

Standing on the Side of Love

The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen and Dot Everhart¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
January 10, 2010

*“God has a plan to help bring justice to the world –
and his plan is us.”*

— Gary Haugen

Opening Words Dot Everhart

On New Year’s Eve, I collected the mail from the copper box on the front porch and eagerly opened the letter from my employer. I had applied for an unpaid Family Medical Leave to care for Kay, my life partner, when she needs supervision due to her mid-stage dementia. Sometimes she is sad and sometimes she’s confused about where she is and what she needs to do. The bad news is that my request for Family Medical Leave was denied. The federal law makes no provisions for domestic partners to use this important benefit extended to those in heterosexual marriages. The good news is that my company, Odyssey HealthCare, a hospice provider headquartered in Dallas, Texas, chooses to stand on the side of love and extends health-care benefits to domestic partners, so the leave was approved through the company policies, though denied by the federal law. I will be able to use up to 12 weeks of unpaid to care for my life partner of 32 years.

When we recite the pledge of allegiance, we close with the words, “with liberty and justice for all.” Clearly, Kay and I have no liberty to marry in PA, so there is no “liberty and justice for all.”

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When either of us die, the survivor will not receive the Social Security benefits we each would be entitled to, were we legally married. In order to speak for each other in health care decisions or in legal business matters, we each have had to secure separate legal documents, not needed were we legally married. It is estimated that there are over 1100 separate federal and state benefits guaranteed to heterosexual couples by marriage. Most of these can be secured by gay couples but at extraordinary personal legal costs and many hours of document preparation and court time. Were we to go to a state or country that has legalized same-sex marriage, when we returned to Pennsylvania our union would not be legally recognized, unlike any heterosexual marriage performed in any of the United States or in other countries. Again, no "liberty or justice for all."

This morning's service is called "Standing on the Side of Love," which is the name given to the Unitarian Universalists' support of marriage equality for same-sex couples. As we worship together, we'll be challenged to discover ways that we all may become involved in this important justice work as part of our UU faith and practice. So, as we light our chalice flame, let us read the words in the Order of Service and kindle the light of justice in our hearts.

Children's Moment

"Jesus Shows Us How to Love"

Duane Fickeisen

Imagine how you would like an adult to be really kind and caring toward you. Maybe a particular person comes to mind: a parent, a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, a teacher. Now think about what they do that shows you they care about you.

Maybe they comfort you when you've been hurt or when you're disappointed or upset. Maybe they help you solve a

problem or show you something interesting. Or maybe they teach you how to do something fun. They probably give you encouragement, tell you you're great, and ask you questions about yourself and the things you like.

Maybe you've heard stories about Jesus and the things he did. He lived about 2000 years ago and he always, always cared about other people. We just celebrated his birthday at Christmas.

He was especially kind to people who others might have wanted to ignore or even be mean to — poor people, sick people, people with mental illness. He paid particular attention to women, who at that time were usually treated poorly — men were thought to be more important and men were allowed to do things that women weren't — but Jesus treated them well.

Jesus taught people to give food to people who didn't have enough to eat, to offer clothes to people who needed them, and to help strangers who needed help.

He stopped people from hurting others and said that we should not act as bullies or ever think that we were more important or better than other people.

He said that we should love everyone, even our enemies. In fact, he taught that we should always treat everyone else the way we would want them to treat us.

Sometimes when people have a difficult choice to make or are wondering how they should act, they will ask themselves "What would Jesus do?" Today I'm going to be talking with the adults about what it means to stand on the side of love. That's pretty much the same question as "What would Jesus do?" because he showed us again and again that what he did was always choose to stand up for what is right – to stand on the side of love.

Many of the adults here have been standing up for what is right in lots of ways. One of them is acting as Silent Witnesses to stand with umbrellas turned sideways to block bullies from disrupting gatherings of lesbian and gay people and their friends. It takes courage and patience to do that without responding in ways that threaten others or make them angry.

I asked some of them to bring their umbrellas and show us how they do that today...

So I would like for you to think about that and see if you can figure out what it would mean to stand on the side of love — to be a caring person and act in ways that you would like others to act toward you.

Readings

from *Passion for Justice*

by Carter Heyward

Love, like truth and beauty, is concrete. Love is not fundamentally a sweet feeling; not, at heart, a matter of sentiment, attachment, or being "drawn toward." Love is active, effective, a matter of making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one's friends and enemies.

Love creates righteousness, or justice, here on earth. To make love is to make justice. As advocates and activists for justice know, loving involves struggle, resistance, risk. People working today on behalf of women, blacks, lesbians and gay men, the aging, the poor in this country and elsewhere know that making justice is not a warm, fuzzy experience. I think also that sexual lovers and good friends know that the most compelling relationships demand hard work, patience, and a willingness to endure tensions and anxiety in creating mutually empowering bonds.

