

Standing on the Side of Love

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Several weeks ago, I was petitioning state delegates to throw out House Bill 48, which was an attempt to amend the Maryland Constitution. The bill said that marriage is a union between a man and a woman and was drawn up by Delegate Donald Dwyer of Glen Burnie, Maryland, who is hoping to get the issue to a public debate and an eventual popular vote which, if his side won, would force legislators to amend our states constitution.

Dwyer also pushed his bill aggressively because a judge in Baltimore Circuit Court recently ruled that barring same sex couples from being married is unconstitutional and denies them the guarantees of equality that the federal and state constitutions afford. The higher courts are now looking at the issue. The fight continues.

Yes. It really is a fight -- a battle. And as I've said to some of you I choose my battles carefully because we all have just a measure of energy and time, so we must be careful about what we take on because a fight is taxing and cumbersome -- and can be stressful.

I don't know if you know this, but I do seek spiritual guidance to direct my path. It's hard for me to explain these days but it is an intuitive instinct I have trusted for a very long time. My father-in-law has always been one to "wait on the divine call." In fact, he tells me he never sought a job in his ministerial life; the jobs sought him (of course it helps to be in the Methodist system which appoints you to various churches -- Amen). But either way, he depends on God to direct him. He would say to me "If God calls you, you'll know it and you must go." Well, I can say to you this morning, that I wait on the call from humanity and when a message comes to me I go with it trusting my heart will guide me.

Years ago the call came to Dr. King. And if you know the story, he never wanted to be the leader of the Civil Rights Movement. The movement came to him. As a new minister, just arriving at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, all he wanted to do was be a good minister, good husband and good father. By the luck of the draw, or some say divine intervention, his church was chosen for a meeting between local pastors to discuss busing in Montgomery, Alabama. In the meeting, King was unanimously chosen as the spokesperson for the eventual Bus Boycott. At first he said, "No. I just got in this town." But the group of ministers persisted. He reluctantly accepted. The rest is history.

My mentors' examples teach me that I have to be patient and wait -- and let the fight come to me. There is no need to force any situation. But when the call comes, accept it, humbly, and go. To be honest, I did not expect fighting for the rights of same sex partners would be one of my calls, but you never know what you'll be called to do when you accept the challenge of ministry.

I received a telephone call several weeks ago from Rev. Phyllis Hubbell, a retired attorney, who is now co-minister with her husband John at the U.U. Church of Baltimore. She left me a message. I did not respond. She emailed me. I did not reply. She emailed me. I began to realize she was serious. I called, left her a message, she called me back, left me a message; finally I caught her on the phone. She explained the situation to me and I realized this was not trivial; I needed to pay attention. In so many words, without her saying the words at all, I perceived she wanted me to get into the fight and the fight needed a person of color, male, heterosexual, who is also a minister, supportive on the issue of same sex marriage. As you know there are not many Black preachers supportive on this issue. I guess I fit the bill. But even still, I was reluctant to give my heart to this apparent call.

As most of you know, my first experience defending same sex marriage came a week later at a press conference unbeknownst to me. And my second experience with this issue was at a lobbying session in Annapolis dealing with House Bill 48 and it was there, in my second experience with the issue, that the call went from my head to my heart.

As I sat and listened to those who supported the bill, I was troubled as I discovered again that there are so many people who hide their fears and insecurities within their religion. More than that, when the opposing side (my side) began testifying and responding to the Delegates' questions, I was appalled listening to the hecklers behind me. We were quiet when they spoke, they were rude when we spoke and they said some nasty things like "You might as well marry your dog if marriage is not between a man and woman," "You might as well marry your sister or your mother or your grandmother if marriage is between two individuals." The absurdities continued and people yelled: "It's forbidden in the Bible." Later on when I spoke and mentioned that my church had theists and agnostics and atheists too, they said, "What kind of church is that? That ain't no real church!" Then Delegate Kelley, whose office is right around the corner from here on Allentown Road, he supports HB 48, which would write discrimination into the constitution, he said to my friend Dan Furmansky, Executive Director of Equality Maryland, "If we allow same-sex couples the right to marry, what do we do with our prison system? Some inmates get married while in prison, but currently the men and women are separated. Married couples can't be together in prison, Mr. Furmansky." Then another Delegate said very rudely to Dan who is an openly gay man, "Mr. Furmansky, do you believe in God?" Dan responded back: "I do believe in God and I believe I am a child of God and that God loves me." As if his private religious convictions were put to public forum for debate! I was quite angry at this point and could not believe I was in a government office; I thought it was the Spanish Inquisition relived or something!

