

Agony of Patriarchy
Delivered by Rev. Margie King Saphier
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The title of this sermon “The Agony of Patriarchy” refers to the agony which patriarchy has created throughout history. In present day we see this agony in the eyes of women in countries where fundamentalist patriarchal religions deny them education, the right to vote, free access to medical care, and much more. In this country as the remaining vestiges of patriarchy are slowly peeled away, we can observe the agony that the system of patriarchy is presently experiencing as society dismantles some of its major beliefs concerning how men and women relate to one another. When the rules change for how men and women relate to one another, the rules also change for relationships of the same sex. Misogyny and homophobia are an integral components of patriarchy as we know it. As a result there are backlashes from those groups, who try to reclaim a patriarchal vision that gives them power and control or the comfort of the familiar. The backlash can be in the form of political protest and action, or worse in the form of hate crimes. So it is critical, a matter of life and death, how we respond to those who oppose UU Principles – to affirm the inherent dignity of the individual.

During the past 6 years as homosexuals began to gain equal civil rights, hate crimes increased against sexual minorities. It began with Vermont’s passage of a law allowing “civil unions” for homosexuals. Then earlier this year, Canada legalized same-sex marriage. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down sodomy laws in *Lawrence vs. Texas*, a decision that invalidated anti-gay laws in 13 states. Wal-Mart, considered the bastion of middle-America, became the latest major company to expand anti-discrimination policy to include homosexuals. And, in November, as we all know, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court found that the banning gay marriages violated the state constitution. In contrast

to this progress, the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Report, stated that in the past 6 years as gays and lesbians were accepted in to the main stream, they were twice as likely to be physically attacked in hate crimes than blacks, who are the next most targeted category of victims. Now they report that no group is more victimized than the transgendered community. In the year 2002, plus the first nine months of 2003, at least 27 transgendered people have been murdered in hate-motivated crimes. The struggle to become who you truly are, is not limited to the spiritual/emotional realm, for some it is a matter of life and death.

Because many who defend patriarchy refer to the Christian Bible as its authority, it is important for Unitarian Universalist to be familiar with liberal Christian thinking. People like Jim Wallis, former Bishop Spong, and Peter Gomes do not claim that patriarchy, as portrayed in the Bible, reveals its virtues. Instead they claim it reveals the evils of patriarchy. Historically the tendency has been to declare these evils as normal and sanctioned by God; so that the Bible was used to defend slavery, racism, apartheid in both South Africa and the United States, oppression of women, homophobia.

As we know only too well, there are many who still claim the social structure of patriarchy, in which man is superior to woman, is ordained by God. But there are many Christian theologians who claim the most fundamental mistake in reading the Bible is to assume that the structures and the systems it describes are as sacred and authoritative as the principles it affirms. These theologians stress the pattern of male dominance reflected in the Bible is not an expression of the will of God. It is rather a reflection of the culture in which Jews and Christians as well as Gentiles lived. In contrast to this legacy, the principles of the Bible call humankind to continually widen its circle of inclusivity."

In present day U.S. A., the decline of patriarchy is not going gently in to the night as evidenced by President Bush's action to introduce a constitutional amendment to restrict marriage to the civil union of a man and a woman. Our response to challenges to limit the rights of sexual minorities is critical to how successful we will be. Although the feminist movement in the '60's, 70's and 80's made great strides for women, it also left a bad after taste in people's mouths so that many women and men are ambivalent about claiming to be feminists. When Sheldon and I attended divinity school - he at Harvard and I at ANTS, we both had similar experiences that reflect the bittersweet success of the feminist movement.

Last month when I told Sheldon the title of today's sermon, he recalled his first day at Harvard Divinity School. In one of his classes the discussion was about patriarchy. Many of the female students were listing the various ways patriarchy had harmed and continued to harm women. When Sheldon suggested that men also were victims of a system run amuck, he received no sympathy nor was he given the opportunity to say more.

Sheldon's story reminded me of my first day at Andover Newton Theological School in my Old Testament class. Just an aside, the fact that Sheldon and I both had stories from our first day at divinity school, stresses the point that sexuality, among other things, is the positive dimension through which we express our spiritual selves. And that is why it is critical we explore the present day controversy of same sex marriage.

Getting back to my story, the first question asked by the professor was, "Who in this class identifies themselves as a feminist?" In our ambivalence many of us wanted a definition of feminism before we committed ourselves, but he explained he was not looking for an agreed upon definition, instead he wanted to know if we identified ourselves as feminist however we understood the word.

Most of the women raised their hands as well as the men. The three women who did not raise their hand were African American.

Then the professor asked, "How many in this class identify themselves as womanists?" The three African American women raised their hands, and the rest of us asked, "What is a womanist?" We soon learned that throughout the history of the feminist movement starting in the 1800's, African American women approached the table of feminism. Sadly, the issues of the African American women were not recognized by white women. Womanists asked that not only the rights of African American women be recognized but also the rights of African American men and children be included in the struggle. Their goal was to raise up the entire African American community, it was not limited to only women. Tragically feminist who fought against the glass ceiling created by patriarchy, created a glass ceiling against people of color, especially African American women.

