

“Is God Still Speaking About Marriage?”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dan Schifeling
Church of the Nativity United Church of Christ
Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2005

This morning we are celebrating Reformation Sunday. As a United Church of Christ, our roots stretch back almost 500 years to the day in 1517 when Martin Luther posted his famous 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany and touched off a revolution that turned Christ’s Church upside down. More on that later. But let me begin this sermon with the point that it is one thing to be able to trace your history back to a reformation that happened 500 years ago, and quite another to say that the reforming process is continuing to this very day. That you are not only a Reformation Church, but you are a *Reforming Church*, still moving and changing with the guidance of God’s Spirit. And this is the question that I hope we can explore this morning. Is the United Church of Christ – and the Church of the Nativity – a Reforming Church? Are we still growing and changing, moving with the call of a still speaking God?

Now you may know that last July, meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ approved a resolution affirming the equal rights of gay and lesbian couples to marry. As you probably know, the General Synod is an every two year meeting of our national church, where elected representatives come from across our country to worship, fellowship, talk, plan, and speak to our local congregations on issues of faith. The General Synod never claims to speak *for* the church! It does not speak assuming that all local churches and church members will agree with

what it says. That would be a “top-down” way of organizing a denomination and would violate the very principles of the Protestant Reformation. Rather, we are a grass-roots, “bottom-up” denomination, so that our General Synod speaks *to* the churches, and then *listens* carefully as the churches speak back to it! That said, its decision to call for equal marriage rights for same sex couples was still controversial! It was carried widely in the press, and it provoked strong feelings among our church members. Some were happy and proud, feeling this resolution was long overdue. And others, as you might imagine, were startled and angry, feeling that this resolution caught them by surprise and was yet another attack on the traditional institution of marriage.

In talking to several of you who heard the press reports and wanted to know what was going on, I decided that this Sunday, Reformation Sunday, would be a good time to talk about the resolution. And I want to talk about it in the context of other events in the history of the United Church of Christ – many of which I listed in the Thought for Meditation in your bulletin – and to ask the question, “Is this resolution affirming the equal rights of same sex couples to marry another step along the way of what it truly means for us to be a *reforming* church, or have we simply gone badly astray?” Now before I say another word about this, let me just admit that I bring this question up with a certain amount of fear and trepidation in my heart! I know this question is controversial, as significant change is always controversial. And I know that we do not and will not have perfect agreement on this

question in this sanctuary. The action of our General Synod has kind of placed an elephant in our living room, and there is certainly a big part of me that would just like to ignore it! That way, no one will get mad at me! And maybe none of you will get too mad at the church! I've been cautioned by more than one person that our Stewardship Drive just began last Sunday, and that we are hoping to get a lot more pledge cards turned in *today*... and that maybe this just isn't the topic we ought to address right now! Nevertheless, I trust that we *can* talk about this safely. That it is never good to let elephants live indefinitely in your living room. And that in our denomination and in this local church we value diversity! It would be intolerably boring if we all agreed on every issue. How would God speak a new word to us then? And I hope you know by now that on this or any other issue of faith you can disagree with me and I will still love you, and respect your opinion, and be interested in listening to what you have to say – which is why we have planned a talk-back time in the Sangree Chapel following the service today. So please come to that talk-back and let me know what you think.

Now to the question before us this morning: Was our General Synod right to speak out in favor of equal marriage rights for same sex couples? Is God still speaking about marriage, and does God call us to extend to same sex couples the covenant of marriage that has previously been available exclusively to heterosexual couples?

I believe our General Synod had two basic reasons for voting as they did. First, they considered the question of equal marriage rights for same sex couples as a question of justice. Did you know that there are more than 1400 laws which give rights, privileges and responsibilities to married

couples that are currently unavailable to gay and lesbian partners? These include things like the right to visit or to make health care decisions for a partner who is in a serious situation in the hospital. Or the legal right to a partner's Social Security after his or her death. Or access to a partner's workplace health insurance. Or the ability to file joint tax returns. Civil unions or domestic partnership laws work on a state by state basis and are not necessarily "portable" across state lines. So right now, same sex couples miss out on many, many rights that heterosexual couples automatically enjoy. Our General Synod delegates asked, "Is this fair? Is this just?"

