

The Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
Rev. Mara J. Dowdall  
February 14, 2010

### **“Will You Stand on the Side of Love?”**

Last fall, when Catherine, Sherri, and I sat down to plan this year’s worship calendar, I had what seemed like a unique and cute idea.

It began a few months earlier, at our annual UU General Assembly, with the launching of a new grassroots social-change campaign. The campaign, which kicked off with an immigrant rights rally, is called Standing on the Side of Love. SSL is the acronym, if you take out the prepositions and articles, and it’s pronounced Sizzle!

This campaign is about harnessing love’s power to transform communities for the better. Against the forces of exclusion, Sizzle supports inclusion. Where there is oppression, Sizzle stands against it. Harnessing the words of MLK, Sizzle encourages us to be “extremists for love,” in the face of injustice and hate.

When I learned about this effort, I thought, as we preachers sometimes do – there’s a sermon in there somewhere! And so, off it went into the sermon-incubator until September, when I picked up the church-year calendar and noticed something serendipitous: Valentine’s Day would fall on a Sunday this year. And I ask you: is there a better time to preach about love and our calling to stand on the side of it than V-Day? I didn’t think so.

Now, to make a minor confession, I thought this was all pretty clever of me. I mean, what a nice synergy between Sizzle and St. Valentine, right? And on top of it, I knew that there was this great song that goes along with the theme; it was written by a UU composer a few years ago during the battle for marriage equality in Massachusetts. Catherine agreed it would be perfect for the choir.

A few months ago, I checked out the Sizzle website to learn more about its current efforts. Well, it turns out I wasn’t the only person to have this idea. In fact, on the front page of the website<sup>1</sup>, there was a big banner which said “Re-Imagining Valentine’s Day.”

And indeed, Sizzle was starting a nation-wide campaign, inviting UU congregations to devote their services today to standing on the side of love and to events aimed at widening the circle of inclusion in their communities.

Many of the “Re-Imagining Valentine’s Day” actions are focused on supporting the right to marriage for gay and lesbian couples. After all, it seems fitting on a day which honors love – to celebrate not only love’s power to fight oppression – but also the love of same-sex partnerships, a love which, under the law, is still treated as separate and unequal in far too many states.

There are other events, too. In Lawrenceville, Georgia, the UU church there hosted a prom, where gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members of the community could come and dance openly with their significant others.

In Fort Collins, Colorado, our UU brothers and sisters are planning a day of Loving Action; folks there will spend coffee hour performing small acts of service, like making toiletry kits for their local homeless shelter and writing letters to support healthcare reform.

This morning, we join those congregations and over a hundred others in standing on the side of love – we stand with churches in Florida and South Carolina, New York and Michigan, my home-state of Pennsylvania and the lone-star state of Texas – the list goes on.

And so, here we are, re-imagining Valentine’s Day, with our sisters and brothers in towns and cities and villages all across over this land. Of course, this means I can no longer claim unique cleverness, but that seems a small price to pay to be part of a larger UU effort to bring more love and justice to the world.

*Hate drew a circle that shut me out--  
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took hate in!*<sup>ii</sup>

So, to recap, we begin with the synchronicity between Sizzle and Valentine’s Day. But there’s another synergy that seems important to mention here near the outset of this sermon, which is this: Our congregation, as you may have heard or read, is embarking on the process of becoming an official “Welcoming Congregation” – capital W, capital C – in our UU denomination.

What, might you ask is that?

Well, the “Welcoming Congregation” program recognizes churches that include and affirm people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Many churches who enter the program are, like our congregation, already welcoming of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members.

But by becoming an official “Welcoming Congregation,” our status would be clearly recognizable to anyone who is looking for a liberal religious congregation in our area. It would be noted in all public listings of UU churches – like on our denomination website and national directory.

The next gathering of folks interesting in the Welcoming Congregation is this coming Wednesday at 5:30 in the Fireplace Room if you want to learn more. Also, stay tuned for notices in the Communicator.

