

## Still Standing on the Side of Love

A Sermon by John Parker Manwell  
The First Unitarian Church of Baltimore  
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### READING

Our reading this morning provides a starting point for looking at today's hot button issue of same-sex marriage. We read from an article by reporter Rebecca Allison in the August 1, 2003 issue of the British newspaper, The Guardian. It's headed, "Pope calls for halt to 'evil' gay marriages."

*The Vatican yesterday urged Catholic politicians to actively campaign against legalising gay marriages which it said were evil, deviant and posed a grave threat to society. . . . Catholic lawmakers were warned that any support of same-sex unions was "gravely immoral" and there was a moral duty on them to publicly oppose moves towards legal recognition of such marriages. . . . The paper represents a ratcheting up of the Vatican's struggle to reverse the worldwide momentum behind legalising gay marriage.*

*"There are absolutely no grounds," [the Vatican said,] for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family. Marriage is holy, while homosexual acts go against the natural moral law," it said, adding: "Legal recognition of homosexual unions or placing them on the same level as marriage would mean not only the approval*

*of deviant behaviour ... but would also obscure basic values which belong to the common inheritance of humanity."*

**SOLO** – Charles Blackburn, singing “Somewhere”

Charles Blackburn and Vernon Rey, singing “One Heart, One Hand”

## **SERMON**

Listening to the voice of the Vatican, then listening to the voices of Charles and Vernon Blackburn, I wonder sometimes whether we on opposite sides of the argument about same-sex marriage (or same-gender marriage, as we’re beginning to call it today), whether we even live on the same planet. The voices against us are so angry, so shrill, you might think the world is in danger of ending.

Can we not pause for a reality check? I want to begin with some historical perspective that may help us to understand that, in fact, same-gender marriage is not new. And the church has not always opposed it. Let’s take a look.

The late John Boswell, when he died far too young just a decade ago, was the A. Whitney Griswold Professor of history at Yale, where he served for more than twenty years. Brilliant in languages and comfortable across a broad expanse of western history, he took a special interest in western cultural attitudes toward homosexuality.

He's best known for his 1980 book<sup>1</sup> tracing the history of social tolerance toward minorities in western culture, especially of homosexuals, in the Christian era up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It won the American Book Award for history. Boswell argues that it has not been religion, but popular prejudice wrapping itself in the cloak of religion, that has been at the root of intolerance against gays over the centuries. He was himself a convert to Roman Catholicism, and we might see his writings as a passionate effort to show the church a better way.

In Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe,<sup>2</sup> published posthumously in 1995, he documented the existence of religious ceremonies for same-sex unions and their broad acceptance in western Europe as the second millennium began. He included texts, in Greek with his own translations, of more than a dozen liturgies for same-gender union services, found in various collections of Roman Catholic liturgies, side by side with liturgies for heterosexual marriage. Were they equivalent? Some scholars have insisted that the same-gender liturgies were for spiritual friendship or brotherhood, and were not intended to bless homosexual intimacy. Boswell, it seems to me, pretty convincingly holds that they were. But even if they were not, his books are a powerful antidote to histories which take for granted the repugnance of same-gender love, "the sin that cannot be named" – a modern attitude not shared, even in the church, during much of the first millennium. His book concludes with these hopeful words:

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<sup>1</sup>John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 1980.

<sup>2</sup>John Boswell, Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe (New York: Random House/Vintage Books), 1995.

Recognizing that many – perhaps most – earlier Western societies institutionalized some form of romantic same-sex union gives us a much more accurate view of the immense variety of human romantic relationships and social responses to them than does the prudish pretense that such “unmentionable” things never happened.

I want now to draw from Boswell’s writings three main points that may help us to put today’s arguments about same-sex marriage in perspective.

First, he shows that Greek and Roman attitudes toward same-gender relationships were far more tolerant than those in recent western culture, and often positively accepting, and that this continued, with fluctuations, right up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Certainly there was controversy from time to time, but same-gender unions were far from the polarizing issue they are today. The Greeks’ comfort with homosexuality is well-known, going back at least to the Golden Age. But though less well-known, the Romans, too, celebrated same-gender unions, and in general were comfortable with homosexual relationships.

A key reason was that heterosexual marriage, until modern times, has not been about love. So same-gender relationships did not compete with heterosexual marriage. That’s hard for us to understand, living in a culture that in which marriage is all about love. But until recent times, marriage has been about families, descendants, wealth and power, and it was fine if in the end love developed. But it was not initially about love. It was not seen as society’s main outlet for sexual intimacy, at least for males.

Bearing and raising children had to take place within the family, to perpetuate it, and pass property along family lines, so the wife's sexual activity was confined to the marriage. But it was normal for men of position and power in those patriarchal societies to find their sexual satisfaction in outside relationships, be they with women or with men – and often both. These might be casual relationships, or with prostitutes or, if you had enough money, with concubines; or they might take the form of committed same-gender relationships. I don't want to hold up Roman sexual attitudes as models of equality or restraint, only to note that homosexuality in Roman culture for most of the first millennium carried little social stigma. That's my first point.

Second, it's striking to note that even when there was controversy, these issues of sexuality were not seen as centrally *important*. The core concerns of previous societies, and perhaps nonwestern ones today, have been more likely to revolve around heroism and war, the cycles of agriculture and the seasons, developments in literature and the arts, or religion and politics, than around sex and romance, which so dominate western culture today.

