

Coming Out

February 20, 2005

“Coming Out” is a great sermon for a Unitarian Universalist church embarking on the Welcoming Congregation process, or any church interested in being more welcoming and affirming of gay lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (glbt) people. It is also a good primer for heterosexuals who need a new framework or lens through which to understand glbt issues. I use a story from the Christian scriptures that illustrates how even Jesus sometimes had difficulty in accepting others.

Thirty-five years ago, in 1970, the Unitarian Universalist Association passed its first resolution opposing discrimination of homosexuals and bisexuals.³⁴ Since then, the UUA has passed nearly a dozen related resolutions. We have become one of very few faith groups in the United States that ordains gay clergy and encourages clergy to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies. About fifteen years ago, the UUA established the *Welcoming Congregation* program. This program assists congregations in becoming more welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Today, about half of our one thousand congregations are Welcoming Congregations. We are the only Houston congregation with a fulltime minister that has not yet become a Welcoming Congregation. A few months ago, our Board of Directors chartered a Welcoming Congregation Committee to begin this process.

We do this work because gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are still, more often than not, unwelcome in religious communities unless they are willing to change. Just yesterday, there was a conference here in Houston teaching that homosexuality is destructive, preventable, and treatable. Over one hundred and fifty people, including thirty from our church, peacefully protested yesterday’s conference. We offer a spiritual home to all people. We affirm the worth and dignity of every person just as they are. We need to distinguish ourselves in this regard. We need to *come out* as a congregation. Even though we have many openly gay and lesbian people in our congregation, there are also gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in this congregation who are not out because it is not yet safe. There are people in this community, gay and straight, who don’t know that we offer a safe, spiritual home.

This process transforms congregations. It will do more than create a more welcoming spiritual home. It will do more than bring new people into our midst. It will also teach us how to learn from each other and how to be with each other in more mutually affirming ways. My hope this morning is that you leave with an open heart and open mind. My heart tells me this is very simply an issue of human worth and love—nothing more and nothing less. I am talking about the pure love that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13:

Love is patient; love is kind, love is not envious or boastful, or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.³⁵

Last week, I co-officiated a wedding ceremony for about fifty gay and lesbian couples at Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church in Houston. Nearly a dozen clergy from various denominations participated in the ceremony. I had the particular honor of officiating the ring exchange. I have rarely felt the power of love I felt at that service.

The Universalist side of our heritage has carried this message of universal love through the ages. It is expressed today in our first principle of affirming and promoting the worth and dignity of every person. I value both our Unitarian and Universalist heritage, but had I been one or the other before they came together in 1961—the year I was born—I would have been a Universalist. I would have been a Universalist because my heart breaks every time I witness a denial or violation of human worth. My heart breaks and I am left without the ability to understand hatred and violence by or between human beings. My heart breaks when someone is denied a spiritual home. We are all born into this world worthy of all the love and opportunity our miraculous universe has to offer. Love is not love without a basic respect for human dignity and acceptance of who we are.

In the Christian scriptures, Jesus repeatedly taught those around him to love their neighbors and even to love their enemies. This is a tough thing to do. Jesus knew this, and even he was not always good at it. He held prejudices like the rest of us, and learned along the way to be more affirming of people. In the fifteenth chapter of Matthew, you can read about his travels northwest of the Sea of Galilee, near the Mediterranean, in what is now Lebanon. One day, while walking, a local woman approached him and his disciples. The woman was a Canaanite, historically the pagan enemies of the Israelites. She came to them actually shouting and asking Jesus to show mercy and to heal her daughter, who was possessed by a demon. At first, Jesus didn't answer. He didn't even acknowledge her. He just kept walking. Then his disciples advised him just to send her away, that she was too bothersome with her shouting. So, Jesus said to her, "I was sent only to help the lost sheep of the house of Israel."³⁶

Whoa! Jesus basically said, "Hey lady, I am only here to help God's chosen people, and you aren't one of them. You're from the wrong side of the tracks." She wouldn't give up. She knelt in front of him and said very simply, "Lord, help me." Still, Jesus said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."³⁷

Whoa again! Jesus compares her to a dog and refuses to give her what is reserved for others. Jesus both metaphorically and literally dehumanizes this woman to her face because of who she is.