But back to Standing on the Side of Love. As this morning approached, the divinity school student in me had an impulse to prepare a lesson for you about the theological roots of Love in Unitarian Universalism. It was going to be a long sermon. And that sermon may still arrive here some day.

But as today drew closer, I realized that what I really want to do is simply share with you some stories – three stories, in fact, about someone or someones who chose to stand on the side of love – to stand against fear or hate or discrimination, to stand for solidarity and inclusion and equality.

Here is the first one: It comes from a woman named Mary Caplan, who recorded this account as part of the Story Corps program.<sup>iii</sup> I heard it on NPR a few years ago, and it has stayed with me since. An expanded version was included in a book about the Story Corp project called *Listening is an Act of Love*.

In the early 1980’s, Mary Kaplan’s brother Tom, like so many gay men, became ill with a mysterious illness called AIDS. When he became too sick to take care of himself, he came to stay with Mary. Mary said she had a terrible voice, but she sang lullabies to her beloved brother, and she sat vigil at his bedside until he died at home.

After Tom’s death, not only did Mary have her grief to contend with – but she also experienced the added pain of people’s callous and hateful remarks when they learned she lost her brother to AIDS. Someone once said to her, “don’t you think God is letting the homosexuals die for a reason?” And so Mary learned that she could not openly share the truth of her or her brother’s experience. She learned it wasn’t safe to be honest.

But one day, in the midst of this terrible time, something transformative happened. Mary was in a store buying a sympathy card for another friend of her brother’s. There was a young gay man behind the counter – and she found herself saying to him in a whisper, “My brother died of AIDS.”

And the young man said, “You don’t have to whisper to me.” He came around the counter and took her in his arms. And, in that moment, Mary says that she loved him. She didn’t know him, but she loved him.

*“You don’t have to whisper to me,” he said.*

*Fear drew a circle that shut me out--  
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took fear in!*

That first story comes from New York City twenty-five years ago. Now, fast-forward to the present day, and travel east, thousands of miles. Our next story comes from Uganda, although also in part from Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Maybe you have heard about the draconian and sweeping anti-gay law that has been proposed in the Ugandan legislature. How many of you have heard about it? Called the “Anti-Homosexual Bill of 2009,” if passed, this law would not only criminalize being gay – but would also make it illegal to fail to report to the authorities so-called violations of the act. In other words, this law would require the friends and family members of gay Ugandans to turn them into the police. It also adds enhanced punishment for what it calls “aggravated homosexuality.”

It is hard to describe the horror and the hate-filled language of this legislation. If it wasn’t an actual bill, you might almost think it was a parody of one, prepared by the Daily Show writers, pointing satirically to the horror and hypocrisy of homophobia.

When news of it first reached the States, an acquaintance of mine, who happens to be gay, posted on her Facebook status something along the lines of: I don’t know what aggravated homosexuality is, but I can tell you that when I think about this bill, I am one aggravated homosexual!

For gay Ugandans and their allies, it is a terrible and terrifying time. But in the midst of that something transformative is happening.<sup>iv</sup>

The Reverend Mark Kiyimba, who is the pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Kampala, and other UU’s in Uganda, are taking a stand. This very day, they are hosting a conference to start an effort to defeat the legislation and to build a social movement to work for full equality for LGBT Ugandans.

And my colleague from Tulsa, the Reverend Marlin Lavanhar, has traveled to Uganda to stand in solidarity with Mark and all of those who are putting their safety and well-being on the line to stand on the side of love. Marlin's church became a partner church with the UU's of Kampala, and they are sending him as a way of standing in solidarity.

You can learn more about this at [uua.org](http://uua.org). For now, let us hold Marlin, and Mark Kiyimba, and all of those taking a stand in Uganda on this day in our hearts. And let us pray for the defeat of that legislation.

