded Old Testament law code. In abolishing slavery and ordaining women we've gone beyond biblical literalism. It's time we did the same with gays and lesbians. The problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with biblical passages that condemn it, but rather how to reconcile rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ. It can't be done. So instead of harping on what's 'natural,' let's talk about what's 'normal,' what operates according to the norm. For Christians the norm is Christ's love. If people can show the tenderness and constancy in caring that honors Christ's love, what matters their sexual orientation? Shouldn't a relationship be judged by its inner worth rather than by its outer appearance? When has a monopoly on durable life-warming love been held by legally wed heterosexuals?"

2. From Rabbi Michael Lerner, The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country From the Religious Right, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005:

"One of the most startling accomplishments of the Religious Right has been its ability to make its desire to control sexuality a central political issue. In a world filled with pain and war, starvation, and homelessness, the Religious Right manages to refocus attention on who is sleeping with whom and how and what they do and what happens afterward."

3. From Luke 6:41

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not take the log out of your own eye?"

### THE SERMON

On Wednesday, April 22, I had the great privilege of testifying before the Maine Senate Judiciary Committee, in favor of Sen. Dennis Damon's Marriage Equality bill, LD 1020.

I was the selected representative of the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry in Maine, a coalition of 166 religious leaders and clergy from the United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Unitarian Universalist, Religious Society of Friends (Quaker), Evangelical Lutheran, American Baptist, Reform Jewish, and other religious traditions. All of these 166 religious leaders have signed a statement saying they favor the freedom to marry for lesbian and gay couples. Many of them came to Augusta and stood behind me as I gave my testimony.

The right to marry has been spreading. Same-sex couples can now legally marry in the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, South Africa and Canada. In some other states such as Massachusetts, Connecticut and Iowa, courts have ordered equal marriage rights for same-sex couples. In Vermont the legislature passed a same-sex marriage bill by overriding the governor's veto. The governor of New Hampshire says he will sign that state's equal marriage bill, if the legislature adds language to protect churches and other religious institutions.

And Maine's bill, which will give same-sex couples the same right to marry that I already have, and protects the freedom of religious organizations to decide who they will marry and who they will not marry, has now passed both houses of the legislature and has been signed by Gov. John Baldacci – he is the first governor in the United States to actually sign a same-sex marriage bill. The bill will go into law on September 14, unless those now gathering signatures for a "people's veto" referendum gather enough signatures by September 13 to put it on the ballot. It is likely the religious right (the Maine Family Policy Council and the Catholic Diocese) will get the 55,000 signatures they need, thus forcing a referendum vote.

In the presidential election last fall, over 550,000 Mainers voted. So if the marriage equality bill goes up for a statewide vote, same-sex couples in Maine will be asking 550,000 people for the right to get married. I only had to ask one person, Michelle. I'm so very glad she said "yes." But I never had to ask a half-million plus people for the right to marry the person I love. For me it was simple. Because I am part of the sexual majority, and the majority makes the laws, I have the right to marry. But people in the sexual minority do not have the same rights I have. The minority has to ask the majority to grant them the right to marry.

Imagine blacks in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia or South Carolina, in 1954 or 1964, asking whites to vote on whether or not to end racial segregation. It just wasn't going to happen that way. The white majority was not going to grant equal rights to the black minority. It took Supreme Court rulings like *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Act, passed by Congress and signed by President Johnson.

Minority rights should never be put to a vote by the majority. In a representative democracy, yes, the majority rules, but minority rights must also be protected. That's why we have constitutional protections and courts.

Yet it looks as though the issue of marriage equality will probably be put to a state-wide referendum, very possibly this next November.

### **Biblical and traditional marriage ~**

So what are the arguments for and against the right to marry? The folks on the religious right say that very few societies in the past have recognized same-sex unions as marriage, and so by giving the same rights to gay couples that straight couples have, we would be redefining marriage. The historical record tells us that various societies in different times and places have had a variety of attitudes toward homosexuality. In some countries today such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, just being homosexual is enough to get you the death penalty. Many other societies, such as ancient Greece, peoples of the South Pacific, and traditional Native American tribes, have been very tolerant of homosexuality.

