

A Call to Make Legal Same Sex Marriage

Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn

Reverend Vann Knight

February 1, 2004

With all its challenges, marriage is still an attractive option for most adults. This address is not an endorsement of marriage, but it is an affirmation that ***“legal marriage” should be a choice available to all***. Deciding to marry is a choice each person makes based on their deepest feelings and beliefs, and **no person should be denied that choice because they love someone of the same gender**.

This affirmation that ***“legal marriage” should be a choice available to all*** is consistent with our Unitarian Universalist principles. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.”

This affirmation is not consistent with some Biblical texts, but some Biblical texts are not consistent with other Biblical texts. This affirmation that ***“legal marriage” should be a choice available to all*** is, however, consistent with my understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus.

This affirmation is not consistent with the sinful tendency of the human family to segregate and oppress a minority group. Throughout history, there has been a pattern of the majority labeling some minority group as immoral, portraying them as a danger to society, denigrating them in order to preserve the majority’s sense of superiority. But this affirmation that ***“legal marriage” should be a choice available to all*** is consistent with the proposition that all persons are created equal and that regardless of race, religion, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation, we are all blood kin.

This affirmation is not consistent with the position of the Catholic Church. Though I want to be respectful of the Catholic Church, I do believe that the Catholic hierarchy needs to remember that they are not the only valid expression of Christian faith. And all Christians, Catholic and Protestant, need to remember that Christianity is not the only valid religion. Worldwide, Christians comprise only about 20 to 25 percent of the world’s population. Here in America, and in our own state, we increasingly live in the midst of many religions of good will. Christianity is most familiar to us, but it does not hold an exclusive franchise on wisdom, inspiration, or grace. This affirmation that ***“legal marriage” should be a choice available to all*** is rooted in universal grace and is consistent with the experience of mystics in all religions, in every age and culture, who find the presence of the holy in all life.

This affirmation is not consistent with the position of our Governor, nor of the person occupying the office of President of the United States. This affirmation that ***“legal marriage” should be a choice available to all*** is, however, consistent with the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and our Pledge of Allegiance; all of which guard and hold safe “liberty and justice for all.”

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees that ***“legal marriage” should be a choice available to all***. Some object on the basis that marriage was instituted by God and that “same- sex marriage” would violate what God intended.

I believe that marriage is rooted in the far dawn of human history and that it is a relationship made sacred by the love, commitment, and respect that persons bring to it. I believe the holy is present in all persons and in all life, and that to the degree a married couple is conscious of that presence, their marriage is blessed by the holy.

Let's examine the assertion that marriage was instituted by God. The most common biblical texts used to implicate God in marriage are two short passages within two larger creation accounts. Both creation stories are found in the first two chapters of Genesis. Within the context of the first creation story, which has God creating male and female at the same time, the writer says, "God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth, and subdue it; have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth."

To me, that doesn't sound like God instituting marriage.

The second creation story has a totally different order of creation with woman created not with man, but after man. This story says that God formed woman out of the rib of man and presented her to the man. Then the writer says, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and attaches himself to his wife, and the two become one."

To me, that doesn't sound like God instituting marriage. I submit that these are theological stories related to creation, not marriage.

The making and keeping of covenants was an important part of the Jewish experience with God and with one another. In the Hebrew Scriptures, there are several accounts of covenants being made. But nowhere is there a reference to God establishing a marriage covenant to be entered into by one man and one woman. Nowhere is there mentioned a formal exchange of wedding vows or of a priest being present at any kind of marriage ceremony.

Another traditional argument for marriage being instituted by God is that Jesus attended a wedding. If you are convinced by that argument, then bless your heart.

If God instituted marriage, why would the Apostle Paul, the chief spokesperson of the Christian faith, say, "It is good for a man *not to marry*." (I Corinthians 7: 1). Why would he say, "If you do marry, you haven't sinned.... but those who marry will face many troubles and I want to spare you this." (I Corinthians 7: 28) If God instituted marriage, why did the Church have no involvement with it until the ninth century?

In the face of all that, if one still chooses to believe that God instituted marriage, at least concede that it must have been the institution of spiritual marriage, not legal marriage. And the issue before the legislature is legal marriage.

Others say they oppose same sex marriage because marriage "by definition" involves a man and a woman. I agree that this is how most people in most cultures have defined marriage; but there have been exceptions.

