

## **Just Love<sup>1</sup>**

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*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

Our church voted last year to support equal marriage for same-sex couples, and this year the Maine legislature is considering a bill that would make that hope a reality. On April 22<sup>nd</sup>, many of us from A2U2 joined thousands who participated in the Public Hearing on LD 1020, an Act to End Discrimination in Civil Marriage and Affirm Religious Freedom. This week on Tuesday, the Judicial Committee sent it on to the Senate and the House, with an “Ought to Pass” recommendation.

On Thursday morning, I went to Augusta for the Senate session. I was with a few dozen people who were there to encourage the undecided senators to support the bill. Since my own senator Jerry Davis had already voiced his strong opposition, I hung out with a young man from Lewiston who was hoping to speak with his senator as she came into the chambers. Michael is an 18 year old Catholic, a high school senior, and the valedictorian of his class. He was accepted to Williams College for the fall, and he hopes to eventually go to medical school. He told Senator Craven, “I want to be able to come back to Maine, and work here as a doctor, and marry a special man, and have a family. I hope you will help me do that.”

It was only a few moments of conversation, and then the session began. Later, when the senators were speaking for and against the bill, Margaret Craven talked about how, no matter what she did, she was going to betray the hopes of half her constituents. But she concluded her remarks by saying she was voting for Michael. As you probably know by now, the Senate voted 21-14 to pass the bill. Michael was elated. Next, LD1020 goes to the House of Representatives on Tuesday, and if it passes there, to the governor to sign. Every step of the way involves hours and hours of work by organizers and volunteers. And after all that, opponents will gather signatures to launch a people’s veto, and we’ll likely be facing a vote in November. But with effort and struggle, it is possible that we will see marriage for same-sex couples in Maine within the year.

Why do religious conservatives get so upset about this possibility? What are some of the deeper issues that make this such a hot-button conflict of our times? Those of us who stayed all day at the Public Hearing heard about 11 hours of testimony—5 ½ of which was from those who were opposed to same-sex marriage. We heard some heavy-duty condemnation of anything to do with homosexuality. I won’t even repeat it here. But it was a window into how the other half thinks.

There is something about it that never ceases to amaze me. With all of the trouble in our world today—with all of the many evils that could be soundly condemned by using the words of the Bible—you know, the greed and corruption on Wall Street that caused so many people to lose their homes, the torture at Guantanamo, the genocide in Darfur, so much violence and poverty across the world—why attack gay people? Why attack gay people? It’s just love.

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It doesn't make any sense to me. But of course, on a deeper level, I do understand. I understand the power of this movement to change the whole world. I will grant that to the Rush Limbaugh's of this debate—those who have openly stated that they are worried about the demise of the power reserved to straight white men.<sup>2</sup> Equal marriage for same-sex couples rests on a foundation of pivotal issues that aren't always at the center of the conversation, and do have a profound capacity for social transformation.

To begin with, marriage for same-sex couples promotes a partnership model of marriage. You cannot say “wives obey your husbands” if there are two wives or two husbands. Same-sex marriage affirms the value that each spouse is the equal to the other. That might not seem like a big deal to us, because that is a model of marriage we also affirm. But there are those among religious conservatives who still hold to patriarchal marriage, where the wife is subservient to the husband. Equal marriage for same-sex couples fosters the equality of women in opposite-sex marriage, as well, and in society.

The movement for women's equality in society has also been a pre-condition for same-sex marriage. The more women are equal, the more they have freedom of choice in love. They no longer have to marry primarily for economic security. We forget that this is a new phenomenon. Just one hundred years ago, women were required to sacrifice their legal personhood when they married. All their legal rights and property became the rights and property of their husband. Remember that. Some feminists used to say they didn't want to marry, because in marriage women were treated like property. Same-sex marriage is one more step in undoing that model of un-equal marriage.