I believe it *is* true, however, that granting equal marriage rights to same-sex couples means redefining marriage. This would be nothing new. In fact, humans have *often* redefined marriage.

In the Bible, marriage was between one man and as many women as he could afford. Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel, and two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah. He had twelve sons by these four women, and those sons became the patriarchs of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. God approved of Jacob so strongly that He re-named Jacob "Israel," and Israel literally became the father of his nation.

King David had fourteen wives. He took another man's wife and had the husband sent to the front lines of battle so he would be killed. Those are biblical family values we wouldn't want to emulate.

According to the biblical book, 1 Kings, Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines – the Bible says Solomon was a wise man, but one wonders how he ever found time to govern the country!

Biblical law also provided for Levirate marriage, where if a man died without heirs, his brother was required to marry the widow and produce offspring. If the resulting child was a son, he would be considered heir to his mother's late husband (Gen. 38:6-10).

Women could be kidnaped during war and forced into marriage (Deut. 21:11-14).

An unmarried woman who had been raped was required to marry her attacker (Deut. 22:28-29). But, thankfully, we have redefined marriage since Bible times!

Oh, and the Bible also allowed for monogamous heterosexual marriage. When Jesus attended the wedding feast in Canaan this was most likely an arranged marriage.

The Rev. Meg Barnhouse says, "I can't see the biblical-family-values people wanting to know about actual biblical families. I can't see them wanting those families in their neighborhoods or their churches."

For most of European history, marriage was more or less a business agreement between two families who arranged the marriages of their children.

In ancient Israel, Greece and Rome, and many other societies, there was no specific marriage ceremony – just mutual agreement, and the fact that the couple regarded themselves as husband and wife. The same was true in all of Christian Europe until 1545. In that year the Council of Trent declared that Roman Catholic marriages would only be considered valid if a priest officiated a ceremony with two witnesses. That's the beginning of wedding ceremonies – 1545.

In the United States, before the Civil War it was illegal in the Southern states for slaves to marry. That allowed the slave-owner to legally break up the family – he could sell the man to one person, sell the woman to another, and sell the children to still other potential buyers.

It used to be perfectly legal for a husband to beat and/or rape his wife.

Before 1967 it was illegal in many states for a black person to marry a white person. The marriage of President Barak Obama's parents was illegal in seventeen states. But we have redefined marriage.

The "Ozzie and Harriet" or "Leave it to Beaver" family is actually a *modern* family, not a traditional family. We have redefined marriage many times, and I say, thank God we have redefined marriage! And now it's time to do it again, so that we can make the laws treat people fairly and equally.

### **Other objections to same-sex marriage ~**

Last fall Maine's Roman Catholic bishop said that because marriage exists for the purpose of procreation, a marriage that cannot produce children is "meaningless." Well, Mickey and I have been married for nearly thirty years, and our marriage has produced no children. And yet neither she nor I think our marriage is meaningless. Despite the bishop's insensitive words, many childless couples in Maine have meaningful marriages. In fact, I would say that our marriage is the most meaningful part of my life!

Doesn't it seem ironic that two of the groups most opposed to marriage equality are the Mormons and the Roman Catholic hierarchy? The Mormons largely funded the anti-marriage-equality Proposition 8 in California. The Mormons talk about preserving "traditional marriage,"

and Mormon prophet Brigham Young had 55 wives (he had children by 16 of them). Although the Mormons officially abandoned polygamy in 1890, many in leadership

positions in the Latter-day Saints continued the practice long after that, and some "Fundamentalist Mormon" offshoots continue the practice today.

And the Roman Catholic hierarchy is officially celibate, and therefore inexperienced with the practical issues of marriage. Pardon me for saying so, but these seem to me to be odd groups to be leading the charge against the freedom to marry.

