

More Love... Right Here

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
June 21, 2015

During the first ten days following the legalization of equal marriage rights in Massachusetts for same sex couples, I officiated at five same sex wedding ceremonies – including that of our own Mary and Abby Diamond-Kissiday. These couples had been together from seventeen to twenty-five years – a total of over 100 years!

So I suppose it goes without saying that these women and men had pretty clearly given some careful thought to the commitments they made at their wedding ceremonies, commitments actually made long before they became legally married, commitments they maintained for a long time in a culture that mostly did not (to put it mildly) recognize their relationships for what they were – married in all but name.

I've told you before what a special joy it was for me to officiate at the dozen or so weddings of gay and lesbian couples during the several months following Massachusetts' legalization.

These couples spoke the same promises I had heard hundreds of times before as a bride and groom spoke them; yet though the exchange of vows is always a powerful moment, always filled with emotion, there seemed an added dimension to these exchanges between those who had waited so long, indeed, who had for most of their years together not imagined that marriage would ever be possible for them.

In similar spirit, the love that surrounded these couples – whether in a small gathering of friends and family in a back yard, living room, or in our Parish House parlor, or here in the Meeting House with fifty or a hundred dear ones – that love and support also manifested a unique, special, even poignant joy.

It was in short a huge privilege to be part of such moments... moments, ceremonies, I could not have imagined at the time of my ordination twenty years earlier – none of us could, the change seemed if not unthinkable, certainly unrealistic.

Yet here and now we are, a mere eleven years after equal marriage rights were recognized in Massachusetts – and thirty-six states have followed suit, and the Supreme Court is poised to rule on the question for the entire nation.

And though it may be that many of us have almost come to take equal marriage for granted during these eleven years, it is worth naming that this is a cultural sea change of astonishing (and wonderful) proportions.

Now, several weeks ago my working title for this sermon was "Love, Marriage, and the Supremes".

My thought then was that the Court would have handed down their equal marriage decision by now – ruling one way or the other – and I would be able to reflect on the meaning and import of their decision.

Well, the opinions have no doubt been written, and the ruling may come as early as tomorrow; which means that the nine justices and I suppose a few others already know what it will be.

But... you know what? Though it matters a great deal for couples in states where marriage equality is not yet recognized, in the long run I don't think it matters much at all which way the Supreme Court rules. For the court of remarkably transformed public opinion will have its way as the wave of history sweeps away any ruling to the contrary of love and the right to marry. For what was unimaginable twenty or thirty years ago, unthinkable even those eleven years ago will come to pass sooner than later.

In short, love – committed, dedicated love – is and will be on the winning side regardless of what the justices tell us tomorrow or next week.

For yes, though in critically important ways the issue is about rights – not just the right to marry the person of your choosing, regardless of gender, but the hundreds of legal rights that come to a married couple simply and immediately once they are legally married... all this said, most fundamentally this is about love: committed, dedicated love. After all, in our time and place most marry not because of obligation or family arrangement... but because of love.

And, really, what right does the state or anyone else have to decide who can marry whom, any more than the state or anyone else could possibly have any significant influence over who will fall in love with whom, or whether I or you or anyone is more attracted to people of the same sex or the opposite sex?

Not too long ago, one had to argue this point. Now, at least for many of us, it seems to be as plain a truth as each morning's rising sun.

Yet, plain as it might now seem, it is no small matter.

For whatever else the world needs more of, the world needs more love – not somewhere... but right here... everywhere: committed, dedicated love

All kinds of love.

Now, there is danger in sentimentalizing love, treating love as a delicate flower... only. Yet though it is sometimes that, it is also something more, far more.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said as much:

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.

And the Christian monk and writer Thomas Merton wrote:

We do not become fully human until we give ourselves to each other in love.

“Supreme unifying principle of life...” which is essential to our becoming “fully human.”

We are indeed talking about a great power when we talk about love. And love as a verb as much or more than as a noun. In the spirit of the brief reading from Mother Teresa, and as I say to every couple at whose wedding I officiate, the beautiful *feeling* of love is evoked, sustained, and strengthened through our daily acts of love – mutual support, sharing chores, listening ears, kind words, helping hands.

