

On Being an “Issue”
Rev. Sue Phillips
Skinner Award Service
June 27, 2005

Readings

The first reading is from the decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in the case of Goodridge, et. al. v. Department of Public Health.

Marriage is a vital social institution. The exclusive commitment of two individuals to each other nurtures love and mutual support; it brings stability to our society. For those who choose to marry, and for their children, marriage provides an abundance of legal, financial, and social benefits. In return it imposes weighty legal, financial, and social obligations. The Massachusetts Constitution affirms the dignity and equality of all individuals. It forbids the creation of second-class citizens. The question before us is whether, consistent with the Massachusetts Constitution, the Commonwealth may deny the protections, benefits, and obligations conferred by civil marriage to two individuals of the same sex who wish to marry. We conclude that it may not.

Our second reading is from the poem “dive for dreams,” by e.e. cummings.

*Dive for dreams
Or a slogan may topple you
(trees are their roots
and wind is wind)*

*trust your heart
if the seas catch fire
(and live by love
though the stars walk backward)*

*honour the past
but welcome the future
(and dance your death
away at this wedding)*

Sermon: On Being an “Issue”

I spent months preparing this sermon. I read books on the history of the institution of marriage and how dramatically it has changed over time. I reviewed countless articles in the mainstream press assessing the political and social implications of same-sex marriage. I read and re-read the statements of religious conservatives who assert that opening marriage to gay and lesbian people would diminish the institution they hold to be the thread of our nation’s social fabric. I saved reams of articles that would have helped me offer a spirited political defense of gay marriage. I spent hours trying to understand the historical context out of which the public policy debate about marriage emerged. And I developed impassioned arguments about why gay marriage is an

essential civil right. If I were straight, I would have preached about this issue long before I actually did.

But I'm not straight. I'm joyfully, abundantly, thoroughly queer. And so I have to talk to you about what's ranging around in my heart. This means, of course, that I can't with any integrity offer reflections on gay marriage as a social "issue," no matter how much political and historical homework I have done. If I used that kind of intellectual analysis this morning I would be hiding. If I placed the authority for my reflections outside of my own experience it would feel like an act of cowardice, somehow, that keeps me hidden from you. And so it is from my personal experience that I want to speak with you.

As I begin, I must say that it is very strange to be "an issue," to have an essential part of my identity debated as a public policy question. Listening to late-night pundits debating the morality of my "lifestyle" is both absurd and offensive. The truth is, I'm not even sure what a "lifestyle" is, but I'm pretty sure I don't have one.

I should have preached about this issue months before I did, but I was afraid. I was afraid as a brand-new minister that some people would think I was a one-issue person, that I planned to lift up one aspect of my identity above all others in a way that felt unbalanced. I was afraid that I might be pigeonholed as the lesbian minister, which might make it harder to serve my congregation as I so dearly desire. I was afraid that they might think I was concerned about same-sex marriage because it affects me directly, and my children, and my community. But I am, of course! I am deeply concerned. I want to tell you why.

In the months leading up to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision, I listened very carefully to how my UU minister colleagues chose to address the "issue" of same-sex marriage. I watched as other ministers declared their support for same-sex marriage by refusing to sign marriage licenses for opposite-sex couples. Over the course of last year, more and more ministers refused to offer to one set of couples the official sanction they could not offer to others. After a lot of prayerful reflection, I decided to continue signing marriage licenses. But in the midst of that difficult decision, and in the long months after it, I have lived with a profound and disturbing irony: that I am authorized by the state of New Hampshire to sanction marriages and yet the state will not allow me to legally wed.ⁱ This is one reason why gay marriage is more than an "issue" for me.

I am required to pay lots of taxes, and I do so willingly. As my friend and colleague the Rev. Erin Splaine observes, I support public education and believe I should do my part to take care of our roads, and to help other citizens who need help. I serve on juries when I am called upon, and vote in Town Meetings, and go to the voting booth when it is open.ⁱⁱ And as Erin writes, "I do all that with pride and a sense of honor (as a citizen of the United States... And yet it is wrong) to confer all the (responsibilities) of citizenship while at the same time denying me all of the rights."ⁱⁱⁱ I would have no trouble speaking out about this injustice if it were someone else whose rights were being denied. But I have been afraid to advocate for my own civil rights in a state I only recently moved to and in a community I don't know very well. This fear is another reason that gay marriage is more than an "issue" for me.