*The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be? Will we be extremists for love or for hate? For justice or injustice?*

For our last story, we return home, right here to our own beloved Green Mountain State – where, in the past year, love has certainly had occasion to celebrate. Not only do we live in the first state to pass civil union legislation – but now we are one of only four states in the country with full marriage equality for all citizens. Montpelier seems like a fitting place for all of those V-Day hearts!

But it's not all perfect here, a fact we have been reminded of recently, when one of our own church families came face to face with the forces of exclusion here in our Central Vermont community. You probably know the details, and in fact, many of you have already spoken up to support our fellow church members Cate and Elizabeth Wirth.

Cate and Elizabeth were told by their local Boy Scouts district director that they could not be parent volunteer leaders for their son's Cub Scout troop. Never mind that they had volunteered before. Never mind that they were seeking to help. Never mind all of that. Because of the national Boy Scout Association's discriminatory policies, Cate and Elizabeth were told "no." End of story.

But of course, that's not the end of the story for the Wirths – or for all of us, who stand in solidarity with them. As a minister, I was outraged that such a hurtful thing happened to dedicated members of the congregation I serve.

But here's the thing, at the beginning of this month, the forces of love and justice poked their heads up again, just like the groundhog. Something transformative happened. Did you see it in the *Times Argus*?

An aide to a congressman from New York called the Wirths and said that the representative had heard about their story. It prompted him to write a letter to the Boy Scouts, along with 25 of his congressional colleagues.

In their letter, they say they support the values of scouting and the opportunities those programs afford so many children and youth in our country. But they also urge the BSA to end its policies that discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. In the letter, they write: *“it is particularly disappointing that an organization that prides itself on inclusion and diversity remains committed to a policy that is anything but.”*<sup>v</sup>

Now, in practical political terms, it’s quite possible – likely even, that the letter in and of itself won’t change the policy. But still, the action of those 26 leaders, among them Vermont’s Peter Welch, matters. It matters because they took a stand for love. Maybe they wouldn’t put it in exactly those terms, but I do. And any day that love makes a stand is a good day, as far as I’m concerned.

You see, we may doubt that our individual acts on behalf of love and justice, our small efforts to expand the circle of inclusion, will make any real difference in the world. But that’s the thing about love – we are asked to stand up for it anyway.

It is not just our responsibility as citizens in a democracy that asks us to fight injustice. It is also our calling as spiritual beings, as members of this liberal faith tradition, as living beings in the interconnected web of all existence. We are called to draw a circle that takes others in.

And here’s another thing – we may not get tangible results from our actions right away, but know this, believe this in your bones: any time you take a stand for love, transformation begins to happen, whether you can see it or not.

Invisible as they may be, acts of love dampen fear and neutralize hate. Acts of love communicate to another person that she is not alone, that he is welcome, that she can tell the truth about her life, that they can be who they are.

An act of love says, *“you don’t have to whisper here.”*

And, at the end of the day, isn’t this what becoming a Welcoming Congregation is all about?

The great social activist Dorothy Day wrote this, which is printed in the back of our hymnal:<sup>vi</sup>

“People say, what is the sense of our small effort. They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.”

She goes on, “a pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.”

And so it is with us. There is too much work to do. And there is too much love to offer – enough love to share with our families, our church, our community, and our world.

My friends, may we have the courage to stand on the side of love. May we heed love's call. And may the actions for justice and love we take, no matter how small, cause ripples that spread out in all directions.

May it be so with us, now and in the days to come.

#### Notes:

---

<sup>i</sup> Check out the Standing on the Side of Love website at: <http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Edward Markham, “Outwitted,” See [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Edwin\\_Markham](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Edwin_Markham).

<sup>iii</sup> See <http://storycorps.org/listen/stories/mary-caplan-and-emily-collazo>.

<sup>iv</sup> See <http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/158042.shtml>.

<sup>v</sup> <http://ackerman.house.gov/> - follow links for “news,” then “press releases,” then see February 1, 2010: “Congressman Ackerman and Members of Congress Call on Boy Scouts of America to End Its Discrimination against Gays and Lesbians.”

<sup>vi</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition*, #560.