



**What is Marriage For? –
A Freedom to Marry Sermon
Rev. Suzelle Lynch
UU Church West
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First Reading

From Sam Keen's book "Hymns to an Unknown God" pp. 178, 179

Most of my adult life has been spent in the state of matrimony.... Gradually I have been disillusioned of the romantic myth and have come to understand that a good marriage is an unfolding spiritual journey. Inhabitants of ashrams and devotees of various gurus claim that their guru shatters their egos, destroys their illusions, and forces them to choose between unconditional love or taking flight. Perhaps they do. For me, it has been marriage and the daily discipline of living in a family, rather than any formal religious practice, that has softened my ego, taught me compassion, and allowed my eros and spirit to lie down together. (178)

When we approach marriage and family life as a sacrament, we encounter the great mystery that is at the heart of both love and faith.

Second Reading

From What Is Marriage For? By E.J. Graff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), pp. 246-247.

One day in 1991, almost against my will, I knew Madeline and I were going to stand up in front of the people we loved and commit ourselves to each other. Of course, it's ridiculous to say that it was against my will. I decided. Madeline, being distinctly private, wanted just to exchange rings. But an insular suburban life had strangled my childhood and my parents' marriage, so I recoiled: something inside me insisted on a ritual moment in full community view. It took awhile to write a ceremony that meant enough, but not too

much. In our dearest friends' living room, we would say a few Jewish prayers, recite four favorite poems, exchange rings, speak our declarations, and, of course, kiss.

All of which we did, semicircles of family's and friends' eyes on us like lamps.

How can I describe what came next? It was nearly a delirium: by accident we'd spilled into something sacred. In that backyard in (yes) June, we kissed madly, actually forgetting we were lesbians, forgetting that the neighbors might be shocked. My dryly sarcastic brother cried so hard while making his toast that he could barely complete his sentences. My stepfather, who once squirmed at hearing I was queer, announced his pride in me and my friends. My mother led the blessings, cut the challah, and charmed all my friends. To poke fun at the ceremony's earnestness, we brought out a cake topped with two brides--laughing so hard that we brought down the house. To our utter surprise, the ceremony did bring us closer, pulling an invisible cloak around us that has warmed us during difficult times. We'd thought ourselves as committed as any couple could be: how else could we have exposed ourselves to the world's ridicule? But now even the most subtle traces of doubt dissolve instantly, chased away by the memory of the day when we made our declarations so publicly, placing our love in the hands of God and everyone we knew.

Third Reading

Freedom to Marry Week, which begins February 8, 2004, and, specifically, Freedom to Marry Day which is Thursday, February 12, are occasions to raise awareness about marriage equality. The designated Week and Day are times to celebrate the lives and love of same-sex couples and their families.

Since 1998, at about the same time every year, hundreds of events ranging from public forums to religious ceremonies have been held throughout the country to call attention to the burgeoning national movement for marriage equality and to ask for support from our non-gay friends and allies.

SERMON

The very first wedding I ever performed was for two young women named Mary and Sarah. It was a beautiful ceremony, conducted in the chapel of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, only a month or two after I had begun my ministerial internship there.

Did it matter to me that this ceremony was not going to result in a legal marriage? Not at all. After all, I knew that since 1984, UU ministers had been officiating at ceremonies of union for same-sex couples with the public support of the Unitarian Universalist Association (and for a number of years prior to that resolution of support). And I supported same-sex marriage then, just as I do now.

No, my worry was that Mary and Sarah would find out that theirs would be my first wedding. They were not yet members of the church, they didn't really know me or much about Unitarian Universalism, and yet they trusted me to craft and lead a ceremony that would solemnize their relationship. I was scared. I pretended I wasn't scared. I wasn't sure I knew what to do. When I met with them, I acted as though I knew what to do. And then I asked internship supervisor lots and lots of questions.

The wedding turned out to be lovely and dramatic. Mary and Sarah's friends made sure this was so. They turned down the lights in the chapel, spotlighting the chancel. They lit

candles around the edges of the room. They brought beautiful flowers and provided beautiful music. And when Mary and Sarah appeared, walking each other down the aisle, in gold satin pantsuit and sparkly green sequined dress, we all cried.

Was it really a wedding? Well, that's what Mary and Sarah called it. And what their friends, family members, and I did that evening was witness their vows, witness the outer manifestation of an inner union of their hearts and lives that was sacred and profound. We witnessed them marry not just from or for their private love, but we also saw that they promised to the broader community that they would share responsibility for one another and their household "so long as they both shall live." And we pledged ourselves to support them both in their love, and in their responsibilities.

