

WHAT IS MARRIAGE FOR?

A Sermon Delivered at
The First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, February 9, 2003
The Rev. John A. Buehrens

First Reading

from Emerson's *Journal*, Sept. 1848

John Buehrens

None ever heard of a good marriage from Mesopotamia to Missouri and yet right marriage is as possible tomorrow as sunshine. Sunshine is a very mixed and costly thing as we have it, & quite impossible, yet we get the right article every day. And we are not very much to blame from our bad marriages. We live amid hallucinations & illusions, & this especial trap is laid for us to trip up our feet with & all are tripped up, first or last. But the Mighty Mother who had been so sly with us, feels that she owes us some indemnity, & insinuates into the Pandora-box of marriage, amidst dyspepsia, nervousness, screams, Christianity, "help," poverty, & all kinds of music, some deep & serious benefits & some great joys. We find sometimes a delight in the beauty & happiness of our children that makes the heart too big for the body. And in these ill assorted connections there is every some mixture of true marriage. The poorest [pauper] & his [partner], if well-meaning and well-tempered, get some just & agreeable relations of mutual respect & kindly observation & fostering each of [the] other. & they learn something, & would carry themselves wiselier if they were to begin life anew in another sphere.

Second Reading

from Theodore Parker

read by Liz Keil

It takes years to marry completely two hearts, even of the most loving and well-assorted. A happy wedlock is a long falling in love. Young persons think love belongs only to the brown-haired and crimson-cheeked. So it does for its beginning. But the golden marriage is a part of love which the bridal day knows nothing of.

A perfect and complete marriage, where wedlock is everything you could ask and the ideal of marriage becomes actual, is not common, perhaps as rare as perfect personal beauty. Men and women are married fractionally, now a small fraction, then a large fraction. Very few are married totally, and they only after some forty or fifty years of gradual approach and experiment.

Such a large and sweet fruit is a complete marriage that it needs a long summer to ripen in, and then a long winter to mellow and season in. But a real, happy marriage of love and judgment between a noble man and woman is one of the things so very handsome that if the sun were, as the Greek poets fabled, a god, he might stop the world and hold it still now and then, in order to look all day long on some example thereof, and feast his eyes on the spectacle.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE FOR?

A Sermon Delivered at
The First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, February 9, 2003
The Rev. John A. Buehrens

She was a member of my congregation in Knoxville, TN. When she came to church, which was not often, she was always alone. A professor at the university, she could remember the Scopes trial and the McCarthy era. And now a war in Vietnam was on. Then one winter day she called me. Would I be willing to do a private graveside service? The deceased was a woman she described as her “good friend.” Her next door neighbor for almost forty years. They had never dared to live under the same roof together. Yet as I stood there, on that lonely cemetery hillside, and read the poems she had selected, and heard her read from a letter, and said a final, tearful prayer, it became clear to me that they had been married, totally, though no one had been allowed to know it. And I stood there saying, inwardly, “This is not right. This must be changed. Both in the church, and in society.”

The following summer, three years after Gwen and I had been married, I did my first ‘service of union’ for a gay couple. Twenty-one years later, at the General Assembly of our Association held in Indianapolis, I told that story. I asked for special recognition to do so. Because the UUA was voting to become the first denomination to call not just for blessing same-sex unions religiously, but for legal recognition of gay marriage. Then I asked all the dozens of same-sex partners attending the Assembly to join me on the platform. The resolution passed overwhelmingly.

When I spoke at the Millenium March for Equality on the Mall in Washington, in May, 2000, to more than half a million people, I asked those present who had ever been in a Unitarian Universalist meeting house to raise their hands. Nearly two-thirds did so. Because all across the country, UUs have been leaders in trying to combat homophobia and to protect the civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons.

Because marriage is a basic human right and an individual personal choice,
Resolved, that the State should not interfere with same-gender couples who choose to marry and share fully in the rights, responsibilities, and commitment of civil marriage.
Today support for that simple proposition is spreading. Over twenty religious groups, Jewish and Christian, have endorsed it. So have moral leaders like Coretta Scott King. Not to mention hundreds of celebrities, writers, and entertainers.

Last weekend I became the one representative of straight allies and the religious world on the steering committee of a new national organization called simply Freedom to Marry. Today I want to tell you why.

Marriage is not for everyone; it never has been. Indeed, when I've done counseling on the subject over the years, both with those unhappy in their marriages and with those wishing they had a life partner, I've been reminded of the one press conference given by Pope John Paul I, who served as pontiff for only a few weeks. A reporter asked him about Catholics wanting to divorce and priests wanting to marry. And he reportedly replied, "Eh! What's a poor pope a gonna do? Those who are inside, they want to go outside; those who are outside, they want to go inside!"

As the writer Judith Viorst says in her recent book, *Grown Up Marriage*, "Although marriage is for grown ups, very few of us are [fully] grown up when we marry. Growing up takes time, perhaps a whole lifetime, and getting there – if we get there at all – is hard. But marriage, which can be the most vexatious of human relationships, can also be [an] engine of our growth. For in making some sort of peace with the disenchantments, demands, and astonishing complexities of ordinary everyday married life, we can create – and no, this isn't a contradiction in terms – a grown up marriage." She adds,

In a grown-up marriage we understand that we aren't, and shouldn't be, each other's teacher, parent, editor, supervisor, or home-improvement project.

A grown-up marriage allows us to find a balance between autonomy and connection.

