

STANDING ON THE SIDE OF LOVE

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

October 5, 2008

"Dearly Beloved." Am I right that just by saying these two words I can call an entire scene into your mind? I say "Dearly Beloved" - what comes into your mind? A wedding? "Dearly Beloved" is the beginning of "The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony" in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. It's the way every wedding I've ever seen in movies or on TV begins, at least.

And those words come to my mind today as I think of our member Lois Hansen. Lois yesterday flew to California. She does that often. Two of her children, raised in this church, – Maren and Andy – now live there. Alan, Lois' husband, who died last year, had other family there as well. And this trip's high point will be a family wedding. It'll be next Saturday on the breathtaking hilltop site of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, California. Maren, you may know, is also the Reverend Ms. Hansen, a U.U. minister. She'll perform the ceremony. And the couple will be Sue Hansen, Alan's brother's daughter, and her beloved, Judy Stone. Yes, it's a wedding, of two women-in-love – sanctified by our church and sanctioned by the state of California, in the full light of day and in full view of the entire San Francisco Bay area. And yet regardless of the weather, a cloud will hover on this wedding's horizon. The state's sanction for it was created by California's Supreme Court last May 16. It determined then that denying the right to marry on the basis of gender violated the state constitution's equal protection clause. But those offended by this interpretation have successfully petitioned to place a proposed amendment on the California ballot just one month from now. On November 4, the voters of California will decide whether to rewrite their constitution to say that "Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California."

We know all too well how that vote may go. Eight years ago, in November 2000, our effort and our investment here failed to keep that amendment out of Nebraska's constitution. Sixty-seven percent of our fellow citizens voted it in. Then only Alaska had preceded us in erecting this wall. Now its shadow covers half of our nation, 25 of our states. How can we roll this cloud back? We need more than words. We need spirit – like that generated in our music. And we are generating it here.

Our opening song, "Standing on the Side of Love," is our chorus. It was actually born in this struggle. On February 25th 2004, President Bush made his public call for inserting a ban on same-sex marriage into our national constitution. On that day the Rev. Jason Shelton, Music Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville, was at the Unitarian Universalist Association's headquarters in Boston. He was meeting with our Association's President, Bill Sinkford, as part of creating our new blue songbook *Singing the Journey*. When word came of President Bush's call however, that meeting stopped. Our faith required our President to make an immediate response. And, as Jason recounts, "One of the things he said was, 'We stand on the side of love.' It just struck me. I started writing down words. I literally heard the song in my head. I went home, and

my choir did it that Sunday. . . .It was sung at a rally at the Massachusetts State House. . . . It's just taken off from there." (UU World. Fall 2005).

This chorus, however, is connected to a verse. You heard it last Sunday at the beginning of our service. Our choir sang it: "Love is the Doctrine of This Church." It's the covenant repeated by all our members, standing, to begin each Sunday's service, in many Unitarian Universalist churches. A doctrine is a teaching. It is more dynamic than a principle. It is in motion. It is a lesson that we communicate, that we plant in the lives of others and nurture so that it takes root. At the same time, it is more supple than a dogma. It takes on its shape in our relationship with others. Its power arises, fundamentally, not from our will to give instruction, but rather from our hearers' hunger to find meaning.

And driving both chorus and verse, of course is a rhythm and a beat. Jessica and Mollie bring it to us this morning. Its history far, far predates Gay, Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Month, or Coming Out Day. We name it on the back of our bulletin, over on the right side, among the sources flowing into our "living tradition." It's the fourth: "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." Last Monday, at sundown, the head of the year, Rosh Hashannah, ushered in Judaism's 5 thousand 7 hundred and 69th year. We are in the Days of Awe preparing ourselves up to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. But as in every year, we have work to do. Love, transcendent love, God's love, is open before us, but we have to prepare ourselves to receive it. We must reconcile ourselves with our neighbor, we must atone – make ourselves at-one - before we can be inscribed into the book of Life.

