

# «Friendship, Marriage and the Pursuit of Happiness»

Sermon by Tray Hollister, February 8, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

## Part I: Friendship with Lisa and Invitation to her Wedding

I have a story to tell you. It's a story of friendship. Not just any friendship, but a friendship that has crossed social boundaries, transcended the miles and has endured 35 years. Lisa and I met in preschool. We bonded while playing in the sandbox and making clay figures with our hands. We then went to kindergarten and elementary school together, where we climbed on the jungle gym and played at each others' houses -- building forts, watching the Brady Bunch, playing Sorry and Clue, swimming in her pool, and dancing around to music. We also both named our pet rats Inky.

When my parents went through a bitter divorce when I was 12, Lisa was there for me. When I had to move to another state with my Dad and brother, we kept in touch and when I returned to visit my Mom, we would go to the mall, watch movies and just hang out. Lisa has been the most loyal of all my childhood friends.

Yet we were unlikely friends. We had different interests. As a sporty kid, I played on the soccer team and ran track, while Lisa was decidedly unathletic. I loved academic challenges while Lisa preferred to occupy her mind with musicians and Disney characters. We also had different racial backgrounds, with Lisa being half Puerto Rican. Perhaps our most striking visual difference was in high school when she went through her punk rock phase – with purple spikey hair and black clothes. I was dressed, well... much as I do today. Fortunately, her dress sense has improved other the years while mine, sadly, has not! I dated guys with names like Greg, John and Chris while she preferred to date Atila, Thrasher and Davey Blade. It didn't seem to matter to either of us that we were in different social groups. Our friendship was deeper than that. I felt an unusual acceptance by Lisa. Even during times when I judged myself, Lisa accepted me for who I was. I will always remember Lisa's simple, pure-hearted advice ... "*as long as it makes you happy.*" From Lisa, I learned the meaning of true friendship – wanting the other person to be happy – even if what makes them happy is not what makes you happy.

Throughout the years Lisa and I have remained in touch by phone, as we have rarely lived in the same state. Most of what we talked about is our relationships -- we've both dated lots of people in our long quests to find the right life partner.

I am now excited and delighted to tell you that Lisa has found her soulmate and just got married in September. I knew it was important to Lisa that I be at her wedding. She even paid some of my expenses. There was never any question that I would be there to help her celebrate and wish her well, even though I didn't have the vacation time and even though going to weddings painfully reminds me of something that I cannot have-- legal and social recognition of my own life partnership.

## Bridge between Part I and Part II

And why can't I join so many of my friends and the other millions of Americans who are entitled to the 300 or so state rights and 1000 federal rights, protections and benefits that come with marriage – including hospital visitation rights, shared health benefits, inheritance, employment benefits, and more – along with the social recognition and acceptance of my relationship?

I am after all a voting, law-abiding, tax-paying, even *church-going* U.S. citizen! That ought to count for something. But it does not. Even if one does not vote, pay taxes, does not go to church, and breaks the laws of this country and gets imprisoned, one could still get married. As the S Ct ruled in TURNER v. SAFLEY in 1987, marriage is a

*fundamental right*. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote that, "Prison walls do not form a barrier separating the inmate from the protections of the Constitution."

So what is it about ME that separates me from what is arguably part of MY fundamental constitutional right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? As a UU, in my own free and responsible search for meaning, I discovered at the age of 27 that I am gay. I represent, quite proudly, many colors of the rainbow.

During the years in which I thought I was "straight" I expected to be married someday -- if I ever finished my elusive quest for the right man. When I discovered I was gay, I carried over my sense of heterosexual privilege and my desire to be married. As was, after, the exact same person. I expected to be treated in the same way by the same people as I did before, and for the most part, I was. However, there is no escaping the fact that if I am going to be true to myself and be with a female partner, the state of NC and the Federal government will not legally recognize my long-term commitment.

## **Part II: History of Perceptions of Same-Sex Couples**

So how did we get to this place of preventing people like me from marrying as a country and how we can get out of it? I'll share some history and a few thoughts of hope with you. I will then return to my story of my friend Lisa and my hopes for her and everyone who wants to get married.

**First, I have a question for you. How many of you have ever been misunderstood sometime in your life?** It looks like it's a near universal feeling. But for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, it is not a temporary, situational feeling, but rather a pervasive, sometimes lifelong misunderstanding of the very basics of who we are and why we are *that way*, and just what "our agenda" is anyway.