In a grown-up marriage we gradually acquire a rueful tolerance of each other's limitations and imperfections.

In a grown-up marriage we do not keep score—at least not out loud.

In a grown-up marriage we recognize that we don't always have to be in love with each other. In fact, we are well aware that we couldn't possibly always be in love with each other. But a grown-up marriage enables us, when we fall out of love with each other, to fall back in. A grown-up marriage involves a tricky combination of honest and polite.

In a grown-up marriage we're able to apologize when we're wrong and not gloat when we're right. We can also accept an apology that falls short of total abasement -- but not too short. In a grown-up marriage the laughter exceeds the regret.

In a grown-up marriage we've learned to forgive and forget. Well, maybe not forget.

In a grown-up marriage we know how to communicate with each other and know when the only and best thing to do is shut up.

In a grown-up marriage we recognize that marriage not give us a real identity, or keep us safe from the sorrows and pain of life, or even protect us forever after from loneliness.

As I say, marriage is not for everyone, and never has been. But the more grown-up we become about it, the more we can recognize in marriage an extraordinary combination of accepting and discovering human differences while affirming and deepening what we humanly have in common. Gwen always says that in a good marriage the rocks in one head come to fit the holes in another. She also claims to have been married to me for thirty years, twenty-five of them happily. And when I ask her which the bad years were, she replies, “Buster, it's a daily percentage!”

But why on earth would we, as a clergy couple, want to deny any loving couple the chance publicly to enroll in the great school for spiritual growth known as marriage? Why would we deny them our support and blessing? Because same-sex relationships somehow challenge “the sanctity of traditional marriage,” as some conservatives claim? How insecure! How immature! So I have a simple message for religious conservatives who oppose gay marriage: Grow up! As my good friend William Sloan Coffin says, “Quit using the Bible and tradition the way a drunk uses a lamp post – more for support

than for illumination.” Consider whether God hath not yet more light to break forth the scripture. After all, few traditions have changed over the years as much as those of our most intimate institution. It changes even in the pages of Bible, by the way.

In a book from our Beacon Press, social historian E.J. Graff asks, *What Is Marriage For?* Is it for children? Well, sometimes. But if we are to limit marriage to those who capable of having biological children together, then let’s have a fertility test along the blood test. Is it for kinship? Well, for centuries marriages were arranged. Parents and patriarchs knew best. Is that what we are trying to preserve? Or do we believe in love and free choice? Today, if a man chooses another man, or a woman a woman, why should the state interfere? Is it because we are made uncomfortable by same-sex sexuality? *Sex is a part* of marriage, but if there is a public interest in abstinence, fidelity, and safer-sex, as the authorities say, isn’t it both hypocritical and immature to denounce gay promiscuity and then to block gay marriage? Or is it money? Since two can live *almost* as cheaply as one, another part marriage has always been financial. So society’s interest in promoting marriage has been reflected in the tax code, inheritance, shared benefits, and over a thousand specific legal rights that married couples have and gay couples are denied.

Some people say, well, let’s have domestic partner laws; or civil unions, as in Vermont. But such state-by-state arrangements aren’t recognized elsewhere. And “separate but equal,” never turns out to be really equal, does it?

That’s why my friends Hillary and Julie Goodridge have sued the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for denying them a marriage license, in contravention of the equality provisions in our constitution. They and their daughter, Annie, want the Freedom to Marry. They are joined in their suit by six other couples. Three of them are Unitarian Universalists: Gloria Bailey and Linda Davies, from First Parish in Brewster; Richard Lindell and Gary Chalmers, from the UU Church of Worcester; David Wilson and Robert Compton, from downtown Boston’s Arlington Street Church.

As the playwright David Mamet has noted, it's time to give the old term, "a Boston marriage," a real and new meaning. That's why there is also a bill before the legislature, sponsored in part, by Needham's own Senator Cheryl Jacques.

Tuesday of this week, the 12th of February, is Freedom to Marry Day. I invite you to learn more about its purpose and the events planned in conjunction with it by visiting www.equalmarriage.org for Massachusetts news or www.freedomtomarry.org for the national organization with which I now serve.

Because I feel so strongly about the injustice of issuing marriage licenses to heterosexual couples while denying them to same-sex couples, I have decided to join with clergy colleagues all across the country in declaring that as long as this inequality exists, when I help couples to celebrate their union in marriage – which I will continue to do most joyfully – I will no longer sign the license. I will function only in my religious capacity, not as an agent of the state. I will arrange to have a judge or a justice of the peace do that.

One of the great ministers of the civil rights movement, Will Campbell of Tennessee, always taught in any case that the proper thing for a minister to do at a wedding is to have the license signed *before* the ceremony, in the presence of the couple, and then to fling the signed document into the corner, hollering, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's!" and reminding the couple that they are now about to go out in front of God and everybody and enter into a covenant with one another. A grateful acknowledgement of the love and trust they have found in one another. And a promise to try to sustain and renew that love and trust even when the going gets tough. With the help of a Love that was there sustaining them even before they found each other.

At times all of us, even those most clearly blessed in their marriages, wonder what marriage is for. Just as at times, we can wonder what work is for, or life itself is for. There are gaps of meaning, there are abysses of injustice. But love makes a bridge toward a better and more meaningful future -- if we are truly open to it, in all of its many forms.

So let our hearts and minds be truly open, and let us join our hands with those who seek a simple right – the freedom to be full citizens, including the freedom to marry. Amen.