The African American women modeled their movement after Martin Luther King's movement to expand democracy. I deliberately use the phrase "expand democracy" because King understood that democracy was more than having the right to vote, it was also having good schools, good jobs, good homes, being able to go to the same movies, same swimming pools, beaches, hotels as whites. In his sermon "Loving Your Enemies," King stressed that we each need to develop the capacity to forgive. We need to know that there is good in the worst of us and there is evil in the best of us, **and we must seek not to defeat or humiliate those we perceive to be against us.** King's formulation to expand democracy was based on the teachings of Jesus, as well as the writings of Thoreau, Gandhi and many others. Unfortunately I believe many feminists

modeled their movement after the societal structure they were opposing – patriarchy. They worked to increase their rights, but did not look beyond themselves.

Patriarchy is a form of hierarchy. According to Henry Nelson Wieman, a UU philosopher of religion, hierarchy is both a necessity and an evil: Hierarchy is necessary for a society, as well as for democracy, to exist and perform effectively. A hierarchal social structure that enables the greatest number of people to express their creative abilities for the common good is called, according to Wieman, a hierarchy of sensitivity. Wieman would say a hierarchy of sensitivity is a result of an on-going Creative Event. Creative Events occur when humanity interacts with God to create Good, with a capital “G”. For those of you who are uncomfortable with the God-word, Wieman defines a God/The Source as energy, and energy is quality – it is the Source of Human Good. Quality is also the substance from which the Universe is made.

So when humanity is awake and aware, it can interact with this creative energy for the good of humanity creating a sensitive hierarchy. But if we do not participate with creative energy, we can create a hierarchy that has the potential for evil because it will be a structure which suppresses the creative expression of the many. As Lama Govinda said, “We live in the world we deserve ... because we are co-creators.”

Continuing with Wieman’s theological model, I believe that we are presently living during a period of a LARGE Creative Event, in which the shackles of patriarchy are being challenged throughout the world. As the challenges increase, so does the resistance. As James Luther Adams has written so poignantly, “**History is a tension of conflicts in which tensions between**

the will to mutuality and the will to power appear in their most subtle and perverse forms. In short history is tragic, ...”When Adams says history is tragic, he means that the perversions and failures in history are associated precisely with the highest creative powers of humanity and thus with our greatest achievements. Therefore to be aware of this inherent paradox, there are three teachings from Jesus that we need to hear and follow.

The first two are: “Fear not,” and “Keep awake,” and the third I will discuss shortly.

When we hear the admonition “fear not,” we need to remember all fear is not bad. Fear, after all, has served as an alarm system for humanity to all kinds of dangers. The fear of war was one of the forces behind the birth of the United Nations. Fear of pain has led to medical discoveries to anesthetize pain.

So the question is not “Are you afraid?” but rather “How did you respond when you were afraid?” “Was your response life-affirming or did it create more fear?” When we are fearful, we often do not see the suffering of others. Our vision becomes limited causing “the world” that we are able to accept to grow smaller. We lose sight of the first UU principle to affirm the inherent dignity of the individual. In fact, fear can breed hatred. That is why hate crimes against sexual minorities are on the rise. Fear has a way of feeding itself, increasing exponentially.

At the same time we need to be awake. When we fail to be awake, history can be tragic because we fail to see opportunities for creative good or as Adams said, “the will to mutuality” along side its perversions, or “the will to power.” As Dr. King said, **“We need to know that there is good in the worst of us and there is evil in the best of us,”** so that we understand how intertwined these opposing qualities are within each of us. Both directives: “fear not” and “be awake”

are essential for the third teaching: To love God or The Source of Human Good with all one's heart, mind and soul, and to love your neighbor as your self is to participate in the Creative Event.

How do we do this when my neighbor or President or both is denying you and me of our civil rights? Raising awareness is nearly always the first step that has to precede societal change. It is a long process that requires commitment, endurance and courage. It requires that we be awake to our fears and aware of our responses. We ask ourselves, "Is my response life-affirming?" "Does it affirm the inherent dignity of the individual, although their actions do not affirm us?" Just as important is the need for clarity about the situation and our position. Sheldon's letter to the Editor in the Patriot Ledger on February 23, 2004, had clarity and was life-affirming. If you have not read it, I highly recommend that you do. He explained that as a religious leader he reserves the right to decide whether or not to perform religious ceremonies of marriage (and I stress religious ceremonies) according to the principles of the church. He also made it clear that it is the state that grants license of marriage. By articulating the distinction between civil ceremony and religious ceremony, Sheldon explained it would be a severe blow to our liberty if the religious beliefs of the majority are imposed on the minority. He appealed to legislators to hold fast to our founding principles. Throughout Sheldon's letter, he conveyed respect for those who hold opposing viewpoint by not attacking them. On the other hand, Sheldon did not compromise his message for equality.

The proposed resolution on gay rights and marriage that the Welcoming Congregation Committee has written is done in the same spirit as Sheldon's letter. This Sunday and next Sunday at 9:15 AM discussion forums are being held in the church parlor to invite opinions – and yes, opposing points of views are welcome. When we enter in the spirit of inquiry and when we don't attack

the other, we are forced to go deep within ourselves to find the words that speak our truth. Then we speak words that provide opportunities for creative events to occur. May it be so.