

# The Pearl of Great Price

## Preface: Readings

*The First Preface is an edition of a much longer article by Stephanie Salter, a newspaper columnist that I first read in the San Francisco Examiner back in 1996, the date of this particular piece, but she is found in many newspapers around the nation*

In 1936, Heinrich Himmler established the Third Reich's Central Intelligence Agency for the Struggle Against Homosexuality and Abortion. In a February 1937 address to SS Leaders, Himmler laid out the logic of part of the struggle: he authorized the "extinguishing of abnormal life" i.e. the murder of homosexuals.

Germany had lost two million men in the Great War. Meanwhile, the estimated number of German homosexuals was two million. "In other words," (Himmler continued) "a lack of four million men capable of having sex (with women) has upset the sexual balance sheet of Germany, and will result in catastrophe."

Lest anyone doubt the significance of his phrase "sexual balance," he said, "There are those homosexuals who take the view 'What I do is my own private business, a purely private matter.' However, all things which take place in the sexual sphere are not the private affair of the individual, but signify the life and death of the nation."

Sixty years later, in May, 1996, Oklahoma Representative Steve Largent, co-sponsored a bill—actually titled "The Defense of Marriage Act" - that would ban same-sex marriage by defining marriage as the "legal union between one man and one woman." At a press conference, Largent said, "The bond between man and woman exists as the foundation of American society. As the family goes, so goes the nation." Lesbians and gays should not be allowed to marry, he said, because they "don't procreate."

Now no sane person would argue that a strong nation does not need strong families. The screwy thinking today, from a vote hungry Democratic president as well as from Republicans like Largent, is in the idea that strong families come in but one, rigidly defined standard model.

The reality, according to the US Census Bureau, is that strong, weak and average families come in many varieties. Forty nine percent of United States children live in a family structure other than the alleged perfection of mom and dad under one roof. Further, as any American can attest, many strong happy families have no children, and don't plan to. How long before the status used by the likes of Largent- "they don't procreate" - will deny legal marriage benefits to childless heterosexuals?

It is 1996. This great (and prosperous) country of ours still staggers under debt. Medicare and Social Security are on the verge of extinction. Millions of job-holding, tax-paying Americans have little or no medical insurance. We have the highest per-capita rate of

incarceration of any civilized nation. The drug addicted and insane live in ever-increasing numbers on our city streets. The violent virus of racism snarls beneath the anxious hum of daily life. The gap between the wealthy and the poor has never been wider, or more abetted by government.

Threats to the stability of the family are plentiful and severe. So what do Congress and the President hail as protection and reinforcement for the family? A ban on two people who want to officially pledge their loyalty and commitment to one another. Himmler would have seen the logic.

*The Second Preface is a story or parable attributed to Jesus of Galilee; it is found in several gospels, but the form in which I am giving it is considered by critical scholars to be an authentic utterance of the Galilean wisdom teacher. The Quelle, or Source called Q, a collection of Jesus' Jewish teaching stories and proverbs that lies behind our present gospel editions, is dated usually to around the year 50 of our era.*

There once was a pearl trader who found an expensive, perfect pearl. So he sells all of his stock in trade for that one perfect pearl.

## **Talk**

Several years ago, I was privileged to attend the wedding of a member of the congregation I used to serve. She was widowed after a 53-year marriage; a few years after her late husband's memorial, she met a man she came to love, a widower himself, and they decided to get married. The husband's minister, also a Unitarian Universalist, officiated at the rite.

They were in their late seventies, and yet the strength of this new relationship completely transformed them both. I saw two twenty-year old "kids" living behind their eyes. This gave me no little joy.

The same day I attended that wedding, two gay men called me at home wondering if I might officiate at their wedding "as soon as possible." One of them, you see, had been given a short time to live...no, not AIDS, kidney problems. They had only been together for a few months when this health problem showed up. They had hoped to have a more elaborate ceremony one day, but the life-threatening condition changed their future plans. I told them I would be glad to come over to the hospital to officiate. And as I talked with these strangers on the phone, I was repeatedly touched by their mutual affection. This, too, brought me great joy.

The sheer power of marriage was evident to me in both these cases. But as you know, all over this country, including here in Ohio, state legislatures are tripping over themselves to join the Federal Government in a simple proclamation. To wit: the first couple I mentioned, even though they will not procreate, may make a marriage, whereas the second couple I mentioned, though they will not procreate, may not. Why? Their love is perceived as a threat to the nation.

Part of me grieves that this is so.

Part of me, if you'll excuse my language, doesn't give a damn.

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First, this morning, the part of me that doesn't give a damn.

I never had a wedding ceremony, but I was married nonetheless for 16 years to a man named Phil. We are no longer together, but I think it's fair to say we still care about each other very much.

Phil did not want to have a ceremony. Oh, we talked about it, and he was very active in his church, a United Church of Christ congregation, which supported such ceremonies. But, for many reasons I will not go into here, Phil just didn't want a public ceremony, and I eventually acquiesced.

