

“Marriage in God’s Eyes”

Melrose Unitarian Universalist Church

October 2, 2005

Anne E. Noonan

Today is Protect Marriage Sunday. Do you know about this? Protect Marriage Sunday is the kickoff day for a campaign to end legal same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. So as we speak, people worshiping at Catholic and some conservative Protestant churches all over the state, are being asked to sign a petition to advance a ballot initiative that would protect marriage, but only for a certain class of citizens.

I want to thank the Welcoming Congregation committee for creating today’s service, and for allowing me to talk about a research study on same-sex marriage that I’ve been involved with, that I think has some bearing on the protection of marriage as an institution. What I want to do in the next 15 minutes or so is talk some about the study, share some of our findings, and suggest what all of this might mean for us as Unitarian Universalists. But, more specifically, I think we need to look at what all of this means for us as members of this congregation that has worked for and earned the designation of being a “Welcoming Congregation,” -- a congregation that is intentional and deliberate about welcoming people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

But first I think we need to ask the question – do we really need to bother with all of this? After all, this community has a lot of work to do this year, and there’s certainly plenty of work to be done out in the world.

I think the answer to the “why bother” question can be provided by the people who participated in our research study, even though this was not a question we asked them. I’ll say more about the particulars of the study in a minute, but right now let me share excerpts of the stories of four participants (whose real names are not used).

One woman told us:

That’s why I said I’m a bit displaced because I ... don’t want to celebrate my religion or spirituality with, or my relationship with God with, people who are in turn just going to basically say, ‘You know what? You’re

going to hell and what you're doing is a sin' . . . And it makes me sad because . . . I want to . . . feel like I am going to be welcome at mass . . . I want to take part in mass. But even . . . when I go [home] and my parents go to mass . . . I don't want to go. . . . Just because the overall church's stance. And there are other things that I don't necessarily agree with but . . . that's a pretty big one. Cause I feel like it's personally . . . attacking.

Another woman said:

We're both practicing Jews. . . .Our rabbi married us and she . . . couldn't wait. I mean she was so excited and . . . it was sort of a big deal. And I think the fact that she embraced us in the way she did and that the congregation did and . . . she asked me to . . . give a talk at the High Holidays about our marriage. So I did that and people, even now, if I run into them, they'll still say, 'That was incredibly moving.' . . . It was very meaningful to me to . . . be able to have a sort of traditional Jewish wedding . . . and to have a lot of the same rituals that my brother and sister had.

Here is a woman who belongs to a UU church:

We got married spiritually seven years ago. . . .We were recognized within our church community as a married couple, all of these kids recognized us as a married couple, from the spiritual union. . . . And . . . everyone was excited that we could legally get married, for us, but . . . ever since then we've been accepted as a couple, as a married couple.

And finally, here is a man who tried to continue being Catholic and raise his children Catholic, but left the church after his priest delivered a homily highly critical of the court decision that legalized same-sex marriage. He and his partner got married in an Episcopal church, and here he is talking about their wedding.

Jerry and I had tuxes on and we walked down the aisle and it was very awkward. It was very, very awkward . . . Jerry felt uncomfortable about holding hands in public. Well, I did too. . . .But we did it - but it was just so awkward. . . .I've always had guilt about being gay and being Catholic and being in a relationship with Jerry. You know, no matter how hard you try or how much you say, "the Church is wrong and I'm right," there's that little voice in the back of your head . . . "What if they are right and what if you are wrong . . .What if you are going to hell?" . . . But it was a

wonderful recognition of our love and relationship for one another and I wanted it to be a church. I said it has to be a church because I wanted God to be there. I wanted to be in God's eyes. It has to be in God's eyes.

So should we bother with this Welcoming Congregation business and with the support of marriage equality? On the basis of that data, I would say yes. But I think an even better question is – how can we not bother?

So now that I've given you a taste of the data, I need to back up and tell you a little bit about the study that the data come from. It was an exploratory study of 50 same-sex couples in Massachusetts, focusing on their experiences with legalization. The study was conducted by a team of us from the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. The team examined multiple aspects of couple's experiences -- I worked on the issue of religion and spirituality with my colleague, Catherine Senghas, who is also a UU divinity student at Andover Newton and a member of the Framingham UU church.

