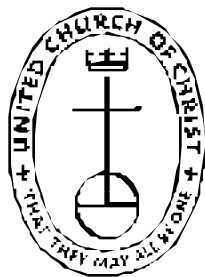


# **SERMONS**

**Equal Marital Rights #20**

This is an Equal Marital Rights for Same Gender Couples educational/advocacy resource of the United Church of Christ, Wider Church and Justice and Witness Ministries. United Church of Christ congregations have permission to reproduce this resource for use in the local church.



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## **Fidelity and Integrity: A Matter of Trust and Truth**

By the Rev. Barbara Gerlach

John 18: 33-38

*Poems are hard to read  
Pictures are hard to see  
Music is hard to hear  
And people are hard to love.*

-- William Meredith  
"Major Works"

Growing up in my home, the "sin above all sins" was having sex before marriage. My mother was terrified that one of her daughters would get pregnant and not go on to college. We were cautioned on the dangers of necking and petting. We were drilled on the double standard because boys' sexual drives were stronger, and it was up to us girls to hold the line. Now I give my mother credit. She was determined that her daughters would know more about sex than she learned from her mother. But there were some glaring gaps, like how to navigate all that sexual and relational water between that first goodnight kiss and the wedding night.

It's that difficult sexual and relational water, I would like to reflect on today. And it doesn't end on the wedding night or with the decision to remain single. There's nothing like strong sexual feelings to set us in turmoil at any stage of life, no matter what our sexual preference or marital status.

If you are visiting this church for the first time, you need to know that we're in midst of a two part series on "Fidelity and Integrity: Sexual and Relational Ethics." A little over a year ago, the Presbyterian Church passed a resolution on Chastity and Fidelity. Chastity in singleness. Fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman. But the resolution reflected more than a desire to set sexual standards. It was an attempt to keep homosexuals, including those in committed relationships, out of the ordained leadership of the church.

When a similar resolution was brought to the United Church of Christ General Synod this summer, it underwent a transformation and resulted in a resolution that celebrated the diverse relationships in which covenant and commitment, fidelity and integrity are essential and foundational. It reaffirmed fidelity and integrity as the standard for sexual and relational behavior in marriage and in other covenanted relationships, but also in singleness and in all relationships of life.

Last week in his sermon on "Covenant," Jim Ross reported on a conversation he had this summer with his 15 year old granddaughter Cathy, who asked him, "How do you know when you're in love?" To which, Jim answered, "You know you're in love, because you can't think of anybody else. That person becomes your whole world." This is the obsessional stage of love. When love is new and exciting and all-consuming.

And it's wonderful when this obsession is mutual and both people are single and free to fall in love and that love matures into a committed, life-long relationship. But what Jim didn't tell Cathy is that this love-thing is usually a lot more emotionally and decisionally complicated. Complicated because sometimes the person you are obsessed with isn't interested in you and your love goes unrequited.

Complicated because the passion of the moment can cause us to do impulsive things, like one night stands, or lying and sneaking around, or unsafe sex and someone gets pregnant or contracts HIV or gets hurt or used. Complicated because one or both of the people is already in a committed relationship and what do you do with those feelings then?

Complicated because, even while some of us long for love, we don't have much luck or opportunity or success in finding the right person and developing a relationship. Complicated because even if we are single by choice or are alone again because our partner dies or leaves, we still have sexual needs and relational needs for physical touch and intimacy. Complicated because even in the best of marriages, the falling in love stage passes, passions ebb and flow, and we are faced with challenge of fidelity: How do we stay in love and renew our relationships?

It seems to me that sexual love has two poles, passion and faithfulness. We long for both, but at times they pull in opposite directions. The passionate side of love can be both wonderful and dangerous and that's why we put fences around it and have rules like "thou shalt not commit adultery" or "no sex before marriage" or "sex belongs within the context of a loving commitment relationship." As long as there are human beings, there will be people who accept the collective wisdom and abide within the community's sexual standard and others who break the rules and scale the fences and have to learn, sometime painfully or destructively, from their own experience.

I have a friend who reflected with me on a special, but not quite consummated, relationship with a woman outside of his marriage. He said it was like this group of different churches in some distant land that gathered and celebrated communion together while their leaders were away. Afterwards they decided, "It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened. And it will never happen again."

Because we break the sexual rules or feel ambivalent about them, doesn't mean that there shouldn't be any rules at all, values and visions we hold up as standards for our personal behavior, values and vision we affirm as foundational for the well-being of our community. It's important to come up with values that communities can agree upon and use to guide their relationships, even when we know that our social consensus sometimes shifts and changes, and there will always be followers and breakers of the rules.

For instance, I suspect most of us would agree that infidelity is bad because it breaks trust and undermines loving committed relations. We would also agree that fidelity for fidelity's sake when a relationship has become dead, destructive, or loveless can also be bad, so there is a place for divorce in our sexual ethic. We would also probably agree that we don't want our children and teenagers having sex too young -- before they are mature enough to make decisions about safe, responsible, and loving relationships.