Because I think a misunderstanding of gay intentions and ignorance of gay realities is the problem, I believe a big part of the solution is more gay people coming out, sharing their stories, and more allies standing up for their gay friends to roll back misunderstandings with the truth. And because truth is on our side, ultimately justice will be as well. As Martin Luther King has said, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

Fortunately, these misunderstandings have not always been there. In *Same Sex Unions in Pre Modern Europe*, John Boswell describes how historical records show that from the earliest recorded history on, same-sex couples enjoyed social and even formal recognition of their relationships in hundreds of examples throughout the world. For example, there were many recorded cases of same-sex marriages in Greek and Roman law and society.

Of course, around the time of the Roman Empire some men wrote several "gospels" claiming to be the word of God in which seven passages, between the old and new testaments, are now interpreted by some to denounce homosexuality, particularly among men. Nevermind that this book was used to justify the subjugation of women, slavery, polygamy and other social practices that are no longer accepted today. It still forms the basis by which some justify their bigotry and misunderstanding of gays even today. But the Bible has not always been a popular weapon against gays.

In "Why Marriage?" historian George Chauncey writes that up until the late 1920's in the U.S., gay and lesbian subcultures in cities flourished – and were greeted with fascination and an acceptance that they were yet another sign of the complexity and freedom of a growing metropolitan culture.

Chauncey argues that discrimination and stereotypes against gays emerged in the 1930's-1950's – when gays were scapegoated or attached to other real or perceived threats to the family or our American way of life. The Great Depression brought a crisis in gender and family relations as men's role as breadwinners declined. Some blamed the cultural experimentation and excesses of the Roaring 20's, including the élan of gay culture. Hollywood caved to Catholic pressure to pull gay characters or face boycotts, starting a 30-year censorship of all gay material. Coupled with New York's padlock law to ban gay theatre, this threw a generation of highly visible, integrated gays and lesbians off stage and into the closet.

In the 40's and 50's, with growing conspiracy theories of the threat of Communism, gays also became depicted as extranationals which undermined American values. Gay male stereotypes changed from sissy to threatening molesters, predators, and psychopaths. Some of these beliefs are still used to justify denial of gay rights to teachers, parents, and couples seeking to marry today. During the McCarthy era, more gays were dismissed from government than communists. In the 1950's, in cities like Philly, San Francisco, Miami and NY, police were sent in to close down gay bars and prevent them from congregating. The US Post Office even banned newspapers from the mail for the first gay rights group, the Mattachine Society.

Negative gay stereotypes and censorship of gays from the media and social clubs form a vicious cycle. Stereotypes are easy to generate because gays are biologically only less than 10% of the population, so many people can't counter the stereotypes with what they know about real people who are gay. And the stereotypes also force more gays into the closet, making it even harder for more people to know and understand gay people and easier for myth-understandings to grow.

Fortunately, the next phase of our nation's story in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 60's and beyond, was about COMING OUT... standing up to police harassment of a gay bar in the famous Stonewall rebellion of 1969 in NY, being inspired by the civil rights and women's movements, and coming out in huge numbers, going to pride parades, and the proliferation of gay organizations – from about 50 in 1969 to over 1000 by 1974. In fact, in the 1970's saw a lot of gay rights activism, ala San Francisco's Harvey Milk and others, where gays became more vocal in their public demands for rights, including the right to be married.

One ray of marital hope for the gay community came in 1967, when the S. Ct. struck down common bans on interracial marriage in *Loving vs. Virginia*, saying that the “freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men.”

The first time gay couples tried to get married in the US was in 1975 in Colorado and Arizona. At that time, marriage laws were gender-neutral, though heterosexual marriage had been intended. When the gay couples applied for marriage licenses, county clerks could find no legal justification to deny them a marriage license. This began the flurry of emergency legislation to define marriage as between one man and one woman or to convince the Courts to void the marriages based on a “heterosexual presumption of marriage,” often based on Biblical verses! In Arizona the one marriage was struck down by the AZ S. Ct. but in Colorado the five marriages were never nullified, and several of the couples are still happily married today!

Since then, there have been other strategies to stop gays from marrying, defense of marriage prohibitions on same-sex marriage the creation of segregated legal structures such as in Vermont's civil unions, and California and other European's “registered domestic partnerships.”