I began to see that their fight was my fight! I began to feel the same anger I felt when I experienced racism first-hand. I knew at that moment that this struggle would become a part of my ministry. My friend Phyllis called me on the telephone, but the real call came right there in the heat of that moment!

The call, for me, shouts from the mountaintop that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." That's what Dr. King believed and that is what I believe! I realize that comes with a price. The price of my and our privacy. I take that seriously, church.

And you know my mother has taken a little heat. A few members at the Methodist Church I was reared in asked her, "What is John doing?" She said one person asked if I was gay. I went to teach at Potomac College after they aired the 5-second clip of me on WJLA and News-channel 8 saying I support same sex marriage and one student said to me, "Professor, have you lost your mind?" He knows how much I like Dr. King and he said, "Dr. King would not support same sex marriage." We debated awhile and respectfully agreed to disagree. Another student said, "They always want to take the focus off of Black folks and put it on somebody else." I had to think about that more. I think I know what he meant. As an African American he is speaking for many who do not believe the fight for civil rights for the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender communities can be paralleled with the struggle for Civil Rights in the Black Community. Let me say this: oppression is oppression -- discrimination is discrimination -- injustice is injustice. But those who say the sufferings of Blacks are much greater historically -- they have a point if we are using a yardstick to measure discrimination and oppression. You cannot compare the suffering that came from the Slave Trade and 300 years of chattel slavery to Gay rights, if, again, we are measuring suffering, and I don't suggest we do that, but I recognize what my student's frustrations are. However, we must come together and see that on the basic ground of human rights, similarities can be drawn between the Black community, the LGBT community, and all other groups where oppression and suffering are occurring.

When we look at "Civil Rights" in America, this refers to those protections and privileges of personal liberty given to all U.S. citizens by the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights.

These are guarantees of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The slavery system denied Blacks their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and today because Federal and many state governments don't recognize love between same-sex couples and denies them over 1,000 benefits that come with marriage, they too are denied their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as Americans.

Most who are heterosexual never think about the benefits you get from being married. As an example: Access to Social Security after your spouse's death, access to health insurance through spouse's workplace, the right to custody of children after divorce or death, visitation rights for non-biological children, ability to file joint tax returns and the tax breaks that come with that, the ability to live in a neighborhood deemed "families only," access to fostering or adopting children -- in some cases, assumption of spouse's pension after death. The list goes on and on and on. There are 1,138 benefits or federal protections married couples get that same sex couples are denied!

But still, why are we as a culture and country denying them their intrinsic rights as U.S. citizens? As mentioned, it is due to some of our fears and apprehensions. Many believe because of the complexity of our world and the rapid pace we are evolving that we are moving further and further away from God and morality; and they equate the rise of homosexuality with this evolution.

I could spend hours debunking mostly Old Testament scriptures on same-sex relationships but that is a waste of valuable time. What I will say is same-sex relationships have been with us probably as long as heterosexual relationships.

Think about, if Leviticus in the OT is an ancient book, around 2500 or 3000 years old, and it says, "man shall not lie down with man," "woman shall not lie down with woman," then same sex relationships must have existed for them to make mention of them. (Hello!) Additionally, I don't know if you know this but the Roman Catholic Church, from the 5th to the 14th century, conducted special ceremonies to bless same-sex unions and they were nearly identical to heterosexual unions.

Same-sex relationships, homosexuality is not a new phenomenon that threatens our existence. These relationships have been with us for a long, long time. The gay community is not a new arrival to this planet as some would like you to think. The fact is this marginalized community has had to live in the closet for way too long. They've sat in churches and lied about their feelings and beliefs; they lied to their parents because they had to; they lied to their heterosexual spouses about their sexual orientation because they wanted fit in. And you know this just as well as I do, that if you are not a part of the norm in society you can be picked with, made fun of, ostracized and victimized. And I know what I'm talking about this morning because I've seen it in my community when you have to "wear the mask that grins and lies. That metaphorical mask that hides your cheeks and shades your eyes. This debt you pay to human guile. With a torn and bleeding heart you smile, while mouthing mere subtleties. But why should the world be over-wise in counting all your tears and sighs? Nay! Let them only see you when you wear the mask!" (Thank you Paul Dunbar.) You have to pretend to be something you are not to be accepted and you just want to fit in -- I know! This is the dilemma many in the gay community have had to live with for centuries. And so for me, injustice is injustice, suffering is suffering, oppression is oppression and discrimination is discrimination.