This is the spirit of our gathering this month – the spirit which will enliven us to turn back the clouds of constraint now growing on love. It is the spirit of standing alongside another. It is the spirit of teaching, and of learning. It is the spirit of reconciliation, of working to make ourselves at-one. Let's begin by sensing more deeply how love can grow from within each of us into greater life for us all.

"Life is simply a chance to grow a soul." Have you heard me say that before? The words are Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies'. They suggest that we do not come into this life, contrary to much tradition, fully equipped with spiritual significance and an identity which transcends our self. All we are given, at birth, is the seed of a soul. Life's opportunity, life's work, life's mission, is first to know the seed for its glorious potential, and then to unleash and nourish its possibilities into flower and then fruit. What we in this church teach is that contained in our English word love, there can be found all three - the seed, the flower, and the fruit - of a meaningful life.

The seed of meaning, in our word love, the Greeks knew by the name eros, source of our word erotic. It is not something we learn, not something we can be taught, it is something that we are, and would not be human without.

Aristophanes, in Plato's Symposium, explained its origin this way:

"The primeval humans were round, their back and sides forming a circle, and they had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely alike; also four ears, two privy members and the remainder to correspond. ... Terrible was their might and strength and the thoughts of their hearts were great, and they made an attack upon the gods. ... Zeus said 'Methinks I have a plan which will humble their pride and improve their manner. ... He spoke and cut each human in two, like a sorb apple which is halved for pickling, as you might divide an egg with a hair: and as he cut them one after another he bade Apollo give the face and half of the neck a turn in order that each human might contemplate the section of himself or herself. They would thus learn a lesson of humility. ... After the division, the two parts, each desiring his or her other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces longing to grow into one. ... So ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, ... that each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the indenture of a person and we are always looking for our other half. ... The desire and pursuit of the whole is called love."

The mythic truth contained in this fantasy is profound. From sources far more primordial than our consciousness, and far beyond the power of our will to suppress, we sense ourselves incomplete, indeed incapable of meaningful life, as simply ourselves, isolated from at least one other. We have a need, sometimes we sense we are nothing more than a need, to connect, to join - it feels like to re-connect, to rejoin - with at least one other to make ourselves whole - healthy - holy. We know the need as sexual, physical, animal, just like hunger or thirst. We call it love, but neither we, nor anybody else, teaches it as doctrine. What we teach is how to work with it, to give it - and the life it engenders - meaning.

The root fiber of our teaching is captured by Anne Morrow Lindbergh: "People talk about love as though it were something you could give, like an armful of flowers. And a lot of people give love like that -- just dump it down on top of you, a useless strong-scented burden. I don't think it is anything you can give ... love is a force in you that enables you to give other things. It is the motivating power. It enables you to give strength and freedom and peace to another person. It is not a result; it is a cause. It is not a product; it produces. It is a power, like steam or electricity. It is valueless unless you can give something else by means of it."

We teach, first then, the recognition that what we feel as love for another, if left in its erotic seed, may be no more than a burden to that other. It is a burden if all we bring to another is our need, our riven half with its unique knobs and cavities. It is a burden if we demand by our insularity that our other first understand our knobs and cavities without assistance, then that he or she find a way to fill and accommodate them, fit him or herself to them just as they are. What we teach in this church is how erotic need can be brought to others so that it is a gift not a burden. We teach how it can be brought along with the desire to understand another's need before we present our own. We teach how to bring our need not as a rigid receptacle to be filled, but rather a flexible

opening whose contours may be mutually re-shaped to find how connections might best be made between us.

