

LOVE AND COMMITMENT
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“Love and commitment.” Some of you might have thought that I chose this subject because this is Valentine’s week. That’s appropriate. Others may have noticed the connection between this subject and the recent movement to put a proposed amendment to the Florida constitution on the September ballot. This is an amendment to define marriage as between one man and one woman. This is also an amendment that is unnecessary because this definition of marriage is already Florida law. I was solicited by phone to sign. Our congregation also received a letter offering us petitions to circulate. Marriage is certainly a political *and* a religion issue. This is the reason I chose the sermon topic. Then, I discovered that today marks the beginning of “Freedom to Marry Week,” a time that many people are choosing to enter a dialog about what marriage means and why gays and lesbians should have the legal right to marry. For all of these reasons, then, let me begin.

“Love and Commitment: isn’t that what marriage is all about?” I think so. And, I believe that when most people are asked if they agree, they would say, “I do.” In my lifetime, the weddings that I have experienced have always included the speaking of vows, i.e., the promises that the two people are making to each other. It is understood that they have already made these promises privately, and the speaking in public is for the witness to their friends and to all of society. It is commitment, and everybody knows that.

To what is the couple committing? What are they promising to each other? If you are married or have been married, or you have been to a wedding, do you remember what the vows were? Vows vary, of course, with the couple, and with the religion, or type of service that is being conducted – in a church, on the beach, in a snowstorm, led by a religious leader, a notary, or a judge. The government part is, of course, the license, which has certain legal prescriptions.

When I was growing up I remember the promise was “to love, honor and *obey*,” at least for the woman, and “to love, honor, and *cherish*” for the man. Then, later it became a promise to live together in marriage, to give comfort to each other, and to honor and cherish each other. But, it *always* was in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, and to forsake all others as long as they both live. Now, that’s a whole lot of commitment! In these vows there is nothing said about sex except perhaps “forsake all others” means that?

Many people, including some Unitarian Universalists, write their own vows. For example, “I will have you to be my life’s partner, to share joy and sorrow, etc.” I helped to conduct a service once in which the couple did not share their public vows with each other until the ceremony. What trust they had between them! As it turned out, one of them sang the vows to the other.

At the pronouncement or conclusion of the ceremony, the person conducting the service often says, “I declare that by the authority of the state and in the sight of God, you are now husband and wife.” As in the case of vows, *other* statements are sometimes made for the pronouncement, sometimes quite simple statements, i.e., “You are now married.” It is a way of ending the service and making clear that the marriage has taken place. In one ceremony

that I attended years ago, the minister asked the assembled friends and guests, “Are John and Kathy married?” And everyone said, “Yes!”

Some of you have had experiences of different wording for marriages, but I wager that they all contain something about commitment, on the part of the two people to each other, and a statement of that commitment to the entire community. If there are no words spoken about commitment, the legal document that is sanctioned by the state brings a significant commitment to the relationship on the part of the couple to each other and on the part of the society to the couple.

There is no doubt in my mind that marriage is about commitment. Now, what about the other part – love? Now, who am I to make any definitive description of love? There are hundreds of years of love, books, poems, songs, religious and non-religious statements about love. Clearly, love means a lot of different things to a lot of people. It’s likely that we have heard others say, or if we, ourselves, haven’t said from time to time, something like: “I just love key lime pie,” or “I love walking in the woods,” or “I’d love to come see you when we are down in Florida.” In the book, *The Quotable Woman*, the greatest number of quotes in terms of subjects is from the categories of life, love, and marriage, in that order.

I decided to ask some people what they thought love was. So, in a restaurant after a recent peace demonstration in Inverness, I asked some of the other demonstrators to give me their words of wisdom in one sentence. Most of them, given the limitations, said it in a word or phrase. The first one to speak got the conversation started by responding, “Love is a many splendored thing.” It went on from there to: “Love is tolerant, unconditional, and accepting;” “Acceptance of the whole human race;” “Romantic love is usually an illusion. Love is putting yourself in another person’s place.” Another friend told me, “Love is a caring, warm feeling.” On the way home I saw a bumper sticker that read, “Real men love Jesus.” A roadside sign said, “Looking for Love? Find it on Hwy 19. Nissan/Honda.” Then from the comic strip *Peanuts* we have Charlie Brown saying, “I never knew that love would bring me so much trouble;” and Lucy, “Love drives me crazy!” and another little girl, “Love makes me do strange things.” From an old movie comes, “Love means you never have to say you’re sorry.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. had a lot to say about love. “Love is the most durable power in the world.” “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” “Love is understanding, redemptive, creative, good will for all men.” Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Zen master, said, “To love is to understand;” and, “If love is real, it will be evident in our daily life, in the way we relate with people and the world.” Both of these men worked in nonviolent social change.

Next, I went to Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical, which expounds upon the meaning of love – God’s love, erotic love among humans and the relationship between the two. He hopes, he says, to restore the idea of love to its “original splendor,” and thereby strengthen the Catholic faith. He may strengthen the Catholic faith, but *restore* the idea of love to its “original splendor?” No one knows that, even the Pope, and I even doubt that there was an “original splendor,” even though today we can think of love as a “many splendored thing.”

However, I like the way Benedict begins the encyclical by quoting the scripture, “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him,” (1 Jn 4:16) and the link he makes of the love of God to another scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:31.) But the reasoning goes on from there with scriptural references and

Catholic dogma, to form the solid theological base for Benedict's political agenda that includes marriage only between a man and a woman.

