

Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Alliance
Annual Meeting 18 October 2009

Just Ask. Just Tell.

Seven years ago our church board passed a resolution to support a decision to sign no marriage certificates for heterosexual couples until I can sign them for everyone. At the time, no other congregation in Minnesota had taken that step. Very few have joined us now. I still preside at lots of weddings, but none are legal marriages. They're not *illegal* (much to the disappointment of one over-eager maid-of-honor, who thought she might be embarking on an act of civil disobedience), but they are all "ceremonies of holy union." I could pronounce everybody married by the authority vested in me by the state of Minnesota, but I won't do that until the state of Minnesota broadens its embrace of the phrase "created equal."

Since 2002, only one couple has questioned this policy – and in their case it was not the couple themselves who took issue with our stand, it was one parent on one side who chose to make a scene (a scene that became a rant that lasted several months, and eventually involved a restraining order and a sheriff here on Sundays, with church members posted outside the building to keep everybody safe). In every other case, and there have been dozens of weddings, people who might never have chosen it have told us they are grateful to be part of this action toward justice, to be brought into this witness, especially on their happy day. Some couples decide to get married here precisely because of it. Others have struggled a little, mostly with the inconvenience of having to make an appointment with the county office, and then said afterwards that it really made them think about "inconvenience," and privilege and entitlement. Who's entitled to the 1,049 benefits bestowed by a marriage license? Who even knows what they all are, until you're up against their denial, until your child is brought to the emergency room, and you can't go past the waiting room because you lack a piece of paper?

In the earliest days of our nation's history, before the great debates defining church and state, marriages made in the church were always separate from civil marriage; people always made two stops. This old separation still prevails in many parts of Europe. The sacred blessing bestowed by a religious community was not the same as a household's legal status on the village ledger. Priests and ministers have not always served as agents of the state, and in this I'm happy to regress. Your right to hold your spouse's hand in the hospital, or to buy a house or file your taxes jointly should not be contingent on whether or not I bless your union in a wedding.

People here in the congregation have asked whether a symbolic action such as this makes any real difference at all. It seems to me that history is the collected anthology of "symbolic" actions - songs, symbols, metaphors, marches, demonstrations, declarations of independence written on parchment and sent across the ocean to the king, declarations of love, words of hope whispered to our children. I've had conversations at wedding receptions with cummerbund-ed uncles and chiffon-ed mothers of the bride that I never had before, about justice, freedom, family values, oppression, hate crimes, the rights and powers of the judiciary and the legislative branches and the very will of God, and none of this would have come up if I'd just gone ahead and signed the license. I've heard confessions with a glass of champagne in one hand and a plate

of shrimp in the other, from people who say, frowning, shaking their heads and then looking up and quietly smiling, “You know I never thought of it that way. This is a matter of fairness.” *Symbolic action is action.* That’s a premise of the religious life, and civic life as well.

If our campaign now is called “Standing on the Side of Love,” our method might be called, “Go Ahead and Ask. Go Ahead and Tell.” *Just ask. Just tell.* Like all civil rights movements, this one requires up front, out loud, outspoken public presence. There is nothing about this work that can go without saying. We need to speak and *we need to speak as religious people*, grounded, each of us in our conviction, in something deeper than an elevator speech. We are called to *testify*.

Whenever any person, whenever any one of us, comes out and speaks our truth, truth in the world is expanded, and the ideal of Truth is honored and defended. Coming out, speaking out, for marriage equality is not a job only for the particular percentage of Minnesotans who happen to be gay, or the even smaller number who might be wanting to get married; it’s everybody’s job to protect our constitution, and it is our job uniquely to preach a more glad gospel, about family values, family life, human life, human love, moral life, civic life. This is religious action more than it is political - to interrupt a conversation at your workplace, or with your extended family or your neighbors, or at the children’s soccer game, or school conferences, and say, “In my creation myth, we are all created equal, with certain inalienable rights.” Or to say, when the question arises (or even when it doesn’t, which it may not, if you stay silent), “The law as it stands and the premises that underlie it - theological, ideological premises - is unethical, unconstitutional, and wrong.” Or to just come out and say, “It seems to me that what we’re needing nowadays is more courage and more love in the world, not less; less fear and less hate in the world, not more.”

Go ahead and ask. Go ahead and tell.

You can’t come out *half-way*, or live by your convictions *partially*, or be *kind of* outraged or *sort of* concerned or *vaguely* passionate. We have to decide what story we are living in, what sacred story we are living by, and live it out, out loud.

When people say this is a “legacy issue” for Unitarian Universalists, I think what they mean is that this is one issue on which in fifty years, a hundred years, our descendants will be able to look back with pride, and gratitude and say, “Here is the evidence of our faith in action.” They will look back at us, at our work now, and say, “Here is embodied, in the hard work of our predecessors, the Unitarian insistence on the dignity and worthy of persons; here is manifest the glad gospel of Universalist love.” This work will bear a lasting theological impression.

There have been other moments in our history when we did not take up the work that was so clearly ours to own, and we look back now remorsefully, with appropriate chagrin. Read the archives of Universalist and especially Unitarian congregations in the early 19th century, the middle 19th century; read the sermons, the minutes of meetings, and you will often find lukewarm or incidental support for the abolition of slavery, if you find any at all. Individuals may have spoken out, some clergy lost their pulpits for it, but congregations as a rule did not. It

felt too rash, too risky, too distracting as the nation moved to civil war; “too divisive,” said some women, who saw their own suffrage as more urgent. Slavery could have been a legacy issue, but in the end it wasn’t, because so many well-intentioned Unitarians and Universalists who supported abolition, who believed in it, were reluctant to speak out. *We need to move with caution*, they said. *Society is not ready. President Lincoln has a lot on his plate. Moderation in all things. Let’s not lose our heads.* But you wonder if they lost some part of their souls.

Here, in our own moment, we are uniquely poised among religious people to be fierce and faithful leaders. Other denominations are constrained by theology, by polity, tradition, by heart-wrenching votes, soul-wrenching dissensions among their members, fights that may split their communions forever. We’re constrained by none of that. Lassitude is never a good legacy. This issue calls to us uniquely.

So just ask. Just tell. Be vocal. Vibrant. Vigorous. Rigorous. Be brave. Be glad in the work, in the glad gospel of our faith. Live it out, out loud. Let’s be faithful to the core of our conviction.

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