

Standing on The Side of Love

Rev. Leslie Takahashi Morris
Guest Minister
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester
Mt. Kisko, New York

Meditation and Prayer:

I invite you into the spirit of meditation and prayer:

Spirit of life, God of many names,

Be present with us as we seek to make our presence as concerned and faithful people known.

Give us comfort that our deepest principles are not foolhardy, that our dreams of a more united world are not absurd, that we are not alone in our desire to live in a more equitable world.

Give us courage that no matter what hate others may foment, we will never be silent until all discrimination and oppression is defeated.

Let us be reminded here today that what we work for is something larger than ourselves, a vision of a world where the rights of all are honored—the right to food, to shelter, to safe and productive work, to bodily safety and the right to love and sacred commitment.

Affirm for those of us who believe that life is sacred, that love is sacred and help us work for a world where whom you love will not matter. Affirm for us that there is more love, more peace, more hope and more truth. Affirm that we are asking and praying from the depth of our souls for the courage to believe that we can stand on the side of love. So may it be. Blessed be.

Reading: "A Million Votes No"

by Doug Loyd, member Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church-Unitarian Universalist

(Doug wrote this for our Day of Advocacy in 2006.)

I stand here today to represent
The straight or not parents
And lovers and friends
Of those who simply want
To love whom they love
To walk their own paths
To bear one another's burdens
To share each other's lives

I wait here today for
The straight or not parents
Aunts uncles and cousins
And brothers and sisters
And lovers and friends
Of those who simply want

To love whom they love
To walk their own paths
To bear one another's burdens
To share each other's lives

I come here today to celebrate
Those who simply want
To love whom they love
To walk their own paths
To bear one another's burdens
To share one another's lives

And I call upon
Their straight or not parents
Aunts uncles and cousins
And brothers and sisters
And children and partners
And lovers and friends
To rise up and defeat those -
Including the politicians and preachers -
Who are strangely afraid
To let them love whom they love
And walk their own paths
And bear one another's burdens
And share each other's lives

Sermon:

"We'll Build A Land where we bind up the broken." We sang this hymn yesterday at a memorial service for a beloved member of my congregation. In its last lines, we hear a paraphrase of a famous line "Let justice roll down like water and peace like an ever-lasting stream." These are probably the best known of the words of the Hebrew prophet Amos, and I, like many others, found them comforting, that is, until I learned more about them and about Amos. You see, I thought of prophets as self-righteous proclaimers who rejoice in bringing difficult and doom-filled messages. Amos didn't consider himself a prophet. When labeled by his fellows in 700 BCE as "seer" he replied, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees." With this somewhat obscure words, he makes clear that he is no rabble-rouse or attention-lover. He is a pretty well-off person for his time and place, anointed to preach in a community where he was an outsider, required by his faith to bring an unwelcome message that it was time to put aside personal advancement and consider justice. For me, one of the most startling and disturbing things to learn about Amos and a number of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures was they didn't apply for the job.

You are about to do something amazing. As a congregation, you are about to enter into a relationship with a new minister. One I am sort of partial to—a guy I have known for about a decade and a half, who I watched come into the UU Fellowship I was part of with the same passion and hunger and enthusiasm I had brought myself a few years before, who I entered

seminary with, who I entrusted to feed squash to my infant son, who has been a role model for my now-college age daughter, who I have seen stand up and speak unpopular truths when I needed an advocate on issues affecting me. Michael is many things—he is an artist, a scientist, a minister, a great loyal friend—and he is also the devoted partner, to Eric, with whom I share a passion for politics, public policy and good journalism.

You might think it is because of this last fact that I chose to talk this morning about the issue of marriage equality for same sex couples. Yes and no. Yes, because I believe that if you are to truly appreciate the amazing leader Michael is, you have to understand the context of his life as a gay man in a nation that still treats gay men unjustly. And no, because this is an issue I often address because I consider it one of the most important civil rights issues of our times.

Unitarian James Luther Adams wrote in the last century, “In the great ages of prophecy the prophets...stood not only at the edge of their own culture but also before the imminent shape of new and better things to come. At times of impending change and decision, they have seen the crisis as the crisis of an age; they have felt called to foresee the coming of a new epoch.”

As a minister I feel establishing gay marriage rights is the crisis of our age. I have lost beloved couples from the congregation I serve when they decided it was too dangerous for them to live in Virginia, the state that as of last year has the most punitive laws restricting gay marriage. Two summers ago I sat with a dying woman who knew that her family would not respect her wishes to allow her lover to remain in the house they shared, both of us knowing that the law would side with this heartless act. I have counseled a gay couple faced with losing visitation rights with their children. I have conducted religious services for same-sex couples who entered into their marriage with great love and commitment—and came out of them with none of the rights that heterosexual couples do. I do so as a “straight or not person”, like the author of the poem we read earlier, who has a child I love who identifies as a lesbian. I also do so as someone who understands how slippery the rights of marriage can be. I am multiracial and born in 1962, five years before the Supreme Court ruled that my parents marriage was legal.