For this reason loving involves commitment. We are

not automatic lovers of self, others, world, or God. Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called "love." Love is a choice -- not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity -- a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh.

from Isaiah 58

Is not this the fast that I choose:

To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke!

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see them naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

Sermon²

Duane Fickeisen

Standing on the Side of Love. It's easy enough for us to say, to

sing about with enthusiasm, to wear the tee shirts and buttons, to rally under a banner. But it is not often so easy to *actually* stand on the side of love when it really counts, even if we know that if we stand on the side of love our world will be like a watered, fertile, lush garden; like a spring of never-failing, life-giving, healing waters.

It can be difficult to stand on the side of love, to stand up for what is right even when it isn't popular, to say "no" to the bullies, to demand justice on behalf of others. The call to stand on the side of love — to do it and to do it consistently — is a powerful challenge. None of us is up to it, at least not in every action we take, yet that's what we are being called to do. God is urging us toward it, luring us to choose love, and not just to choose love, but to stand for love.

The best exemplar we know of the practice of standing on the side of love is Jesus. He was crucified to warn others from following his example, but the spirit of compassion was not stopped — it could not be extinguished.

The history of the radical reformation and our liberal religious ancestors is filled with people standing for their convictions and being met by violence. Michael Servetus proclaimed his conviction that Jesus was not made of the same stuff as God in his book *On the Errors of the Trinity*, and for that was burned at the stake under John Calvin's orders in 1553. The Socinians, who professed a unitarian theology, were exiled from Poland for their heresy and fled to Transylvania. Many of them lost their lives in the difficult trek across the mountains in the winter of 1658. Their descendents include subsistence farmers in the Unitarian villages in Romania today.

Unitarian minister and scientist Joseph Priestley's home and laboratory was burned in Birmingham, England in the summer of 1791 because he supported the French Revolution.

He fled to Northumberland, just up the Susquehanna River and from there helped found the first church to call itself Unitarian in America — First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia.

James Reeb went to Selma in 1965 to march for the right to vote for all African Americans and was beaten to death as he left a restaurant with other UU clergy. Lt. Col. James Barrett was shot and killed in Pensacola in 1994 as he was escorting Dr. John Britton, an abortion provider who was also killed, into his clinic. James Barrett was acting on his UU principles. Just a year and a half ago two people were killed on Sunday morning in a UU church in Knoxville by a shooter who was upset at the church's advocacy for progressive social policy.

And yet — and yet — as a movement we have declared that we will not be deterred from our efforts for justice, equity, and compassion. Standing on the Side of Love is a Unitarian Universalist movement for a variety of efforts on behalf of justice. I will publish the link to their website in this week's Previews and you can follow up to learn more.

The term was first used in UU circles, as far as I know, by former UUA President Bill Sinkford, with reference to our position on marriage equity — the proposition that civil marriage should be a legal covenant between two people regardless of their gender.

The Knoxville congregation's response to the shooting there was to affirm their social action programs, to redouble efforts to advocate for justice, and to refuse to define their church community by fear. Partly in response to their example, the Standing on the Side of Love campaign was formally launched last June at General Assembly in Salt Lake City.

The banner shown on the cover of the order of service was several stories tall and was hung prominently on the outside of the Salt Lake City convention center where the General As-

sembly was meeting. A sudden and violent thunderstorm arose soon after I took the picture. With a burst of wind and an incredible downpour of rain and crashing thunder, the banner was destroyed and broke out several of the windows behind it.

But that did not stop us. Banners and slogans proclaim the effort and give us a rallying point, but they are transient elements. The real work of acting with compassion, seeking justice, and working for equity will not be stopped.

But neither will it continue without the action of people who find the courage to stand up for what is right despite the risks and the costs.

Not long ago it was popular for Christians to ask “What would Jesus do?” to help identify a course of action.

The answer of course to the question is that Jesus stood on the side of love. Again and again in the stories about his ministry, he’s found on the side of the downtrodden through actions and parables. His radical ministry was about casting off privilege, power, and wealth and embracing those who are in need. Feed the hungry. Shelter the homeless. Clothe the naked. Celebrate the return of the estranged son. Comfort those who mourn. Stand with prostitutes, lepers, and demoniacs. Refuse to obey unjust orders. Ignore the law — even the Sabbath prohibitions — when love demands it. Forgive sins but don’t justify them. Treat others as you would like to be treated.

Isn’t that about standing on the side of love? It’s still a radical idea and call to action.

There are many ways to stand on the side of love. To be effective in the struggle, we must focus our energies and practice self care. It does not help the many causes of justice to burn out, to lose your sacred grounding, or to scatter your en-

ergy so diffusely that you are ineffective.

