

By The Power Vested in Me...

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“I promise to love and care for you,
Through times of joy and times of sorrow,
To rejoice when you are happy,
And grieve when you suffer,
To share your interests,
And hopes for the future,
To try to understand you,
Even when I do not agree,
To do all in my power
To help you be your true self,
The person God calls you to be,
In all this, I ask God’s help,
Now and in the days to come.

Words like these are said every day somewhere in the world. Two people fall in love, two people decide to make a public declaration of their love and commitment to each other, two people thumb their noses at the long odds of staying together for a lifetime, two people who might be named Bruce and Theresa, Don and Kathleen, Kevin and Tat, or the two women who actually spoke these words to each other, Beverly and Jamie. If you happen to be a man and a woman, these words, and the “I dos” and the marriage that follow them, are embraced and celebrated by not only your friends and family but the government as well. Once your wedding license is signed, you receive 1,138 rights and

benefits from the federal government and up to 400 rights and responsibilities from the state you live in.

If you happen to be a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, these words are followed by just as strong a commitment, just as strong a love, just as strong a bond as anyone's. But instead of being embraced by society, you are scorned and discriminated against; instead of being granted the equal rights and responsibilities that come with marriage, you are told your love, your commitment does not count and you are granted nothing.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has been clear about its position on same gender marriage for a long time. At the 1996 General Assembly delegates approved a resolution that said in part, "We urge the member congregations to proclaim the worth of marriage between any two committed persons and to make this position known in their home communities." Unitarian Universalist ministers have been officiating at same gender marriages and commitment ceremonies for many years. This week when I was reading the Georgia State Law on marriages and marriage licenses, I discovered that, because I married Kevin and Tat (two men) last year, I could be guilty of marrying people without a license which is a misdemeanor that carries with it a fine of \$500. If I am ever arrested, I will be happy to pay it.

Having your minister stand up and tell you that he is in favor of same gender marriage and that he believes anytime two people publicly declare their love and commitment to each other, and state their desire to build a life together, we should celebrate and grant them all rights of marriage, is probably not that big a surprise to you. At least I hope it is not. But the current climate and conversation about same gender marriage demands more than nice words about love and commitment. We must engage in conversation and dialogue, not only with each other, but with those people who will do everything in their power to heap abuse, hatred, and discrimination on same gender couples who only want to love each other, be granted equal rights and be left alone. And we must take action.”

I preached those words on September 28, 2003 at the last congregation I served in Atlanta, Georgia. If someone “googles” my name they are the first words, my first sermon they will find. When I stepped into the pulpit that morning I was excited, I was anxious, to be honest I was a little scared, about the reaction I would receive from the congregation on the action I had decided to take.

This morning on the Sunday before Valentine’s Day, a day that for all its commercialism and forced gifts is one of the most popular days for lovers to become engaged, I want to tell you about the action I took in September 2003, why I took it, what has happened since then and what you can expect from me, and I hope I can expect from you, in the future.

If you should decide one night to treat your insomnia by “googling” my name and read the sermon I preached that morning, you will read, what I am sure you will agree, is a well crafted, compelling and even moving description of why denying same gender couples the civil rights, responsibilities and benefits that come with marriage is unjust. You will read about loving, committed same gender couples who have been denied health care benefits, who have lost children, who have not been allowed to be at their partners’ deathbed and who have been robbed of property and death benefits because the government refuses to recognize the sacred and often, religious bond, of marriage and commitment a couple has made. And you will read that I believe, as this congregation believes - as evidenced by the vote you took in 2004 to affirm your commitment to marriage equality - that every time two people declare their commitment and love to each other we should stand up and cheer and grant them every religious blessing and equal civil right we can.

But the point of my sermon that September morning 3 ½ years ago, and the point of my sermon today is not to articulate all the reasons we should do so.

I grew up in San Francisco when the gay and lesbian population exploded. My first "real" job, selling newspapers each afternoon when I was in the sixth through eighth grades, was one block from Polk Street, which was the Castro street of the sixties and early seventies in San Francisco, and was the most "out"

community for gays and lesbians in the city. Like most hormone-crazed, teenage adolescents I was self-conscious of my sexuality and did my best to be one of the guys – even when that included making jokes and calling gay people and others kids derogatory names.