This reluctance about public wedding ceremonies had little to do with Phil being gay. After all, I have officiated at hundreds and hundreds of "legal" heterosexual marriages. And I tell you now, if I had a dime from every husband who thought there might be a way to wiggle out of such a ceremony, I would be in Tahiti right now with the money I'd have piled up from all the bribes. On the other hand, if I had just a quarter from every husband and wife who have told me with mock surprise that "everything is different now since the ceremony," I'd be on the beach in Bali in a hammock between two palm trees.

And though I agree that sometimes ceremonies can serve to demarcate differing stages in a relationship, I also agree with Phil that ceremonies, in and of themselves, don't make a marriage, any more than ordination makes ministry. If someone comes to you and cries about a great sadness in his or her life, you don't have to call a minister, priest or rabbi just because we are ordained. Your own shoulder, offered to blot their tears, provides a fine and very real ministry, I assure you.

But this business of marriage ceremonies is even more interesting from an historical perspective. History reveals that for over a thousand years, the Christian church itself didn't even *offer* marriage ceremonies. There were no such things. Oh, people got married, yes, but not in church or with clerical rite. Marriages were arranged by families according to financial or clan concerns that had nothing to do with something so ephemeral as love. Or the groom simply kidnapped the bride, or bought her from a person of the same class; or they just moved in together, with or without a party. The word "woman," in modern English, comes from the old English word "wife-man," revealing that the woman in heterosexual marriage was only valued as the property of the man. She was "given in marriage," not as a sovereign person, but only as an asset and a heir-maker. The awful phrase in the traditional English ceremony from the Book of Common Prayer, 1549 "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" is a linguistic fossil of this reality.

The first religious marriage ceremonies are not recorded till the Middle Ages. It was only in 1076, a thousand years after the first gospel was written down, that Archbishop Landfranc of England ordered priests to “bless marriages.” This was not a church ceremony...the couple just received a benediction on the steps of the church.

However, things changed around the 1200's. Around that time there were large groups of heretics in Italy, France, Bosnia and Bulgaria who taught that the material world was basically evil, and that bringing babies into the world was not the best thing to do.

So their religious leaders lived lives of complete celibacy, although the members of the congregations were allowed to marry and raise children. Amazingly for that era, these heretics considered women to be sovereign equals to men. They even served as clergy,

and as overseeing leaders, that is, bishops. And it was from the ranks of these heretics that we get the Troubadours, the famous singers who wrote about the chaste love of men and women with popular and beautiful melodies. These were the first true love songs in Western Europe; but they celebrated not sex, but love itself, as an emotional and deliberate commitment between equals and friends.

Leadership men and women among these heretics lived, not as husband and wife, but as brother and sister. This ascetic lifestyle really irritated the church government in Rome, which by this time had come *to preach* the celibacy of its clergy, but which invested in brothels for them under the table. The common people, always hoping that religious leaders might actually practice what they preached, abandoned the church in droves and joined up with the heretics, attracted to their consistency, and their doctrines of equality and love.

The church in Rome responded to this teaching in two ways.

First, they sent a mercenary army in a crusade against the heretics. The soldiers killed them all, men, women and children, at least in France and north Italy. The Bosnian heretics they largely captured in raids and used as slaves.

Second, the church, (perhaps, we can hope, somewhat chastened by the sheer horror of the number of people they killed,) began to formulate an elaborate sacramental system. They declared that marriage between a man and a woman was a sacrament, that is, an outpouring of grace on earth. They furthermore allowed that love and devotion in marriage was more important than class or wealth, which upset all the barons and kings who thought they controlled all the European family systems for their own profit. Third, they said that the couple alone made the sacrament. The priest was only a witness, and did not effect the marriage, merely recognized it. This began to lift up the status of women considerably. But the secular state didn't like it one bit.

So then the Protestant Reformation begins in the late fifteenth century. The reformers abolished the sacramental system straightaway. They redefined marriage as a freely entered covenant, not as a sacrament ordained by God. And, because it was primarily the princes and gentry that supported their reforms against the Church of Rome, the reformers gave over all legal aspects of marriage to the state. They affirmed that the marriage is spiritually witnessed in the church, but legally created only by the laws of the state.

Henry the VIII certainly made sure that the state had control over the church so that he could divorce his wives in good conscience when he wasn't having them beheaded for treason. Henry's marriages, in fact, are one of the things for which he is famous. I'd wager, since there is an awful lot of combined historical information gathered in an assembly of this size, that if I asked you, you could give me the names of all six of Henry's wives. (Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Katherine Howard, and Catherine Parr.)

