

STANDING ON THE SIDE OF LOVE AND EQUALITY

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Last Sunday, I spoke about the different places where we meet the holy in our lives, the places where we encounter the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary, the places where we become aware, in the words of Abraham Heschel, “of living in the holy dimension of existence.” Like Henry David Thoreau in his retreat at Walden, many of us meet the holy in nature and in the meditations of our quiet moments. We need to go to such places from time to time to replenish our soul.

But I said that seeking the holy in nature or in quiet retreat, while renewing and necessary, is by itself not enough. I suggested that it is when we engage with the world with our love, it is when we respond to the voice of conscience, it is when we take a public stand against the evil and injustice of the world that we meet the holy in an especially powerful way. In such encounters we experience the truth of our lives. We find the purpose of our living. Such encounters bring us into touch with the source of our passion for justice and of our compassion for others in pain. It is in these places that we meet the holy. It is in these places that we touch the deepest source of our vitality.

A week and a half ago, I joined with some of you and about 50 other people along the seawall at Wollaston Beach for a candlelight, and a flashlight, vigil for peace. I thank Helene Sansoucy for organizing the vigil. We stood there to honor the 2000 American military men and women who had been killed in Iraq as of that date. Together with more than a 1000 vigils taking place that night across the nation, we bore silent witness to the tragedy of this war and the moral imperative of peace.

Did we think we were going to end the war all by ourselves? It would have been easy for us to have given into resignation, to have stayed home and kept warm. However, for me to have stayed at home would have been depressing and spiritually numbing. It was deeply enlivening to be standing on the side of peace that night. It was an act of hope as much as it was one of moral outrage. I also believe that such actions, as small as they may seem, do make a difference. Such actions release a spiritual power that like a light shining in the darkness can transform the world in ways we cannot always imagine.

Two weeks ago Rosa Parks died at the age of 92. Almost fifty years ago, on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, tired out and on her way home from work, refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. One ordinary person claimed her equality and by that simple but powerful act she changed the course of history. Of course, and equally important, there were thousands of others ready to act with her for the sake of equality.

You see, I believe that the love at the heart of the universe works in history through the lives of very ordinary people, people just like you and me, who decide to stand for what is right, for what is just, and for what is true equality. This is how love works. “Standing on the side of love and equality” is one place in particular where we encounter the holy dimension of existence in a powerful and life changing way. Love and equality do go together, because when we take seriously our love for our neighbor, no matter who they are, then we have no choice but to stand with them as they seek to secure their full equality and protection under the law on an equal basis with everyone else.

Many of you have heard that the Board of Governors of this church voted at its meeting last month to take a public stand for marriage equality

by displaying a large banner across the front of the church. Many of us are understandably feeling a little apprehensive about taking such a public action. There are obviously a number of concerns we will want to think through and prepare ourselves spiritually as a congregation before we proceed with putting up the banner.

First, let give a brief background to the Board vote. Recall that in November of 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the Massachusetts Constitution guarantees the legal rights and protections of civil marriage equally to all couples whether of the same or opposite sex. The court ruled that “the Massachusetts Constitution affirms the dignity and equality of all individuals. It forbids the creation of second class citizens.” In 2004, the State Legislature began a process to amend the Constitution so as to restrict marriage to couples of opposite sex, but to provide for civil unions for same sex partners. This congregation at its Annual Meeting in May, 2004, adopted a resolution calling this congregation to take a public stand for marriage equality and asking the Legislature to uphold the court ruling and defeat the amendment. We published our resolution in the Quincy Sun. I, along with two of my ministry colleagues met with our State Senator, Michael Morrissey.

The Legislature’s proposed amendment was defeated this past September. There is now a petition drive underway to put a new constitutional amendment on the ballot. If adopted, this amendment would restrict civil marriage to couples of opposite sex and make no provision for civil unions. If the necessary signatures are obtained by the end of this November, the initiative will then only need to pass the Legislature by a 25% margin in order to be placed on the ballot in 2008.

Civil marriage is far more than a ceremony and a certificate. By civil marriage, the state recognizes and protects the commitment by two people to support each other and be a family together. Civil marriage is between a couple and the state. In no way does it dictate to churches how they should view marriage religiously, nor does it require a church to perform any ceremony contrary to its own religious principles. The act of civil marriage is a legal act. It conveys important legal status on a family and invokes a large body of legal rights and protections that work for the well being of a family and its children. It would be a most unfortunate and morally lamentable thing for our state constitution to have written into it an explicit discrimination against one class of people as a fundamental principle of the Commonwealth.

