

A LIVED FAITH: WHEN LOVE BREAKS THROUGH

Next time someone asks, “Is your soul saved?”

Say, “No, its spent, spent, spent!”

~Linder Unders

All this talk of saving souls, souls weren't meant to save, like Sunday clothes that give out at the seams. They're made for wear; they come with a lifetime guarantee. Don't save your soul. Pour it out like rain on cracked, parched earth. I will spend my soul, playing it out like sticky string into the world. so I can catch every last thing I touch. Next time someone asks, “Is your soul saved?” Say, “No, it's spent, spent, spent.

This excerpt from a poem written by Linder Unders led me to recall a recent late March morning, bright, blue and clear in Washington DC. I had gone in response to an invitation to join clergy from around the country for an interfaith prayer service and Passover Seder, both of which were extraordinary multi-faith, multiracial and intergenerational events occurring surrounding the Supreme Court hearing oral arguments for two historic cases regarding same gender marriage. These rituals were both profound examples of a diverse community of religious and spiritual traditions instrumental in ‘*spending their souls*’ as a relevant and critical voice in the ongoing dialogue toward marriage equality in this country. They also clearly spoke to the notion that our convictions, our faith and traditions compel us to treat our fellow human beings the way we ourselves wish to be treated.

That morning we moved from a beautifully integrated multi-faith prayer service a few blocks from the Supreme Court and processed to join hundreds of those who had already gathered at the Court's steps in the early hours of the day. As we moved through the crowd, fellow citizens of all ages and backgrounds thanked us for being there with them to represent and symbolize the numerous contributions and perspectives that religious voices have brought to a profound and historical moment in the life of our country. It was an extraordinary and humbling moment to say the least. The United States Supreme Court was preparing to hear two potentially groundbreaking same-sex marriage cases. On March 26, the Court heard a challenge to California's Proposition 8, a ballot measure approved by voters in this state in 2008 that amended our constitution to ban same-sex marriage. The following day, March 27, they heard a challenge to the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), the 1996 law that bars the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriage.

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Just in case you may have missed it, there has been significant momentum for marriage equality lately, as 12 states and the District of Columbia now allow same-sex marriage – 17.9% of the United States population. Minnesota is the most recent only weeks ago; Rhode Island preceded with their Senate’s entire caucus of Republicans announcing support of the bill – the first in the nation to do so. In only a decade, the attitudes of our citizens and the political landscape as a whole have indeed shifted toward greater acceptance of marriage equality. We also should not lose sight of the fact that beyond our own shores 14 countries around the world

allow gay marriage, France the most recent to do so. I also learned recently that one of the most vocal proponents of widely discredited “sexual orientation change efforts” not only denounced the practices, but apologized for the countless lives he destroyed as a result. According to the Human Rights Campaign, John Paulk, the former chairman of Exodus International, a Christian ministry devoted to what is called reparative therapy, was once featured on the cover of Newsweek under the headline with the question, *Gay for Life?* Paulk previously claimed that he had successfully changed his sexual orientation through prayer and personal determination. “Today,” he says, “I see LGBT people for who they are – beloved, cherished children of God.”

Perhaps many of you here this morning are thinking what’s the big deal? Let’s move on. It seems like gay marriage is really no longer an issue. You are preaching to the choir literally and figuratively Rev. Sanders. Well, maybe, maybe not. There may be some of you here or listening to our service broadcast that disapprove or disagree. I know this to be true, because I have heard from you in the past.

Needless to say, there are three reasons I decided to preach about this topic today, for which I ask your indulgence. 1: It is June and this marks the month that the United States Supreme Court will render a decision on the two landmark cases I have mentioned. 2: Our scripture texts, the psalm and gospel appointed by the common lectionary and not ones chosen out of the air, remarkably, though never surprisingly, illuminate and ground how we might think about such a moment and momentum in the arc of history; 3: Yes, this is personal. As an openly gay woman living in a committed, loving relationship for 21 years, my partner and I have been waiting for a long time for this day to come. It was Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg who offered a straightforward criticism in the Supreme Court on March 27 of the second-class status for gay and lesbian couples that DOMA creates. Because of it, Ginsburg suggested

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there's "full marriage," which is available to straight couples, and there's "skim milk marriage" for lesbian and gay couples.