It's just that within the religious spectrum, there are those who believe the Bible sets clear and absolute rules for sexuality, i.e. chastity in singleness, fidelity in heterosexual marriage. There are others who come to their sexual and relational decisions out of a more fluid interplay between individual conscience, their family's values, and the visions received from their faith community, who weigh not only what the Bible says but also principals such as mutual trust and responsibility, honesty, justice and health, age-level appropriateness, cultural differences and recent insights from science and psychology.

It seems to me that there are three dynamics important in making our sexual decisions: truth, trust, and talking together.

First, it's a matter of truth. We have to listen for our truth out of the depths of our experience and conscience, and risk speaking that truth in love, even when our truth seems different from those we love. Isn't that part of what integrity is? Speaking our whole truth. Bringing our whole being to our relationships? If we don't make ourselves known then we can never feel truly loved. But we also have to listen to the truth of others, because our truth is partial and self-centered and needs to be modified and broadened by the perspectives of others.

But more than listening to the truth of our little circle of family and friends and church, or our own time or culture, we also have to listen to collected wisdom of the past on sexual and relational matters which reflects the best thinking of those who have gone before us. And at the same time, we have to be open to new truth, to the sense that God isn't finished with us yet and creation continues and new light is always breaking forth on our sexual and relational ethic. For most of us that has happened around homosexuality. There has been a great change between what we thought 25 or 30 years ago and what we think now because gays and lesbians have come out and made themselves known. Finally, we have to judge our truth by our actions, by the impact and consequences it has on others. Is it loving or destructive? Does it break down or build up relationships?

Second, it's a matter of trust. Trust is very close to truth. There is no trust without truth, that what you see is what you get. One of the worst experiences for some of my divorced friends was not being able to see the breakup coming. Dissatisfactions were hidden, feelings were withheld, a lover kept secrets. One of things that has helped me with my sexual decision making is imagining how I would feel -- how I would be feeling -- if [my spouse,] John, did what I was considering. Would I be hurt, my trust undermined, my confidence in our love threatened? We have to put ourselves in one another's shoes, which can be difficult when we are obsessed. And finally I ask, "Would I want others to know?"

The breaking of trust between two partners has a larger ripple fact. Anyone who sees the film, "Eve's Bayou," will see the effect of the husband's infidelities not only on his wife and the other woman and her husband, but most especially on the children -- in their confusion and anger and in the sexualizing of their relationship with their father to win his love. In our deepest committed love, we need to feel some things are sacred, special, unique and exclusive to our relationship. We need not only sexual fidelity but also a special emotional intimacy as part of the wholeness and integrity of our love.

Finally, it's a matter of talk. Adrienne Rich wrote a book and an essay called. "Lies, Secrets, and Silence." We all know about hiding and withholding, avoiding and deceiving in our deepest relationships. We want the people we love to read our minds and sense our deepest need, so we don't have to risk revealing ourselves. Truth and trust involves talking, making ourselves known to the one we love. But also talking with our communities of faith. As a teenager, I remember my terror of uttering any of my sexual dilemmas in church for fear of someone saying, "You did what?!"

And then being judged for some great sexual transgression. Today in our much more sexually permissive culture, there is probably a greater fear of being ridiculed for the lack of sexual experience. Talking together, we realize that we are all uncertain and seeking when it comes to matters sexual and relational. Falling and staying in love is hard to do. It's hard to be true to ourselves and true to others. It's hard to keep our passion faithfulness together.

Yesterday, at Gayle McFarland's Ecclesiastical Council, Gayle read her ordination paper and observed how covenants are more important than creeds and confessions in the United Church of Christ. She pointed out that joining a church involves making a covenant to be part of a community. She said that our covenant to walk together reads almost like wedding vows, except that it is a covenant to be part of a community rather than two people and God. In last week's sermon, Jim Ross began by reminding us that the **BIG BANG** of creation threw us together into big clumps like galaxies and solar systems, into smaller clumps like tribes and nations, into pairs and gathered singleness, but, still, all of us find our way into relationship and community. One of those important clumps is this congregation, and our commitment to be faithful to this particular community of people, where we can seek the truth, and speak our truth, and trust that we will find people with whom we can walk and talk together. We are called to fidelity and integrity not only in singleness and our committed relationships but in all the relationships in our lives.

The Rev. Barbara Gerlach is Associate Pastor of the First Congregational United Church of Christ, in Washington, DC. This sermon, which is reprinted with permission, was preached at First Church on November 23, 1997.

# Marriage Rights for All

A Sermon By the Reverend Reine Abele

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

Matthew 19:8-12

There was a time in our country when it was against the law in many states for a White man to marry a Black woman. Those laws, if not the cultural attitudes which backed them up, have all been changed. In recent years, more and more people of the same gender have wanted to seal their commitment to one another with marriage, or holy union. Why?

