



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

What the Hell Am I Doing Here? (And Other Quandaries)

Zel McCarthy, Church Member, Guest
Speaker

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

“Like a thunderbolt,” said President Obama, is how justice arrived in the form of the Supreme Court ruling that legalized gay marriage last month. Invoking, perhaps, Zeus himself, the President may have been speaking to the feeling of that day: electrifying, powerful, and of-the-heavens. For those who have been involved with the marriage equality movement, including Neighborhood Church and many of our members, it may have felt less like a bolt of thunder and more like a long-awaited parting of the clouds, moved painstakingly by hand over decades.

A flurry of celebrations—public and private—have followed and as anyone who was in this room last night can attest, marriage equality can be a lot of fun! It feels good to celebrate a victory over discrimination and as Reverend Lissa Gundlach said from up here yesterday, these celebrations are important. Still, Saturdays are for parties and Sundays are for shining a light on what afflicts us.

The fact is, clouds still hang over much of our country with regard to LGBT rights. In 28 states, you can now get married on the weekend and fired on Monday morning because there are no employment laws that protect people against discrimination based on sexual orientation. In 31 states there is no employment protection for gender identity. That’s more than half the country. Through loopholes you can even live and work in California but be employed by a company based in a state like Texas or Florida and find yourself unprotected. It was particularly tone deaf when in the days following the Supreme Court decision, marriage equality campaigners were boasting about being out of a job, having rendered themselves redundant through the success of their campaigning. This is to say nothing of the complicated state-by-state laws on adoption or access to housing or the atrocious patchwork of rights for transgender Americans. One would think the fight for equality shouldn’t be limited just to marriage, but in many ways, it has been.

Despite the fact that fewer Americans get married now than ever, marriage equality has become the primary concern for the 21st century LGBT rights movements including the UUA’s Standing on the Side of Love campaign. In part this has been a response to some of the odious state laws, including Prop 8 here in California, that so blatantly discriminated against people who deserve equal protection under the law and, as we believe, have inherent worth and dignity.

Dignity was a word used by Justice Kennedy in his majority opinion in the marriage equality decision and in so using it, he confirmed to the world that he is not a UU. Same sex couples, he said “ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.” *New York Times* commentator Michael Cobb pointed out, “one reading of the majority opinion suggests, one isn’t dignified unless one can be married.” Kennedy even claimed that the hope of same sex couples “is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions.”

This should strike all of us as problematic. Loneliness aside, our first principle recognizes the *inherent* worth and dignity of *all* people, not just those who marry.

Some of this, I think, is a result of how convoluted this issue has become in the political realm. The ruse of the right's religious freedom complaints has been used as a pantomime for hatred and bigotry. So rightly, we have responded to it, as Dr. King would have liked, with the "dimension of love." Historically, marriage had nothing to do with love at all. It wasn't until the 19th Century when the Romanticists (some of them Unitarians) infused what had been a business arrangement with the ideal of romantic love.

Ironically, it was business, not love, that stood at the heart of two of the big marriage equality court cases. In 2013's *US v. Windsor*, Edith Windsor was seeking a federal tax exemption for the estate of her late wife. In this year's *Obergefell v. Hodges*, James Obergefell sued the state of Ohio to recognize his out of state marriage so he could be listed on his late husband's death certificate as the surviving spouse. Call me cynical, but in this context, marriage seems to be less about love and more about death and taxes.

While it is absurd to argue that marriage has been redefined, given that so many marital rights are legal and financial, it might be safe to say that those advocating for marriage equality have perhaps *rebranded* it. Yesterday's #justmarriage celebration was even named with a hashtag — the ultimate sign of a branding project. Until recently, marriage's brand wasn't #lovewins or #samelove or #loveislove. Marriage was almost exclusively about restricting access to power. Tax breaks, property rights, parental rights... all benefits that non-married people are systematically excluded from, to say nothing of the micro aggressions and passive discriminations that happen regularly to unwed couples and single people. It's not a coincidence that LGBT people and culture have become more accepted by mainstream society through proving our compatibility with this fundamentally conservative institution.

This is not to say that marriages are evil tools of capitalism or that single people should be a protected class, but rather if we are seeking to expand rights and freedoms, shouldn't they be expanded for all?

This dilemma doesn't exist in the same way north of the border. While the right to marry has been dealt piecemeal to same-sex couples in the US with fits and starts for about a decade, Canada has had marriage equality since 2005 when a federal court upheld that discrimination based on sexual orientation was in violation of Canada's charter (their version of our constitution). The ruling clarified language that meant *any* gender or sexual orientation discrimination was illegal, not just in terms of marriage. The comparison between us and our northern neighbors is somewhat startling on this issue. A friend of mine in Montreal pointed out that "America patting itself on the back for allowing gay marriage a whole decade after Canada is *so* America. Just like only taking down the Confederate flag after a racist mass murder is *so* America."