Why all this prevention activity? All based on another misunderstanding, or shall I say *myth* understanding -- that gay marriages will threaten the institution of marriage. As anti-gay extremist James Dobson warned when Massachusetts S. Ct gave gays the right to marry in 2004, it was akin to issuing "death certificates for the institution of marriage." Perhaps only our own history can explain this seemingly irrational belief system-- that it invokes Depression-era- like fears of upsetting a rapidly-declining fragile gender order based on traditional roles, or the Biblically-based notion that someone it's immoral to be gay or that marriage is between a man and at least one woman? Again, gays are easy to scapegoat for problems that are a much larger threat to the institution of marriage. As women have become less economically dependent on men, unhappy marriages have increasingly led to divorce. Such larger societal trends cannot be reversed by excluding gays from marriage.

We have the most data to counter this myth in countries that pioneered separate-and-not-quite-equal status for same-sex couples called "registered partnerships" --Denmark (1989), Norway (1993), Sweden (1994), and Iceland (1996) (which just last week got its first lesbian leader) -- the marriage rates among heterosexuals have been going up and in the 1990s, divorce rates were unchanged. No surprises there.

Of course, we will have new and better experiments soon that will replace fears of destroying the institution of marriage with hard facts. Since 2001, the Netherlands and Belgium have opened full marriage to same-sex couples, and since then parts of Canada and now also Spain, South Africa and as of last month Norway also gives same-sex couples full marriage rights. That is seven countries.

In the U.S., both Massachusetts (2004) and California (between June and November 2008) and now Connecticut permit same-sex couples to marry, while about seven states allow for less equal domestic partnerships or civil unions.

### **Part III: Back to Lisa's Wedding**

Now, back to my story about Lisa. What I intentionally left out of this sermon so far is that Lisa and I share something else of significance. Lisa actually lives in California and married.....Michelle. Yes, Michelle. Lisa is also a lesbian.

Now, let me stop for a second. Admit it, how many of you assumed Lisa was marrying a man before I told you? [show of hands....] I intentionally left this information out because I wanted you to experience the assumption of marriage as a heterosexual privilege. Now I want you to notice how you may have felt differently about my friend Lisa if I told you I was going to her **domestic partnership ceremony**.

I know I would feel differently. I was so excited when I learned in mid-May that the S. Court in my home state of California had legalized the term "marriage" for same-sex couples, and then just a week later, I got a personal invitation to my first legal gay wedding, and in my hometown to boot! If I were going to her "domestic partnership ceremony," I would have had a "lesser than" feeling, not fully recognized, much as I imagine it would feel to go to the Colored Water fountain rather than the white one. Even though the water might have been much the same, it conjures up a separate but unequal system based on differences in social acceptance.

To Lisa, too, the term marriage has a special significance. With or without the California S Court decision, Lisa and Michelle had planned to get "married" in 2008. Legal or not, they were going to have a wedding and they were going to call it marriage. As Lisa explained, she would never say "I'm getting domestic partnered." She said the term marriage just conjures up a higher level of respect.

In their historic decision last May, the Republican California Supreme Court's ruling boiled down to what Lisa put so succinctly. It's about respect. The Court ruling was only on the constitutionality of using the term *marriage vs.* domestic partnership. California had already recently given same sex couples the same exact 300 or so state marriage rights as opposite-sex couples in domestic partnerships. To quote the Ca. S. Ct ruling, the name marriage matters because "denying such couples access to the familiar and highly-favored designation of marriage is likely to cast doubt on whether the official family relationship of same-sex couples enjoys **dignity** equal to that of opposite-sex couples." Acknowledging the widespread disparagement that gay individuals historically have faced, they further argued that a "separate designation may well have the effect of perpetuating that gay individuals or same-sex couples are in some respects **second class citizens** who may be treated **differently than and less favorably** than heterosexual individuals or opposite-sex couples."

I can't tell you how affirming these words are to me. They have the joyful ring of truth to them, like an oasis in a world where people like me and Lisa are too often misunderstood in our simple act of loving someone of the same gender.

It is important to note that neither the C. S. Court decision nor Lisa and Michelle's decision to get married were really about a difference in rights. Lisa and Michelle were not getting married for the 300 or so state rights that come with state marriage rights. Lisa explained that most non-gay couples don't get married for those rights either. She's right; I had never heard of opposite sex couples who were really excited about those rights. It's like the rights are an added benefit, a perk. The main focus is the public recognition of a long-term love and commitment. But although the rights are not the focus, they do matter, a lot, especially over the years, when hospital visits, health

insurance, children, adoptions, taxes, and inheritance come into play. They are society's way of recognizing and rewarding this love and commitment through time in real, meaningful ways.

