

## **10/10/10 Sermon**

“Marriage Equality – Why Not Me?”

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Ours is a faith that has always been on the side of justice and love in the battle for equality. Our Seven Principles affirm the call to human dignity.

When we advocated for the abolition of Slavery and civil rights, we were standing on the peaceful side of love. When we support immigrant family rights, we are standing on the side of love – as we do when we support health care that is more equitable, more available and that better serves human need.

Our faith’s newest public voice has shifted to the struggle for “marriage equality.” Marriage equality is not about changing anything. It is, in the words of Janet Hayes of the UUA, “about taking a vital, respected, legal institution and ensuring fair and equal access to that institution for all people who wish to participate.” In so doing, we are baring moral witness and helping love win out over fear, bigotry, and homophobia.

Same sex unions have become legal in Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Iowa. Civil union – though not equal in rights – is available in New Jersey and Connecticut. These advances in justice were supported and, in the case of Massachusetts, led by UUs.

While we are on the right side of history, our efforts have seen more defeats or postponements of justice than successes. California is a case in point. Since my days in seminary in Berkeley, I have worked for marriage equality. I stood at the Bay Area Rapid Transit station in 1999 to gather signatures to defeat Proposition 8 that would ban same sex unions in the state Constitution. I endured jeers and worse for my efforts to support equal rights, not special rights, for people just like me. That initiative won with a disheartening 60% vote to legalize discrimination. Surely, this was a clear example of the tyranny of the majority squelching the right of a minority.

Three years ago, my congregation in Rancho Mirage, California, and I phone-banked to overturn Proposition 8 and to finally legalize marriage equality. Again failure but by a relatively close margin, 48-52%. Outside money from Mormons and others, and unfortunate support of many African American churches succeeded in allowing prejudice to once again prevail.

I found that particularly difficult since people of color still have to endure heinous prejudice and discrimination.

Can any of you imagine what it feels like to have your right legislated away by your fellow citizens, perhaps your neighbor – in the process sending you a clear message that you are not worthy of respect – that you were a second class citizen.

Look at your wife or husband next to you and imagine for a minute not being able to have married him/her, or to even visit them in the hospital or take care of them in a time of crisis. Imagine not being able to legally pass on property to them or receive the tax benefits of the marriage deduction and over 1,400 other rights.

Forty-two years ago, I married the woman I loved and had two wonderful sons whom I could protect, love and support without restriction. Yet 14 years ago, I could not marry my male partner and offer or receive from him the same benefits. We were told that separate was equal, even in the face of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that denied that reasoning. In a similar situation, interracial marriages have only been legal since 1967. To continue to deny gays and lesbians the same rights feels cruel and inhuman.

When Alex and I had our commitment ceremony it was never recognized before the law. We had no community support or protection for our love and caring except by my UU church. Real people are being hurt as were Alex and I. It hurts then and still does that we are considered less worthy than other taxpaying citizens. I can fight and die in a war but not marry the person I love, except now in a few states, and certainly not here in Georgia.

Yes, this is both a personal and religious struggle for me. My rights are denied; my dignity diminished as it is for others within this congregation and beyond. The denial of anyone's rights needs to make all of us furious. Make no mistake, this is blatant discrimination and bigotry, it is spiritual and emotional violence.

The one saving grace in all this is that our Religion over its long history has actively supported justice and equality for all people. As a faith, we support civil rights, marriage equality but also accept that each religion has the right and responsibility to interpret their faith and scriptures as they will. We do not support forcing any religion to accept marriage equality, even when many churches use religion to mask their blatant homophobia. I wonder what Jesus would do and say in such a situation?

Our first principle – the inherent worth and dignity of every person with justice equity and compassion in human relations, however, calls us to affirm marriage equality and the right of all citizens to justice and

compassion. We believe that homophobia is the sin and not homosexuality.

We believe love is the motive force of our faith. Marriage equality is about that love. I find it curious that DOMA, the Defense Of Marriage Act blames gays for the soaring divorce rate, yet to my knowledge no heterosexual divorce decree has ever cited same-gender marriage as the reason their divorce.

Interestingly, the Netherlands and Spain make a farce of DOMA. They both have legal marriage for same gender couples and these countries have not crumbled and the divorce rate has not accelerated!

UUs believe religious dogma should not dictate public policy in matters of civil rights and liberties and marriage. We believe that separation of Church and state is what makes this country great and allows us all to practice religion freely. Further, to deny gays and lesbians access to both the protections and responsibilities of marriage is a violation of the equal protection and establishment clause of the Constitution. What happens to one group of citizens denied can happen to you. The threat is real.

This issue also has ramifications throughout our society. States like Florida prohibits same sex couples from adopting. Children being raised by gay and lesbian parents should have the fullest opportunity to grow up in a secure, protected family unit. Marriage provides important safeguards for parents and their children, such as the ability to make medical decisions in emergencies. If their parents are not protected, these children do not have the same rights and protections that other children have.

I know with a moral certainty that we all have the capacity to learn to do what is right for its' owns sake in the light of our unique experience and new emerging truth. This embodies the great UU Spiritual journey that, in Barbara Pescan words, "is the root of our faith that we expect ourselves never to cease working for justice, equity and compassion in human relations, especially when we have found our home inside these walls."

It is incumbent upon us to push the boundaries of the word "we" to see whom it may come to include. We belong here, all of us: black, white, yellow, brown, gay and straight, differently abled, and chronically challenged. We are entitled to receive comfort beyond tolerance, but rather true wholehearted acceptance. We must also speak out for those yet waiting welcome, support and equality under the law. This is our sacred call.