Catherine and I posed a very simple question in our data analysis. We wanted to know if and how the same-sex couples in our study viewed marriage through a religious and/or spiritual lens. In other words, what were their religious/spiritual perspectives on legalized marriage? The analysis that we did was qualitative research, a certain kind of research in which people's words and stories and narratives are the data to be analyzed, and numbers and statistics are less important or not important at all. I should also point out that our sample is not a representative sample, it does not speak for all same-sex couples in Massachusetts. For example, 72% of our sample was married, 64% was female, and people had been together anywhere from 2 to 40 years, with an average of just over 10 years. Most participants were middle-aged, white, and middle class, although we did have some diversity along those lines.

I also need to tell you something about how people described themselves in terms of religion and spirituality. About 30% of the sample said they had no identification with a religious tradition, 22% identified as Jewish, 14% as UU 10% as Catholic, 10% as Episcopal/Anglican, and 5% as Protestant. Another 10% of the sample consisted of people who held specific beliefs but did not affiliate with a faith tradition. In terms of participation, 27% of the sample reported they were actively involved in a faith community.

The first thing we found in people's narratives about religion and spirituality was a whole lot of complexity. Religion and spirituality was connected to the way people experienced the legalization of same-sex marriage in a variety of ways. For those couples who decided to get married, for example, it influenced the design of their ceremonies. Some told us things like "there was no invocation of God," while the man you heard from earlier talked about needing to get married "in God's eyes."

Religion also figured into people's decision-making about marriage, and into their beliefs about marriage as a social institution. And it was not just their own religious or spiritual beliefs and practices that mattered. People reported being highly influenced by their families of origin, by the religious communities that they were a part of, by organized religion of all stripes, by the voices of religious leaders in the media, and by more macro-level cultural ideas about the bible and homosexuality and marriage.

Now you'll remember that not everyone in this study identified with a religious tradition. So maybe our most important finding is the extent to which religion influenced the experience of legalization, even among people who said they were not religious or spiritual. More specifically, there were several couples who told us that religion had figured into their decisions not to get married, that marriage as an institution was too religious, or that religions had too much say about the institution, and that kept them away from it. So one of the things we're hearing from these people on the forefront of legalization in our state is that religion is getting in the way of legal marriage. Religion – even for people who don't describe themselves as religious – is getting in the way of an institution that only the state has the authority to provide access to. Today's signature-gathering activity in many churches across Massachusetts shows that religion, at least some pockets of it, has every intention of getting in the way of legal marriage. And what our data show – even before the first signatures were gathered – is that it's working, at least for some people. And if it was working last year when we collected our data, how well will it be working next year and all the years leading up to this proposed 2008 ballot initiative?

It will probably not come as a surprise to you that many of our research participants felt very strongly that religious marriage and civil marriage were two separate things that should be kept separate. One married woman told us: "I don't think

religion ... and the state need to be anywhere near each other.” An unmarried woman said: “Our stance is ... damn it! Separation of church and state. . . .Defining marriage between a man and a woman ... that’s a biblical interpretation. It’s the bible. . . .That’s the thing that just drives us crazy.” Many expressed the view that civil marriage should be everyone’s right. Couples could decide whether to involve religion, and individual religions could decide whether to be involved, but civil marriage was widely seen as a fundamental civil right.

So what do we do about all of this? What do we do about it as Unitarian Universalists, one of the few faith traditions that support same-sex love and relationships and marriage? Luckily, this is not a wheel that has to be re-invented, it is more a bandwagon that can be jumped on. And I don’t say that with the negative connotation of blindly following along and not asking questions and not registering disagreements where they exist. I say that to remind you that our denomination has been, is, and will continue to be on the forefront of this movement, and it’s not hard to plug into that world, especially in the Boston area. You may also know that there’s a Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry that consists of religious leaders from a variety of faith traditions – Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Episcopal, Jewish, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker, and of course Unitarian Universalism. And on a very exciting note, the Catholic members of that coalition are gathering their own signatures right now, to ask their fellow Catholics to support marriage equality for same-sex couples in Massachusetts. And their statement is compelling and beautifully worded and I urge you to check it out.

