

“Civilization and Its Malcontents”¹

Rev. Dr. Janet L. Parker

Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ

September 24, 2006

Genesis 16:1-6

Ephesians 5:21-25, 6:1-9

Galatians 3:23-29, 5:1, 13-15

On Independence Day, 2005, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ stunned the world, not least many of its own members, when it became one of the only Christian denominations on the planet to formally endorse the concept of marriage equality for all couples regardless of gender. As a result of this action, the denomination which claims to believe in a stillspeaking God was launched into an internal debate that continues to this day, as local churches, associations, and conferences wrestle with the question: “Is God still speaking about *marriage*?” And if so, what is God saying? The resolution that was passed at General Synod, entitled “In Support of Equal Marriage Rights For All,” had this to say on the subject:

Is God still speaking about marriage? The overwhelming testimonies of countless couples, regardless of gender, throughout the United Church of Christ, and beyond, say, ‘Yes, God is still speaking.’ Couples who have chosen to exchange covenantal vows attest to the blessing of God’s abundance and life-giving power in their relationships.

Therefore, theologically and biblically, there is neither justification for denying any couple, regardless of gender, the blessings of the church nor for denying equal protection under the law in the granting of a civil marriage license, recognized and respected by all civil entities.

Now if you know much about the polity of the United Church of Christ, you will know that far from settling the issue for the denomination, this General Synod action functions more as a prophetic and pastoral call to dialogue and study

¹ With thanks to Sigmund Freud for inspiring the title of this sermon, which alludes to his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

on this issue, for in our system, the General Synod cannot legislate policy for local churches. So part of the resolution calls upon all the settings of the denomination to engage in “serious, respectful and prayerful discussion” on the subject of marriage equality.

Well, in good Rock Spring fashion, we have been preparing to do just that...for a year! And after a year of hard work, today’s the day when we begin to talk formally to one another about what this all means for Rock Spring, and how it relates to our standing commitment to be an Open and Affirming Congregation.

As we do this, we recognize that not everyone in our church is in agreement on this issue. And so those of us who have prepared the forum series that begins today on marriage equality hope that people of differing views will come to the sessions and make their voices heard, or use the comment boxes that have been placed around the church, because we believe that the process is as important as the outcome, and all voices have a right to be heard. Having said that, I would like to spend some time today offering some historical and theological context for our discussion on marriage equality.

The movement for civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons is often compared to the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s. But I think that there may be two earlier periods in history that provide even more fruitful comparisons when it comes to the issue of marriage equality. In fact, the controversy we face today over extending marriage rights to same sex couples is similar in some ways to the controversies that our society faced in the 1800s and early 1900s over the abolition of slavery and the movement for women’s rights

and women's suffrage. Then, as now, what is at stake is an entire paradigm for how a whole class of human beings should be viewed, and what place they have in society. And then as now, defenders of the status quo warned that changing the paradigm would lead to the collapse of Western Christian civilization.

Let's begin in 2006, with the fight over the Virginia Marriage Amendment, now in full swing. If you visit the website of the organization called va4marriage.org, you will find the following statement:

“va4marriage.org is a non-partisan, grassroots project of concerned citizens, pastors, community leaders, and like-minded organizations united together to preserve the bedrock of Western Civilization in Virginia, namely, traditional marriage as a lifelong union between one man and one woman.”

Another organization, The Family Research Council warns that “homosexuality and homosexual civil marriage would rip the fabric of society in ways that may be difficult, if not impossible, to mend.”²

The bottom line for these groups—same-sex marriage is unnatural, contrary to the will of God, harmful to children and ultimately, a threat to Christian civilization. On this basis, they organize tirelessly to prevent committed, monogamous gay and lesbian couples from sharing in the rights and responsibilities of marriage.

Now turn back the clock to 1862, and hear the dire warning of one Rev. James Henley Thornwell, an eminent pastor from South Carolina who wrote in that should the North prevail in the Civil War, “Our wives and daughters are to become the prey of brutal lust. The slave, too, will slowly pass away, as the red man did before him, under the protection of Northern philanthropy; and the whole

² Speech by Peter Sprigg entitled, “Homosexuality: The Threat to the Family and the Attack on Marriage,” posted on the Family Research Council website, www.frc.org

country, now like the garden of Eden in beauty and fertility, will...be a blackened and smoking desert.”³

It’s easy to forget that these proslavery Christians acted not only out of economic interests, but also out of a belief that slavery had been ordained by God. A resolution passed by the Baptist State Convention of Alabama condemned abolitionists as unchristian and extremists. The good Baptists wrote,

“We regard with...strong disapprobation the proceedings of such fanatics, believing that their efforts are inconsistent with the gospel of Christ; are calculated to oppress the slave, to arm the assassin to shed the blood of good people in our state, ...and to endanger the peace and permanency of our happy republic.”⁴

Proslavery advocates didn’t have to strain too hard to find support for their position in Scripture....they only had to turn to passages such as the ones we read today to show that the patriarchs of the Bible practiced slavery, with the apparent sanction of God, and that the New Testament books of Paul explicitly condoned slavery by urging slaves to obey their masters. Slavery was simply the natural state of humanity in which God ordained some races to be masters and some to be slaves. Early abolitionists who came to their churches preaching a gospel of equality between the races and emancipation for slaves must have seemed like wild-eyed radicals...and it took many years and a bloody war for history to vindicate their cause.