Indeed, as Christianity became the established religion, there was a tendency to spiritualize all sexual relationships. The church held up celibacy as the ideal, even while recognizing that it would be beyond the reach of most people. But it's noteworthy that marriage continued for several more centuries to be primarily a secular matter. People did not get married in church. The church did not develop liturgies for any kind of marriage until late in the first millennium. But in the meantime, it made saints of many martyrs of the faith, even some who famously

went to their deaths in loving same-sex relationships, the most famous being Saints Serge and Bacchus, and Polyeuct and Nearchos. Their sexuality just wasn't that important.

There's a third point I want to draw from Boswell that may help us to lower the heat, particularly as we consider the *religious* issues around homosexuality. They don't, he insists, go to the heart of Christianity or Judaism. Stand back, he suggests: If you wanted to understand the core teachings of any religion, you would begin with its scriptures. Look then at the Christian scriptures. Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. Paul's view is obscure, at best. The Ten Commandments don't mention homosexuality at all – the Hebrew scriptures condemn homosexuality only as part of a code of cultic purity, most of which today's Christians happily ignore, along with many if not most Jews. In short, homosexuality is at most a fringe concern of both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures. Even though some of the institutions of religion have in our time seemed to obsess about sexual issues, a sense of history supports a hope that this is a passing phenomenon, stemming from culture more than scripture.

Let's turn now, with these perspectives in mind, to the culture wars that so divide us today. Is it not apparent that if the world is about to end, it won't be because of same-gender marriage, or even abortion? If the world is ending, surely it will be about the rich increasingly turning their backs on the poor, about our culture of increasing violence, and about war, and global warming, and much more. It might even be about the weakening of the family and the neglect of children – but it's not about same-gender marriage.

So let's try to look then at the marriage issue more dispassionately: Will it be good for gays and lesbians? Will it hurt the rest of us? If it's good for society as a whole, the slippery slope issue becomes an irrelevant diversion.

No one who watched the new clips of crowds of joyous men and women flocking to City Hall in San Francisco two years ago to be married, after the courts had for a time opened the door to do so, can question the longing of thousands of gays and lesbians, often already partners for many years, to be married. Nor can anyone who watched the similar scenes in Massachusetts, after its legislature acquiesced in a similar (and final) ruling of the state's Supreme Judicial Court. Marriage may not be for everyone – traditional marriage isn't either – but for a very great many, perhaps in the long-term most gays and lesbians, as for most heterosexuals, marriage and family are a deeply rooted longing.

Is it good for society? I would ask, can it possibly be good for any society to *withhold* the right to marry, and so many other rights, to a large segment of its population – just because the object of their affection is a person of the same sex? Yes, I have no doubt, it is good, it is very good for society to extend equal rights to gays and lesbians, just as, over the decades and the centuries, western societies dominated by white, male, property-owning males have, with feet dragging all the way, slowly and grudgingly extended equal rights to working people, to women, to African Americans and ethnic minorities – and now, equally slowly and grudgingly, to sexual minorities.

Marriage, today, is about love. It's about commitment. It's about family. It's about providing for each other and for children homes that are stable, and safe, and caring. Same-gender marriage? Heterosexual marriage? It makes no difference. But God knows, in a world in which half of marriages end in failure, in which there is so much violence and abuse and neglect, we need marriage, and we need to make it work.

Yes, it is good for all of us, to extend the right to marry to same-gender couples. Is it a slippery slope? I feel sorry for those who are trapped in such imaginary fears. End of the world? It's time we put an end to the world of having to live in the closet, to remain invisible, to deny the person that God made us to be. Let's make a beginning to a new world in which we honor the human dignity of *all* of us, in which we stand on the side of love.

I cannot end without adding a word from my own experience. As a minister I have probably married two hundred or more couples over the past fifteen years, maybe thirty of them of the same sex. I have spent many hours with them, and with their friends and families. From this, and from my own experience of two marriages, I think I have learned something, at least, of what it takes to make a marriage work. I have some experience of committed relationships, both gay and straight.

I can say without the slightest hesitation that the same-gender couples I have married are no less committed than the others, no less determined to make their relationships endure, no less committed to their mutual spiritual growth. If

anything, perhaps more so: for they have to work harder at it, because of the social disapproval they so often face.

They are no less committed to forming loving families, no less committed to being good parents, and no less committed to the larger good. I can't imagine anything in the relationships I've been invited to solemnize that could threaten anyone. There's no reason to believe that two-father or two-mother couples don't make as good parents. That's pretty obvious, I think, from our experience together here in this congregation.

In the end, the issue of same-gender marriage is far more cultural than religious. The real core issues Christianity, and Judaism – and of Unitarian Universalism as well – are not about sex. They are about welcoming the stranger into our lives. They are about learning to love our neighbors. They are about building a world based on justice and mercy.

Our society has come a long way toward these ends, but we have a very long way still to go, and of course the horizon will keep receding before us as our vision is stretched. But one thing we know: Whatever our shortcomings, as a society and as individuals, whatever distance we still have to go, at the core of our Unitarian Universalist faith is a longing to stand on the side of love. And right now, this longing, this love, are calling us to stand up for equal rights to marry. We'll have that chance in Annapolis on lobby day next month -- on Monday, February 13, the day before Valentine's Day. Let's come out and lobby for love, as more than a hundred UUs did last year, along with maybe a thousand others.

If you can't go, you can write. You can call. You can speak out in settings where homosexuality was once a taboo subject – with family, with friends, with neighbors and in the workplace.

When this issue is long behind us, and the world has moved on, what do we want people to say of us? Let's hope that people will say, they stood on the side of love.