Moments like these also present an opportunity, as some have suggested, for either 'good theology' or 'bad theology.' Lest we not forget, we have had some devastating natural disasters of late in the shape of tornados in Oklahoma, still threatening regions of this country today. Interesting God-talk always prevails at such times, in hapless attempts to explain such unwarranted, random tragedy. 'God giveth and God taketh away.' 'God never gives us more than we can bear.' Writes Rev. Anne Howard, Executive Director of the Beatitudes Society: "It's the kind of theology that keeps God at a supernatural remote, external to our world, off on some throne. The kind of theology that's always waiting for the other shoe to drop. There is not theological cause and effect to explain natural disasters. God does not send these things. The forces of nature – sometimes human influenced – cause the wind to blow and the earth to quake as forces of nature, not as tools of divine punishment or reward."

Rev. Howard and others have illuminated for me in these moments, in the wake of tornados and in the proverbial climate change of marriage equality, that we always have an opportunity to call out fear-based religion for the oppressive force that it is, waning and sounding groundless, given the positive trajectory we are currently witnessing. Nevertheless, we have an opportunity for liberation and healing, which is what is central to the story of the centurion's servant in today's gospel. "This includes," writes Rev. Howard – "liberation from old superstitions of divine punishment, liberation from the cultural taboos against infirmity and disability, liberation from the notion of healing, or illness somehow deserved only by a certain kind of person or group."

In today's gospel, the centurion protests he does not deserve, is not worthy of such liberating, healing, compassionate presence. As the gospel narratives consistently illustrate, Jesus had a way of debunking any theory that supports the idea that healing, forgiveness, liberation comes only to those who deserve it, who practice the right religion. Nor, for that matter, is it withheld from those who practice the wrong religion or none at all. To the contrary, Jesus acknowledges instead the desire of the centurion as the foundation of faith – of lived faith – and new possibilities. Desire leads to breakthroughs, overcomes estrangement and in the end unleashes extraordinary possibility for change, healing and the ultimate ability to breakthrough taboos, barriers and superstitions, much of which I believe has been brought to bear in the debate concerning marriage equality. It also brings to mind the closing words recited together that evening in Washington DC at a Passover Seder meal: "*May we*

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recognize that liberation is not a destination, but an ongoing labor of love and that no one is free until all the bonds are cut and the waters have parted.”

One of my favorite writers is Wendell Berry. He is a Kentucky farmer, essayist and activist sometimes described as a modern-day Thoreau. Recently he expounded on gay marriage and particularly criticized theological strategies (or bad theology) used to marginalize the gay community. In other words, a community that does not deserve or is worthy of liberation, of healing and compassion.

Writes Berry: “The Bible has a lot more to say against fornication and adultery than against homosexuality. If one accepts the 24th and 104th Psalms as scriptural norms, then surface mining and other forms of earth destruction are perversions. If we take the gospels seriously, how can we not see that industrial warfare – with its inevitable massacre of innocents as a most shocking perversion? By the standard of all scriptures, neglect of the poor, of widows and orphans, of the sick, the homeless, the insane, is an abominable perversion. Jesus talked of hating your neighbor as tantamount to hating God, and yet some hate their neighbors by policy and are busy hunting justifications for doing so. And yet none of these offenses – not all of them together - has made as much political/religious noise as gay marriage.”

Berry contends that the oddest of the strategies to condemn and isolate the gay community is to propose that gay marriage is a threat to heterosexual marriage, as if the marriage market is about to be cornered and monopolized by homosexuals. He said, “so-called traditional marriage is for sure suffering a statistical failure, but this is not the result of a gay plot. Heterosexual marriage does not need defending. It only needs to be practiced, which is pretty hard to do just now,” writes Berry.

For example, allow me to point out that the U.S. divorce rate overall remains higher than most European countries. Most Americans still marry at some point, despite currently higher co-habitation rates, but many of these marriages still end in divorce. Further, a timely illustration: the June publication of *The Atlantic* features on its cover a substantial piece: *What Straights Can Learn from Same-Sex Couples*. It is well written and presents important research that illustrates that compared with straight marriages, same-sex unions tend to be happier, with less conflict, greater emotional intimacy, and more-equal sharing of chores, responsibilities and child-rearing. I commend it to you. Its author, Liza Mundy, writes: “But what if the critics are correct, that somehow married

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gays and lesbians will fundamentally change the institution of marriage, just not in the way they suppose? What if same-sex marriage does change marriage, but primarily for the better? By providing a new model of how two people can live together equitably, same sex marriage could help haul matrimony more fully into the 21st century.”

The tradition, in which I am ordained, the Episcopal Church, recently created a service for same-sex ceremonies that grounds marriage in a free coming together of two people to live out their lives, rather than in the traditional doctrine of creation and procreation. I have heard from a number of colleagues that the language and spirit of this liturgy is so profound many Episcopal heterosexual couples (and others) prefer to use it in their wedding ceremony. And many married ones wish they could have. A study group has convened to look at the Episcopal Church’s teachings on marriage with the hope that at our next General Convention a new ceremony for all Episcopal weddings will be adopted and the current same-sex service will serve as its foundation.