Equal partnership in marriage promotes partnership all around. Last week I mentioned two different models of religion that were articulated by Marcus Borg. The first upholds a strict father God, who is seen as a king or a judge, demanding unquestioning obedience; this God is usually mediated by a hierarchical religious organization. The second model is a partnership model of religion, with a democratic religious organization, like what we affirm as Unitarian Universalists. In the partnership model, the divine is seen as inherent in all of creation, so that everyone is sacred, and everything is sacred, and all of life is related.<sup>3</sup>

These different models of religion are played out in the vast divide in our country between conservative and liberal faith communities. I was struck by some of the opponents at the hearing brashly stating that if we allow two people of the same sex to marry, then it will be a slippery slope that will end in people marrying their dogs. It doesn't make any sense until you see it through a mentality of obedience to an outside authority. The logic goes that if you disobey one commandment, then you'll disobey them all. All hell will break loose. For people whose religious identity is based on obeying some sort of higher authority, disobedience is the worst kind of evil.

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<sup>2</sup> I can't locate a source for that statement, so it is possible it was a rumor, or that another right wing commentator was the origin of the remark.

<sup>3</sup> This is loosely derived from Marcus Borg as described in *The Great Turning*, by David Korten. For more, see Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the Very First Time*, and *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*, both published by HarperSanFrancisco, in 1994 and 1998.

To the contrary, liberal religious people believe in a very deep and demanding morality—but it doesn't come in the form of a list of rules. We are moving from hierarchy to partnership in our ethical understandings. We uphold the values of love, respect, mutuality, and caring. We base our relationships on what Martin Buber describes as an ethic of "I and Thou." Every person is seen as having equal worth and dignity—none is higher or lower than another—so we must walk through our days with that kind of regard for ourselves and the other. It leads us to the work of justice—we are called to uphold the rights of all of those who are marginalized or oppressed, to give food to the poor, to care for the environment, and to end war and violence. It is hardly an "anything goes" kind of *laissez faire* lifestyle.

In our sexuality education with our teenagers, we focus on these partnership values and teach skills that create good relationships. The program is called *Our Whole Lives*, or OWL for short, and offers tools to our young people to help them discover their sexuality in safe and respectful ways. Most of the lessons are about communication, healthy relationships, assertiveness in making one's own choices, and respect for the choice of the other, transparency in intention, and upholding the dignity of self and of the other. A partnership model calls us to a higher ethical ground.

Of course, that leads into another issue involved in the debate over same-sex marriage—our attitudes about sexuality itself. It is a funny thing that religious conservatives try to claim Jesus on behalf of so-called traditional marriage. According to the writers of the gospels, Jesus encouraged his disciples to leave their families and their jobs and come follow him. His mother was called a virgin. It helps if we understand that these gospels were written in an apocalyptic age when the early Christians imagined that the world was about to come to an end. Ordinary things like marriage and family were seen as not so important as the wider community of faith. Paul allows that it is better to marry than to burn—but he himself became celibate so he could focus on the work. Christianity really wasn't very focused on marriage and the family.

Unfortunately, by about a thousand years later, all of this had translated into very negative attitudes toward sexuality in the church. By then, the Roman church had instituted a celibate clergy—at least in name. The church became anti-sex, anti-body, anti-woman, and anti-earth. When I was growing up Catholic, I remember getting the very clear message that if I really loved God, I should become a nun. When I was in eighth grade we had some sex education classes taught by our teacher who was a nun. Someone asked about slow dancing. Her reply—"if it feels good, it is probably a sin." I believe that is a really warped message to give young people about the feelings in their bodies. Shouldn't we be saying, "If it doesn't feel good, you don't have to do it?"

Now some might protest that they do see sex as holy, as long as it is confined to a holy marriage. But the contradictions run deep. A couple weeks ago, Anne and I attended a workshop with our colleagues, run by Rev. Deb Hafner, of the Religious Institute for Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing. She shared one of her favorite awful quotes: "Sex is dirty, save it for your spouse."

I believe the church's rejection of sexual wholeness contributed to many problems we face today—serious problems like rape, child sexual abuse, prostitution, sexual slavery, clergy abuse, and domestic violence. On the other side of this overt sexual violence, there is the widespread commodification of sexuality—our society uses sex to sell cars, clothes, vacations, food, diets, make-up, you name it, we could probably find it in a television ad. Sexuality is suppressed in our culture and over-saturated at the same time.

