

STANDING ON THE SIDE OF LOVE

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, February 14, 2001
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Love is more than romance. Even our teenagers in this congregation seem to understand that. Last Sunday our Youth Group conducted the service. They spoke of human rights. In his own reflection, Needham High Senior Byron Doerfer spoke about a female classmate who had left two years ago for an alternative school; and of learning this fall that she had taken her own life. Without for a moment speculating on what led to that tragedy, Byron simply expressed his sadness that no one at her former school had felt moved to pause publicly to acknowledge her death. “Everyone should have the right to be recognized, to be remembered,” he said.

Earlier in the week I had heard an interview on NPR with an expert on school bullying. It was provoked in part by the suicide of a student at South Hadley High School, Phoebe Prince, a bright, attractive young woman whose desire to be liked by her peers made her vulnerable to the hate-filled envy of other girls who bombarded her with disdain in text messages, on Facebook, and in corridors. But you have to be taught to hate, said the expert. And it’s not enough simply to punish bullies. We all need to realize that a degree of culpability attaches to everyone involved to those who simply stand idly by, not facing down those who demean others.

Some weeks ago I talked to a graduate of our Youth Group, Patrick Banker. He and his buddies had heard about a hate-filled law against homosexuality being considered by the parliament in the East African country of Uganda, proposing penalties up to and including death for simply being gay. What could they do? They didn’t want to be silent bystanders. We talked about the tie between First Parish and a village in Eastern Uganda caring for orphans of AIDS; about the work of our members, Ron and Jackie Shepherd, in creating African Baobab. About the long-standing ties of my own family to that country, dating back to my own teenage years, when we hosted Sulaiman Kakooza, an Uganda exchange student. Ties strengthened by the fine care given to my parents in their last years by a live-in aide from Uganda, Frieda Sebalu—who yesterday spoke and sang here at my mother’s memorial service. We agreed to contact the Ugandan Embassy,

warning that the country's reputation would be at stake if such a law, such a violation of human rights, were actually adopted. Now it turns out that the law was inspired, in part, by right-wing evangelicals from America. But there is a Unitarian Universalist congregation now in Uganda – one consisting of young urban professionals in the capital, Kampala, who discovered our liberal faith through the world-wide web. And this weekend, at great personal risk to themselves, they are hosting a conference of more than 200 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activists from across the country. With them will be the minister of their partner UU congregation here in the United States, the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma—Molly's home church, and our very largest congregation, approaching 2000 members.

This is some of what our Unitarian Universalist Association intended when it launched a public witness campaign last year called "Standing on the Side of Love." It was inspired in part by the response of the congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I was ordained and served my first pastorate, to the invasion of their sanctuary during a summer children's service by a man with a shotgun, whose self-confessed goal, inspired by right-wing talk show hosts, was to "kill as many liberals as I can." One such liberal, Greg McKendry, stepped in front of the first blast to protect the children, and was killed. So was Linda Kraeger, a visiting UU. Six others were wounded.

That congregation has a long history of courageously "standing on the side of love," bearing witness to the idea that if *every* human being is a child of God, with an inherent worth and dignity, then no one should be dehumanized through acts of violence, oppression, or exclusion because of some subsidiary identity. That's why they were the first racially integrated church in Knoxville. That's why they risked holding inter-racial summer day camps in the early '50s, before black and white kids could go to school together. And had to move the camps when the Klan threatened violence. That's why they opened their doors to gay and lesbian organizations in the 1970s—and had all the church windows shot out. That's why in the 1980s they were a sanctuary congregation for refugees from the right wing regimes and death squads in Central America that were secretly funded by our own government. Long ago they realized that it is not enough merely to be *liberal*—to seek *freedom from* oppression, especially for oneself. Truly "Standing on the side of love" also means that one must also risk being *liberating*—standing up for *freedom to* for others. Like the freedom to marry, for all citizens.

Last summer, when the UUA held its General Assembly in Salt Lake City, they hung a huge version of the banner hanging in the back of the sanctuary this morning on the side of the convention center. But an equally huge thunderstorm with high winds came and shredded it. Quickly replacing it, the UUA leadership joked that the banner must have offended the local Mormon god—and then handed out pieces of the torn banner to be taken home to the 1000 member congregations. Jim Sargent brought us this piece.

The congregation in Ogden, Utah, by the way, is part of this year's Reimagining Valentine's Day effort. They know that they live in a state where one can still be fired from a job or evicted from a home simply because of sexual orientation or gender identity. As they speak up against such inadequate laws, doing more than preaching to the choir within their own sanctuary walls, they ask all of us around the country to stand with them—on the side of love and against exclusion—if only by hanging up the same banner.

But I'm also thinking of ways we should be standing on the side of love that are closer to home. Here in Massachusetts, for example, immigrant parents with children born here in the United States have been brutally separated in immigration raids. Just recently I was talking with a hard-working woman named Elizabeth who came here from Brazil over twenty years ago, leaving behind loved ones, in order to work and send money home. But all that time she has had to work in the shadows, cleaning houses, putting a son through school, and always in fear of deportation. One immigration attorney took her money and did nothing to help her regularize her situation. Finally, just last month, she obtained a green card—and started down the path to citizenship.

So I understand why a growing number of UU congregations and leaders have decided that there is a need for a so-called New Sanctuary Movement, to stand on the side of love against family separation and for a comprehensive immigration reform that includes a more open path to citizenship for more people like Elizabeth. I have endorsed that movement personally. For me, and for the new President of the UUA, Peter Morales, and for many others, it's simply another aspect of what it means to be "Standing on the Side of Love."

Take the case of Jean Montrevil, an immigrant rights activist from Haiti. He was in detention, awaiting deportation back to that country, at Christmas. Unitarian Universalists joined others in standing outside the detention center, protesting how Jean would be separated from his children, who were born here, and from his wife, an American citizen. Only the illness of a fellow detainee prevented him from being shipped home on January 11. After the earthquake struck Haiti the next day, President Obama issued an order allowing Haitians in the US what is known as “temporary protected status.” But now I find myself wondering, every time someone clearly from Haiti bags my groceries or helps me take them to the car, “Who will stand beside you, should my government try to separate you from your children a few years from now?”

On the website for the UUA campaign a woman named Audra is quoted as saying of her active support for the freedom to marry, for immigrant rights, and against oppression, exclusion, and violence, “I stand on the side of love because there is no other way I wish to live.”

So I ask you: Will you join me in saying this simple affirmation: “Love is how I wish to live.” (“Love is how I wish to live.”) And then let us do so, in community, with courage, using the power of love not for ourselves alone, but out of the hope and faith our own youth have learned, knowing that all people both need and deserve it, and helping love take social form as justice.

*Hymn 1014

Standing on the Side of Love

Jason Shelton

The promise of the Spirit:/ faith, hope and love abide.
And so every soul / is blessed and made whole;/ the truth in our hearts is our guide.

We are standing on the side of love: /hands joined together as hearts beat as one.
Emboldened by faith, we dare to proclaim/ We are standing on the side of love,
standing on the side of love. We are standing on the side of love.

Sometimes we build a barrier/ to keep love tightly bound.
Corrupted by fear,/ unwilling to hear,/ Denying the beauty we’ve found.

(Chorus)

A bright new day is dawning/ when love will not divide.
Reflections of grace/ in every embrace,/ fulfilling the vision divine.

(Chorus)

Benediction

And now in our going, may Love bless us and keep us,
May the light of Love shine upon us and be gracious to us,
But also shine out from within us,
And grant us courage and peace.
For these are the days we are given to live.
Let us rejoice and be glad in them. Amen.