In the eleven years since Mary and Sarah placed their trust in me, I have married well over a hundred couples. I've actually lost count. I have married women to one another, men to one another, and women and men to each other. I've married people in their twenties and people in their sixties, some who were married once or twice or even three times before.... I married my big sister and my husband's little sister, thinking to myself both times, "Always the minister, never a bridesmaid...."

And every time I have officiated at a wedding or ceremony of union, I have felt blessed by the presence of something greater, deeper, and more whole that comes to life when two people stand before their communities and their God and promise their lives to one another. This is the primary reason why I support the right of same-sex couples to marry, because making the commitment of marriage has the potential to powerfully deepen the self-understanding, the spirituality, the maturity, and the compassion of any person.

By the time I got married I had married more than a dozen couples. For most of my adolescence and young adulthood, I was pretty sure I didn't want to marry, and I was almost certain I would never have children. My own parents' marriage, while enduring, wasn't a model I wanted to emulate, and while I had all the advantages of a white middle-class suburban childhood, my studies in feminism in the 1970s made education and career the important goals; marriage and children were the tools of patriarchy.

When I met my husband, I had an education and a successful career, indeed, I was in graduate school to change careers. I wasn't worried about being snared by patriarchy anymore. Young and I never questioned our right to marry – despite the fact that within our lifetimes, in some states, it would have been illegal for us, as an interracial couple, to do so. Indeed, it wasn't until 1967 that the United States Supreme Court declared that all Americans are free to marry, regardless of race.

Not all of us here today are married. Some of us cannot legally marry. Some of us did marry and are now widowed or divorced. Some of us perhaps have never been in a long-term relationship. Some of us are grieving, some of us are wounded, some of us are resigned, some of us are free and fine or committed and fine. But I wonder how many of us have ever really asked ourselves, "What is marriage for?"

In my seminary and internship training on marriage, no one ever asked that question, philosophically or practically. I suppose we were simply supposed to know, or to accept that marrying couples was one of our ministerial duties. The only answer I'd ever heard about marriage was for came from the mother of one of my girlfriends when I was a teenager. One day she was lecturing us against having premarital sex, telling us that if we "did it," the boy would never marry us. "After

all,” she said, “Why buy the cow if he’s getting the milk for free?”

E. J. Graff, a journalist and Radcliffe scholar asks and answers the question of what marriage is for and many related questions in the book “What Is Marriage For?” the source of our second reading. Beacon Press, our UU publishing house, published Graff’s book in 1999. In an environment where some 37 states have passed some kind of Defense of Marriage (DOMA) legislation or constitutional amendment that defines a legal marriage as one between “one man and one woman,” Graff, who is a lesbian, took a bold, compelling and good-humored look at the history and current practice of marriage. Her research encompasses ecclesiastical and civil law, and maneuvers through shifts in the Western cultural view of money, sex, procreation, kinship norms, the civil order of society, and the heart.

Despite the claims of conservative Christian organizations like “Focus on the Family,” that say (quote) “History, nature, social science, anthropology, religion, and theology all coalesce in vigorous support of marriage as it has always been understood: a life-long union of male and female for the purpose of creating stable families,” (unquote) (from www.family.org) Graff’s research shows that there are no “objective” truths about marriage. Instead, there are collections of customs, agreements and norms that have fluctuated widely throughout history. The aspects of marriage -- money, sex, children, kinship, social order and love – have waxed and waned in importance over the centuries in various Western cultures. And what we now call traditional heterosexual marriage has really existed only since the middle of the 19th century.

I’m sure most of you wouldn’t be surprised to hear me say that historically, marriage has mostly been about money.

In Rome and throughout the early Christian church, vows were exchanged not between a groom and bride, but rather between the groom and his future father-in-law! The vows weren’t “I promise to love you and to trust you for better or for worse,” they were those of one male transferring property to the other.

Marriage also was a means to change a family’s social status if you were upwardly mobile or a way of keeping wealth and social status once you had them. The marriages of one’s children were used to further these aims, too, in a sort of mergers-and-acquisitions approach to family expansion. Children were valuable assets, not allowed to marry “for love.” One early 18th century advice manual put it this way, “Children are so much the goods, the possessions of their parents, that they cannot, without a kind of theft, give themselves away without the allowance of those that have the right in them.”

Women, once married, continued to be assets, not people: in British law, a 1765 statement by Lord Blackstone read, “In law husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person.” A wife could own no personal property, make no personal contracts, and bring no lawsuits.

Obviously, all this changed with time and the laws that enfranchised women and gave them property rights. But even today, ironically, marriage is still often related to economic necessity, for as many of us know, two incomes often are needed these days to support a household. But there is nothing in this that would exclude same-sex partners.