As Mother Teresa once said: “Love has to be put into action and that action is service... (and) it is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing...”

Further, she, like Dr. King, was of course not only or even primarily talking about intimate love between two persons, but also about the kind of love made manifest in every dimension of our lives, from the briefest and simplest daily interactions to our major commitments of family and work and activism.

It’s all about love. Or should be.

When I talk about climate change or some other environmental issue, what else is that about but love, concern for those – most often the poorest, those already living at the margins – affected by rising seas and devastating heat waves, as well as appreciation for and valuing of all beings, *love* for all beings, human and otherwise?

When I talk about peace, what else is that about but about love, concern for the well-being of each and every person?

When I talk about any social justice issue, what else is that about but love, concern for the well-being of one or another oppressed group or minority and each individual life therein?

And... when we respond to the horrific shooting at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston with such deep sadness and sympathy, our response is all about love. Just as our desiring a nation without such gun violence, and with deeper racial understanding, and with something closer to real equality of opportunity and freedom and justice for all, without mass incarceration of young black men, where black lives do indeed matter... well, it is all about love.

Further, as we respond too to the remarkable (astounding to ordinary consciousness) words of forgiveness to the shooter from family members of those he killed, and we ask “how is this possible?” the only answer is “love” – years (generations really in that church) of nourishing the growth of seeds of love into robust loving ways of living. Indeed, during that hour of Bible study the group was studying the parable of the seeds in Mark’s gospel.

At the deepest and broadest level of our lives: When we explore questions of our essential identity, naming that identity as the divine light within or Buddha-nature or Atman, or declaring that we are all children of God, what else is this about but love, rooted in the recognition that we are indeed all profoundly connected, part of one web of life?

Even the universe itself... is not just “stuff” – from quarks and electrons to stars and galaxies. For since we, creatures who love, are part of the universe, the universe is also about love – maybe *all* about love, expanding for 13.7 billion years into more love, love woven into the fabric of the universe.

So then, it is no trivial sentimental ritual, this our annual Flower Communion, this symbolic representation of love in community, many flowers, one bouquet. Not trivial or sentimental at all – rather, maybe the most important ritual affirmation I can imagine, with potential ripples far beyond these walls – to Charleston and to all those in need of more love.

Now of course in all these layers of our lives we human beings sometimes or too much of the time fall short – whether in our personal relationships, in our social and

political arrangements, and even in our spiritual communities: churches, temples, mosques. In fact, maybe we fall shortest of all in our spiritual communities, here at Old Ship as much as anywhere... since we set for ourselves such a high bar for love, love manifest as welcome, as hospitality, as friendliness, as acceptance.

But we keep at it! Of course! What else would we want to do but keep at it – this life work to bring more love into our lives and into our shared life? And if the people of Charleston and the people of Emmanuel AME Church can keep at it, then surely we can.

Back, then, to where I started. With a final thought about marriage, anyone's marriage.

Bob Kimball, who was president of my seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry, when I was there, in his book *Restless is the Heart*, quotes "a poet acquaintance" of his:

Will you marry me?
And she said yes
If you can answer satisfactorily
One simple question:
What would we give each other
Married, that we've withheld today?
He thought awhile and
Then the only answer
I can give is nothing –
Not one single thing
Of value I can think of –
Now, she said
Let the bells ring
For the record.

Bob then comments: "And, in the moment of the bells, all is new. A step is taken, a world opens."

That's it. "Let the bells ring / For the record" and "all is new... a world opens."

A world with *more love* right here. A world blessed by that more love, blessed by the example of dedicated commitment, which means patience and kindness in the midst of better and worse, sickness and health, including, as the writer bell hooks puts it, "intention and will... care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility..." – and not only in marriage, but every day, in every way.

You see, more love anywhere, all kinds of love, personal, social, political... means more love everywhere.

And more love is always beautiful, always good.

Amen. So may it always be.