If something terrible happened to my partner Jennifer while we were at home in New Hampshire, there is no guarantee that I would be allowed to see her in the hospital, despite all the legal papers we have drawn up. If I died, Jennifer would not have an inherent legal claim to my property or my pension. We don't receive any joint income deductions or special tax breaks for couples. If my children John and Mariah lived in New Hampshire, I would not have an automatic right to pick them up from school, or confer with their teachers, or even sign field trip permission slips. John and Mariah live in Massachusetts, thank God, where these rights are protected. There are more than a thousand federal laws offering benefits, rights, and privileges based on marital status. I don't have access to any of them. And so you can see why gay marriage is not just an "issue" for me and my family.

In my home town of Northampton, Massachusetts, last spring, on the first day that the town clerk was able to sign licenses, people celebrated in the streets. A man and a woman who refused to get married until the right was extended waited in line side by side with a lesbian couple to apply for their marriage licenses. All of them were UUs. And when they weren't sharing a line they shared the same pew.

That is just one of the reasons I have never been prouder to be a Unitarian Universalist. I am so proud of our little ragtag religious movement and the national leadership we have shown in our prophetic call for gay and lesbian rights.^{iv} As early as 1984, our General Assembly passed a resolution affirming the practice of UU clergy performing services of union. In 1996, the UUA Board of Trustees passed a unanimous resolution calling for civil marriage. In the months before the Supreme Judicial Court decision, our ministers in Massachusetts placed a full-page add in the *Boston Globe* declaring their support for same-sex marriage. The page was covered with hundreds of names in tiny print, the ministers' parishes listed after their names in a proud litany.^v Many of you know that the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association is at 25 Beacon Street in Boston, immediately next to the State House on Beacon Hill. All last year a huge banner hung outside the windows of UUA headquarters declaring that "Civil Marriage is a Civil Right!" Right there, right next to the doors that legislators use every day, our movement took a clear stand. Four of the seven couples involved in the lawsuit that established the constitutional right to gay marriage in Massachusetts are Unitarian Universalists.

As I eagerly watched the national news the first day gay marriages were legalized in Massachusetts, I saw footage of Kim Crawford Harvie, the minister of the Arlington Street Church, marry two men who were plaintiffs in the lawsuit, even as she was married to her partner earlier that morning. And I saw the lead plaintiffs in that historic case, Julie and Hillary Goodridge, as they were, at long last, legally married by UUA President Bill Sinkford at 25 Beacon Street. Just outside the windows of that very room, the banner still hung, "Civil Marriage is a Civil Right!," at last a statement of truth rather than a dream.

How can I describe to you what I felt seeing those images? As I sat with my beloved late that night, weeping with joy. We have become so accustomed to losing political battles, to being left out. There have been so few victories to celebrate. This history makes the celebration even sweeter, especially because support for gay marriage in Massachusetts came from such diverse places, from organized labor, to legislators from working class communities, to mainstream religious groups. Watching all those beautiful, happy people walking up courthouse steps hand in

hand brought out all the grief of previous losses, and all the relief of this victory in one jumbled torrent.

That night, sitting with Jennifer, I wept with joy that the tide has turned at last toward justice. Until last year I honestly didn't think that gay and lesbian marriage was possible in my lifetime. Now it seems inevitable. There is still a lot of work to do: federal recognition of gay marriage, getting the state of New Hampshire to overturn its ban, state reciprocity. But let's worry about those issues another day. The hope that this success has rekindled will fuel other victories, and nothing can take that away.

Along with all this happiness has also come confusion. Last spring, on the way home from a church service celebrating gay marriage, my children excitedly told their other mother that now she and I could get married. They knew in their minds that we had split up years ago, and that I have another partner (whom they adore). But like all children of divorce their hearts yearn for their parents' reconciliation. So even as their community was celebrating, my children, and I imagine many others, were actively and painfully reliving a profound loss.