What about sex? (What about that cow?) Many people, even today, believe that marriage exists to legitimize it. There’s a long history associated with this belief as well. In early Rome and in early Judaism, marriage was a social and civic obligation intended to produce heirs and increase the tribe. In Rome the rules about sex and marriage also regulated

the way male citizens could use their power, which unfortunately included the sexual abuse of slaves, young children and any woman they chose, so long as she was not already the property of another Roman citizen. For the Jewish people, in addition to procreation, sex had sacred significance, ritual significance. It was a mitzvah, a blessing, and like the ritual significance of many other facets of life, served to give Jewish life its distinct and separate form.

In this climate of social and civic obligation about sex and marriage, the early followers of Jesus proclaimed their right to celibacy. Celibacy was their communal ideal – for it would stop birth and thus death and bring on the new millennium. It also was a political rebellion against the authority of both the Roman state and Jewish tradition. The apostle Paul furthered this idea through his writings by saying that one should refrain from marrying, as the second coming of Christ would happen soon and those who refrained from procreation or sex at all would be first among those saved.

However, since Jesus took his time in coming back, eschatological hopes faded. And as Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, it too needed a model of marriage that would support, sustain, and grow the empire. The monks who had adopted the ideal of celibacy began at this time explaining that marriage was a respectable thing for common folks with mortal weaknesses. In the hands of Augustine, this development took a radical turn. While sex had previously been a natural thing, and celibacy an unnatural revolt against political oppression, Augustine decided that sex was the unnatural act, and celibacy the vehicle for divine communion. Marriage was viewed as a lesser evil, and necessary to avoid the more deadly sins of the brothels. Marrying meant you were weak enough to need sex, but it also saved you from eternal damnation. Sounds very appealing, no?

But of course people did not live as the church mandated, and corruption was so rampant that at times the church itself actually licensed brothels. The Protestant Reformation arose in part as an effort to salvage the moral fiber of the people and to cleanse the temple of Christian tradition, and thus redefined marriage as “holy matrimony,” shoring up the one place where sex was legal and moral, because in marriage it clearly was for procreative purposes.

The Protestant idea of holy matrimony faced challenges in the ideas and struggles we associate with Margaret Sanger and the passage of the Comstock Laws regarding obscenity. Before the 20th century, contraception was widely viewed as immoral, especially within marriage, because it gave women the ability to commit adultery with a freedom previously reserved for men only. Roger Comstock, our nation’s first postal inspector, and other orthodox moralists found birth control and sexual education “obscene,” and they fought them tooth and nail. They relied mostly on the argument that birth control destroyed the sanctity and stability of marriage, and therefore of all society, and enforced laws that made it illegal to disseminate sexual education materials by mail.

Margaret Sanger knew, however, that for women to have any control over their lives, they had to have control over their fertility. She was imprisoned several times for distributing material to explain birth control to the masses. But her ideas won out, as we know, though it wasn’t until 1965 that the Supreme Court finally decreed that what happened in a couple’s bedroom – at least, that is, in a heterosexual couple’s bedroom -- was their private business. Again, the purpose of marriage was radically redefined – with procreation written out of its requirements.

In these cultural wars, the voices of opposition often spoke of the wrath of God that would be felt as the rules of

marriage were overturned – the same arguments we hear today when the subject of legal same-sex marriage comes up.

But if the purpose of marriage is now primarily to let equal partners willingly share responsibility for each other's lives and fortunes, then shouldn't same-sex couples who choose to be able to legally marry? If the state allows adoption, or allows one parent to retain custody of the children after a divorce, or allows donor insemination, then gay and lesbian couples parenting children cannot be excluded from legal marriage.

This is especially so because of the legal and financial benefits marital status confers. According to Graff's book, the General Accounting Office of the United States issued a January 31, 1997 report listing 1,049 "federal laws in which benefits, rights, and privileges are contingent on marital status."

At a workshop at last June's UUA General Assembly in Boston, Hillary Goodridge, a lead plaintiff in the Massachusetts Supreme Court case seeking rights for same-sex couples, pointed out that it is often only in times of "death, disability or disaster" that people realize the many rights and privileges afforded those holding a marriage license. She described the efforts she and her partner went through to gain some of these rights, documented by a stack of papers several inches thick, and still, she said, not equaling those granted with the single sheet of a marriage certificate.

For example, marriage allows a couple to be recognized after one of them dies in countless ways that non-married couples cannot hope to achieve. Here are just two examples. Even if a same-sex partner leaves everything to his or her partner in a will, the dead partner's parents, children, or siblings can challenge the bequest. A legal widow pays no

inheritance tax on jointly-owned property, but if one member of a same-sex couple dies, the other will have to pay inheritance tax just to inherit his or her own property.