One does not argue with another's faith, but we can choose the scriptures, the writings, and the logic for our own faith. Rebecca Rod, a lesbian in a committed relationship for sixteen years said, "If God was Love, how could loving be a sin?" And, "I can't help hoping the world will wake up and simply value the powerful potential of love in any one."¹

Love has many dimensions: love of country, love of one's profession, love between friends, love of work, love of your spouse, love between parents and children, love of neighbor, love of nature, love of God. In other words, that which touches us most deeply is many dimensional and involves the self, the intimate other, all human beings, all of existence, and all of ultimate reality. And it involves caring. That's the connection. It is not a matter of domination; it is mutual.

Where does loving begin – at birth. Being loved creates loving. If you were somehow deprived of unconditional love from the beginning, and many of us were, how do you learn loving? Why, the best way we can, at any time in our life. Parents are the first source of love, but the whole world surrounds us and offers love to us. We just need to respond, to search, to give and be the first to offer. That's what we mean by wholeness – a caring so deep, so expansive, that we are filled with it. The feelings are not with us constantly, but our actions will let us and others know that we care.

What does sex have to do with it? Sometimes sex is called eros, or physical love. Eros was the Greek god of erotic love, embodying a fundamental creative impulse having a sensual element. We all have senses and we respond to them. Probably one of the deepest of human desires is sharing oneself in intimacy – our heart, our mind, our spirit, and our body. Related to this is the creation that comes through our bodies, i.e., our children, or through our hands, our minds, our talents, our work, our giving to the community. Again, it's a wholeness or oneness of self with what we do.

So why do some people object to a man's loving another man even more strongly than they object to a woman's loving another woman? It has to do with what we are taught, the culture in which we are raised, the ideas of masculinity and femininity that are imposed upon us. We often assume that these ideas are embedded in nature because that is what we have been told. Our sexual orientation *is* embedded in nature, but the range of sexual orientation is much broader than what is generally believed, broader than just two categories homosexual and heterosexual. It is probably more likely that each of us exists somewhere on a flat scale of sexual orientation that has homosexuality at one end and heterosexuality at the other with bisexuality in the middle. There are considerably more of us toward the heterosexual end, but there are only a few that are just one or the other. There are also probably more of us who have some homosexual leanings than we will ever know because of ignorance, repression, and fear of rejection, of stigma, persecution, and discrimination, and fear for life itself.

Many of the stories of gays and lesbians who have dared to "come out" are heart breaking. It's even estimated that one third of the teenagers who commit suicide each year are gay. Rebecca Rod, whom I quoted earlier, is one of the lucky ones who has finally found a loving community in her church. She tells of a kind of sadness or lost-ness she carried around with her when she was in her early teens. In the 7th or 8th grade she even found herself standing on the railing of the downtown bridge holding on to a light pole, thinking about jumping off.

In high school Rebecca dated a fair amount, but it was when she had a crush on a girlfriend that she felt something akin to being “in love,” and it bothered her. As a freshman in college, another friendship with a young woman gradually blossomed into a wonderful relationship. Rebecca describes the beginning as “a kind of energy in the air, like sparks and the force of magnets working overtime.” This was new to her, but it was mutual. After a few months they broke it off. Her friend was a Baptist and the guilt of their loving started to eat at her. A Lutheran, herself she tried praying to God to just make her normal.

After again dating guys for a while, Rebecca met another young woman and fell in love. They were together several years and finally they both came to the understanding that they were in fact lesbians. They had much company within the lesbian community in the big city where they lived, but hiding their sexuality from the young woman’s mother finally got to them. Her mother found out about them and came to see them, screaming, “If I had a gun, I’d shoot you both!” Finally, for both of them, the denial of self and love, the shame and secrecy began to destroy their spirit and undermined their relationship.

Now, she is in a committed relationship of sixteen years that she can call marriage because it has been blessed by her church. Both of their families, the community, and the church, a Unitarian Universalist Church, are supportive and happy for them. Rebecca and her partner are lucky. I compare this to the story in the movie “Brokeback Mountain,” and I feel sad and angry. We do not choose whom we love. The heart chooses, and we should not discriminate against people because of that.

But we do discriminate by the laws we make. By denying the right of marriage to same-sex couples, they experience the loss of tax benefits, health insurance benefits, the right to hospital visitation and to make medical decisions for one another, inheritance and Social Security benefits, family-leave benefits, rules that would protect both partners’ interests if the relationship were to end, housing and immigration benefits and hundreds more. Why should whom you marry decide these things?

Love and commitment – yes, this is what marriage is all about, love for each other, our families, and our shared world. For we are a part of the whole mix and our commitment to those who love each other is made known by our behavior and the laws that we make. When we, the government, give a license for the couple to say, “We do” may *we* also say, “We do,” that we do support them not only in their love for each other, but for their place in the world with us. Love and commitment: this is what marriage is about. May it become what our community, our country, and our world are about. And may love guide us on our way.

Resources:

Bill Sinkford. “Whom God Hath Joined Together.” Freedom to Marry web site.

“Deus Caritas Est.” Encyclical letter of the Pontiff Benedict XVI. Internet.

Lotte Hoskins, editor. *“I Have a Dream.” The quotations of Martin Luther King Jr.*

New York, NY: Droke House Publishers, Grosset and Dunlap, 1968.

“Pope expounds on meaning of love.” St. Petersburg times 1-26-06.

Rebecca Rod. “How Labels that Hurt Can Also Heal.” A sermon on the Freedom to Marry web site.

Thich Nhat Hanh. *Peace is Every Step*. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1992.
Hanh. *Love in Action*. Berkley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993.