We teach more than this. We accept that humanity's initial love-quests are directed toward one other person, at least one at time. Earlier in western religious tradition, there was a suspicion of personal romance. At times churches attempted to repress romantic love, as contrary to a spiritual life. In this church we teach that, if we pursue it openness to the discoveries nascent within it, personal romance can be the doorway to spiritual life. To fulfill our need to merge with another, we will eventually be forced to try understand that other. And that quest to understand one other is the first step in a quest for knowledge, in the search for truth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, our forebear, once said, "'Do you love me' really means 'do you see the same truth as I do' or at least 'do you care about the same truth.'" When love becomes able to fix on something beyond the raw desire to couple, when it finds a polestar beyond the relationship itself, it grows beyond eros. The Greeks called what it grows into philia, the essence in our concept of friendship. C.S. Lewis, in his book The Four Loves, spoke of philia as akin to "the feeling which would make a man (or woman) unwilling to deface a great picture, even if he (or she) were the last (person) alive and himself (or herself) about to die." What we teach, in teaching love, is the power which mutually exploring, affirming and serving ideals has to enrich our relationships, give them depth, and increase their potential for longevity. The flower of Love, we teach, is service. It is service to others made valuable by its service to such ideals as truth and beauty.

And we teach one thing more in this church. Margaret Fuller was Emerson's contemporary and collaborator. She led us to this extension of his thought. "Two persons love in one another the future good which they aid one another to unfold." Our teaching of love gives it a future dimension. We teach that our connections find the greatest possible richness if we place the experience of the moment in service to an experience yet to come, an experience which we have the power to create. Once we place ourselves in service to the future, however, we confront the limits of our own experience. We face the truth: we each will die one day. And when we do the power of eros will die with us. And yet the fruit of love as we teach it is its potential for calling us to sacrifice our own experience to help sustain the ideals we serve into a future beyond our own. Such self-sacrificing love is what the Greeks knew as agape. Jesus' words and example in John's gospel give us its sharpest image: "No greater love there is than to give one's life for another." But the possible lives which might be served and sustained by loving sacrifice are greater than just one other human's. Self-sacrificing love may equally give life to truth, or to beauty or to justice for hundreds of other lives. This is the fullest fruit of love, to give completely of ourselves to make life itself more full for others beyond our own life.

Do you remember Barbara Jordan, the Texas Congresswoman of the 1970s, the first southern black woman to be seated in Congress. Her autobiography, A Self Portrait, tells of the lessons her grandfather, a minister turned junk dealer, taught her. One that sticks in me is this:

"Just remember the world is not a playground but a schoolroom. Life is not a holiday but an education. One eternal lesson for us all: to teach us how better we should love." (Barbara Jordan: A Self Portrait. p.9-10)

When the Rev. Ms. Hansen, our Maren, met with her cousin Sue and her beloved Judy to plan their wedding next Saturday, I suspect she told them the same thing I tell every couple who asks me to perform their ceremony. It is that "the only reason our church performs weddings is to support marriages. When you ask me to perform your wedding, you are really asking our whole church to stand with you to support you in living out the vows you will make to one another." That's why I take the time to learn the story of each couple's love before we talk about their wedding. We find the words they use to structure and communicate their feelings. Those words are bridges. They are conduit to carry their love into lives outside just their two. They are the conduit to carry their love also into lives beyond their today. And in the ceremony, I include us in the vows made. I say "please remember that the love here present today comes not from the two of you alone. It is brought as well by your families and friends who stand ready from this day forth to express that love to you in presence and support. It is brought also by our church, which also stands ready from this day forward to offer you counsel and inspiration. Never be afraid to reach out and to share your lives with those whom you trust and who love you. Our very presence with you here today is our statement of commitment to being there for you for all the days to come."

So "Dearly Beloved", we are, truly. We gather here bathed in a faith which love brought to life. We are dear to each other. We are beloved by all who have carried us to this day. Let us now stand at love's side. Let us go forward and teach love's lessons. Let us grow in love, making it as wide as it is deep. Let our love flow over the dams others erect to hold it in. Let our love shine through the clouds which others gather to close it down. Dearly beloved, let us, in our turn now, love.