

SAME SEX MARRIAGE – SO WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

Doreen M. Peever
Unitarian Congregation of Niagara
April 24, 2005

To begin, let’s talk about what the word “marriage” means. It has both social and legal implications. The dictionary defines marriage as: 1. the state of being married; relation between husband and wife; wedlock; matrimony; 4. any close or intimate union. Matrimony, a formal word, applies specifically to the religious sacrament of marriage and stresses the rights and obligations of the marriage state. To me, the word “marriage” means to live in a lifelong, monogamous relationship with another person, to support each other, to love each other, to raise children together if both people want and are able to have children. It is both a legal and a social union. Legally, you may take a common name; you are usually responsible for each other’s debts; your marriage is registered by the provincial authorities as a legal fact; you are the legal parents of any children you have; you are each other’s next of kin. Socially, you are recognized as a family unit. The word “marriage” is seen as shorthand in our society for a committed relationship, a family. Is this what each of you understand by “marriage”? Do any of you have anything to add to that definition?

Because marriage gives couples certain legal rights, it is recognized as a valuable thing. Being married gives a spouse the right to make decisions about end of life situations, such as recently occurred in the Terri Schaivo case in Florida. In some countries you may not share a hotel room unless you are married. There are implications for filing tax returns as a couple. It means you can introduce your partner as “my wife” or “my husband” and have everyone understand that you share a committed relationship. Living common law or just living together doesn’t have the same sense of permanence, of commitment. You can just pick up your marbles and go home if you have a disagreement, without going through the messy and expensive process of a divorce.

Unitarians tend to think of the issue of same-sex marriage in terms of our principles, which affirm the worth and dignity of every person, as well as justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We are appalled by statements such as the ones made by Bishop Henry of Calgary in which he said: “Since homosexuality, adultery, prostitution and pornography undermine the foundations of the family, the basis of society, then the State must use its coercive power to proscribe or curtail them in the interests of the common good.” He went on to say: “Contrary to what is normally alleged, the primary goals in seeking legalization of same-sex “marriage” are not the financial or health or inheritance or pension benefits associated with marriage. The search for stability and exclusivity in a homosexual relationship is not the driving force. The principal objective in seeking same-sex “marriage” is not really even about equality rights. The goal is to acquire a powerful psychological weapon to change society’s rejection of homosexual activity and lifestyle into gradual, even if reluctant, acceptance.” It makes me wonder if he has ever talked to a homosexual couple.

2.

Why shouldn't same-sex couples have the same rights to a recognized marriage? What possible effect does the marriage of a gay couple have on anyone else's marriage? Does it make your marriage less of a commitment? Does it take anything away from your rights or devalue your relationship? It expands the definition of marriage rather than diminishing it. By accepting gay people and their right to marry we actually protect them from discrimination and abuse.

People who oppose same-sex marriage refer to "family values" being threatened. I have married 116 same-sex couples. Here is a picture of one of those couples and their family. Jane and Julie have been a couple for more than 20 years. Gracie is Jane's 26 year old daughter from a previous marriage; Jeff is the 16 year old son whom they had together, with Julie as his biological mother; Zoe is their adopted 10 year old Chinese daughter. Also living as part of their family is Jane's elderly mother and Julie's autistic 50-something sister. There are also a couple of cats. They own a home together. Jane is a lawyer and Julie a Sociology Professor. Can anyone tell me that they are NOT a family? And yet in Richmond, Virginia they are not recognized as married. (Tell story of couple on their street and bigoted mother)

Then there is that infamous verse in the Bible, Leviticus 18:22 which states: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination." Well, there's no getting around what it says, or putting a different face on it. It's pretty clear, though it only mentions male couples. A lot of fundamentalists take that verse out of its context and base their whole argument against homosexuality on it. But there are several things we should consider. One is that homosexuality existed and was recognized way back then. Another is that the old testament was written maybe 4,000 years ago, in a different time and place and culture. There are a whole lot of things in the old testament that no one takes seriously or literally any more. Let me read you a very funny take on some of them that someone sent me by e-mail. (Read Dr. Laura letter) I've checked the Biblical references for these and they're right there. There's a thought-provoking UU pamphlet I saw years ago that said on the front: "What did Jesus say about homosexuality?" When you open it up it's totally blank. The back page says: "That's right. Nothing."