It's uncomfortable to admit, and even though as UUs we stand on the forefront of progressive social issues, as Americans, on matters of equality, freedom, and justice we have lost the primacy in the world that we had when old Rip van Winkle took a nap during the American Revolution. Still, there's no reason to accept this state of affairs as irreversible.

Several weeks ago when Reverend Sara LaWall gave her final sermon at Neighborhood from this pulpit, it was in the days following the shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. She issued a challenge to our graduating youth. In the aftermath of this atrocity, she said first, feel it.

I don't know that I have taken up that challenge. I am overwhelmed by the prospect of feeling something so big and horrific. How do I begin to feel what an event like that means? I know the morning I woke up to that news, I wanted to cry. I started to think about if something like that happened at our church. I don't know how to feel it, but I know that feeling it is what distinguishes the work of the church versus the work of politics.

The grace and composure of the people of Emanuel AME in the weeks since has been inspiring. Yes, that racist flag no longer flies over the South Carolina state house, but we still have other problems with regards to race in America in 2015. Perhaps we have been lulled by what Dr. King called the "myth of exaggerated progress." Yes, things are better today than they were 50 years ago. But we're not there yet.

One of the many reasons we are lucky to have Rev. Gundlach as our new Senior Minister is her passion and leadership in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. As we are a faith dominated by white people and even a church with a racial and ethnic demographic that does not reflect the broader LA County population, we could easily duck and say that #BlackLivesMatter is not *our* issue. As UUs, we know that the equality of all is always our issue. We are preceded by rabble rousers and agitators who demanded dignity and respect for all lives. This is what we teach our kids; this is what unites us; this is who we are.

As convicted as I am in my faith as a Unitarian Universalist, it was only a year ago that I found myself in a deep spiritual crisis. I was serving on the search committee for our senior minister and I wanted out. To be clear, this had nothing to do with my fellow committee members or our eventual minister, but rather the UUA, an institution based in far-flung Boston that seemed to have little to do with our church or our lives here on the West Coast, yet whose dictates were guiding the laborious and arcane process of search. I grew up UU, so unlike many of you, I never had a big bad religious institution to rebel against and perhaps, my experience on the search committee gave me that opportunity.

I still hold that the UUA is not without fault. There is something incredibly out of touch about a search process that hasn't kept up with advancements in search in the Google era—as Californians, such disregard for technology should be deeply offensive. More than that, I began to see the UUA as a lumbering bureaucratic institution overly concerned with itself and not the missions and visions of our religion. Where is the church that broadens horizons, challenges

the status quo, and questions mores? If this is how they run things, if this is how they see the world, then what the hell am I doing here?

I have asked this question before in different situations. In 2008, like many of us, I was volunteering to stop Prop 8 from passing. While I didn't personally believe in marriage then (and still don't), as a UU, I fervently believe in equality. I have alienated a few people over the years with my thoughts about the marriage equality movement, but when we are in line with the principles and values of our faith it is our obligation to question, to challenge, and sometimes to raise hell.

A meme that circulated in the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision promoted the idea that there was now "equality for all." While we can celebrate victories like these we must be steadfast in our commitment to a greater goal.

When all 50 states don't protect Americans against discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, there is not yet equality for all.

When rates of suicide, abuse, homelessness, and unemployment in the transgender community are higher than other groups, there is not yet equality for all.

When being called a homophobe, a racist, or a bigot is considered a grievance equal to actual homophobia, racism, and bigotry, there is not yet equality for all.

When black men are incarcerated disproportionately greater than white men in a prison system more concerned with profit than rehabilitation, there is not yet equality for all.

When a black teenage girl can be thrown to the ground by a white police officer for being at a pool party and that officer doesn't lose his job, there is not yet equality for all.

When a police officer can shoot an unarmed black man, and we add him to the list of unarmed black men murdered by the police without systemic change, there is not yet equality for all.

When a public figure can say despicable things about Mexicans, using that as shorthand for immigrants and Latinos and still be a major party Presidential candidate, there is not yet equality for all.

When immigration policies are driven by fear and bigotry against people of color rather than life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, there is not yet equality for all.

When the quality of education our children receive depends more on their skin color and zip code than ability, there is not yet equality for all.

When adult women have to live in fear that their state government will enact laws that tell them what they can and can't do with their bodies, there is not yet equality for all.

When women who do the same job as a man make 30 cents less on the dollar, there is not yet equality for all.

When the NRA is more at home in the halls of congress than the ERA, there is not yet equality for all.

From this, our beloved community, we must go forth into the arena of social action, we must remain awake, and lead with the love we know is mightier than any ills in this world.