John and Ralph had been devoted partners for seven years. Ralph became seriously ill and had to be hospitalized. John notified Ralph's parents who lived in another state and who had never approved of their relationship. At the same time, Ralph's younger sister had become a close friend to John and was glad for their happiness. What John feared, happened. Ralph's parent came to the city, rented a motel room, and took over Ralph's care, denying John access to the intensive care unit where Ralph was being treated. Ralph wasn't able to speak, but he gave signs of being very sad. John's company had recognized Ralph as his domestic partner, and it was John's insurance which was paying the bills, but because John wasn't legally related to Ralph by marriage, Ralph's parents were able to bar John from seeing him. When Ralph died, his parents had his body flown back to his home town for the funeral. They made it clear that John wasn't welcome to come. John was heartbroken, even though he was surrounded by a host of loving friends. They held a memorial service that friends and co-workers of both men, and Ralph's sister, attended. Many gave spoken testimony not only of the wonderful person Ralph had been, but also of the love which John and Ralph shared and how that love brightened the lives of all who knew them as a couple.

There are hundreds of laws which automatically come into play when two people are legally married. When married, two people are recognized as next of kin to one another. Those laws cover joint ownership of property, taxes, health care, pension plans, and inheritance, among other things. It is unjust, it is not right, to deny marriage rights to people of the same gender who choose to marry. As long as legal marriage, or a legal domestic partnership which would grant the same rights, is denied to some people because of their choice of a partner of the same gender, a grave injustice is being done to all people who would like to share such benefits. The story I told about John and Ralph has been repeated countless times over the years in different ways. It is only one example of the kinds of injustice and hurt which can happen as long as partners of the same gender are denied the right to be officially and legally recognized as marital partners.

As followers of Christ, I believe that we are called to do what we can to see to it that nothing less than justice prevails for everyone. Christian love compels us to go beyond justice, not to ignore it or to allow justice to be denied to anyone.

As a Christian minister and pastor, I believe that our affirmation of same gender partnerships needs to go beyond the basics of simple justice. Why do people want to get married? I usually ask that

of couples who come to me for counsel in preparation for making their marriage vows to one another before God and God's people. Before the days of generally available birth control, one of the reasons was to get official permission for a committed sexual relationship. Nowadays, that is no longer true. Few couples wait until marriage to start a sexual relationship. Indeed, most couples are already domestic partners before they get around to making it official. When our daughter Susan and her love, Char, graduated from Georgetown University, the two families, including my mother-in-law, had dinner together. Char's father and I sat across from each other and shared family histories as if we were at the wedding or at least the engagement party. We knew that Sue and Char would be living together that summer and that their relationship probably meant marriage one day. Many years later, it did!

What is marriage for, in the eyes of the Church of Jesus Christ? Three things, always, I believe, and sometimes a fourth. The three are: companionship, including recreation and sex; mutual care; and loving, sole, commitment. The public blessing of God and God's people seals these important dimensions of marriage in ways which affirm them and each of the partners in the relationship. The benefits of this relationship to each partner in it and to society are great. Committed partners are healthier, happier, and friendlier than most single people. That is why 260 major corporations in our country officially recognize domestic partnerships between people of the same gender and extend to them married couple benefits like health insurance.

As Christians, we don't need any reminders of the godly values of companionship, care, and commitment. As Christians, we should not need reminders that the alternatives to such relationships are often harmful to individuals and to society. The passages of scripture which we heard this morning reflect both the benefits of committed relationships and the dangers of the lack of such commitments.

A fourth dimension of traditional understandings of marriage is children. What about children? Many states in our nation allow same gender couples to adopt children in need of homes. Getting permission to adopt a child is hard work, as one of our daughters and a couple of close friends can testify. The social worker wants to know everything (!) and wants to make sure that the home is stable and loving. Gay and lesbian couples have long established the fact that they are quite capable of raising children. It has also been well established that children raised by such couples are just as happy as and well adjusted as other children, and that their sexual orientation is not affected.

I believe that sexual orientation is God given. That is, I believe that it is natural for some people to be specially attracted to persons of the same gender. The study which I have made on this subject backs up this belief. I believe that such persons should be encouraged to find life long, faithful, loving, committed partners, and that the people of God and the Church of Jesus Christ should gladly offer ceremonies of holy union for such partnerships.

Not all Christians see things this way. My own experience and training have given me a certain point of view on this subject - one which has changed greatly since my early days in ordained ministry. I am happy to delve further into this subject with any who are interested in doing so. I would hope that the Christian virtues of charity and fairness, and a willingness to try to see each other's point

of view, would prevail in any such dialogue. As for me, I wish God's fullest blessing on all people who seek to find and covenant with a partner in a committed relationship, whether their partner be of a different or of the same gender.

The Rev. Reine Abele is pastor of Central Congregational Church, UCC, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. This sermon, preached on January 19, 1997, is reprinted with permission.

