

Sermon – On the Side of Love

Rev. Dr. Tracey Robinson-Harris

February 9, 2014

In 2001 Hillary Goodridge (a Unitarian Universalist and Director of the UU Funding Program) and her partner Julie Goodridge, and several other same sex couples were denied marriage licenses by the Massachusetts Department of Health. With the Goodridges as lead plaintiffs and with GLAD (Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders) attorney Mary Bonauto representing all the plaintiff couples, they took that denial and their case for marriage equality to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Three years later, the court sided with the plaintiffs. Then Chief Justice Margaret Marshall wrote: “The marriage ban works a deep and scarring hardship on a very real segment of the community for no rational reason. . . . Limiting the protections, benefits, and obligations of civil marriage to opposite-sex couples violates the basic premises of individual liberty and equality under law protected by the Massachusetts Constitution.”

Throughout the three years leading up to the court decision, Unitarian Universalists from across the state got involved. Many of our clergy made known their refusal to sign marriage licenses for any couple until all couples had the right to marry. We showed up for rallies. We wrote our share of Op Eds and letters. Many of us lobbied. During the 180 day waiting period after the court decision, given to allow the state legislature to “take such action as it may deem appropriate in light of this opinion,” and before marriages could be performed, a huge banner hung on the side of our Unitarian Universalist Association’s 25 Beacon St. building, the side facing the State House and visible from Beacon Street - “Civil marriage is a civil right”. The 180 days passed. The movement for marriage equality was gaining momentum in other states and more UUs all over the country got involved. Hillary and Julie Goodridge were married in the chapel at the UUA in May 2004!

I tell you this very brief version of the story this morning, a story you may well know, and know very personally, for these two reasons:

First – when the court case “presented itself” as an opportunity for bold action, we UUs went for it. Grounded in an affirmation of the worth and dignity of all persons. Prepared by our history – a legacy of commitment, action and sacrifice by many individuals dating back to 1970. Accountable to communities and individuals directly affected by this injustice. With resources and capacities that fit the need and could make a difference. When the opportunity to stand on the side of love “presented itself”, we did. We are. Just yesterday All Souls UU Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma announced their “OK We’re Ready” campaign after a Federal Judge shocked all sides by ruling in support of same sex marriage in that state. It was and is an extraordinary time! We are past the tipping point and now must work to affirm marriage equality and expand it . . .to continue to be among those who are standing on the side of love.

Those six words – standing on the side of love - are the second reason to remember the marriage equality decision. Those six words are the name of a song written by UU musician Jason Shelton, a song to celebrate and to inspire.

Sometimes we build a barrier to keep love tightly bound. Corrupted by fear. Unwilling to hear. Denying the beauty we've found.

A bright new day is dawning when love will not divide. Reflections of grace in every embrace. Fulfilling the vision divine.

We are standing on the side of love. . . .

Now in 2014, we have Chevrolet advertising on US TV during the Olympics: images of families of many kinds are shown with this message – “what it means to be a family hasn’t changed; what a family looks like has.” And yesterday this from U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder “In every courthouse, in every proceeding and in every place where a member of the Department of Justice stands on behalf of the United States, they will strive to ensure that same-sex marriages receive the same privileges, protections and rights as opposite-sex marriages. . . I will not let this Department be simply a bystander during this important moment in history.”

Not a bystander – but standing. . . on the side of love.

Only four years after the Massachusetts decision, in July 2008, standing on the side of love took on meaning beyond marriage equality, the result of tragedy experienced and courage shown by the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church (TVUUC) in Knoxville, TN. Jessica spoke of this when she told about our Baton Rouge congregation putting on a performance of Annie Jr to honor TVUUC.

On a July Sunday, a man entered that congregation’s sanctuary carrying a guitar case that carried a gun and killed two people (Greg McKendry and Linda Lee Kraeger). After his arrest, police found a manifesto he had written about his hatred for “liberals” as motivation for his actions. On the one year anniversary of the tragedy, the minister of that congregation, Rev. Chris Buice, preached a sermon about the shootings and the year since. He remembered how the congregation had been surrounded with love and support from many in the community – people of different faiths, varying politics, from many neighborhoods. He remembered how much it mattered that so many stood with them!

“In the aftermath of the shooting,” he said, church members “put up (a) wonderful banner that declared, “Love is the spirit of this church” and placed it out on Kingston Pike for all to see, an outward and visible sign of the inward commitment of this church. . . . Inspired by our witness together, (our UUA has launched a campaign to) encourage people all over our nation to stand on the side of love surround(ing) those who are vulnerable and marginalized and at-risk of hate crimes with compassion and understanding. The Universalists of the early 20th century affirmed a faith in God as eternal and all-conquering love. Our challenge is to work with

people of all faiths and beliefs to be instruments of that kind of love in the world, instruments of peace dedicated to overcoming evil with good, hatred with love.”

In that anniversary sermon, Rev. Buice spoke of “the bystander effect” in situations of bullying. When bystanders do nothing, (those who bully) feel they can commit their actions with impunity. “We must send a message. When we are confronted by hatred we stand on the side of love.” Rev. Buice continued, “I once heard someone say, “Ships are safe in harbor, but that is not what ships are made for.” And I would add, “Churches are safe when they refuse to speak out, but that’s not what churches are made for. Congregations are safe when they retreat into themselves and forget the troubles of the world but that’s not what congregations are made for. Temples, mosques and holy places are safe when they remain silent when one voice might make all the difference, when one voice might change the world, but that is not what faith is made for.”

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way. “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Inspired by the ongoing sea change in marriage equality, encouraged by the continuing example of the TVUUC to be more welcoming and inclusive, remembering the words on the banner “love is the spirit of this church” (a line from an affirmation used in many UU congregations today and written by Unitarian minister James Vila Blake in 1894) . . . UUs are looking for opportunities to stand on the side of love.

Many found one yesterday in Raleigh North Carolina. A recently passed state voter identification law became a coalescing issue. The Rev. William Barber, President of the state NAACP and other leaders issued a call echoing Dr. King’s call to Selma during the Civil Rights Movement. “A threat to justice anywhere is still a threat to justice everywhere. Come to Raleigh. Join in the Mass Moral March on Raleigh.” Thousands went, including UUs from all over the country who, again, stood on the side of love – love for fellow citizens whose right to vote is in jeopardy. And more - for those who need to be paid a living wage, for changes to our criminal justice system to make it more just.

Never forget, said Cornel West, “that justice is what love looks like in public.”

Here then is a third reason to share the story of marriage equality in Massachusetts, and Saturday’s march in Raleigh. When we are GROUNDED – when our values and our history compel us to act - to affirm the worth and dignity of all, to uphold the rights of conscience and the democratic process. When we are ACCOUNTABLE - with relationships to build on and the trust to do so as we did with GLAD then or with the state NAACP now. When there is a FIT of our resources and capacities with the needs of those most directly affected by discrimination – . . . there is an OPPORTUNITY for us to STAND ON THE SIDE OF LOVE.

We need not wait for opportunity to come our way. Though by all means we should take it when it does. We need *to look* for opportunity. Look around. . . at the city and region, at the issues facing our neighbors and our community, at what our values demand and our

resources make possible. Stand on the side of love – with youth and families who are homeless, with ex- prisoners, with the glbtq community, with those who work for peace.

Love is the spirit of this church.

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.

Look for opportunities. to stand on the side of love.