Then second, I believe they thought about this as a question of God's love. Right now, gay and lesbian couples usually do not pledge their relationships in church to be blessed by God and their sisters and brothers in Christ. They miss the feelings of joy and encouragement, as well as the power of the prayers of support, that their heterosexual friends enjoy. In so far as it is up to the church, their committed relationships are excluded from the circle of God's blessing and concern. Yet is this truly God's intention? In excluding their committed relationships, are we being faithful to the God of radical love and inclusiveness that we meet in Jesus Christ?

As you and I begin to reflect on these questions of justice and love this morning, let us see that the thrust of reformation history is that God's powerful Spirit works to gather more and more kinds of people into a covenant of love and justice with God and with each other. This happens as God's Spirit of Liberation moves and speaks, creating "yet more light and truth to break forth out of God's Word." To see how this works, let us

recall these main events of biblical and church history:

- The nation of Israel is founded when Moses leads the people out of slavery in Egypt.
- Later, the prophets insist upon justice for the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the foreigners.
- Jesus teaches God's radical acceptance and love. In our scripture reading from Luke, he warns against an attitude of judging others and rejecting them. (Something, incidentally, that we *all* have reason to be happy about as we shall see.) In Matthew, he teaches that those God embraces are those who reach out in love to the powerless, weak, and rejected. He lives out these teachings. He reaches out to poor people; people with terrible illnesses like leprosy or dementia; children who are considered the least important members of society; obvious sinners like prostitutes; traitorous tax collectors; hated Samaritans and other Gentiles; even Roman soldiers who are occupying his nation. Finally, of course, he also reaches out to the "good people" – the Pharisees and others with wealth, power and status. In his ministry he shows us that God loves all of us and calls all of us to come close in love.
- After Jesus' death and resurrection, as the church begins to grow, Philip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch. As a eunuch, this man is prohibited from full temple worship because he is considered flawed, "unclean". But Philip baptizes him and brings him

into the full faith and fellowship of the church.

- Soon, Peter baptizes the household of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and Paul converts countless Gentiles and starts churches in much of the known world.
- Fifteen centuries later, as the church grows excessively authoritarian and uses its power to oppress its own members, Martin Luther translates the Bible into German so common folk can read it; puts an end to the selling of indulgences which exploit the poor; undermines the top-down authority structure of the church in favor of the authority of scripture; and proclaims salvation by God's grace through faith instead of salvation by accomplishing acts that can be manipulated by the church.
- Then follow the UCC "firsts" which give power to more and more of God's people and insist on equality and justice between them. Let me just mention a few of the ones I printed in the Thought for Meditation in your bulletin:
- In 1700 the Rev. Samuel Seward writes the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America, "The Selling of Joseph." *In 1785 the Rev. Lemuel Haynes is the first African-American ordained in a mainline denomination and the first to pastor an all white congregation.
- In 1853 Antoinette Brown is ordained the first woman pastor since New Testament times and perhaps the first ever elected to serve a congregation as pastor.

- In 1972 the UCC's Golden Gate Association ordains the first openly gay person as a minister in a mainline Protestant denomination, the Rev. William R. Johnson.
- In 1976 General Synod elects the Rev. Joseph H. Evans president of the UCC. He is the first African-American leader of a racially integrated mainline church.

As we consider the history of God's people from Old Testament times to the present, what we see is the widening of a great circle that includes all – absolutely all – of God's people in a great covenant of love and justice. No one is excluded from that circle by race, age, economic status, moral goodness, doubtful faithfulness, religion, sex, sexual orientation or any other characteristic that we can think up. Those who are initially held outside the circle – the poor, women, children, those outside the faith, the sick, those of the wrong race or nationality, those with a different sexual orientation – are finally brought into the circle. And they are brought in by the working of God's liberating Spirit, which causes "yet more truth and light to break forth out of God's holy Word."

Next, let us come back to General Synod's concern that same sex couples are missing the blessing of the church. And here, let us see that when the Bible speaks about blessed relationships, it means that two parties are bound together in this covenant of love and justice. There is, then, a wide variety of relationships in the Bible that are blessed by God. These include Abraham and Sarah; Jacob and his *four* wives; David and Jonathan; Ruth and Naomi; Jesus and his disciples; Joseph and his father, Jacob, as well as the brothers who sold him into slavery;

Mary and Martha; and many others. Many *different kinds* of relationships are blessed, and they are blessed because somehow they *all* mirror the covenant that God keeps with God's people.