# **In Season and Out of Season**

## **II Timothy 4:2**

A Sermon by the Rev. Allen Happe

II Samuel 1:17-2

II Timothy 4:1-5

I Timothy 5:1-2

Mark 10: 28-31

Jesus of Nazareth related to people in such a way that his own people eventually rejected him. Before his deeds and stories were forgotten, fortunately, they initiated a movement which is the fastest growing movement in the world today. And yet I would claim that the example of Jesus has been of limited influence and hardly more honored among Christians than among other peoples. "The trouble with Christianity," it has been said, "is not that it has been tried and found wanting, but that it's never been tried."

The pure Gospel is addressed to sinners but as soon as it reaches them (us) it is no longer pure. Jesus' teaching has had an influence in human societies but wherever it has challenged prevailing customs, such as the worship of Caesar, it has also been threatened by them. We choose to believe that Christ has much to contribute to positive social benefit, but every contact of pure love with real people is a compromise. Even so, the major evangelical task in the world today is not to broadcast the name of Jesus but to figure out how to live more faithfully in obedience to the love of God and neighbor which he expressly taught.

We wish to eschew violence and warfare, surely, but it is also a pathetic failure of non-violence and peace to allow the barbarism of ethnically crazed [combatants] to proceed unresisted. Our ethical dilemmas are like those of the physician who cannot treat a virulent disease without taking the chance of becoming contaminated by it. How may the church support an ordered, lawful society with that order, whatever its shape, being unfairly oppressive for some people? Individuals are different and relationships are complex; what is right for one may be wrong for another. And to do nothing at all to order our common life would unleash such a torrent of excess that everyone would be swept away without protection.

In the swirling water of recent debates about Christ and culture, or religion and social policy, I would like to put my oar into the muddied current on one issue: that of same sex marriages. A marriage between a man and a man or between a woman and a woman is not recognized by any of our fifty states and is forbidden by most Christian churches. A test case before the Hawaii State courts has drawn public attention and this is an issue where churches should measure their position by the standards of Christ, especially since we have chosen to cooperate with the state in the performance of legal weddings. Nearly half of my sermons this time of the year are wedding sermons so my head is just full of considerations about what constitutes a loving marriage and what makes it beneficial to the broader society.

It was not always so because the church of Christ did not conduct weddings for centuries and Puritan ministers of this congregation were not allowed to speak at weddings. The Puritans were worried about inordinate church control and about an unholy alliance between church and state. They also thought marriage was a natural right not restricted to church members; therefore they didn't want the church or ministers to have any regulating power to perform weddings. A Roman wedding allowed the exchange of a woman as chattel property from father to husband. Vestiges of that tradition remain in most American weddings but Christians eventually elevated the role of the bride to be that of a free, independent, moral agent with personal rights of her own. Still, we are painfully aware that women have achieved social, economic, political or religious equality.

For the moment, let's see how the church has been "taken in" by a prejudicial society. As the church approved heterosexual weddings, those arrangements were held up as socially normative and legally/morally exclusive. There was not comparable social place or moral approbation for single people, celibate people, or people whose affections turned toward others of the same sex.

As if it wasn't restrictive and harmful enough down throughout the centuries to be treated as different, the tensions are now being both exacerbated and questioned. "Homophobia" is, indeed, a widely prevalent phenomenon and not a few "Christians" have joined its benighted crusade.

I fully agree that heterosexual marriages need all the help they can get but does that mean that everyone else must be denigrated? Do we know how Jesus dealt with persons who were lesbian or gay? Yes, we do; every shred of evidence shows that Jesus made no distinction between people on this score. For that matter, we know nothing at all about the sexuality of Jesus himself. What we do know is that to say he was in no way sexual is to cast aspersions on one doctrine which all orthodox Christians hold: that Jesus was fully human. It is silly to speak of a non-sexual Jesus and it makes "no never mind" difference except for those who doggedly insist that what Jesus was or what he thought somehow justifies their own preconceived, often prejudicial, notions.

I'm glad the church has added weddings to its repertoire of services. Whenever two persons commit themselves to each other for an unknown future, they must throw themselves on the mercies of God. Whenever they seek to base their love upon the boundless love of Christ, we should encourage them as best we can. And whenever they are reasonably mature and are freely entering into the marital covenant with understanding of its seriousness and the responsibilities it demands, we should celebrate with them.

There is no biblical requirement for an anatomical test for the loving union of two people and, were there one, I, for one, would be unwilling to conduct the examination. Quite to the contrary, the scriptures describe a variety of exemplary relationships such as that of Ruth with her mother-in-law, Naomi, or Hosea with the harlot, Gomer. Some think David's lament for Jonathan indicated a homosexual relationship, "greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." I'm not convinced this poetry says anything about behavior but it is vivid testimony to one of the Bible's closest friendships.

Neither the word "homosexual" nor the word "family" as in "family values," occurs in the gospels. There is a new set of relationships in Christ in which we all become related to each other with mutual care and holiness.

Don't speak harshly to an elder but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters -- with absolute purity.

There's the biblical, Christian norm: a place of respect for everyone. The affirmation of one does not require the denial of another.