One of the best lessons of my three years selling newspapers on the streets of San Francisco, was that all people - no matter what their color, sexual orientation, or gender – were at times friendly and at times jerks. Living and working in a diverse city taught me that what is important is to, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said – judge people by the content of their character and not their appearance. But as a teenager I couldn't or wouldn't admit that very often when it came to gay people.

I confess my homophobic memories to point out how ironic it was that 28 years later I was ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister in San Francisco. When I served in San Francisco as an interim Assistant Minister in 2000 and 2001, two of my colleagues, David Pettee and Margot Campbell Gross were among the first ministers, Unitarian Universalist or otherwise, who took a stand against signing all marriage licenses.

My friend David wrote why, “I now believe that when I sign a marriage license, I am simply re-affirming state-sanctioned discrimination against same-sex couples who are categorically denied the privilege to make their unions legal.” As

a new minister right out of seminary who loved weddings, at the time I did not support taking such a stand because I feared people would not want me to officiate at their weddings if I took such a stand and because I thought it would be an inconvenience for heterosexual couples. But every time I signed a marriage license in my first three years as a minister, I fought my conscience, wondering if I was signing licenses because it was the right thing to do or because it was easy to do – both for the couples I married and the congregation I served.

After three years of doubts, of prayer, of reflection and meditation I decided I could no longer act as an agent of the state, as the language of some state constitutions put it, and in good conscience sign marriage licenses. I could and would do the religious affirmation and blessings that I have been ordained to do for all couples, no matter their gender, but I could no longer do the civil work of signing a marriage license and granting the over 1400 governmental benefits that come with it. Benefits that Brittany Spears received when she was married for ten minutes but benefits that Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, a lesbian couple in San Francisco who will celebrate 53 years together this Valentine's Day, cannot receive.

That morning in September 2003 I told my congregation that this was an agonizing decision for me to make but that when I turned to the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. for guidance there was only one decision I could make. In his

book *Stride Toward Freedom*, King wrote about how he came to believe in and practice non-violent disobedience. In one section of the book he wrote about his struggles with his conscience when he initiated the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, after a newspaper accused him of following the same discriminatory economic practices of white organizations. “Something began to say to me, he who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it. So in order to be true to one’s conscience and true to God, a righteous man has no alternative but to refuse to cooperate with an evil system.”

I decided to stop signing marriage licenses because I believe any system that refuses to acknowledge the commitment and love of two people who wish to spend their life together, is evil. Any system that does not allow lifelong partners to be at their loved one’s deathbed or deprives custody of their children simply because of who they chose to love, is evil.

That was what I said in September 2003 and that is what I say in February 2007. But, as the radio newscaster Paul Harvey likes to say, now for the rest of the story.

The congregation I served in Atlanta responded to my sermon that morning by giving me the first, and only, standing ovation of my career. That was sweet and unexpected. The Board agreed I no longer had to sign marriage licenses and

revised our covenant. Affirmed by the congregation, I decided to go public with my stand. The Atlanta Journal Constitution published portions of my sermon on the op-ed page, three newspapers interviewed me, I was asked to speak at synagogues and other congregations, I appeared on television and I spoke at a rally at the state capitol. I helped coordinate and lead the opposition to a proposed constitutional amendment banning same gender marriages in Georgia. The amendment won in a landslide but almost every UU congregation in the state wrapped their buildings in rainbow ribbon one Sunday morning before the election to stand in solidarity with other congregations as “no hate zones”.

Two members of the congregation told me they resigned because of my actions. Others may have left without telling me. I received some hate letters from people in the community but just as many letters brought me to tears from the genuine and sincere appreciation people shared with me. The number of marriages I officiated at went up and only one couple decided they preferred the “one stop shopping” that a minister who would sign their marriage license offered. Several couples asked me to include in their ceremony words about my stand so that more people could think about the discrimination same gender couples face and so that heterosexual couples could appreciate the benefits they receive and often take for granted.