Another argument that's used is that the population would die off if homosexuals were allowed to marry. Well, the guestimate is that 10% of the population is gay. That still leaves 90% to continue procreating. In fact, it might be better for the health of the planet if there was a whole lot less procreating! The earth is overpopulated now, using up its resources faster than they can be replenished, with a disproportionate amount of those resources used by first world countries. In many places, even in the USA, gay couples are permitted to adopt children. Of the couples I have married, at least 5 couples have adopted children, several in international adoptions, giving them loving homes. Several other couples have biological children conceived by artificial insemination or with a surrogate mother. Jane and Julie, the friends in Virginia, have prepared wonderful scrapbooks for Jeff and Zoe to explain their arrival in their family. For Zoe, there are

3.

pictures of the plane trip to China, the village where she was born and cared for by foster parents for a year after she was found abandoned in a field as a newborn, pictures of Jane signing the adoption papers and their joyful arrival home. They are part of a group of parents of Chinese daughters who meet regularly to support each other, learn Chinese language and culture, share birthdays and so on. There is a similar group in St. Catharines. For Jeff, they explained artificial insemination and had pictures of Julie pregnant and in labour and holding him as their new baby. Both scrapbooks use wonderful language to tell the children how much they were wanted and are loved. They are very secure children.

Another argument that I have heard is that children raised by a gay couple will be damaged. They won't know who they are. In all my pre-marital planning sessions with gay couples, it is evident that people know very early that they are "different". Sometimes it takes people a long time to accept that they are gay. It is certainly not something that they choose to be. Who would choose a lifestyle which causes them to be discriminated against and abused? And it's not catching! It is an innate characteristic that they cannot change. What children need is a loving home, preferably with two parents, where they have a secure place to be themselves.

Of course, many straight couples choose not to have children, or are unable to. One of my recent marriages was for a couple who are 89 and 81, members of my church. Even the Catholic Church, which insists that the purpose of marriage is to produce children, marries people who are beyond childbearing years. I wish they would be consistent! Couldn't these older or infertile couples just "live in sin"?

I have been lobbying our federal MP, Walt Lastewka, for some time on this subject. He is Ukrainian Catholic. When the law changed in June 2003 to permit same-sex marriage, the Pope came out with a statement that tried to force all of our MPs who are Catholic to vote against the re-definition of marriage. Well, I just saw red! Here's the letter I hand-delivered to Mr. Lastewka. (Read letter) Did I get an answer? NO! Did he come to any of those weddings? NO! So the next time I was in his office, this time with a group from PFLAG, his assistant passed out a pad of paper for people to sign if they had been in touch with Walt by mail or phone and not got an answer. What an opportunity! So I signed and said that I had hand-delivered a letter and got no response. Before the end of the day, the assistant called me. He said: "I don't know why you'd expect an answer, it's just a point of information." So I replied that there had been an invitation in the letter, to which he repeated that it was just a point of information. So I sighed mightily and said: "I guess I'll just have to send an RSVP next time." And I gave the letter to newspaper reporters for the St. Catharines Standard and the Guardian Weekly who attended one of those weddings on my front porch. Walt wound up on the front page of the newspaper trying to defend himself, saying he didn't push his religion down anyone's throat and he didn't want anyone to do that to him. The next occasion was also in his office, when he would allow 10 people in to talk about same-sex marriage. He

4.

actually said that there should be three separate words to describe marriage: “Marriage” for heterosexual couples, another word for gay men and a third word for lesbian women couples; he couldn’t suggest what those words might be. When I asked him what his logical objection was, he launched into a description of his upbringing and beliefs. When I persisted by saying: “But logically, Walt, what are your objections?” he just didn’t hear me! Now I go to his office and get 25 or so little Canada pins which I give out to the same-sex couple I marry, saying: “And this Canada pin is from Walt Lastewka, our federal MP, who totally opposes same-sex marriage.”

Some people insist that civil unions or registered domestic partnerships should satisfy the gay community. That the word “marriage” is somehow so holy that it should be reserved only for traditional heterosexual couples. As the Supreme Court keeps on saying, separate but equal is not equal. It didn’t work with segregated education in the States. It didn’t work with apartheid in South Africa. It’s not going to work in Canada. Same-sex couples want and are entitled to the same dignity and legal rights in recognition of their committed relationships as any other couple. Thank goodness I’m Unitarian and have the support of both my church and my denomination. I can’t imagine being anything else but Unitarian – I’ve been one for almost 50 years.

I’ve brought 2 binders with pictures of my same-sex weddings in 2003 and 2004. Look at the joyful faces! When Jane and Julie’s wedding was over, Jane swung Zoe around and around saying: “We’re married! We’re married!” It gives me great joy to provide a dignified, warm and LEGAL wedding to couples who come from great distances for such recognition. And they are so grateful! In fact, one of the couple I married last September from Buffalo broke into a hearty rendition of “O Canada” accompanied by their guests. This was after one of the grooms had made a speech thanking Canada for permitting him to marry, even though his own country would not. Canada has even gained a doctor who left California to practice in British Columbia. So I repeat – what’s the problem with same-sex marriage?