If we dare to proclaim the equal worth and dignity of all people, then we must dare to stand on the side of love for full equality under the law. In this case, we must dare to stand with all couples who wish to secure the full rights, protections, and obligations of civil marriage under the law. We must dare to stand on the side of love and equality.

Certainly this is not the first time we have put our faith in action and taken a stand. Through our work with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization we have taken stands on affordable housing by collecting signatures and by challenging the Quincy City Council to adopt an inclusionary zoning ordinance to produce affordable housing. At times, we were criticized. We have stood with janitors for fair wages and nursing home care workers for fair treatment and dignity. Today, we are collecting ballot petition signatures for a significant reform of health care in Massachusetts. This effort is making a difference as we can see in the recent action at the State House. We provided a home for the Quincy Crisis

Center's program to provide hot meals and community when no one else would. We are being criticized by certain community leaders who feel that this is an inappropriate program for our building and the city center. But, we are also cooperating with them to find an even more appropriate home.

But coming back to the Board vote, we recognize that taking a stand for love and equality involves risk. We may be criticized. We may be asked what right do we have to use this historic landmark to proclaim our understanding of what is truth and justice? Some of us may want to ask, why don't we instead put up a non-controversial banner that simply says "Love and equality"?

There come moments when we must take a stand in public. It's one thing to have lofty ideals, noble principles, and inspiring dreams. It's one thing to affirm love and equality amongst ourselves. But we don't know what our faith looks like, and others do not know what our faith looks like, until we take a concrete stand, in a concrete situation, and in a concrete way. The other evening as I left the church a man walking by, looking up at the rainbow flag flying above the Parish Hall entrance steps, thanked us for "welcoming everyone." I have also received a letter thanking us for displaying the flag. This person wrote that he was "really moved to see an outward and visible sign of your congregation's affirmation of gay people and same-sex marriage." He said that he was sad, as a member of a UCC church, "that *none* of the UCC congregations (in Quincy) have taken the bold step," that none of them had "the courage and conviction to overcome their ... fears and proclaim the essential truth." He thanked us "for the love that you've shown." I must also tell you that we have also received a couple of criticizing calls. You see, by taking a public stand we shine a light in the darkness of silence and inaction.

This little flag may seem a small thing. But what it does is proclaim to the city that there is at least one church who affirms love and equality as principles worth flying a flag for - not just in general, but specifically for a class of people who are the targets of deep seated fear and discrimination. It says that we are not afraid to stand with them out of love and for equality. In ways that often defy practical reason, this little flag is changing the consciousness of the city.

The vote of the Board left the details and planning of the banner to a committee of three people – myself, Pat Artis, and an anonymous donor who is part of our community and is raising money to cover the cost. The banner needs to be designed and the exact wording decided upon. The timing needs to be decided depending on the progress of the ballot initiative, assuming that it gets the necessary signatures. We will want to consult with the leaders of the gay and lesbian community in Quincy for their concerns and advice. We will want to comply with the rules and regulations of the Historic District ordinance and obtain a necessary permit. The money needs to be raised. Pat and I welcome your thoughts and ideas for what the banner could say, the right time to display it, and for how long.

I commend the Board for its courage and its vote. But we want to be sensitive to those who are concerned about the public nature of the action. Decision by democratic process is a principle of our faith. But ours is also a religious tradition that honors and respects minority voices. We will want to proceed with our planning thoughtfully in the spirit of our covenant as a congregation.

When Thoreau decided to leave Walden, he wrote that it is one thing to build dreams and castles in the air. That is where they belong. But what we now must do, he said, is put foundations under them.

This is a time for us to put foundations under the ideals of our faith. This is the time to stand publicly as a congregation for love and equality. To deny certain families their equal rights and protections under the law would not be just. It would harm society as well as individual families and their children. To embody such discrimination in the Constitution would be a terrible wrong. As King reminded us, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Let us stand on the side of what is compassionate and right – affirming the worth, the dignity, and the full equality of every person! Let us stand both with courage and within a unity of spirit.