What has happened since 2003 in the battle for marriage equality? Four countries have granted full and equal marriage benefits to all couples. Twenty-four states have passed constitutional amendments banning same gender marriage. One state, Massachusetts, has granted full and equal marriage benefits to all couples. On average, the divorce rate has gone up 2% in states since they voted to change their constitutions and ban same gender marriages; in Massachusetts the divorce rate has gone down since marriage equality for all has been granted. So much for wrongheaded notion that same gender marriage will ruin the institution of marriage.

As of June 2006, 37 UU ministers have declared their refusal to sign marriage licenses. Eleven of those live in Massachusetts and were able to begin signing licenses again. I have had many conversations with my colleagues of all sexual orientations about my stand. Some have agreed with it and some have not. The same could be said, I am certain, for all of you. When the Search Committee asked me to be your candidate as Lead Minister the first thing we did was negotiate the letter of agreement, the covenant, which speaks to the promises we make to each other.

There was not much to negotiate. I wanted to be here badly, and the Search Committee wanted me to be here as well. But I was a little nervous when I asked if there would be any problem with changing the language about my

responsibilities for performing weddings. I don't know what conversations the Search Committee or the Board had about my request but I did my best to tell them the reasons for my stand against signing licenses. They quickly agreed. Our covenant reads, "The Lead Minister is responsible for the religious aspect of weddings and commitment ceremonies, he may chose not to participate in the civil aspect of these ceremonies (the signing of the marriage license)."

I was very grateful for the swiftness and ease in which the Search Committee and Board responded to my request. They did not know that I would not have come to serve this congregation, as much as it would have broken my heart and jeopardized my family's financial well being, if they did not affirm my decision. I was reminded of my gratitude recently when one of my colleagues came to the same decision I have come to after years of reflection and prayer. But when my colleague went to their Board they found the Board was not willing to change their covenant and give permission to my colleague to stop signing licenses. I do not fool myself that we are of one mind as Unitarian Universalists on the issue of marriage equality, and especially of having one of your ministers tell you he will not sign your marriage license. But I hope and pray that we respect and appreciate each others' perspectives, as our principles inspire us to do.

These days I do not officiate at very many weddings. The responsibilities that come with being a Lead Minister of a large congregation do not afford me the

time to work with couples who are not members of this Fellowship. I still love officiating at weddings; I am often moved to tears by the sacred work that two people commit to when they promise to love each other for the rest of their lives.

But I don't miss signing their marriage license much at all. In fact, I've come to see the act of clergy signing civil marriage licenses the most blatant breakdown in the wall between church and state that exists. Perhaps one day we will follow the wisdom of many European countries, where couples must have a magistrate officiate at their civil ceremony, and, if they desire, a clergy person officiate at their religious ceremony.

In my first few months as your minister I have intentionally focused almost all my energies on getting to know you and this Fellowship. Serving and loving you, will always be my most important priority. But my calling as a minister and the call you have given me demand that I speak out to the larger world whenever injustice reigns. I don't know how and I don't know when but I will eventually be lending my experience and my voice, publicly with Mary's, to the fight for marriage equality in our community and in our state. I hope you are called to join me in this work but whether you are or you are not you deserve to know what I will be doing and why I am doing it. If you want to talk more about this issue I invite you to join me in the chapel/sanctuary 15 minutes after the service ends this morning.

I leave you this morning with the words from a Boston Globe editorial from 2003. Words that proved prophetic in Massachusetts and one day will prove prophetic across our land. “In Massachusetts, as elsewhere, the everyday reality of same-sex families is far ahead of the law. At Little League games, school plays, and Thanksgiving dinners, gay and lesbian couples and parents are living ordinary lives. They have made moral, emotional and financial obligations to each other and seek only the recognition and protections a legal marriage affords. It is time to extend those rights and responsibilities to all Americans.”

It IS time. And one day, when that time comes to North Carolina, I will be able to sign a marriage license again. May it be so. Amen.

CLOSING WORDS

Love is the doctrine of this church.

The quest of truth is its sacrament,

And service is its prayer.

To dwell together in peace;

To seek knowledge in freedom;

To serve humankind in fellowship;

Thus do we covenant with each other.

GO IN PEACE