(See *The Case for Same Sex Marriage* by William N. Eskridge, Jr.)

More importantly, we don't live in the past.

One of the anxieties of living in this postmodern era is that old definitions, in every area of life, are being reconstituted. That may not be comfortable for some of us, but the world never has been what it used to be. In light of our expanding experience, knowledge and compassion, we have the opportunity and power to redefine marriage in ways that include our gay and lesbian friends and family.

Throughout history, our understanding of the universe, of what constitutes family, and our sense of social justice has matured. Once upon a time most people believed the earth was the center of the universe. In 1633, the Catholic Church defended that sacred position by sentencing Galileo to life in prison. But regardless of what the Church or ancient science said, we don't believe that any longer. We've outgrown that thinking.

Regarding what constitutes family, the Bible gives conflicting messages, reflecting different times and circumstances. In one place, the Bible says, "It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." (I Corinthians 7: 1-2) But the Bible also tells of a time when it was permissible for men to have many wives. (Genesis 29: 17-28; II Samuel 3: 2-5; II Samuel 5:13; I Kings 11:1- 3; II Chronicles 11: 21;) There are also passages that absolutely prohibit divorce, (Deuteronomy 22: 13-19) and some that allow it. (Deut. 24: 1-4; Matthew 5: 31-32) The Bible also prohibits persons of different faiths from marrying; and those who violated this prohibition were put to death. (Ezra 9:10 -12; Numbers 25:1- 9) The Bible says that if a married man dies without fathering a child, his brother must marry the widow and produce a child for his deceased brother. (Deuteronomy 25: 5-10; Genesis 38: 6-10) The Bible allows for the stoning to death of any wife who was not a virgin on her wedding day. (Deuteronomy 22: 13-21). There's a lot in the Bible we're not prepared to practice. Just because something is in the Bible, or the church says it, we no longer feel compelled to believe it. We've outgrown that thinking.

Regarding our sense of social justice, this too has changed. When Europeans first came to this country, many thought it natural, even their God given right, to kill native people and take their land. Later, there was a time when politicians and clergy endorsed such expansion as our manifest destiny. We don't believe that any longer. We've outgrown that thinking.

After the American revolution, most whites, including our political leaders, accepted slavery as a natural or necessary part of American society. After all, the Bible says, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters." (Ephesians 6:5) But even if that's in the Bible, we don't believe that any longer. We've outgrown that thinking.

Social justice evolves slowly. From the 1620's until the enactment of the 19th Amendment in 1920, it just seemed natural that only men should vote. Giving women the vote would be contrary to the way God intended things. After all, the Bible says, "Wives, submit to your husbands," and it goes on to say, "Women should remain silent in the church" and "If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; I Corinthians 14: 34-35) But even if that's in the Bible, my wife told me I couldn't believe that any longer. She says, we've outgrown that thinking.

Our sense of social justice and morality related to family continues to mature. In the first half of the 20th Century, most priests and ministers were telling their congregations how terrible it would be to marry someone of a different faith. Some religions still haven't gone beyond that. In the first half of the 20th Century, it was considered immoral and illegal for persons of different races to marry. Some of you, some of your parents, some of your children, could have been jailed, just a few years ago, because of interracial marriage. Not long ago, most priests and ministers were telling us how immoral and devaluing of marriage such unions would be. As late as 1970, twelve states still had laws prohibiting interracial marriage. South Carolina removed their law in 1998, Alabama in 2000. But regardless of what the Church or State may have said, we no longer believe that interracial families are immoral or devaluing of marriage. We've outgrown that thinking.

But as recent as this morning, many Americans still believe in racial segregation. I grew up in southeast Alabama in the 1960's, and I remember segregation. I remember the fable, "separate but equal", which was always separate but never equal. I remember the blood on the road from Selma to Montgomery. I remember George Wallace standing in the door of the University of Alabama, with his lips "dripping with words of interposition and nullification." Though I never saw them dressed in their white robes, I saw and heard the Klan, and I remember.