The etymological roots of the word, prophecy, mean simply to be tied by a religious vow—and religion, at its origins, means to be “bound together.” And so, to be prophetic is to be called to speak and act because of the beliefs to which one is bound. To ask for peace among peaceniks or care for the earth among environmentalists is one thing. To witness for peace among those tied to the war effort is another—and to call for equal marriage rights for all in today’s society is, sometimes, to take the risk of standing alone. About four years ago, when the debate was much more contentious in Virginia, our congregation voted to put up a rainbow banner on the front of our church that states that we believe in marriage rights. That was a prophetic act, tying us to our religious beliefs. Since then we have hosted regional gatherings and will host one next week with a panel of seven local clergy, raised the funds to replace the banner twice and we have also held public rallies where we witnessed outside our church. And last November, we held an evening vigil to hold the heartbreak of the BLGT community and of many of us straight allies to that community the night after the elections when our state passed a state constitutional amendment which added legislated hate to the state’s bill of rights, of all places.

Like Amos, you and I, the ones faced with the need to be modern day prophets, may not want the job either. The fact is that we are experiencing the inconvenient truth of a prophetic call—called to speak what we believe as Unitarian Universalists—in the inherent worth and dignity of

all people, to make our faith real and to let it walk in the world even when we would much rather be a herdman or maybe even a dresser of sycamore tree, for whatever that is must be easier than bothering others with a message they may not want to hear or that makes us question our own deeply held assumptions. Being prophetic requires us to risk in order that others might understand more fully what *our* faith compels us to see.

To call for Prophecy makes us uncomfortable because our realizations about what is right do not come with neon signs that tell us that yes, this is the next social frontier. This can only be determined through hindsight. Our movement was far from unanimous when slavery was debated. Initially only a few saw it as the out-growth of Unitarian and Universalist values while most realized it was against the economic and social interests of the mainstream and just didn't want to talk about it. The prophetic voice makes us uncomfortable because it challenges the order in our lives. Unitarians and Universalists were uneasy when women asked for equality. Today we are proud to claim the legacy of Olympia Brown and Susan B. Anthony who also traveled with us along her journey and the other suffragettes whose cause now is so much more acceptable to mainstream society. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, as the children's story reminds us, the liberal religious establishment has a lukewarm reaction to Olympia's right to fulfill her call to ministry—and to the larger opening of opportunities for women.

In that time, many denied the truths that women were competent to do the work society had deemed was only for men. In the same way, we might want to deny the truths that are around us—that people we respect and people we love are competent to be in committed and true relationships, are in fact doing so, yet are denied the many, many privileges that come with marriage. Scores of legal rights come with marriage—Patricia Cain of the Santa Clara School of Law has a long list of just the ones that fall under the Internal Revenue Service code—because marriage which some claim as a religious act, is also mixed up with a civil act in this country. As a result, bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender couples face, among other things,

- The inability to visit a partner who becomes ill if the family of origin denies it
- The possibility of being denied access to a child in the hospital
- The inability to access health care benefits through their partners and
- The inability to transfer property to a spouse upon death or to, in states like Virginia, to own property together.

A group in our congregation had a fascinating discussion of E.J. Graff's book, *What is Marriage for?*

I am proud of the risks the congregation I serve has taken. We had a long journey towards becoming a Welcoming Congregation, one designated by the UUA as having done the work of looking at the unconscious bias we may have in our language, our attitudes and our ways of being. When you walk into our church today, one of the first things you see, nestled among the Jeffersonian architecture is a large collection of books on the bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgendered experience. I wish, I wish, we had become politically active earlier. The poem Michael read by Doug Loyd is called a million votes no. That was what we thought we needed to defeat the constitutional amendment we faced. We got close to that million but the religious right got more. The amendment passed in Virginia by a much narrower margin than anticipated—and yet its proponents were already organized when it was launched. I keep thinking—what would have happened if we had been?

I am a middle-middle aged heterosexual woman with two kids, a dog, two rescued feeder mice and three elusive fish. I am privileged to already enjoy the benefits of marriage, in some way this is not my story. Yet it has become mine in the same way that the message Amos was called to give became his own, working for the larger cause of equality around marriage has become personal for me because of what I believe and because of whom I love and that gives me courage to do some things I wouldn't be able to otherwise. I will continue to find my prophetic voice, no matter how tremulous, because people I love identify as bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgendered. I want them to have the same advantages that I have. To love whom they love, commit their lives when they find partner who increases life's joy, to have kids as they choose, financial security as they can manage it, the opportunity to work and exist as who they are and not in the cloaked identity that saps so much of life and creativity, and, in the most important times of joy and grief when others have their loved ones around them, I want them to have that same care and comfort.

So, in closing, I would invite any of you willing to join with me in a litany one we closed with at the Day of Advocacy our Gay-Straight Alliance hosted last year. Your part is easy, you just have to say, we stand on the side of love, a phrase the Rev. Bill Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association spread in his statements in support of gay marriage.

Because we cannot be silent when rights would be taken.... *We stand on the side of love*

Because we know that democracy is for establishing rights and not denying them... *We stand on the side of love*

In a world so torn and scarred by hatred, because we know that an attack on love is simply a distraction from other issues some would have us turn away and not see.... *We stand on the side of love*

Because legislating discrimination is an affront to our traditions of honoring human rights.... *We stand on the side of love*

Because we know that this is not an issue just about some, it is an issue for all who would live in a world of justice and decency.... *We stand on the side of love*

Because we know that this world is not just ours, it is the one we bequeath to our children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews and generations to come... *We stand on the side of love.*

May we be the ones to make it so. Amen.

Benediction

These are words of the great Unitarian Theodore Parker, words immortalized by that great worker for civil rights Martin Luther King: "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Let us get on with the business of bending.