In Christ, we must leave the restrictive, exclusionary ties which once bound us and enter into an open covenant which receives us into a genuinely catholic and unending community. One of the public charges made against the early Christian movement was incest because of their familiarity with each other and because they called each other "sister" or "brother." When Peter spoke of what he had lost to follow Jesus, Jesus through the voice of the early church in the first gospel said:

...no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields...will not receive a hundredfold now in this age -- houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions -- and in the age to come life eternal.

I am sorry for those few persons who left this church when we declared ourselves an Open and Affirming UCC congregation, not because they violated some high principle but because they did not get to know and love some of the persons here of different sexual orientations whom the rest of us have come to know and love as brothers and sisters in Christ. I am even more sorry for those persons down through the centuries who have felt unacceptable or unloved because they have been drawn toward persons of the same sex; the burden of that pain should hang like a cross around the church's neck! The real mystery, of course, is why any one person should ever be drawn to another and grace is given capacity to have our love shaped by the living Christ into positive, faithful, helpful, honest, non-exploitative, forgiving, renewing, passionate love for one another.

If the church is to respond to Christ by conducting the wedding covenants of those couples who come seeking Christ's love as the source, seal and surety of their own, then the church should do so regardless of the physical characteristics of those persons. To do so, in keeping with the freedom of religion as guaranteed by the Bill of Rights in the federal Constitution, the state laws regulating weddings must be changed to grant all citizens equal protection under the law and to allow Christians the free exercise of their obedience to Christ. If some churches or individuals wish to place their own peculiar restrictions on Jesus' command to love, they may legally do so but they have no right to prevent the rest of us from exercising a wider interpretation of Christian discipleship, nor to prevent the free exercise of our religious covenants as guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

When another United Church of Christ congregation considered becoming "Open and Affirming" toward gay and lesbian persons, a prominent woman in the congregation spoke out strongly against such a move and organized others to help defeat the ONA motion. Sometime later the woman's son

came home and said, you guessed it, "Mother, I have something to tell you." Confused, torn, ashamed, afraid, hurt, searching, she came to her minister. Her mind was not turned around immediately; in fact, she didn't know what to think. But, she did say to her pastor, "I am so thankful for my church because it has helped me to think about these things. My church has given me a language to speak about my fears...and my love, especially the love I have for my son."

With freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion, the laws of the states should be brought into conformity with the Constitution and allow citizens to speak of their love, and to mean it. And the church, with even more compelling reasons, should speak of Christ's love, in this very real world of sin and grace. As Christians, we should not only allow but should celebrate when two sincere persons pledge to remain "with each other in constant love and affection, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to forgive and to be forgiven, so long as (they) live, according to God's mercy and will." To paraphrase Robert Frost, the church is the "right place for love. I don't know where it's likely to go better."

The church has a primary mission, following Jesus, in the furtherance of love, establishing justice (a dimension of biblical "righteousness"), and seeking peace. To meet these aims, the church has for many centuries cooperated in the formation of families and in the provision of services to uphold our promissary covenants, including, centuries ago, conducting same-sex marriages. (Consult the research of John Boswell.) There are still domestic laws to protect children, to prevent incest, to check disease, to set financial obligations, and to limit consanguinity in marriage. One large religious organization in our country views marriage in sexual terms and then teaches that sexual expression is only for the purpose of procreation, yet even that church does not refuse to marry couples over sixty with no procreative intentions or infertile couples.

For us who view love, and the married form of it, as a matter of "heart, soul, mind and strength," quoting Jesus (Mark 12:30), there is nothing written in any of the customary wedding vows which prevents their use by two responsible persons of the same sex. It's time for the church to catch up to or, at least, aspire to the promise of the Gospel. And it's time for the states to honor the equal protection standard and the religious liberty provision of our nation's fundamental charter.

We know how narrow, how conventional, how cruel, and how obsessed the human mind can become. We also know that "sex" has become the fetish of our age. Yet the larger, more important question remains: How wide is God's gracious, saving covenant? This is the voice of the LORD according to the prophet Hosea (2:18-20):

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will break the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.

Trust in the love of God evades us still, a spring we search for, crave and fear to taste. May God dig such a well in us, against our will (if need be), that every NO may be erased by joy. For, in God, our Betrothed, things impossible are now called forth by love, and very soon will be!

The late Rev. Allan Happe was Senior Minister of the First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, United Church of Christ in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This sermon, preached on July 30, 1995, is reprinted with permission.

## Reading Ruth and Naomi

By the Rev. Louise Green

Ruth 1: 1-18

So much in the Book of Ruth is unexpected. The plot twists and turns quickly and the characters' fortunes are changed in a single sentence. You believe the tale is going to be about the enduring bond between Ruth and Naomi, but this is only Act One. In subsequent chapters, Ruth will go through various machinations back in Bethlehem to secure land, husband and heir. Boaz, a relative of Naomi's dead husband, reclaims family property about to be lost, marries Ruth, and fathers the son Obed who ensures the lineage of the house of Perez. Obed's son was Jesse, and Jesse's was David, the very one who became the first great king of Judah. So Ruth is David's great-great grandmother. Just when you thought you were finally reading a Bible story about women, you figure out that the whole thing is a story about the lineage of the fathers.