I can not begin to imagine the pain and destructiveness experienced by those ostracized by the phrase and reality, "White Only." I can not begin to imagine the pain and destructiveness experienced by those who were told day in and day out that they were inferior- intellectually, socially, morally, and legally inferior. But I remember. I remember, in the eyes of little black boys and little black girls, what segregation looks like. And I remember, in the unnatural submissiveness of their mamas and daddies, what segregation looks like. I remember listening as they tried to explain to their children why they were treated this way. I remember watching as they tried to live their lives as normally as they could under a cloud of unreasonable prejudice and unjust discrimination.

I remember what segregation does. It makes everything less. It makes the soul less. It makes the community less. It makes liberty less. It makes America less. When we ghettoize any segment of society and make that group the sin-bearers of the community, we do violence not only to them, but to ourselves.

From the perspective of the majority, I remember what segregation looks like. For the most part, it looks like good people trapped in their cultural blindness, not knowing they are limited by their particular time and place and religion. In the South, so many of us were racist, and most of us didn't even know it. We thought we were defending the way God intended things to be; but we were wrong.

And just as racism is no longer acceptable, this bias against gays is gradually fading. Even though it's been dressed up in religious language, and propped up by centuries of prejudice, it's still a manmade proposition that is passing away, just as surely as did the sacred theology that the earth was the center of the universe.

It's only a matter of time before same-sex marriage will be a normal part of American life. In just a few decades, young people will look back on this issue and ask, "What was all the fuss about?" It will be just one more advance in our nation's long tradition of living out our vision of "liberty and justice for all."

Another argument for excluding same-sex couples from legal marriage is that the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a sin. In fact, the book of Leviticus, in Chapter 20, verse 13, goes so far as to say that homosexuality is punishable by death. But if you take that literally, be prepared for some surprises. (see Leviticus, chapters 20-24) For instance, Leviticus says that heterosexual adultery is punishable by death, and cursing or reviling your parents is punishable by death. Leviticus says that consulting a medium or fortune teller is punishable by death; and that blaspheming God's name is punishable by death. Has anybody listened to the language at a Red Sox-Yankees game? We'd lose half our membership by the third inning. If we want to take the Bible seriously, we cannot take it literally.

Let me offer a serious, but not literal, interpretation. That homosexuality was a sin was certainly the conviction of the writers of Leviticus, the Apostle Paul, and others. For these devout persons, nothing was more important than being faithful to the will and purpose of God, and nothing should stand in the way of being true to one's God-given identity and purpose. They believed that homosexuality did just that. They believed that homosexuality hindered people's ability to experience the fullness of their God-given identity and purpose. Considering their time and context, it would have been unusual for them to have understood homosexuality any other way.

But we don't live in that time and context; and I respectfully disagree with these biblical writers and with good people today who hold that position. I believe that one's sexual orientation, whatever it is, is not a hindrance to the will and purpose of God, but a basic component of it. Homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is not a distortion of God-given identity and purpose, but one expression of it.

I find it instructive that the gospel writers do not record one word coming from Jesus about homosexuality . But when they tell stories of Jesus with persons who were marginalized by society, the writers always present Jesus giving an extra measure of compassion and hospitality. I challenge anyone to read the Gospels and conclude that Jesus would exclude Gays from marriage. You may be able to do that, but I can't.

Clergy and representatives of religious bodies certainly have the right to decide for whom they will perform a marriage ceremony. And religious institutions have the right to set marriage policy. Marriage may or may not be blessed by God, but legal marriage is a social construct regulated in our society by government. In our context, it is inappropriate for government to continue to deny equal protection under the law for any reason -- including that some religious traditions may be offended.

Another objection to same-sex couples being legally married is the argument that this would cheapen marriage. Those who have concern for the integrity of marriage are to be commended. But it has not been same-sex couples who have compromised marriage. To this point, they have been excluded. In light of the present rate of domestic violence and divorce, making **“legal marriage” a choice available to all** will neither threaten marriage standards nor diminish its integrity.

Another argument against same-sex marriage is that these couples can't produce children. It's interesting that this objection is never raised to heterosexual couples who may not want to bear children, or may be sterile, or may be too old to have children. Historically, the Catholic Church has had much to say about marriage, sex, and children. However, in light of recent revelations, I find it difficult to seriously consider the Catholic hierarchy's teachings about marriage, sex, and children. In fact, I find it amazing that they feel ready to lecture anyone about human sexuality, sexual orientation, or sexual ethics.