But I've decided on this issue that I want to stand up. I'm choosing sides. I'm choosing the side that Dr. King would have chosen. I'm choosing the side that Corretta King chose, I'm choosing the side the Julian Bond chose, I'm choosing the side that Bill Sinkford chose, and I'm choosing the side that my religion has chosen -- and that is I choose to STAND ON THE SIDE OF LOVE!

You see, somewhere I read that ALL people are created equal. Somewhere I read that there is worth and dignity in all creation; somewhere I read that God's love is unconditional; or as we say in my neighborhood, "God don't make no junk." Somewhere I read that real love is patient and kind and not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It hopes all things and endures all things. It is that kind of love that loves because of our differences, not just in spite of our differences. It is that kind of love that unites and celebrates life, NOT the kind that divides, conquers and destroys life -- we call that hate! It is that kind of love that embraces instead of erases.

You know, when I was testifying I also listened to several stories. I heard one from a wonderful young woman who is married now to a man. Her birth parents divorced when she was young but her dad found another partner for life -- a man, and both of her dads raised her together -- successfully. She talked about how dysfunctional her heterosexual parents were but how nurturing her same-sex parents were, and how upset she was they could not be legitimately married. It was clear she was dispelling the myth that gay couples make gay children. Of course you know that most of the stuff you hear against same-sex couples is the same type of hogwash folk used to keep interracial couples from getting married in Maryland. Maryland did not honor interracial marriage until 1967 (not that long ago). And it's also the same type of thing you heard when the government was about to desegregate schools. They said "If you integrate the schools it would push the White race back a generation," which meant that it was okay to keep an oppressive educational system because it would cause the other to fail, thereby justifying continued subjection and discrimination. It was fully irrational as is most of what you hear today regarding same-sex marriage.

But, the one story that got to me the most was the one involving a lesbian couple raising a little boy. One of the ladies lifted this cute kid up in the air and when you saw that innocence it affected you, no matter who you were. Then she said to all the Delegates, with tears in her eyes: "How can you deny this little child the love we have for him and the future we want to give him -- together?" My heart dropped, and there was no response to her question. My mind began to drift in that moment and I began thinking about the thousands of children who need to be adopted, who spend their whole lives in the foster care system in this country and many of them were neglected by their birth parents; and they need someone to love them -- to provide a future for them. How can you deny folk because of their sexual orientation, the gift of being able to share their abundance with so many who need them? And all I could hear were the words to one of our great hymns crying in my soul: "Can I see another's woe and not be in sorrow too? Can I see another's grief and not seek for kind relief? Can I see a falling tear and not feel my sorrow's share? No, No never can it be. never, never can it be!"

Then some other words came to mind: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love -- I AM NOTHING. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may willingly die for a good cause, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

And so, we have to stand up on the side of love and say that if we believe in the worth and dignity of all people, no matter their sexual orientation; that if we believe "God is no respecter of persons"; if we believe we are all sisters and brothers on this planet, then whenever you get the chance, and humanity calls to you, stand up and say with power and conviction that denying folk their inherent rights as human beings is wrong!

Perhaps you are wrestling with this issue. Let me say to you -- I understand. However, I ask that you simply do what Gandhi challenged us to do, "Walk a mile in another's moccasins" and you will see, like I saw, it is not just a fight for the gay community, it is a battle for justice and freedom for all human beings. We are either going to live up to the principles of our faith and tenets set forth in our constitution then move forward, or go backward to tragic days history won't allow us to forget. I say let us, once and for all, put an end to subjugation; put an end to discrimination

against folk just because they are a woman, or just because they are a man, or Gay or Straight or Asian or Black or Arab or Jewish or Palestinian -- put an end to this madness, once and for all no matter how it manifests! And if we do this, I do feel we will speed up the day of peace on earth. We have the power!

And so, we have to look at this moment in history and realize with all of the changes taking place from the Supreme Court to District Court, this is our time -- humanity is calling us; calling all of the gentle, angry people and asking "Will you stand of for what is right? Will you stand up for what is just for the sake of the world?" The Universe is calling and asking, "Will you stand up together on the side of love?" We've been quiet too long now. The thinkers and progressive minds that built this country have been quiet too long now. The call has come and it is time for the gentle, angry people to say something -- it's time for the justice seeking people to say something -- it's time for the young and old together to say something -- it's time for the land of many colors to cry out for reciprocity. Yes, it's time for the gentle, angry people to say they are standing on the side of love! It is "in this spirit that we will build a community and move toward restoration." Amen.