As Unitarian Universalists we embrace a sexuality grounded in healthy relationships. In fact, you might say we are committed to a transformation of sexual relationships. In this church, truthfully, we don't really worry about whether or not a couple is married. Having a license and a ring isn't what creates an ethical relationship, though it might be a part of it. Ethical relationships are based first of all on justice between the partners, on honoring each person's worth and dignity, and caring about what they need to thrive.

So, whether married or not, we do worry about whether one partner might be hurting the other through verbal or physical abuse, or taking advantage of the other through controlling behavior or violence. We want to end sexual and emotional violence, the sacrifice of one partner's choices and dignity over to the control of the other. We believe every person is worthy of respect and love, and every couple is called to give respect and tenderness to each other.

The Religious Institute for Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing has identified five criteria for an ethical sexual relationship: it must be consensual, non-exploiting, honest, mutually pleasurable, and protected.<sup>4</sup> Good relationships require honest communication, and transparency in intention and purpose. They require a sharing of pleasure and of tenderness. We are looking for mutuality, caring, affection and faithfulness. We are looking for love, grounded in justice. We are looking for a just love.

As Unitarian Universalists we are working for a world which celebrates sexuality as a wonderful and intimate part of being human. We support birth control, and the responsible choices that lead to parenthood, so that all children are wanted children. We are aware of the problem of overpopulation and support the choice that some couples make not to bear children. We live in a different world from our ancestors. We don't need large families anymore for human survival and economic viability. We don't see sex as merely for the procreation of children, but also for a celebration of companionship and the deep joy of life.

Deb Hafner called attention to how deeply ingrained is the anti-sexuality bias in our religious imagination. A few religious institutions are now saying that gays and lesbians need civil rights because they have no choice about being who they are. But they would refuse to include bisexual persons because they believe bisexuals could choose to be with an opposite sex partner. As Unitarian Universalists we go one step farther. To celebrate sexuality means that the gender of the partner is not so important—what is important is respect and honesty and affection.

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<sup>4</sup> Find out more about the Religious Institute at <http://www.religiousinstitute.org/>

It seems particularly fitting to be talking about this today, because we are in the time of Mayday, the old Celtic festival of Beltane. Tradition has it that Beltane celebrated the beauty and fertility of the earth, and that the goddess claimed all acts of love and pleasure as her rituals. Sexuality is so confusing and sometimes terrifying because it is so intimately linked to our deepest identity as living beings, and unites us to the beauty and creativity of all Life.

So, yes, there are complex issues underlying the debate about same-sex marriage, and perhaps these reflections can help us to have more compassion for those on the other side. But even more so, I hope that we might see how significant this issue is for all of us—not just for those who cannot marry the one they love. Equality in marriage is part of a larger ethical movement for a partnership way of being in the world, a true democracy which celebrates the equal worth and dignity of all people, and of all families, in all of our beautiful diversity.

It is an exciting time to be alive. We can directly participate in building a world of compassion, equality, and freedom. I asked Darlene Huntress at Equality Maine what was most needed this week. She said they need volunteers to come over to Equality Maine's office, and make phone calls. Most of our local representatives have expressed support for LD 1020. Calls are being made to people in other districts where the outcome is not assured. If you can give one hour or one day, it might make a difference.<sup>5</sup>

There was an activists' summit last weekend in Maine where participants went out into neighborhoods to talk to people who were opposed to same-sex marriage. They found out that 10 minute conversations door to door were able to convince 4 % of people to change their minds, and support equality in marriage. With polls saying that public opinion is divided about 50/50 on this issue, 4% would be enough to change the outcome. Equality Maine can train us how to have those conversations. As we go forward into a likely people's veto campaign, it will be volunteers walking door to door that will determine whether equal marriage will be a reality here in Maine. Think about it.

Remember, it's just love. We are looking for love, grounded in justice. We are looking for a just love.

### *Closing Words*

This place is holy, for we kindle here the sacred spark of love and partnership.  
This community is holy, for together we can fan the flames of justice for all.  
This time is holy, this very week, and month, and year,  
for we have an opportunity to add our energy to the fires of social change.  
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,  
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

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<sup>5</sup>Find out how to help at: <http://equalitymaine.org/>