A more relevant objection is concern about the welfare of children who are raised by a same-sex couple. I have no doubt that children being raised by same-sex couples have unique pressures and issues. But little of that seems to be coming from within the home. Most is coming from the community. It's the ignorance, fear and hostility of teachers, classmates, gay bashers, and religious leaders that kindle most of the unique stress. Let's not demonize same-sex parents for the demons their children have to face in society. Homosexuality is not a sin. Being uncomfortable with this issue is not a sin; but homophobia is.

So what are the real reasons we're not already celebrating legal same-sex marriages? One reason is that it just takes a long time for our collective sense of fairness to become stronger than our old prejudices.

Another reason is that lots of good people, clergy and politicians, oppose same-sex marriage on religious grounds. They hold this view with the same sincerity and fervor as earlier folk who, on religious grounds, opposed the freeing of slaves; and others, who, on religious grounds, opposed the right of women to vote; and still others, who, on religious grounds, opposed interracial marriage and racial integration in general. How often *religion gone wrong* has bruised the human spirit, rather than blessed it.

Another reason we're still waiting to celebrate same-sex marriages is that the majority of earlier political leaders either shared a religious or social bias against gays; or for political reasons, they voted the prejudice of others, possibly under threat of church reprimand.

The bottom line is that we're not yet celebrating same-sex marriages because of **illegal discrimination**, based on gender and sexual orientation. Hopefully, we are about to end this practice; a practice that favors one class of citizens while depriving another of equal protection under the law; a practice which created a caste system, with gays and lesbians being the untouchables.

Consider the anxiety that gays and lesbians may have felt this morning? How would you feel in a public gathering that reviewed all the reasons some people say your love relationship is immoral and unworthy of legal recognition?

Imagine that for years you were told by religious leaders, gay bashers, and by your own government that there is something so wrong with you and with your beloved, that you cannot be legally married? How would you like to explain that to your children? What do you think the effect of that message has been on the children of same-sex couples? And what has the government's refusal to allow same-sex marriage said to parents about their gay and lesbian children?

Not long ago, I was told this story by a young woman. She has two brothers. One was married five years ago and the other about two years ago. Both were wed with the love, support, and celebration of the whole family. However, since this young woman "came out" as a lesbian about six years ago, her father has barely spoken to her. At the last brother's wedding, when it was time to take the big family photograph, she and her beloved were asked to step out of the picture. When the two of them are married this summer, most of her family will be there, but her wedding will be scarred by anger, embarrassment, and division.

The responsibility for these attitudes rests with the family. But does it help or hurt that father and daughter that the government, for years, labeled this man's daughter immoral and unfit for marriage. We can dress it up all we want to, but that's the emotional message that our government has been giving to families with gay and lesbian children.

How do you think gay bashers have interpreted the government's rejection of same-sex marriage? My fear is that it fueled, confirmed, and gave permission for their hatred.

But as Americans become more familiar with gays and lesbians and increasingly appreciate the pain and injustice of their situation, we will support what's fair. Winston Churchill once said, "Americans always do what's right, after they've exhausted all other options."

What we need now is for our political leaders to lead. I'm calling on all state Senators and Representatives to ensure that "**legal marriage**" is a choice available to all. There are times in the political process when leaders have to lead. If they don't, the minority will be tyrannized by the majority. You haven't been elected to follow in the narrow path of yesterday, but to lead us all into broader horizons of liberty. You have not been elected to nod to and then turn a blind eye to our nation's noble principles of freedom. Rather, you have been elected to incarnate these sacred ideals in law, institutions, and everyday life.

Ensuring that "**legal marriage**" is a choice available to all will give a clear signal that in this state we will make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free expression thereof.

Ensuring that "**legal marriage**" is a choice available to all will confirm our allegiance to the pledge of "liberty and justice for all."

Ensuring that "**legal marriage**" is a choice available to all is an affirmation that the body politic still has the power to "establish justice" and "secure the blessings of liberty."

Ensuring that "**legal marriage**" is a choice available to all gives witness that we still hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. You, our leaders, hold these sacred principles in trust. This is your time to form a more perfect union.

What I'm calling for is not special laws for gays and lesbians. Rather, I'm asking that present laws be interpreted and implemented in such ways that ensure **“legal marriage” is a choice available to all.**

It's just fair.