One of the most devastating effects of any oppression is how cultural messages of inferiority get internalized. This happens so subtly over such a long period of time that it can take years of vigorous self-reflection to understand the contortions of spirit that oppression has caused. I didn't really understand how intensely my imagination had been limited until last spring. Imagine being in a committed, gloriously happy long-term relationship and never once thinking about marriage. It simply hasn't been an option. I know that this victory in Massachusetts will require a recalibration, an expansion of imagination. And that scares me a little. What questions will this new option raise? About the nature and extent of our commitment, our willingness to share financial resources, and to subject ourselves to state laws governing property rights and divorce. I really am completely confident in my relationship! But there are a lot of new conversations to have. And Jennifer and I are certainly not the only ones who need to have them. This is another reason gay marriage is more than an "issue" for me.

Despite all the celebration, I have been surprised at the lukewarm interest many of my friends in committed relationships have in actually getting married. Most of my gay and lesbian friends had commitment ceremonies years ago, and have spent thousands of dollars on legal work that only marginally protects their relationships. Imagine the public education effort that will be required to teach gay and lesbian people about all the rights and responsibilities of marriage. The tax implications alone are enough to scare anyone. But seriously, many gay and lesbian people haven't the faintest idea, for example, what divorce laws are or how they work. Most folks, including me, literally don't know what it means to be married from a legal perspective.

The public policy debate over extending marriage often focuses on the differences between civil marriage and marriage as a religious and emotional sacrament. Gay and lesbian people know all about these differences. Our community has never been able to fully integrate legal and emotional commitments. Many gay couples already feel married in every meaningful way, and while we celebrate the ability to get married many have no intention of availing themselves of this new right. I have no illusion whatsoever that the divorce rate in Massachusetts among gay and lesbian people will be any lower than anyone else's. Needless to say, we, too, can and sometimes do make really bad choices in spouses. But in a way, that's what this victory is all about. The ability to make

choices that expand our imagination. Making choices, as in ee cummings' poem, helps us to "dive for dreams," so that a slogan won't topple us.

I want to tell you a story that might help you understand what the victory in Massachusetts has meant to me. I went to college in the mid-1980s during the Reagan renaissance of political conservatism, at a very traditional, fraternity-dominated liberal arts college in upstate New York (which shall remain nameless – okay, Colgate). There were exactly two out gay and lesbian students in our entire school. My friend JoAnn and I took this responsibility very seriously. We offered homophobia workshops. We were the gay poster children in diversity classes. We spoke at (poorly attended) rallies. And we were subject to all manner of minor harassment, from graffiti on our dorm door to demeaning lampoons in the college newspaper. I think now that all of our frenetic political activity was our way of protecting ourselves from the pain of being perpetual outsiders and the veneer of fear that followed us around. Despite these challenges, though, maybe because of them, JoAnn's friendship reminded me that I was a whole person, and her courage helped me to know that I didn't have to be afraid.

Last spring, on the day gay and lesbian marriage was legalized, I went in search of a Boston *Globe*, because I wanted to save something from that moment in history. And there, on the front page of the *Globe*, in full color, was a picture of two women kissing in the front yard of the Unitarian Society in Northampton, just moments after they were legally married. They looked beautiful in their flowery dresses, their two daughters tugging at their elbows. It was my friend JoAnn with Lise, her partner of twenty years. And I thought Yes! You go girls! Share with the world this private moment of joy.

*Trust your heart
if the seas catch fire
(and live by love
though the stars walk backward)*

*Honor the past
but welcome the future
(and dance your death
away at this wedding)^{vi}*

Amen.

Notes

ⁱ Thanks to Rev. Erin Splaine for articulating this irony in her sermon "The State of Whose Union?" preached at the First Parish in Wayland, MA, February 1, 2004.

ⁱⁱ This litany is adapted from Rev. Splaine's sermon, *ibid*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*.

^{iv} The UUA website has extensive coverage of UU efforts on behalf of gay marriage. See uua.org for more details.

^v The UUA website has extensive coverage of UU efforts on behalf of gay marriage. See uua.org for more details.

^v For a copy of this ad, see

<http://www.uua.org/news/2004/freedomtomarry/images/Freedom%20to%20Marry%20ad%20031004.pdf>

^{vi} ee cummings, "dive for dreams"