

## A NEW HOUR IS COME

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Responsive Reading: “A New Manifestation,” by Margaret Fuller, #575,  
Singing the Living Tradition

There come moments in the flow of time when the forces of history converge to a single point of crisis. These are moments of opportunity when forward seeing people lift their voices in public and move the direction of history towards a new achievement of equality and justice. We remember this morning Coretta Scott King, who died this past Monday, as one such person. Betty Friedan, who died yesterday, is another. We remember them.

There have been many such moments in our American history – the move to independence in 1776, the abolition of slavery in the 1800’s, the long campaign for women’s rights into the 1900’s, the struggle for racial justice in the 1960’s, and the women’s movement of the 1970’s. Today, “a new hour is come.” A new hour is come to achieve full dignity and equality for all people, now without regard to sexual orientation.

Here in Massachusetts the struggle is coming to a focus around the question of marriage equality and whether discrimination is to be written into the Massachusetts Constitution, the very constitution written by John Adams 226 years ago. Our Board of Governors has voted to join the hour by putting up a banner in support of marriage equality. And this is what I must talk with you about today.

Let us first remind ourselves of the trajectory that brings us to this hour. In November of 2003, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts

ruled in the landmark case of *Goodridge, et. al. vs. the Department of Public Health* that “barring a person from the protections, benefits, and obligations of civil marriage solely because that person would marry a person of the same sex violates the Massachusetts constitution.”

The founding principle of our democracy is equality. It is embodied in the most famous sentence of the Declaration of Independence that all are created equal. John Adams wrote equality into the Massachusetts Constitution. The Supreme Judicial Court explicitly wrote in its ruling, “The Massachusetts Constitution affirms the dignity and equality of all individuals. It forbids the creation of second-class citizens.”

For more than two centuries our country has been engaged in an evolving struggle to achieve the promise of equality. The struggle continues today to overcome the structures of society and the anxieties in our own hearts that still work to deny full equality for all. Just because the Court has ruled does not mean this particular struggle for marriage equality is over. Far from it. There is reaction. The State Legislature immediately tried to amend the Constitution to deny full equality.

At its Annual Meeting in May, 2004, this congregation resolved to support the Court’s ruling, to speak out publicly, and to ask our legislators not to amend the Constitution. We met with our State Senator. Fortunately, the proposed amendment was defeated this past September, but perhaps only because there was a ballot initiative going forward for 2008 which would restrict marriage to opposite sex couples only.

The supporters of this ballot initiative have obtained the necessary signatures. It now goes before the Legislature twice, this year and next year, before it can go to the ballot. But it only takes a 25 percent plus one vote to pass the Legislature, a very low threshold. While our Senator has told us he

will vote against it, he warned that it will be very hard to defeat it in the Legislature and that its defeat at the polls in 2008 is far from assured. The Legislature's debate and first vote is scheduled to begin the second week in May – only three months away.

With all this in mind, the Board of Governors voted in October to put up a banner in support of marriage equality. An anonymous gift would pay the costs. The details of timing and message were assigned to a three person committee – Pat Artis, Michele Frost and myself. We believed it was important to meet with marriage equality advocates in the larger community to seek their advice and support. We also want to carefully respect all applicable city ordinances and apply for necessary permits.

The committee has been meeting with representatives from the Religious Coalition for Freedom to Marry, Mass Equality, South Shore Civil Marriage for All, and the Quincy Human Rights Commission. The banner will say “People of Faith for Marriage Equality.” It will be about 35 feet long by 4 feet high and will be installed high up across the columns of the front portico. The hope is to have it up for 90 days perhaps as early as the end of March, depending on the permitting process.

Without going into all the details, the building inspector has ruled that we need to obtain a special permit from the Zoning Board of Appeals. We filed our application of appeal this past Thursday, for a hearing on March 7th. Assuming we get a special permit, we then need to go before the Quincy Historical Commission for its approval in March. Because these are public hearings with notices in the newspaper, our application will become public knowledge within the next week or two. That is why I need to talk about it today. With the problem of missing newsletters, my November pastoral letter on the banner never got out. Then we got into the holidays

and the wonderful Martin Luther King, Jr., event with Senator Kennedy. Now the banner project has suddenly picked up momentum. So we need to talk about it as a congregation together.

Some of you may be asking, “Why this action?” I have given some of the reasons and background already. With our remembrance of Martin Luther King, Jr., still very fresh in our memory, we recall his prophetic words, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” They’re right in our hymnal – we read them together three Sundays ago. Marriage equality is about justice. It is about the fundamental equality each person has under the law to all the rights and obligations of the law, as the Court has ruled. This equality is now severely being threatened by the ballot initiative. The constitution is about equality. If the Constitution can be amended to deny one minority group their full equality, it can be amended to deny equality to anyone.

