

“The Other Who Isn’t”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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Love and fear, war and peace. These are the poles that seem to describe the landscape, the very soulscape, of our country during these interesting times we inhabit.

The mail came the other day as it usually does. I sifted through my items: a postcard from Union Theological Seminary announcing the presentation of the Union Medal to Ophelia Dahl and Dr. Paul Farmer, founders of Partners in Health, a world health organization that has worked wonders in some of the most impoverished places on our planet. Then there was my current issue of the *Harvard Women’s Health Watch*. I scanned the headlines: “Hormone researchers are shifting some of their attention from menopause to the years that precede it.” So much for the facts of life. Onto the next item: a thoughtful note from one of you, along with the enclosed text of a radio sermon by colleague Earl Holt, Minister of King’s Chapel, that Unitarian landmark just off Boston Common. You highlighted a story Earl borrowed from one of my favorite story-telling writers, Anne Lamott. It was about a little girl lost in a big city. She’s rescued by a policeman, who drives her around in his patrol car until she sees something familiar. She does; it’s her church. She explains matter-of-factly to the officer that it would be fine to let her out. From her church she can always find her way home. Hmm, I thought, this is good news for that church and the little girl, though I’m not so sure it’s standard procedure for any police department. And at the bottom of my pile: The hefty 2007 Directory of our Unitarian Universalist Association!

I was reminded that there are ordinary people doing extraordinary things in some of the most imperiled places on the planet, and that the seminary that holds so many memories for me is awarding them its Medal of Honor. I recall a few years back standing in Union’s James Chapel with my husband, Dan, as the now deceased Rev. William Sloane Coffin received that award, rose from his wheel chair and bellowed out: “War is a coward’s escape from the problems of peace!” Of course he had more to say. It was a memorable evening.

And how about that article on hormones in that gem of a newsletter that comes monthly? Just when we think science has a handle on something as basic as menopause and its high tide of hormones, zap! New research turns the tide.

Then that message from one of you – so warm, so thoughtful, with a story from Anne Lamott via Earl Holt, about a lost little girl, a kindly cop, and a way to go home.

And finally that hefty volume that spun in text the Unitarian Universalist neighborhood of our interconnected web.

The mail had arrived – with accounts of courageous people duly honored; with memories of another person of courage, honored and revered; with a lesson on the futility of digging our heels into our assumptions; with a story about what church can be for the lost and vulnerable; and with a palpable gift of names and more that personalize and vitalize this faith that we share. You just never know what the mail will bring!

But I started out talking about love and fear, war and peace. Where’s the connection? Be patient. First things first; second things second.

We’re here this morning amid decisive times. Come Tuesday I hope we will each exercise our precious right to go to the polls and vote. We know about the war raging in Iraq. We

know about the declining availability of health care. We know about the race that so many young families run just to stay in place. We know about the threat of global warming. We know about the nonstop genocide in Darfur; and we know about so much more that stirs our hearts and minds as we consider what to do. I respect passionately our freedom of conscience and am confident that each of us will vote our conscience.

There's an undertow, however, an undertow that is especially fierce for Massachusetts, as it is in a different mode for those states in which it will come up for a popular vote on Tuesday. I'm speaking of that matter of the freedom to marry the person you love. With genocide raging elsewhere, with Iraq near chaos, with our own families in daily fear for the safety of loved ones in the military, with a planet reeling from climate change, what gets galvanized as a deal-breaker for a values confused populace? The freedom to marry the person you love.

Inclusive marriage is an undertow issue, a diverting and divisive issue, but in some ways it casts into relief what all these mega-issues are about: the moat that the anxious "I" constructs to separate me from the scary "other." It's "us" against "them." As an issue, inclusive marriage frames and reframes assumptions made about the facts of life – ala the tide turning research reported by my *Harvard Women's Health Watch*.

Come Thursday, after the ballots are long counted that will tell the tale on these other issues and in some states on this one, our own state's legislators will determine whether Massachusetts will have a popular vote on inclusive marriage. On some grounds, it sounds harmless enough. Then I think about my right to vote as a woman. Had there been a *popular* vote on the matter, those of us who are female and of voting age wouldn't be going to the polls or would continue to go in protest. I think of the many married couples I know who are considered interracial. Just a few years ago, this was a crime in many states. Had there been a popular vote on the "miscegenation laws," would they have been rescinded?