But Act One is important still, and nothing changes the fact that Ruth's decision to go with Naomi out of Moab into Israel is downright mystifying. Genesis 19 claims that Moabites descended from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter, after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Do you remember that Lot's wife became a pillar of salt and available men became scarce? Besides this unsavory ancestry, Moabites worshiped pagan deities who dwelt with them east of the Dead Sea, and they were not considered equals by the monotheistic tribes of Israel.

It would have made much more sense for Ruth to return to the home of her mothers, as Naomi suggested, in order to remarry and have children with her own clan. But something seems to have drawn these two women together, a bond emerged that was so strong that Ruth utters the famous lines, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried." In Hebrew, this is called *chesed*, a commitment beyond duty and devotion that is shown in love over time.

It's not easy to get *chesed* these days! Promises between predictable parties are hard enough to maintain, much less between two women of different tribes, ages, religions, and geographies. The remarkable thing about the vow of Ruth to Naomi is that it represented "irrational, undemanded love," as Vanessa Ochs<sup>1</sup> put it in this morning's New Testament reading. That kind of connection is surprising, unconventional, and difficult to maintain—because everything in the culture is working against it.

In our time, we have a few areas where unexpected love must still strain against societal conventions. I think that deep and intimate friendship is one. Anyone can send a Christmas card, or go out to an occasional dinner, and most of us have friends at that level. But think about the short list of friends who matter most, the ones who are really there for us over time. It's not easy to make sure these relationships have the resources they need to deepen, and far easier to perpetuate the quick social interaction that is so much more common. We have to take time and risk to know these friends better.

My good friend Ceci and I worked together as organizers for the Metro New York Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Brooklyn and she organizes in Philadelphia now. A year ago, when my spouse, Maureen, was suddenly put in the hospital and we were frightened and distressed, Ceci cancelled her work and took the train up here for a day. She sat in the hospital room with both of us, helped me weep in the waiting room, took me out for Indian food and listened to my worst fears. I didn't ask her to travel up here and was surprised when she did. Her unexpected love made a huge difference in my life right then, when I needed it most. These are the actions we remember, the sort of undemanded love we cherish, when friends go out of their way to support us, when *chesed* is freely given.

Unexpected love also exists in the chosen or alternative family we gather around, sometimes quite by accident, sometimes because our own family rejects us. Last Christmas, my family celebrated Christmas dinner in Charlotte (NC) with sixteen people. Everyone at the table was a blood relative or spouse, except for one elderly couple. Several years ago, my sister, Kathy, ran into a woman and her husband (whom she only knew as acquaintances) and learned they were not seeing their children for the holidays. On the spur of the moment, Kathy invited them to celebrate with her family that year. As it turned out, the couple had a strained relationship with their own son and daughter, and loved the chance to be with young children nearby. The result has been a continuing bond that delights four little girls and brings two families together for special occasions. At our Christmas dinner this year, the woman gave a stirring toast to the love of chosen family, and the tears in her eyes showed that unexpected love had moved her deeply.

Unexpected love is present in gay and lesbian families as well. Same-sex relationships and their adoption or bearing of children, come under such intense pressure daily that they have to be classified as irrational, undemanded love! It would make much more sense to simply fit in to the heterosexual categories that are supported by family, government, schools, health care providers, television, movies, literature, church and synagogue. Supportive environments do exist, but they only represent a fraction of the many places couples must navigate in order to have a life or children together. Every same-sex duo knows that sinking feeling when one more bureaucrat asks, "Just what *is* the nature of your relationship?" or "You said you *both* are the fathers of this child?" The hoops we must jump through merely to explain our existence are tiresome and depressing, although quite often comic. No wonder a gay friend recently bemoaned having to tell his parents that he and his boyfriend were having problems and might split up. "We worked so hard for ten years just to be accepted," he said, "that I don't know how to say we aren't the perfect couple after all."

We also encounter unexpected love in the congregation, at a place like Judson Church where we gather again and again for worship, life cycle events, and social occasions. That is the main reason to be here for many of us, to experience the deep friendships and chosen family of people in this community, in an environment where gay and straight families are supported, and theological difference is respected. In the last few months, when many of our Judson tribe have experienced illness and difficulty, the response has been amazing: the cards, the phone calls, the casseroles, the visits, the rides to medical appointments, the holding each other up — all represent commitment far beyond the call of simple duty. This is *chesed*, the rich and enduring connection Ruth and Naomi held between all the differences that should have sent them in opposite directions.

I'll end with Marge Piercy's poetic reading of our tale of Ruth and Naomi. Piercy writes how the strange choice that Ruth made fulfills a longing so deep we may never even articulate the need. For there is no greater yearning or gift than undemanded, irrational, unexpected love — and to find that in a friend, a new family, or a partner is a miracle. Life just doesn't get better than that.

