

## Why Does This Matter?

Rev. Ken Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
May 17, 2009

### Meditation

There is so much hurt in the world...

Hard though it is, let us take that in.

There is so much hurt in the world.

Some is unavoidable... it comes with the nature of living...

And all we can do then is to hold one another  
through the storms and griefs that come with living.

Yet other hurt is or ought to be entirely avoidable...

The injustices we heap upon one another...

The unfairness... the oppression...

And then may we stand up,  
may we speak out,  
may we make change.

Because each person matters, each living being is precious.

### Sermon

Today is the fifth anniversary of the date that the freedom to marry for couples of the same gender became law in Massachusetts. Five years!

And so we celebrate!

Noticing that the institution of marriage has not crumbled. Indeed, I would affirm that the institution of marriage is stronger because it has become inclusive and fair and just – at least here in Massachusetts... as well as now in several other states.

Yes, we have a long way to go, but we have come a long way.

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, homosexuality (as it was then mostly referred to) was not particularly on my proverbial radar screen. And to the extent that it began to be as I entered junior high and high school, it was in the context of epithets: “homo” – “fairy” – “queer”.

Many of you are old enough to remember what it was like (sometimes is still like...).

I didn't know it at the time, but this was also during the same era of those haunting newsreel images near the beginning of the recent film “Milk” – newsreels of gay men being rounded up in bars and hauled off in police vans, as most of them did their best to shield their faces from the cameras.

My goodness – we have come a ways haven't we. At least here in New England and to varying but significant degrees throughout our nation.

We've come a ways. Of course not yet far enough, not nearly far enough. But we have come a long way.

And this journey really has been, for most of us, “we”.

I breathed the same air of homophobia we all did back then. I had a journey to take, as so many have.

Even at my liberal college in the late sixties and early seventies, for example, there was not a public out gay community – though of course there must have been gay men at my all men’s school and lesbians at the all women’s school down the street.

So my first real opening to understanding and whole-hearted acceptance of other ways than the so-called straight way of being a sexual being didn’t come until seminary. Because at the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry thirty years ago in Berkeley, California, many of my fellow students were out gays and lesbians.

Now... in a way that’s really quite something. 1980 after all was still a very tough time to be gay in America, not to mention gay at a religious institution, even a liberal one. But in a more personal way for me, I realized it was not really something, because it turned out it was no big deal to have gay and lesbian classmates and friends. Indeed, in retrospect I can’t quite remember who was gay and who was straight; because that wasn’t the only, or even necessarily the most essential, part of their identity.

All this said... Two women marrying? Two men marrying? This wasn’t even an idea that entered my head thirty years ago. And I don’t know if it entered the heads of my gay and lesbian classmates or not either.

Services of holy union. We were learning about those, beginning to perform those. Okay. But marriage?

Then in the 1990s, as we all know, the question slowly and then more quickly started to enter the political and civic discourse. And at the same time, here at Old Ship we began our journey towards becoming a congregation that would name itself a Welcoming Congregation as defined by the Unitarian Universalist Association, a congregation welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.

And this journey was, we learned, a transformative one: For many of us as individuals (I know for me) as well as for us as a religious community.

For along the way we discovered a most interesting and important reality. Which is this: If you intentionally become more welcoming to some particular group, especially if that group has historically been marginalized, historically *not* welcome... well, you end up becoming more welcoming in spirit to lots of other people as well.

We are hardly perfect in this regard. (Who is?) But I would affirm that our journey towards becoming a Welcoming Congregation opened our hearts in many other ways at the same time.

Including opening our hearts to the idea and reality of marriage between two women or between two men.

(Now, I realize that it may well be that not everyone here this morning is yet fully comfortable with this idea, this reality. We are, as I’ve said, all on a journey. This means that as we each work to discover for ourselves how best to be welcoming and loving human beings, we will have our differences. So along the way it is important that we remain in conversation with one another, open to learning from one another.)

This said, I will affirm how *personally* my heart has been opened through this journey we have been sharing.

This was at no time clearer to me than in weeks and months following the legal affirmation of marriage equality in Massachusetts, a period of time that was among the most joyful periods of my ministry.

The stories I heard. The love and joy I had the privilege to observe, to be part of.

Note this to begin with: The first several of the dozen same sex marriages at which I officiated in just the few months following May 17, 2004 were for couples who had been together fifteen, twenty, in one case thirty years. The joy for those couples! The long-delayed release of emotion!

Along with the surprise many of these couples experienced as the warmest of congratulations sometimes came from quite unexpected quarters: co-workers and passing acquaintances sending flowers, cards... heartfelt shared joy.

And it is within that warmth of emotion, that joy, wherein rests the heart of the answer to my question: Why does this matter?

Yes, of course legally affirming marriage equality matters because everyone deserves equal rights under the law – justice!

But beneath the question of legal rights – important though those rights are (and they are *very* important: inheritance rights, visitation rights, hundreds and hundred of rights that straight couples take for granted...)... but beneath all those rights is the most important thing of all. Which is... of course... love.

Why does it matter to legally affirm marriage equality?

Yes every loving and committed couple deserves all the political and legal rights that come with marriage.

But most importantly everyone – everyone! – deserves love in their lives.

And everyone – everyone! – deserves to be accepted, fully accepted and recognized for the love they have for another human being and the commitment they have made to that other human being.

And you know what? “Marriage” is our word which names that acceptance, that recognition in a way that everyone understands. It matters that we call these legal unions *marriage*.

Did you hear that recently two Russian women applied for a marriage license in Russia? (This is not the beginning of a bad joke – it’s true.) They were, not surprisingly, refused; and they plan to travel elsewhere to get married. But it is a start. A toe even in the Russian door.

First Massachusetts. Then Connecticut. Iowa. Maine. Vermont. Perhaps soon New Hampshire. On it will go. Someday Russia? Someday. Yes. I must believe this is possible.

Why does this matter?

Because love matters... maybe matters most of all

And not just the love of one person for another, regardless of gender... Also the love and support that the rest of us have for those couples.

The love that must be realized and recognized by society in legal forms, named as marriage, we hope celebrated too – in order to fully flower.

The love that *is* the air we breathe... unless polluted by discrimination and hate and injustice... the air we breathe.

Because... though it may not be literally true, it is most assuredly spiritually true...: All you need is love...

So may it ever be.