Thursday offers us a choice beyond going to the polls, though we can surely support or not support legislators who have come out for inclusive marriage. Thursday offers us a choice today to lobby our current legislators through phone calls and e-mails against a popular vote that can bring into play the tyranny of what is simply popular to undermine and overturn what is simply a civil right.

Will we in Massachusetts have the courage to continue as pioneers of inclusive marriage? Back to Anne Lamott's story of the lost little girl who found her way home with the church as her point of reference. Me too, I found my way home with this faith as my base. Some of you know that I first entered a Unitarian Universalist church in the wake of a flight from an abusive marriage. With my then two little girls, I sought safety and assurance and affirmation. And there it was, in the sanctuary of the Mainline Unitarian Church of Devon, Pennsylvania, the church home of my brother and sister-in-law, who had opened their home to us. How ignorant I was about this faith until I needed it so desperately.

What you probably don't know is that the husband I fled was gay. It would have been so easy to blend his destructive behavior with that reality; with thanks in part to this faith, I haven't done that. As I reflect on that time, though, I have a question to pose to you. If a straight woman is married to a gay man and they produce two remarkable children, but the frustration in that man who is fighting his identity finds its shape in lashing out at his spouse, is this a marriage that nonetheless conforms to the legal norms of 49 of our states? I wonder: if inclusive marriage had been on the books, if our society had affirmed the diversity of sexual preference, might there not have been an early and congenial parting of the ways with the knowledge that he had his options and I had mine? Of course, I'm ever grateful for the reality that brought two little girls into the

world, but not for the societal context that contributed mightily to the toxicity of this all quite legal marriage.

Is not homophobia at the base of resistance to same-sex marriage, and does not a naïve “heterophilia” cheer it on? William Sloane Coffin called homophobia the last “respectable prejudice.” I believe that religious and political resistance to inclusive marriage still stands in that venue of “respectable prejudice.” “They” are not like “us.” “Their life style” is just not “ours.” Yet the life style of many of our happily married and sometimes unhappily married gay and lesbian brothers and sisters is so much like that of our straight brothers and sisters that we could trade one for the other and not know the difference. As a straight woman now married to a straight man, I think to myself, this isn’t always easy. It’s easier than the last one, but it’s still not easy. If men are from Mars and women are from Venus, we don’t even start out on the same planet. There’s an argument to be made for options.

In his discussion of homophobia, Bill Coffin called attention to a gravestone in a Washington cemetery. It was the gravestone of a Vietnam vet, and it bore this inscription: “When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.” This, my friends, is a spiritual travesty and a political sin.

Jesus didn’t tell us who to love, just to love. God is love, we teach our children. Love comes from God. Who are we to add on some exceptions, some qualifications, about the particular variety that is and isn’t divinely ordained? When I bless a marriage, I bless a relationship defined above all by mutual love and respect, whoever, however.

The mail arrived, and I was reminded of ordinary women and men who acted with courage and compassion. I was reminded to keep an open mind. I was reminded of the stories that you bring me, like that parable of the lost little girl. I just hope that the church that served as her lodestar was the same church that would bless her wedding years later, whether to a man or a woman. I just hope that the church that served as her compass was the same church that would teach her to love her neighbor as herself and to value and esteem herself, whatever her identity. I just hope that the church where the patrol car let her out was a safe and welcoming space for all who stepped inside.

As for this congregation and all the congregations Unitarian Universalist, delivered in kind via that UUA directory, I am ever grateful for the inclusiveness of a “faith of the larger liberty” and for a faith community that has long stood on the side of all-embracing love.

Come Thursday morning, I will stand as a Unitarian Universalist minister outside our State House on Beacon Hill, in solidarity with other Unitarian Universalist clergy and lay folk. We will stand on the side of love with people of many faiths who support equal marriage as a civil right. And we will stand against a popular vote which would likely take inclusive marriage back to the status of populist homophobia. I invite you to join me. Just let me know after the service or early in the week. I would love to stand with you in this vigil. If you can’t make it, there’s still time to call your legislators and remind them that the freedom to marry freely has fared well these past two years. Why stop now?

Love and fear, war and peace. Can the politics of fear and war be transformed by the spirit of love and peace? Will we be true to our faith in raising our voices? Loving our neighbors as ourselves is that haunting commandment that calls us to be of courage, to question some long-held facts of life, to resist when we must, and to emerge from the undertow with newfound energy to end a war, to stop genocide, to consume modestly, to heal readily, and to love beyond category. “They” are “us.” “We” are “them.” The oft-feared other is neither scary nor other. Amen.

Sources

The Bible (Revised Standard Version)

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