If it’s more general activism around equal marriage that appeals to you, you can check out the Freedom to Marry Coalition website at equalmarriage.org. Our own Welcoming Congregation committee can help you gain access to any of these pockets of activism, so talk to them, ask them questions, read the emails that they post, or get on the Orange Line with them when they go to the state house next.

So maybe that’s the easy question, what can UUs do? Maybe the more difficult question is -- what do we do about this issue as members of this congregation, in this very community, where there are 3 Catholic churches in a 2-3 mile radius of this church, and where the vast majority of us in this congregation are not lifelong UUs. Let’s try a show

of hands here. How many of you were raised in a faith tradition that opposes same-sex marriage? If you're sitting towards the front, turn around and look at the hands raised.

My mother and some of my siblings were mailed letters from their bishop in the past few weeks asking them to sign the petition at mass today. And I don't mean to pick on Catholics because it hurts to be an ex-Catholic and to hear Catholic-bashing at your new church. But I think we have a special obligation, a sacred obligation even, to look into our own upbringings, into our own families of origin, and into our own neighborhoods in this city, where cars bear the bumper sticker: "Melrose, One Community Open to All." And I think we need to get talking with people, lots of people.

Now, clearly, there are some people out there who are steadfast in their opposition to same-sex marriage. You may decide not to put your energy there, and I hear you. If people believe that same-sex marriage is a violation of God's plan for us, even the most elegant and well-reasoned UU argument will fall flat. But lots of people out there are ambivalent, and some are downright confused. And I believe that it is exactly this ambivalence and confusion that presents the most danger. The leaders of the opposition to marriage equality are feasting on that ambivalence and on the short American attention span. And they are doing so in language that is clear and appealing and harmless-sounding. And it is anything but harmless. Protecting marriage sounds great, unless you come to believe that it's people who need to be protected.

Our study, and plenty of other work, has shown that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have a strong desire to have religion in their lives and in their relationships. Many are involved in faith communities and some are happy with mostly private practice and reflection. But many don't know how to meet this need in their lives while also meeting their needs for intimacy and love. Or they are too frightened. For many people, their religious identities and their sexual identities are in constant and noisy conflict with one another. And I really do think we can help.

One possible solution would be to simply increase our outreach efforts and make sure every LGBT person, family, and couple knows we are out here. But the truth of the matter is, even if we want all of "them," they may not want us. As one of our participants said:

There's a Unitarian Universalist church ... up the road, and part of me kind of wants to go there and try to see what they're about. But then the other part of me doesn't because ... there was ... a Unitarian Universalist church where we were living in [another state] and I tried going to one of their services and it just didn't feel like it had anything to do with God. It was just too broad so I didn't get anything out of it. And ... it just felt really hokey. So I just ... don't want to ... have anything to do with that, because ... that doesn't give me what I'm looking for.

Now let's get real here. The opinion expressed in this excerpt is not just a gay or lesbian thing. It's a UU thing. As a denomination we continue to have conversations about our theological diversity, and who God is and what God means and how much God is enough or not enough or too much. We can reach out to LGBT people, and some of them may like what they see in terms of theology within our denomination or within individual congregations. And some may not. But we can certainly be more clear – and proud -- about how theologically diverse our denomination is, and we can let people know that sometimes it just takes a Goldilocks approach. Some UU churches are too hot, and some are too cold, and one may end up being just right. Another way to deal with this is to open up the conversation about God, again, and as many times as we need to. And at the very least, we can be a portal to other faith traditions that welcome LGBT people – the Quakers and the UCC and the Dignity movement within Catholicism and Reformed Judaism, among others. There is a need out there, and I think there's more than one thing we can do about it.

I want to close with the ending words from the Corinthians reading that we've all heard at so many opposite-sex Christian weddings over the years: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” I, as a very proud Unitarian Universalist, would say that we have some love to protect. And I would say we have some marriage to protect. So here's to Protect Marriage Sunday. And let's get busy.