

FEBRUARY 14, 2010

Can You Be My Valentine?

**Roses are red, violets are blue,
I so love to see
your face in the pew!**

Of all the rhymes we have ever toyed with, Valentine's Day prose is probably the most adapted piece of poetry any of us have ever scrawled on a heart to give to another. Next to religious literature, music and poetry, songs of love are the most composed, sung and written verses that humankind has ever produced.

Our expressions and definitions of love have evolved over the centuries largely through the intervention of religious and early mythological figures, which have influenced the customs and traditions of every society. It is a day that really should be a most sacred holiday celebrated especially by UU's all over the world, who have been very instrumental and persistent in purging the hatred and bigotry that has permeated the "acceptable" definition of love through the ages.

All of our conflicts both social and territorial, right from the earliest records, through biblical writings, to the historic, social and political conflicts have its roots in the religious definitions of Love. Basically and sadly, the struggle, the warfare, the tyranny and the persecutions have all boiled down to a battle over who God loves the most and whose beliefs should reign above all? Is it the pagan, the Jew, the Christian, the Muslim the Hindu, the unchurched?

Instead , we as an association of churches and societies, have emerged to speak of the love of God as non judgmental and accessible to all people, not just the clergy and the politicians.

Love and it's supreme expression of a united relationship is of course recognized as the rite of marriage, most often performed by the clergy or an authorized member of the religious community.

Today a battle rages in churches and in our own legislative chambers as to the status of same sex marriages, and who decides its validity, the church or the state?

At a Congregational Meeting on March 8, 1998 First UU voted to become a welcoming congregation. That resolution stated:

We celebrate and support the lives, relationships, religious quests, and contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, and their families and friends. We affirm and promote the full participation of all people at every level of our congregation and community. We pledge our society's commitment to do its part to heal centuries of religious and societal based oppression and prejudice, making our church a sanctuary of spiritual growth and welcome for all."

The task before us today, is how we intend to fulfill our commitment to the pressing issues that presently face the GLBT community?

On this special Valentines Day, as The UUA launches its "Standing on The Side of Love" campaign I would like to begin with the facts on the same sex marriage issue and attempt to clarify this issue through sharing with you the marriage law as it is written. Other than the required information in the marriage application, it is my guess that most couples, who went before the town clerk to register for a marriage license, never read the content of the marriage law, or for whom it was written. I am quoting from The New York State Marriage Law:

"A marriage may not take place in New York State between an ancestor and descendant, a brother and sister (full or half blood), an uncle and niece or an aunt and nephew, regardless of whether or not these persons are legitimate or illegitimate offspring. There is no particular form or ceremony required except that the parties must state in the presence of an authorized member of the clergy or public official and at least one other witness that they take each other as husband and wife.

To be valid, a marriage ceremony must be performed by any of the individuals specified in Section 11 of the New York State Domestic Relations Law. These include:

- **the mayor of a city or village;**
- **the former mayor, the city clerk or one of the deputy city clerks of a city of more than one million inhabitants;**
- **a marriage officer appointed by the town or village board or the city common council;**
- **a justice or judge of the following courts: the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, the U.S.”(the list is extensive)**
- **a villager town or county justice;”**

I d like to comment here that sixth on the list comes the clergy and Please make note of this one statement in particular.

- a member of the clergy or minister who has been officially ordained and granted authority to perform marriage ceremonies from a governing church body in accordance with the rules and regulations of the church body;***

Next comes:

- **a member of the clergy or minister who is not authorized by a governing church body but who has been chosen by a spiritual group to preside over their spiritual affairs;**
- **other officiants as specified by Section 11 of the Domestic Relations Law.**

The law further adds that ship captains are not authorized to perform marriage ceremonies in New York State. “

In addition, The Syracuse County Marriage requirements further elaborate on:

“Proxy marriages: NO. Cousin Marriages: YES; Common Law Marriages: NO and finally...Same Sex Marriages: NO, HOWEVER SYRACUSE COUNTY DOES RECOGNIZE SAME-SEX MARRIAGES PERFORMED IN OTHER LOCALES.” End quote

. As a congregation and a member of the UUA, our Society has the right to perform marriages for same sex couples, as stated in paragraph 6.

However the State, in contradicting its own law, chooses not to legally recognize our authority as stated.

Furthermore, to complicate the issue, the state enforces the law, however our legislators continually quote Biblical and religious doctrine as the evidence for disallowing same sex marriages, which further blurs the line between the authority of church and that of the state. The issue of the separation of church and state, to me could not be any clearer; If the churches are to unite couples in matrimony, then the governing bodies of each denomination should have the authority to decide who can marry whom and register their licenses in the church archives. Conversely if the state is to be the authority, than take that responsibility completely away from the churches. Or as a compromise, allow the churches, not the state to make the decision as to whom they will marry, as they so choose, and the legal system unquestionably honors their respective marriage certificates. That way the churches have a choice according to their beliefs and practices as to who is eligible to enter into a legal relationship according to church law.

This is why I proposed to you, in the December newsletter, my refusal to honor heterosexual marriage licenses, until the worth and dignity of our own membership both heterosexual and same sex were equally honored. I will certainly officiate at the service and there are a number of options for signing the license.

This is a highly emotional issue for some and What I choose to do as minister of this congregation depends very much upon your endorsement or rejection of my stand on this question.

This is Valentines Day, and I hope by next year, there will be greeting cards in the racks for everyone and it will be a day for all couples who dearly love and care for one another. No one's marriage is damaged or cheapened by the love of same sex couples; rather we are so enriched by those who have fought in our wars, healed our sick, cut our hair, managed our bank accounts and adopted children that have been abandoned, or were unwanted.

We are strengthened by hard working couples whose devotion and love for one another and this congregation, is a tribute to our principles, our community and our faith. I wish for us to stand on the side of love in as many ways as we can, as a whole society but I also know that we will not all agree.

It is my hope and prayer that as we gather after the service to discuss our participation in standing up for love, on this Valentines day, that we will do so with a deep and abiding respect for the opinions of others both pro and con. I have spoken with a few who have disagreed with me, on same sex marriage and I am honored that you were brave enough to call. I may not share your opinion but you have every right to be respected and heard as a member of this congregation. No one should be driven away, or feel unwelcome here, for fear of being chastised for their belief or opinion. That is the real essence of our faith, a true test of the love we profess to share; that we can stand together regardless of our conflicting opinions; that we can speak gently and listen kindly and carefully to one another, then, respect the decision of the majority, without undermining the opinions of the minority. May we be the example of the words of our ancestors that ring true today; God, however each of us may perceive our creation, is love.

For us, Valentines Day should be our most treasured, sacred and holy of holidays. It is what all of this church business is all about. We have, through the centuries, stood up for the simplicity of that message and that is why we have no creed for you to memorize. That is why our rites of passage are personal and unique, not a fill in the blanks boiler plate.

That is why we have ordained women ministers since the 1863 and welcomed Wiccans and athiests among our numbers along with Christians and Jews and Pantheists and Breath Arians and anyone else who believes that God, in all the amazing ways the spiritual comes to us... is purely Love. That is why as an Association of Churches, we have no issue with same sex couples who desire to be legally married.

You and me, your spouse, your partner, your children, the person sitting next to you... The kid down the street, the elder whose driveway you shoveled, the child you taught, the couple next door, are all a gift of this remarkable life and for what reason would we deem them unequal?

May we remember them all and honor them all on this day, this special day when here in the company of this congregation, and maybe just maybe through the efforts of living our principles.. no one will need to ask, "Can you be my Valentine?"

So be it

Amen