Even Jesus withdrew for prayer and self-care; for renewal.

It feels risky to list some of the ways we at UUCV stand on the side of love. It's a double-edged sword and I don't want to fall on it!

On one side, I don't want you to think that it is enough to belong to a congregation where others stand on the side of love on your behalf — social action by proxy if you will. At the same time, I don't want to "should on you" with shame or blame for not doing enough. That would not be standing on the side of love.

And on the other side of the sword, I don't want us to feel righteous by thinking we're better than anybody else because of all the good things we're doing. Some pride is appropriate; some celebration of what we are doing; acknowledgement that we are working toward fulfilling our mission of transforming lives and caring for the world. But standing on the side of love means celebrating everyone's good works and seeking new ways to stand for what's right, not resting on our laurels.

So with that disclaimer, let us celebrate some of the many ways we are standing on the side of love.

We are standing with caregivers in our congregation, who seek support, links to resources, and acknowledgement of the hard work they do to care for a loved one and the stress it engenders. Anne Gero and I will tell you more about that in three weeks.

We are standing with villages and their daughters in Mozambique with our bursary project to help girls continue their education and return to serve their communities. Education of girls is one of the most effective ways of enhancing community and preventing the spread of HIV-AIDS in sub-Saharan

Africa.

Last spring several of us literally stood and worked with Chorti people in Honduras to help them build houses. When the project is complete, 27 families will each have a decent home.

We are standing with women who are incarcerated at the Pennsylvania State Prison in Muncy, where we provide visits and pen pals, advocate for their rights, and offer them modest grants for personal items and gifts for their children.

Our Silent Witnesses stand with people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender against bullies who would disrupt their gatherings with vitriolic hate speech. We are advocating for inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes in state law that bans discrimination in housing and employment. While the legislature stalls, we are seeking a local ordinance to establish a human relations commission and protect against such discrimination. Through the UU Pennsylvania Legislative Action Network (UUPLAN), we seek the inclusion of crimes against GLBT people in the state's hate crimes legislation. And we have worked to prevent an amendment to the Commonwealth's Constitution to narrowly define marriage to exclude same-sex couples, while on a national level, the UUA stands for marriage equity and is working in states that have some possibility of recognizing marriage between two men or two women.

We stand on the side of love when we help Project SHARE feed the hungry in our community and when we host the CARES shelter for homeless people — which we will do again in the fall.

We are standing on the side of love with the comprehensive sexuality education that we offer middle school youth — including children of members of our congregation and sev-

eral youth from the community. The program teaches physiology, protection from STDs, and perhaps most importantly, respect for self and partner.

We are standing on the side of love when we offer parents support with classes like Conscious Discipline and when we help elders consider end of life issues.

I know I'm leaving things out. This was meant as a sampler, not a comprehensive list. It is reason for you to be proud to belong to an active congregation that takes seriously the call to stand on the side of love.

And I hope it inspires you to consider ways that you might stand on the side of love, as intentional involvement in changing the world.

This work leads to personal transformation. Those who have traveled to Mozambique or Honduras, who have slept with the homeless, been trained and stood as Silent Witnesses, or experienced our sexuality curriculum either as teachers or students have expressed joy and gratitude at their own deepening sense of connection and contribution. I call that spiritual growth and transformation.

You can also apply standing on the side of love in your daily living without having a large plan of action or strategy for social change. Simply pay attention as you go about your everyday activities. Opportunities abound. When they appear, ask yourself what it would mean to respond by standing on the side of love — with your partner, with your kids, with co-workers or friends, with a neighbor, with strangers. The answer will likely be apparent; the challenge may be to act on it, but if you are clear that it is the right thing to do, courage will usually follow close behind.

Maybe your actions will touch just one person or maybe

you'll become the catalyst for a bigger cultural change or maybe they won't make any apparent difference at all. Maybe no one but you will know what you've done or maybe the world will know and celebrate.

But what I am almost certain will happen is that standing on the side of love will change you. It may even be personally transformative.

Carter Heyward wrote, "Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh."

So stand on the side of love and experience life as the incarnation of the divine that you are, as a full member of the human family. Consider making it your resolution for the new year. Standing on the side of love builds bridges, breaks barriers, actualizes hope, and carries faith. May it become your watchword and guiding principle.

Amen.

Benediction

by Martin Luther King

Cowardice asks the question — "Is it safe?"

Vanity asks the question — "Is it popular?"

Expediency asks the question — "Is it political?"

But conscience asks the question — "Is it right?"

There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, popular, or political; but because it is right.

Image: "Standing on the Side of Love" Banner on the Salt Place Convention Center, General Assembly, Salt Lake City, June 2009. ©2009 Duane H. Fickeisen, used by permission.