## **The Book of Ruth and Naomi**

**When you pick up the Tanakh and read  
the book of Ruth, it is a shock  
how little it resembles memory.  
It's concerned with inheritance,  
lands, men's names, how women  
must wiggle and wobble to live.**

**Yet women have kept it dear  
for the beloved elder who  
cherished Ruth, more friend than  
daughter. Daughters leave. Ruth  
brought even the baby she made  
with Boaz home as a gift.**

**Where you go, I will go too,  
your people shall be my people,  
I will be a Jew for you,  
for what is yours I will love  
as I love you, oh Naomi  
my mother, my sister, my heart.**

**Show me a woman who does not dream  
a double, heart's twin, a sister  
of the mind in whose ear she can whisper,  
whose hair she can braid as her life  
twists its pleasure and pain and shame.**

**Show me a woman who does not hide  
in the locket of bone that deep  
eye beam of fiercely, gentle love  
she had once from mother, daughter,  
sister; once like a warm moon  
that radiance aligned the tides  
of her blood into potent order.**

**At the season of first fruits we recall  
those travelers, co-conspirators, scavengers  
making do with leftovers and mill ends,  
whose friendship was stronger than fear;  
stronger than hunger, who walked together  
the road of shards, hands joined.<sup>ii</sup>**

## Notes

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- i. Vanessa L. Ochs, Words on Fire: One Woman=s Journey into the Sacred, New York: Harbrace, 1992.
  - ii. Judith A. Kates & Gail Twersky-Reimer, Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story, New York: Ballentine, 1996.

The Rev. Louise Green was formerly Associate Minister of the Judson Memorial Church, a United Church of Christ and American Baptist congregation in New York City. She preached this sermon on March 8, 1998. She now serves as a community organizer with the Metro New York Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

## Looking Toward the Festive Day

By the Rev. Eric Nelson

Psalm 124; Acts 10:9-16

Yesterday there was a wedding here, a wedding quite unlike any other that I have ever taken part in—unlike in a few ways, one of which being a matter of degree: the laughter was heartier than at most weddings, the poetry of a solo more poignant, the congregational singing of “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” more jubilant. It was as if a lid were being blown off, which in a way is just what was happening.

Here’s the best way I can think of to depict the feeling of jubilation and of rightness-long-deferred-but-now-fulfilled that filled this space yesterday. It has kind of a Robin Hood tinge to it: Picture a small village, safe for the day from the reach of a repressive prince. One of the beloved sons of the village has been exiled in prison, unjustly, separated from the one he loves. And now he has returned, free and unbowed, and the village turns out for a day of celebration and feasting, a day of witnessing the reunion and finally the marriage of the two who are just perfect for one another. The celebration is unbounded.

The details don’t quite match up, but you get a sense of the extraordinary feel of the day. One of the readings in the wedding was an adaptation of an ancient poem (Roman, I think), with a refrain that the community gathered in proclaiming: “At last, the festive day has come!”

*It was as if we were both celebrating the present and anticipating the future, a future when the captives will be released and all will join in the celebration.*

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If the wedding yesterday was something like the wedding feast in a sheltered village, then we—this congregation, this church—were the sheltering forest that protected the village. It's not as if the minions of the evil prince were trying to beat down the doors or interfere, but the celebration would not have been the same had it not taken place here. The wedding *should* take place at the altar in the village. It wouldn't have been the same anywhere else, without the blessing of the church and the gathered people. We were sheltering some of our own, and we are a sign to other captives that there is yet hope.

Yesterday here in the protective sanctuary of this church, the chairman of our Board of Deacons and the man he loves were married.

Some of you were here with David and Michael; I wish we all could have been, but as with any wedding, the couple has to consider how much space there was both here and at the reception. I hope no one feels shunned; I'm confident that was not the intent.

I also know that the idea of two men marrying each other doesn't fit all of our conceptions of what a marriage is. It has taken some growing into for me, too. It's a logical extension of our Open and Affirming stance, but conviction and logic don't walk at the same pace. I respect the fact that our community includes people for whom the idea of a gay marriage is uncomfortable, yet who will not condemn gay or lesbian people for who they are and whom they love.

I personally must also say how appreciative I am of this community. Yesterday's wedding could not have taken place just anywhere. And I am also grateful for the freedom granted within the polity of this denomination for us as a congregation to be and do what we prayerfully believe God is calling us to.

It is so rare 1) that a gay couple would feel comfortable and affirmed enough to seek to be married in a church and 2) that a church would be so willing not only to allow but to *bless* a same-sex union such as the committed, life-affirming, and mutual love David and Michael share.

Afterward, several people came up to me and told stories of gay or lesbian friends who were unable to have their weddings celebrated so openly and joyfully. One told of a union service that *did* take place in a church, but where the pastor was warned by higher-ups in her denomination that if she spoke at the service, she would lose her ordination. So she took part silently, a mute and powerful witness.

That clergywoman's action was far more courageous than my own yesterday, and I am grateful for the freedom I have, unrestrained by church, state, or community, to take part in a blessing of a loving relationship.