³ James Henley Thornwell, *Our Danger and Our Duty* (originally published in Columbia, SC by Southern Guardian Steam-Power Press, 1862, available online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/thornwell/thornwel.html>

⁴ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 160.

Well, if abolitionists had an uphill row to hoe, advocates for women's rights in the late 19th century had an equally hard time. Women who sought the right to vote, own property, and participate equally in public life faced a social and religious system that naturalized the subjugation of women to men as the will of God, backed up, of course, by Scripture, such as the Ephesians passage read earlier. They faced a belief system that found the idea of a woman voting or participating in the political system to be an abomination, the violation of the very idea of womanhood, and a threat to Christian civilization. Women suffragettes were denounced as a "shrieking sisterhood" and doctors warned that such women were physically and mentally unbalanced. An English parliamentarian warned in 1871 that if women got the vote, "our legislation would develop hysterical and spasmodic qualities."⁵ Intellectual women were a particular concern, and doctors actually warned that developing the brain starved a woman's uterus.⁶

And so, the Victorian ideology of the time preached that women belonged in the home and men out in the world. A woman's job was to reproduce and care for her husband and children—failing to do so would bring both husbands and children to ruin. And here we come to the Victorian ideal of marriage, which was entirely based on the subservience of women to men. The new and emerging idea of marriage as a companionship of equals was viewed as both ridiculous and impossible. As a professor at Cambridge University was reported to have said, "woman was a subordinate being, and...if she ceased to be subordinate, there would be no object for a man to marry...Contrast was the essence of the

⁵ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Science at the Fin De Siecle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

matrimonial relation: feminine weakness contrasted with masculine strength.....”⁷

From our vantage point, these views on women are outdated and absurd, yet it’s important to remember that in some Christian circles they are still in force. It was Pat Robertson, a Virginian, who famously stated as recently as 1992 that “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.” The alternative to feminism, of course, is accepting God’s biblical plan for women, which is drawn quite explicitly from our Ephesians reading today, “Wives, be subject to your husband as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.” Jumping back to our earlier example for a moment, this same Ephesians passage was often quoted in sermons preached to slaves. One catechism for slaves quotes and expands upon Ephesians, urging slaves to “count their Masters worthy of all honour, as those whom God has placed over them in this world...and obey them in all things.”

So how do we deal with what we generally consider such a blatant misuse of the Bible in subjugating women and African Americans? I can’t help but recall the lyrics of an Indigo Girls song, “Strange Fire”. “Mercenaries of the shrine,” they sing, “who are you to speak for God?... Who delivered to you the power to interpret calvary? You gamble away our freedom to gain your own authority.”

And here we reach to the heart of the question...who has the power to interpret Calvary? Who has the power to speak for God? Who is invested with

⁷ Ibid., 25.

the authority to use scripture as a means of social control instead of a tool for liberation? Scripture itself is deeply ambivalent on issues of gender and slavery. On the one hand it clearly describes, without condemnation, societies that practice slavery and practices oppressive to women. On the other hand, our story of Hagar betrays a subtext of concern for this Egyptian slave woman, who is met by an angel God and promised a line of descendants. And then we have the curious paradox of Paul, who in one letter prescribes women's subjugation to men and slaves to their masters, and in another letter proclaims that in Christ there is no male nor female, no slave nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus.

Mainline denominations have largely resolved questions over slavery and women's equality to men, and the way they have done so can be instructive for us as we consider the new challenges posed by the marriage equality movement. As I said in an earlier sermon this summer, "the words of the Bible were written by human beings and reflect human limitations. And so we find ways to interpret the Bible that are consistent with this understanding.... recognizing that as Walter Brueggemann says, 'the arc of the gospel bends toward inclusion' so interpretations of Scripture that are inclusive and loving are more reflective of God's Word than those that seek to divide and exclude. Not every word of the Bible carries equal weight, and we need interpretive keys to sort out what messages from the Bible are authoritative for us today." One interpretive key that both Jesus and Paul give us is found in today's Galatians text, when Paul writes, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love

your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

When we allow our anxieties over Civilization with a capital “C” to overwhelm us, and we allow religious and political leaders to use a politics of fear to control us, we run the risk of consuming one another, and we fail the crucial gospel test of love. Maybe we need to come down from the high ramparts of the fight over “Civilization” and pay more attention to the need for “civility.” Perhaps our challenge today is to worry less about how changing gender roles and marital structures will destroy church and society and worry more about treating one another as we wish to be treated, as human beings who share a God-given human dignity.

On Independence Day, 2005, the delegates to the General Synod of the UCC joined the ranks of earlier malcontents who caught a vision of freedom and inequality that upset the status quo of their day. If a malcontent is, as Webster’s tells us, a discontented, dissatisfied, or rebellious person, then here is what I think the abolitionists, the shrieking sisterhood of suffragettes, and the upstart delegates to the 2005 General Synod were trying to say....as I hear it, they are saying to us, “Let us be malcontented with injustice, and rebellious in the face of discrimination. Let us be dissatisfied with inequality and with any law or policy which fails to honor the full humanity of our neighbor or the integrity of our neighbor’s family.” By this definition, Rock Spring has a venerable history of malcontentism, as it has made such strong commitments to social and racial justice, to peacemaking, and to inclusion of LGBT people. Whether or not these

commitments extend to the realm of marriage equality is now up to all of us. Our dialogue may call for patience and forbearance with one another as we discern the movement of the Spirit among us on this issue, but I trust that God is with us, and that the process will bring out the very best of who we are as a community that loves one another and strives to live out the values of the gospel that we preach.

Amen.