Others on the religious right say that opposite-sex marriage is in danger and needs to be "protected" from same-sex marriage. Well, if heterosexual marriages are in danger, the danger is from heterosexuals. We are responsible for our own marriages. The high divorce rate is caused by people who get married and then mess up. It is not caused by people who aren't allowed to get married.

How is heterosexual marriage threatened by people who want to get married? I'm not going to go out and get a divorce just because same-sex couples are given the same rights I have.

Some say that children will be harmed because having two moms or two dads is not as good as having a mom and a dad. This assumes that all children have a mom and a dad, and that these parents are happily married and aren't abusive. But contrary to popular opinion, "Leave it to Beaver" wasn't a documentary. Most families today aren't in an intact heterosexual marriage with an employed father, a stay-at-home mom, two children and a dog. There are many kinds of families – including single parents, working moms, grandparents, foster families – and we should honor and value all kinds of loving families.

And many gay men and lesbian women are already parents. Most are good parents. Children, of course, are better off with loving parents – but it seems to matter little whether those parents are straight or gay. Happy parents, whether straight or gay, tend to raise happy children. Being happily partnered helps adults stay healthier and live longer than those who are single or are living with someone with whom they are miserable.

And do we need to say it again? Most incidents of child molesting are done by heterosexual men.

Finally, some on the religious right worry that their churches will be required to recognize marriages, or perform marriage ceremonies, that they believe are wrong. But right now all rabbis, priests and pastors have the right to refuse to perform any marriage ceremony – and that won't change. Maine's same-sex marriage law, LD 1020, guarantees freedom of religion, including the right of each religious organization to decide for itself who they will perform marriage ceremonies for and who they won't.

And by the way, while same-sex marriage laws preserve religious liberty by not requiring any religious group to perform a marriage ceremony they object to, laws that currently ban same-sex marriage actually infringe on our own church's right to bless the legal marriage of gay and lesbian couples who want to get married.

## **Equal and fair treatment ~**

I support same-sex marriage because it is good and right and fair. For me, the case for marriage equality is essentially a conservative one. I believe in marriage. The institution of marriage is good for society. Marriage promotes happiness and family values that I support, like family stability and cohesiveness. Marriage promotes financial security, long-term commitment and faithfulness. These are good things. They are good for straight families and they are good for gay families. Here are our family values: In our families, everyone is valued!

All families, gay, lesbian or straight, should have the same legal rights and responsibilities. Right now I have rights that my gay and lesbian friends, family members, neighbors, and church members do not have. This is not right. It is time to stop discriminating unfairly against Mainers simply because they happen to be homosexual.

As more and more nations and states grant equal marriage rights to gay and lesbian families, we have discovered that the sky is not falling. Civilization has not crumbled. Straight couples are not divorcing simply because gay couples are getting married.

In fact, our growing pluralism is a blessing. Our nation's Founding Fathers and mothers envisioned a land of liberty. Our founders, in the Declaration of Independence, stated that all people are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, rights that include, but are not limited to, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." I believe that the right to marry is closely related to the rights of liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The right to marry is a basic human right, and should be made equally available to all adults.

We are building an even more inclusive nation than even our Founders dreamed of. That's a good thing. The world is never perfect. It can always be improved. Our Founding Fathers were great men, not perfect men. Some of them owned slaves, just to state the obvious. We are still trying to build "a more perfect union." We fought against slavery, we struggled for the right of women to vote, we struggled to end segregation. We redefined marriage to allow blacks and whites to marry one another. In many states we are still campaigning for equal rights for gays and lesbians in the areas of credit, housing, public accommodations, and employment. And the struggle for marriage equality is also today's struggle.

Let us love one another. Let us treat all Mainers with the same respect, and grant all Mainers the same rights. It is time. It is just. It is fair. It is the right thing to do.

Amen