One last illustration Wendell Berry gave is profound – forthright and honest. Most of us are aware that the belief that gay marriage will harm marriage has roots in both religious beliefs and secular conservative concerns about broader shifts in American life. Berry says: “If I were one of a gay couple – the same as I am one of a heterosexual couple – I would place my faith and hope in the mercy of Christ, not in the judgment of Christians. (Or others I would add) Condemnation by category is the lowest form of hatred, for it is cold-hearted and abstract, lacking even the courage of a personal hatred. Categorical condemnation is the hatred of the mob. It makes cowards brave. And there is nothing more fearful than a religious mob, a mob overflowing with righteousness – as at the crucifixion and ever since. This can happen only after we have made a categorical refusal to kindness: to heretics,

foreigners, enemies or any other group different from ourselves.” As for me, I do believe that categorical condemnation or suggested unworthiness is so much of what fueled Jesus’ teachings and his approach to power and authority, to those who saw difference as a threat to the bounds of tradition. His life ultimately was committed in advocacy to the most vulnerable and the least powerful. Rather than save souls, he spent his, over and over again in the cause for others.

In the end this idea of not refusing but restoring kindness to our democracy is one of a number of things that overwhelmed me on those bright clear days at the steps of the Supreme Court surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of

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people. Motivated by religious reasons or not, I witnessed in a palpable way the desire by which estrangement, barriers, taboos, condemnation were being overshadowed by the arc of our own history as a nation. That is, adding to the moral moments witnessed before now – the Civil War, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movement, and, while some would argue to a lesser extent, today marriage equality. Of course there were plenty who also came to represent, borrowing from Wendell Berry, the categorical refusal to kindness – but to a large extent it seemed to me a tepid, worn out and outmoded effort. It felt desperate on some level, which can be understood if you're facing the reality of standing on the wrong side of history or motivated by fear or a religious fervor that continues wherever is found an officially identifiable evil.

The deeper questions in moments like these, realized or not, are perhaps both constitutional and religious: the fundamental dignity of each person; the relationship of tradition to science, conscience, and change; the meaning of religion itself.

To some extent, our psalm today runs parallel to these deeper questions. The exhortation to sing a new song, to tune our ears to melodies we have not yet heard, to remember that God's judgment is not all about punishment, but about restoration, a liberation that brings life and fulfillment to all of God's creatures. That the Upholder of Life is ultimately interested in justice and human flourishing. Contemporary scholarship interpretation of this psalm suggests that the discovery of the God of Israel as the creator of all did not lead to self-congratulation or the condemnation of others. The psalmist lived in a context where every community and group had its gods. In other words, difference abounded and our religious ancestors may have been more enlightened and charitable than we realize or credit.

On that bright clear day in the midst of such a broad, vast and diverse representation of fellow citizens I could not help but be buoyed by the optimism that the desire for change, fairness and ultimately liberation brings. And I was grateful to be among religious voices and representation that could help translate a higher and deeper purpose symbolically and otherwise. Surrounded by those who,

present with us or not, had decided to spend and sing their souls in the cause for love, dignity and justice long before, during, and following these historic days.

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Outside the Supreme Court that March morning, I struck up a conversation with a woman, perhaps a little older than me, married to her husband for nearly the same 21 years that my partner and I have been together. I realized in that moment there were many here just like her now, in the past, and in the future to come that were a part of this moment, this movement because they had come to know a gay or lesbian person, a fact of statistic that has substantially correlated with the growing acceptance of marriage equality. It was no longer an abstract concept, something to fear, a tradition to protect, or an argument for the courts to figure out. It had a human face.

During the oral arguments to the Supreme Court, it was Justice Kennedy that took a moment to highlight the 40,000 children living here in California with lesbian or gay parents and asked the lawyer defending Proposition 8: “The voice of those children is important in this case, don’t you think?”

Reconsidering those days in Washington DC and all of the current momentum regarding marriage equality on this particular arc of history makes this poem by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney from the *Cure of Troy* seem very appropriate and instructive:

*Human beings suffer.
They torture one another.
They get hurt and get hard.
History says, don't hope on this side of the grave.
But once in a lifetime the longed for tidal wave of justice can rise up;
And hope and history rhyme.
So hope for a great sea change on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a farther shore is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles and cures and healing wells.*

May it be so.

Amen.