You may have seen the two stories of a different sort in the Star Tribune yesterday, starting on the front page. The first noted how the religious right has shifted its emphasis from being anti-abortion to being anti-gay. With a few horrible exceptions, the anti-abortion forces have been losing steam

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in the past year or two, but anti-gay rhetoric has increased in intensity. Homophobia is finding a wide and zealous audience. The article quotes conservative former congressman Vin Weber, who warns, “This is a much more dangerous issue. The violence connected with abortion is still the exception, but the potential for violence is greater if you incite [anti-gay feelings]. It’s an ugly thingCit makes me nervous.”

The second article warned of the alarming rate of suicide among teenagers, particularly gay and lesbian teenagers. It’s no surprise that condemnation, violence, and hopelessness go together.

If the churches will not take part in the blessing of loving relationships between gay or lesbian people, this cycle of condemnation, violence, and hopelessness will never be broken.

I have heard it said before, but I am becoming more and more convinced of it: the struggle for acceptance and affirmation of people regardless of sexual orientation is the civil rights movement of our times. In the 1950s and >60s, as our society was in the early stages of the civil rights movement, some of the biggest obstacles were the churches and the clergy. But churches and clergy were also movers and shakers on the side of progress and justice.

We are in much the same situation today, with at least one important exception. African-Americans in the 1950s and ’60s had strong religious institutions to support them. Gays and lesbians in the ’90s have much less of that because churches and synagogues across the racial spectrum have been largely unsupportive.

The civil rights movement found important resources in the ideals expressed in the United States Constitution. “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...” If you’re looking for civil support for gay weddings, there it is: the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right. This we believe. And what can be more central to the pursuit than the freedom to celebrate life-affirming love?

If you’re looking for biblical justification of a gay wedding, you first need to recognize that there is precious little in the Bible about weddings of any kind. The New Testament in particular is ambivalent about marriage. Paul didn’t think highly of it, for example, and Jesus never married. Some wedding ceremonies, including one in our own denomination’s Book of Worship, find Jesus’ blessing of the institution of marriage in the fact that he once attended a weddingreception, according to one of the four gospels.

But Jesus’ whole life speaks to affirmation of loving, mutualrelationships. And in a religious context, what is affirmation if not blessing?

Recent historical research has also unearthed liturgies that were used in the church for centuries to bless same-sex unions (see John Boswell, Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe). There are civil, religious, and historical reasons for us to embrace such loving relationships.

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Still, embracing such relationships seems like a new thing, a departure, and it's a hard thing for some of us to accept whole-heartedly. The parallel has been drawn between this change and the experience Peter had in the story from Acts read this morning. (See William Sloane Coffin's sermon on homosexuality in The Courage of Love.) Peter is hungry and falls into a trance. In this dream-state, he sees all kinds of foods spread out on a sheet that is being lowered from heaven. A voice tells him to eat the foods. The problem is that the food laws in Leviticus declare all of these food unclean; only certain mammals, fish, and insects are to be eaten. Peter is troubled and protests that he has never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. The voice responds, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happens three times, for emphasis and perhaps as a warning.

It is true that there are passages in the Bible that declare some homosexual acts unclean and profane. But surely a loving relationship that enhances the life of two people and the gifts they have to offer others is not a profane relationship. It is rather one to be blessed and supported by the community, especially when others would do what they can to disparage it and tear it apart. And if a relationship is worthy of blessing, then loving expressions within that relationship cannot be profane.

Churches may not be the most powerful institutions anymore. I have to modify that: churches may not be the most powerful institutions *for positive change* anymore, *at least in the short run*. Any institution that feeds people's fear and prejudice is an obvious power-player, and it is a shame—a *shame*—that churches exercise as great a power in that way as any other institution.

But until churches start to embrace loving relationships among sexual minorities as they embraced rights for racial minorities, the tide of intolerance and bigotry will *not* be stemmed. And until more and more people embrace love and tolerance, we as a society deny our calling to be humane.

Still and all, our power is mostly in the long run: in the faith that love will win out in the end. And that *will* happen.

Then and now, we can look back and say with the psalmist,

If it had not been the Holy One who was on our side  
when our enemies attacked us,  
then they would have swallowed us up alive  
when their anger was kindled against us;  
then the flood would have swept us away,  
the torrent would have gone over us;  
then over us would have gone the raging waters.  
Blessed be the Holy One,  
who has not given us as prey to their teeth.  
We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped.

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Our help is in the name of the Holy One,  
who made heaven and earth.

(Psalm 124)

Make no mistake: this is a civil rights movement that we are engaged in. It is a human rights movement; it is a religious rights movement.

If I may paraphrase Martin Luther King, I believe that it is through such maladjustment as the present time that we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of our inhumanity to one another into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice. That will be the day when all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, gay and straight, will be able to join hands and voices together in one great shared celebration and say, "At last, at last, the festive day has come!"

The Rev. Eric Nelson is pastor of the First Congregational Church of Minnesota, UCC in Minneapolis, MN. This sermon was preached at that church on September 25, 1994.