She still will not give up. At this point, she has nothing to lose and talks back to Jesus. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."³⁸ Not only had Jesus dehumanized her, he had denied her very existence by not even affording her the basic consideration one allows a dog. This finally got to Jesus. It was an *in-your-face* wake-up call, and he realized what he had done. He said, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."³⁹ With that, her daughter was healed. Jesus finally afforded her the worth and dignity he knew, and had even taught before, that every person deserved. This worth and dignity allowed her to be herself through her faith.

Of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles, the first, "to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person," is the simplest, but perhaps the most difficult to live out. Each of us has done the same thing Jesus did. We have dismissed someone—dehumanizing them because of some aspect of who they are. Such prejudice is most often based on fear and misunderstanding. The antidote is simply better understanding—learning first-hand how someone else experiences the world.

I don't know whether Jesus was afraid of this Canaanite woman. I don't think the story is meant to reveal his fear. Perhaps he was caught up in his own influence and the pressures of his

ministry to the people of Israel. Whatever the case, he initially saw her as unworthy of his concern and dismissed her as less than human. In the end, he finally saw her inner nature as a person of faith. This spoke to Jesus because most accounts of healing by Jesus are a result of the inner faith of the person making the plea. He repeatedly tells people that their own faith will heal them. Jesus also contributed to her healing and that of her daughter because people can only heal and be made whole when they are afforded their inherent worth and dignity. People can only heal and be made whole when they are both loved and able to love. Jesus came to understand the strength of this woman's character and he could no longer dismiss her. He simply learned something about her, and that was all he needed.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people live every day of their lives being denied their selfhood. They are not allowed in our society to enjoy the same benefits as heterosexuals simply because of who they are. They are denied not only the same rights. They are also denied their existence and spirituality because they just happen to fall in love with the wrong people. Someone sitting in my office the other day said, "I just want to be myself and not feel like something is wrong with me. Society always tells me that I am not ok."

When *I* was a teenager in middle school and high school, society told me that too. I dressed rather flamboyantly to say the least. Puffy silk shirts, platform shoes, leisure suits, and long hair. I didn't quite rival Elton John, but it was close. Only one boy in my high school dressed more effeminately. He was openly transgender, presenting mostly as a girl. I have always wondered what happened to him. Being an African American, transgender, male teenager in South Carolina in the 1970s was not a particularly safe way of being. He had such courage to be himself.

Beyond my own colorful appearance, I was in the drama club. Not only was I in the drama club, I was good. I won several statewide and regional acting awards and broke into community and professional theater while still in high school. I was elected *most-talented* boy when I graduated. Everyone knew who I was, and many assumed I was gay. They just had to look at me. If that didn't do it, then they saw who they thought I was because of my affiliations. I nearly gave my drama teacher a heart attack when I performed a monologue of young, gay man struggling with his identity and relationship with his family. She gave me an A, but thought it was too accurate of a portrayal, and was concerned about where I had even learned the mannerisms.

I was exposed to the gay community in South Carolina in high school and college in the 1970s and early 1980s, and am a better person for it. I had many opportunities to be in gay relationships, with more than one guy over those years asking me out or hitting on me. The assumption, after all, was that I was gay. But I wasn't. Much to their dismay, I liked girls. I never decided to like girls, I just did. I never struggled with the idea of liking girls, I just did. However, when presented with the opportunity to be in romantic relationships with guys, the question was at least on the table. I could have chosen to be with men, and to try to fall in love with them. It was expected of me. But I liked girls. It was and is who I am. I had to bring this realization to a conscious decision when I found myself in an interesting triangle with two friends. He liked me, I liked her, and she liked him. He couldn't fall in love with her. I couldn't fall in love with him. So, she and I ended up going steady for a while.

Suppose for a minute that society expects you to fall in love with someone, but you just can't. You can't put your finger on it, but they are just not someone for whom you have any romantic affection whatsoever. Now, suppose the person you want to fall in love with—your soul mate—the person you know you have to spend the rest of your life with—is completely off-limits by society's and your family's rules. They are not the right man or woman for you. It would break

your mother's heart. They would disown you. You might be fired. Your life might be in danger if you made them your life-partner.

In some cultures and places, it is still wrong to fall in love with and marry someone of a different color, a different nationality, a different religion, or even a different socio-economic status. We are still struggling, but in the United States we mostly recognize that love transcends these ancient social norms—at least as long as your partner is still the right gender—the other gender. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in this country are still not allowed to fall in love with their soul mates. They are legally prohibited from marrying, and are more often than not denied a spiritual home unless they are willing to change. Worth, dignity, and love? They can have none of it.