This kind of covenantal love is described by Paul in verses from I Corinthians 13 that we often read in weddings. "Love is patient. Love is kind and envies no one. It is not boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."(I Cor. 13:4-7) Covenantal love like this makes promises of justice and caring to the other partner and it does so recognizing that love is the greatest of God's spiritual gifts.

However, sexual orientation has no effect on these qualities of covenantal love. They are equally challenging for homosexual couples and heterosexual couples alike. So for those gay or lesbian couples who desire the blessing of the church and the prayers of the faithful in supporting their relationship, why should we deny them?

Of course some will object that the Bible says that homosexual acts are sinful. And that is more than a sermon in itself! So let me just point out that there are probably four passages in the Bible that actually speak about homosexuality – as opposed to gang rape or prostitution – as sinful. And before we leap to use these to condemn others, let me point out two things:

First, for every one of those passages, I can find you 50 that condemn greed. Why, I wonder, does the fundamentalist wing of the church leap to condemn homosexuality and utter scarcely a word about greed? Could it be

that the issue of homosexuality, and the supposed danger it poses to the traditional institution of marriage, serve to stir people up and motivate them to give a great deal of money to these churches?

And second, in many other places we have found teachings in the Bible to be influenced by the culture of the times so much that we – and I include here the most literal fundamentalist you can find – that we *all* have decided that those particular verses do not fit well with the rest of the Bible and that they must be *wrong*. For example:

- *Exodus 21:15 and 17 commands us to execute any children who strike or curse their parents.
- Exodus 35:2-3 commands us to execute anyone who works on the Sabbath. (Ever mow your lawn or rake leaves after church!)
- Leviticus 24:16 commands us to stone anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord. (Can you see why those words of Jesus about not judging are important to us? I suspect this sanctuary might be empty today if these biblical commands were actually kept!)
- Going on, Leviticus 12:2-5 commands a single woman who is raped by a man to *marry him*. (The penalty for the man is that he must pay a bride price to *her father*.)
- Exodus 21:2-6 provides regulations for owning slaves and breaking up their families.
- I Corinthians 14:34-35 commands women to remain silent in church at all times and, if there is anything they

want to know, they should ask their husbands at home!

Now we could look at many more instances, but the point is clear: the Bible contains a variety of teachings, some of which are in conflict with others. All of the above, for example, are in direct conflict with Jesus' teachings that we should love others as he loves us (John 15:12)... that we should forgive others not seven times, but seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22)... that we should love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31)... and that we should strive to love so that we may be children of our Father in heaven who makes his sun rise *on the evil* and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and *on the unrighteous* (Matthew 5:43-45). If we can decide that the true weight of scripture is against slavery and for equal rights for women, then why can we not also decide that the true weight of scripture is for fully accepting homosexual people and giving them equal rights, including the equal right to marry?

Let me close now with a true story. (From a sermon by the Rev. Fred Small, First Church Unitarian, Littleton, CO) Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson fell in love. As the years passed they bought a home in Minnesota and exchanged rings symbolizing their lifelong commitment to one another. In November, 1983, a drunk driver smashed into Sharon's car, injuring her severely. When Karen got to the hospital, she couldn't see her partner or even learn what had happened to her – in the eyes of the law she was just a friend. Karen waited for hours in anguish not even knowing if her partner was alive. At last a priest told her that Sharon had suffered a serious brain injury. She couldn't walk. She could barely speak. She would need constant care.

Unfortunately, Sharon had never been able to come out to her parents. Eventually Karen had to explain to them that she was Sharon's life partner. But Sharon's parents didn't understand. They exploded at Karen. What she was saying was insane. They would never accept it. Although Sharon was already making progress under Karen's devoted care, Sharon's parents moved her to a poorly equipped nursing home three hundred miles away and forbade any visits by Karen. It took Karen nine years and over \$300,000 in legal expenses to win the right to visit, care for, and finally bring home the woman she loved. In 1992, convinced that Karen had demonstrated greater dedication to Sharon's rehabilitation than her own parents, a judge granted custody of Sharon Kowalski to Karen Thompson.

Dear friends, it doesn't have to be like this. Everything I know about a loving God tells me God doesn't want it to be like this. I think our General Synod was right to affirm equal marriage rights for same sex couples. I think it is another step along the way of what it means to be not just a Reformation Church, but a Reforming Church. I think God is still speaking to us about marriage!

But now I want to hear what you think! Thank you for listening so carefully to what I've been led to say this morning. And please do come to the talk-back in the Sangree Chapel after the service so that we can reason together about this important issue. 🙏