But you may ask, why us? Because marriage equality affirms core values of our Unitarian Universalist faith – justice, equity, compassion in human relations, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Because we need to declare our faith in public. Advocates have told us how important our banner will be. They said there is much positive support for marriage equality in the community, but that so far it is without a public focus. People feel isolated and alone and not feeling supported to talk in public. One leader, a Quincy resident, said that our banner will, in her words, “consolidate a lot of positive feeling.” Another said, “it will give it a home.”

When we first flew the rainbow flag from the side porch, I received a call and a letter from a gay man who is an active member of another church in Quincy. He was deeply grateful for our flag. He said that although

members of his church are generally in favor of gay and lesbian rights, they are afraid to fly a flag. He thanked us as being the only congregation in Quincy with the courage to proclaim our faith by taking a public stand. Our flag told him that he was no longer alone. You see, it is very important for any minority group to have allies who stand in solidarity with them. Sadly, there is a lot of prejudice, hatred and bigotry in the world. It needs to know that minorities are not alone.

But why us, again you may ask? In the first place, because it is the right thing to do. Again, marriage equality affirms core religious values of our Unitarian Universalist faith. This is a religious message we are proclaiming. By the way, seven of the fourteen plaintiffs in the Goodrich case before the Supreme Judicial Court were Unitarian Universalists. Before I gave the invocation at the dedication of the newly renovated John Adams Courthouse in Boston, I had the opportunity to meet several of the Supreme Judicial Court justices. One of the justices asked if I was a Unitarian Universalist minister. I said I was. He, being one of the 4 affirmative votes, said to me, "I like Unitarian Universalists."

But why now? you may next ask. I have spoken already about the historical forces at work. It is urgently important to provide a focal point so that the positive feeling for marriage equality has a chance to consolidate and gather strength and voice in order to make a difference.

There come moments in history when we must decide and give public voice to the principles of our faith. This is such a moment. To deny certain families their equal legal rights and protections under the law would not be just – families and children right here in our own congregation. It would harm society as well as the individual families and their children. To embody such discrimination in the Constitution would be a terrible wrong.

At an even deeper level, whenever there is a threat to justice, the time is always now. In Margaret Fuller's words, "A new manifestation is at hand, a new hour is come." In her hour, in the 1840's, it was women's rights. For us, a new hour is come for love and justice and equality for people of every sexual orientation and gender identity.

But others may say, what can we possibly achieve? Are we only going to subject ourselves to criticism and ridicule with little chance of changing the outcome either at the State House or the election in 2008? I expect that we will receive some criticism. We may suffer a little ridicule. But every movement for justice begins with a single voice. There was a first voice for independence. A first voice against slavery in Congress was John Quincy Adams. Margaret Fuller was one of the first voices for women's rights.

In our Thursday night group, we have been discussing Jesus' sermon on the mount, which had been an inspiration for both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. When Jesus said "You are the light of world," he meant that his followers were to shine the light of truth and love on all the injustice and oppression and poverty under the Roman rule of his day. They were not to hide their light under a bushel, within the comfortable circle of their little community. It's an amazing thing, but a tiny light dispels a great deal of darkness. Like the boy in the story this morning, an acorn may seem a tiny vision compared with that of a powerful bear or eagle, but from a single acorn, a forest of mighty oak trees can grow.

Even with all this said, like many of you, I am feeling a bit anxious. I am feeling anxious personally because one way or another I am going to be in the public eye. I expect that every one of us privately supports marriage equality. We feel comfortable affirming our values within the walls of our

church. But to go public with our religious values for all the city to see – this takes our faith to a whole new level. This is to take our light out from under our comfortable bushel and put it out there to shine visibly for the city to see

We will want to have some discussion and conversation among ourselves. We will want to prepare ourselves spiritually to be firm in our resolve before whatever reaction may come. I know for sure that we will receive a strongly favorable response and support from a wide cross section of the community which will be grateful for our witness. We can expect media attention. We can also expect some negative reaction. We may get some criticism for putting this banner for marriage equality up on this historic building. But what better use? – a religious building for a religious purpose? We are not a public museum. We are a living congregation of faith.

People in the gay and lesbian community understand and respect that the rest of us may feel a little anxious. One person told me, it's like coming out. "As a lesbian," she said, "I have to come out nearly every day." Yes, we are coming out. As straights and gays and lesbians together, we are coming out of our comfortable circle to publicly declare our identity as people of love and justice in public. Some folks out there are perhaps going to be a bit shocked.

But you know, we have a long religious tradition of standing on the side of love and justice.

"A new manifestation is at hand, a new hour is come. We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open" - to every couple who would choose to protect their family with all the legal

rights and obligations of marriage. “A new hour is come.” Let us give it voice with courage and a unity of spirit.

At twelve noon, after a sip of coffee and greeting newcomers, I will be glad to meet with you here in the sanctuary to discuss further whatever questions, thoughts or concerns you may have.

The closing hymn is in tribute to all the men and women who in every age have joined in the struggle to have every arbitrary barrier to the full dignity and equality of every person thrown down. Written in 1921, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is also known as the black national anthem.

HYMN: “Lift Every Voice and Sing” #149