There are dozens of other marriage benefits as well, everything from assuming a spouse's pension after his or her death to crime victim recovery benefits to visitation rights for a prison-bound spouse. Access to all these benefits has been a driving force behind the movement to legalize same-sex marriage.

Now, some have even suggested that to get beyond the religiously-based objections to same-sex marriage, the institution of marriage itself should be privatized, returned to the realm of religion. If couples wanted to cement their relationship with a ceremony or ritual, they'd be free to do so with any church that would accommodate them. There would be a separate, state-sanctioned way for ALL couples to register as couples to ensure the distribution of benefits. This would separate church and state in these things, too.

Unitarian Universalists have been at the forefront of the struggle to gain equal marriage rights for lesbian and gay couples, including in the recent victory in Massachusetts. We have done this because we believe that all people have inherent worth and dignity, and should have equal rights under the laws of our nation, and this belief, by the way, is rooted in our Universalist Christian heritage which held that God's love embraces all of humanity. We also know that children benefit when their parents' relationship is strong and supported and valued by the wider community, and we want the children of gay and lesbian parents to have that affirmation.

Our religious principles call us to respond; our intuitions about marriage as a deep, profound, and intimate exploration for our bodies and spirits and as a comforting and nurturing estate for our souls call us to respond as well.

But interestingly enough, I wonder how many of us see that the whole debate on same-sex marriage has exposed what one writer named “a huge blind spot: (that) married-only benefits ... discriminate against America’s 86 million unmarried adults.” (Shari Motro, New York Times Op-Ed contributor in “Single and Paying for It,” January 25, 2004.)

Think about it. One thousand forty nine federal laws in which benefits, rights, and privileges are contingent on marital status. Married couples are the beneficiaries of these laws. And yet only 56 percent of all adults are married, compared with 75 percent 30 years ago. If these laws are meant to encourage marriage, clearly they are not working. In addition, the proportion of traditional married-couple-with-children American households has dropped to 26 percent of all households, from 45 percent in the early 1970’s. If the legal and financial benefits of marriage are intended to benefit children, we have to pay attention to the fact that the basis for these benefits also is eroding. Clearly there are many children out there being raised in “non-traditional households.” (Statistics from Laura Kipnis, a professor of media studies at Northwestern University in “Should This Marriage Be Saved?” New York Times Op-Ed pages, January 25, 2004)

The fact is that marriage, as a social institution, is in transition. As Northwestern University professor Laura Kipnis wrote recently in the New York Times, “This is not simply a matter of individual malfeasance; in fact, it may not be individual at all. The rise of the new economy has gutted all sorts of traditional values and ties, including traditions like the family wage, job security and economic safety nets. Women have been propelled into the work force in huge numbers, and not necessarily for personal fulfillment...” (citation above)

If marriage is no longer the cornerstone of civilization, why should it be legally, socially, and economically

privileged? That is, I believe, a question worth asking, especially by us as Unitarian Universalists, committed as we are to justice, equity and compassion; to the inherent worth and dignity of each and every human being.

But for now, let me say this. I do believe that strong, healthy marriages make a community stronger, whether they are between same-sex couples or heterosexual couples. Unions of two people built on mutuality, love, faithfulness and commitment are good for everyone they touch. And while I also believe that friendships between two people, or relationships between parents and children, or relationships between siblings that are built on love, loyalty, and commitment also are good for everyone they touch, there is a difference between these relationships and marriage.

On the morning of my wedding day a little over nine years ago, I was terrified. I knew without a doubt that I was doing the right thing in getting married to Young, for I loved him and knew in my gut that our lives lived as a team would bring a richness unimaginable from my single perspective. But the thought of committing myself to him legally, and committing emotionally, “til death do us part” was almost too much to bear. Though I did not need to marry for economic, procreative or sexual reasons, I was choosing to make a commitment that would push me to become more powerfully loving, compassionate and inclusive. Like Sam Keen, I know that marriage has been a spiritual practice for me, one that has softened my ego, taught me compassion, and allowed my eros and spirit to lie down together.

That’s what I believe marriage is for, ultimately, in this day and age, no matter what the economic, social or financial statuses it confers. It is a human institution designed to foster human development. And I believe that if good people like you and me continue to take action, we can take heart from

these words from E.J. Graff: "whenever proposals such as same-sex marriage surface in public debate, the underlying social changes have already happened." Past experience has shown this to be true, whether the issue was the rights of women to own property, racial intermarriage, suffrage, divorce, the equality of men and women, control of reproduction: when such proposals have arisen for debate in the public arena, society has already changed.

All there is left for us to do is to make same-sex marriage legal, and to keep asking the questions that will lead to greater freedom, justice, equality, and compassion for all persons, married or single, in our world.

Amen.