It happened to be just a coincidence that Lisa's planned wedding to Michelle fell in a month and in a state in which it was legal for same-sex couples to marry. And as I sat through their ceremony, I noticed that one of the *only* differences in the wedding ceremony from the dozens of opposite-sex weddings I had attended was that the minister pronounced them "married for life" instead of the now-antiquated "man and wife." As a marriage equality advocate who can hardly imagine such a legally recognized marriage here in North Carolina, I was in awe of what I had witnessed. But to Lisa and Michelle's friends, it seemed old hat. They had been to other gay weddings. No one acted like it was a big, political deal. It was a wedding like millions of other weddings. It was two people declaring their commitment among friends and family, in fancy wedding clothes, in a church, with photographers, followed by a reception and cake.

Except there were differences. Michelle's parents did not attend, I believe due to disapproval of their daughter's "lifestyle." And Lisa's mom only decided to come at the last minute. Rose, who was raised both Catholic and in the homophobic Caribbean, confided in me that she still struggled with Lisa being gay. She said, "I just don't think it's natural. I mean I never wanted to be intimate with another woman." Though this was heartbreaking for me to hear at Lisa's reception, both as Lisa's friend and as another gay woman, I knew that her presence there and standing up and saying "I will" when the minister asked if they would support Lisa and Michelle, had meant that her love for her daughter had won over her inability to understand her. As Rose explained to me, she wanted her daughter to have someone to take care of her, and she added – reminiscent of Lisa's own lines of wisdom to me throughout the decades, "I just want her to be happy."

As I gave the toast to Lisa and Michelle, I wished that in November the voters of California would affirm Lisa and Michelle's marriage just as their friends and family had. And when I left the wedding, I thought that Prop 8 would not pass. I felt that maybe Californians were more evolved in their understanding of gay people than in the 27 other states that at the time had already passed constitutional amendments prohibiting same-sex couples from the legal recognition of marriage since Massachusetts legalized same sex marriage in 2004. But I was wrong.

As you all know, the voters of California did pass Prop 8 in November, 52-48%, which put an end to same-sex marriages in California. It was the most expensive social campaign in history. Some estimate that on both side over \$60 million was spent by over 64,000 people from all 50 states and more than 20 foreign countries, reflecting broad interest in a race viewed by some as second in national importance only to the presidential election. And Obama, who supports equal rights but believes marriage is between a man and a woman, was used in ads by both the No and Yes sides of the campaign.

What both my friend Lisa and leaders of the No campaign reported was a key part of Prop 8's passage was – no surprise – another myth that teachers were going to be required to indoctrinate kids in teaching them that it was okay to be gay or that gay marriage could cause people to be sued for their beliefs and churches to lose their tax exemption.

Fortunately, my friend Lisa and her wife Michelle will not have their legal marriage revoked. When I asked Lisa if she felt lucky to have been able to have this rare chance at marriage as a gay person, she said no. She said that she feels the right to be married is a birthright, like breathing. And she said that asking a gay person what it's like to be married is like asking an interracial couple what it's like to be interracially married. For the couple who is married, they are just married. And like so many other happy couples, Lisa reported that the effect of being married on her relationship with Michelle is that there is a more solid commitment and a level of comfort that allows them both to thrive.

The bottom line is this. Despite the rhetoric from the religious right, Lisa and Michelle's marriage is no scarier than Stuart and Mary's marriage, or Don and Linda's. Marriage is marriage. People are people. Weddings are weddings. Friendships are friendships. And love is love.

Isn't it just that simple? Can't we act like friends and want others to be happy even if what makes them happy does not make us happy, like Lisa's Mom? Can't we allow all of our citizens to enjoy the same constitutional rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

As Lisa says, by people seeing same-sex couples in the media, having gay friends, and seeing how the world does not end with same-sex marriages, people will realize it's a civil rights issue and allow all committed couples to marry. That of course, is also my wish for not just the US but for all the countries in the world. My wish for Lisa and Michelle as a married couple is that they cultivate their friendship and support of each other's pursuit of happiness within their marriage.

As UU's, let us affirm everyone's right to happiness and at least three basic UU principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

Blessed be.

This was the third delivery of this sermon, updated each time based on current events. Congregations interested in this message contact Tracy at 919-610-8477. To view her blog, go to <http://equalhearts.blogspot.com/>