Sometimes gay people are confronted with questions like, “When did you decide to be gay?” What if heterosexuals had to hear such questions about themselves? “When did you decide to be straight?” No one, straight or gay, can answer this question because we are who we are. I fall in love with women rather than men. Because I am a man, that makes me straight. If I were a woman, it would make me lesbian. I never decided to be who I am. Tragically, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are forced to struggle with who they are every day of their lives because being themselves is not acceptable. They don't decide or choose to be gay—they just are.

One of the arguments used against the gay community is that of choice. Don't gay people choose to be that way? Can't they choose to be straight? Every gay, lesbian, and bisexual person *has* made a choice. But not the choice you might think. They have not chosen who they are or whom they can fall in love with any more than any heterosexual person. Their choice is a different one. They sometimes make a choice to live in conformity with society's preconceptions and expectations of heterosexual normality, thereby denying or suppressing their selfhood.

Or they make a choice to live a double life—privately being true to themselves, but publicly living a façade that requires constant maintenance. Who knows? Who doesn't? Who is safe? Who isn't? Who will still love me? Who won't?

Or they make a choice to come out publicly to their families, friends, and coworkers, often to be rejected by those they love, to be fired from their jobs, or exposing themselves to personal danger.

A friend of mine, whom I met over twenty years ago, only came out to me a couple of years ago. I knew from the early days of our relationship that she was lesbian, but she has lived her life hiding her long-term, committed, monogamous relationship even from some friends. It just is not safe. She never brought the right guy home. She likes girls. It's just who she is. She never decided to like girls, she just does. She could have chosen to be in relationships with men, and thus deny her own selfhood. Instead, she has chosen to live separate public and private lives because it is the only way she can safely be true to her spirit.

Yes, gay people make choices, but all of their choices force them into losing situations. They are still being denied their selfhood in our society. Although progress is being made in many areas, the rights and the spirituality of gay and lesbian people are being threatened like never before in this country with increased support for a federal constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, and several state amendments and laws doing the same.

What if marriage was denied to heterosexuals who had already been married and divorced? What if marriage was denied to heterosexuals who couldn't have children for any number of reasons? What if marriage was denied to heterosexuals who decided not to have

children? What if heterosexuals were denied membership in the church or a job because they were in or might begin a relationship with the wrong person? I simply can't accept the arguments that gay marriage threatens traditional heterosexual marriage; that gay marriage will lead to the loosening of moral and legal standards; that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are not able to raise children as effectively as heterosexual people; that they are poor role models for children; or that marriage is reserved for the purpose of procreation.

If you are concerned about any of these issues, talk to someone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual and find out what they think. Ask them why they should have the same rights that you have. Let them ask you why they shouldn't. Do what Jesus did and learn something about who they are. You will probably find they are just like you. They love their families, their partners, and their children. They are also different from you because they must be on guard every minute of every day. They are dismissed as less than human because they love the wrong people.

Morality is not tied up in whom we fall in love with or whom we choose to be romantic with when the relationship is between mutually consenting adults and no one is being abused. Morality does come into play in how we treat one another. It is immoral to abuse another person. It is immoral to deny a person their selfhood, a spiritual home, and the rights supposedly afforded to every person in the greatest democracy in the world. It is immoral to deny the basic human right of love.

I invite you to take a moral journey of welcoming. I should warn you that you will be forever transformed. You will be opened to a world of understanding and accepting all people in all of their beauty. You will look into their souls and will reveal your own. They will become a part of you and you them.

Paul also said, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."⁴⁰

This journey will require faith—faith in human goodness. This journey will require hope—hope for a world in which everyone has worth and dignity. This journey will require love—love for yourself and for everyone you encounter, regardless of who they are.

You are welcome here! My hope is that in relationship with one another and in the presence of all that is holy to us, we can work together in loving community toward creating a world in which you are welcome everywhere.

Namaste.

Notes

34. Unitarian Universalist Association, *Discrimination Against Homosexuals and Bisexuals* (General Resolution, 1970), <http://www.uua.org/actions/bgl/70discrimination.html>.

35. 1 Cor. 13:4-8 (NRSV).

36. Matt. 15:24 (NRSV).

37. Matt. 15:26 (NRSV).

38. Matt. 15:27 (NRSV).

39. Matt. 15:28 (NRSV).

40. 1 Cor. 13:12-13 (NRSV).