But lest you think I have moved off the topic of two people of the same gender living the married life, let me ask you another historical question: Can any of you name the man that was the loving companion to Leonardo Da Vinci for over 25 years, da Vinci who lived at the same time as Henry the VIII? And let me tell you, Leonardo's relationship lasted a good deal longer in fact, than any of Henry's marriages. (His name was Salai) The very idea that this is not common knowledge poses the problem I am addressing today very well. A whole vast history of same-gender relationships has been deliberately obscured off the face of the earth.

But Leonardo and Salai didn't have a ceremony, you say. Perhaps not, but it does not mean that folks were not thinking of such things in those days. Just a few years after Leonardo and Salai had both died, in Rome itself, at the church of San Giovanni, priests openly solemnized the marriages between two members of the same gender right in the sanctuary. Of course, it wasn't too long before the couple and the clergymen who performed the ceremony were all burned alive in the piazza not far from the church. And that too helps to express the problem that prompts my talk this morning.

As I said, since the days of the Reformation, marriages between a man and a woman have been in the provenance of the state, at least in Europe. Even a common law marriage, a form of marriage that survived from the days before there were ceremonies of any kind, and which has a place in English and therefore American law, is a legal form of marriage only because of that law. Most Christian churches since the Reformation call living together without benefit of ceremony "living in sin" not marriage. But the churches can whine all they want...it is the so-called secular state that controls and defines marriage to this very day, not them. They gave up control during the Reformation. When I solemnize the marriage of a man and woman in our church Meeting House, I can do so, not because I am ordained by a congregation, but only because I paid a fee to the state of Ohio for the privilege of

witnessing a state-blessed legal transaction. When I do weddings, I am a legally only a witness for the state.

The state can decide capriciously that common law marriages are marriage. Or it can decide they are not, as has happened in many states of this union. The state can decide that brown skinned folks and beige skinned folks may not marry, as they have many times in our history, or they can decide otherwise. Even in California, the imagined font of so many egalitarian ideals, marriage between blacks and whites was prohibited by law until 1947, which, I hope I don't have to tell you, is not all that long ago.

But you know, people of every color fell in love and got married anyway...often without benefit of law. This is why I am convinced that *Romeo and Juliet* is one of Shakespeare's most inspired bits of theater...thousands of people who are not supposed to get married for all kinds of ridiculous reasons have nonetheless chosen to get married...and have suffered for it.

And so it has been with men and men and women with women. They have always joined in the "honorable estate" of marriage, with or without ceremony, and always without the state's poor little blessing. Some have even been luckier than *Romeo and Juliet* and lived to old age. In our own century, I think of composers Samuel Barber and Gian Carlo Menotti, together for many decades, and composer Benjamin Britten and tenor Peter Pears. Not far from that church in Rome where men could get married for a while in the 1570's, Gore Vidal has lived with his partner for 30 years. Gertrude Stein lived with Alice B. Toklas for 39 years. Christopher Isherwood, the author whose short stories led to the musical *Cabaret*, and artist Don Bachardy met in 1953 and spent their lives together. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon have both lived together for forty five years and revolutionized women's health care on the West Coast. The chief cultural hero of my heart, Bill T. Jones, used to kiss his life-partner Arne Zane at the end of each dance concert they did, and I've told Bill many times how much that meant to me, how it was a saving event in my life. Then there is Arthur C. Clarke and his *bisexual* partner in life, Hector Ekanayake. And even in my own Unitarian Universalist history, King John Sigismund, known as the first and only Unitarian king that ever lived--he was king of Transylvania during the days of Suleiman the Magnificent...was also in a relationship with a man, and never married a woman. He spent his brief days with Gaspar Bekes before he died of illness at age 31. He may have been the first Unitarian king, but he was hardly the first gay ruler...witness the Emperor Hadrian and his lover Antinoos, the bisexual Alexander and Bagoas, Richard the Lionheart, Edward the Second, and a couple of hundred other names which are still known to high school graduates in our benighted days.

So the main reason I don't give a damn that the state does not approve or support gay and lesbian relationships with the institution of marriage is that we'll just do it anyway. Because they dared for a century to deny Euro-American and African-American heterosexuals the right to marry, I don't trust their moral sense at all. It's hard to imagine they would make any improvements on what gay and lesbian folks

have done for themselves anyway. We can use other legal means after all to get most of the benefits of legal marriage if we really put a lot time and money into it...even the right to visit our spouses in the hospital. Anyway, where does anyone get off dictating who can commit to whom anyway? The hubris is remarkable, even shocking, when I think of it.

I intend to do what is good, and not what the bought and sold State says is right. I will serve Love, (or God, if you will) not the cringing politicians of this nation. I want to live an ethical life based on humane reverence for the realities of real lives. I have no intention of living an expedient life based on the innuendo politics of our day, or, God help us, some posturing TV minister's cruel and idolatrous way of using the tortured scriptures. The call to live such a life...and please note that I have a life, not a lifestyle... in the face of the state's frown is not going to be easy, but who ever said that doing the right thing is a piece of cake?

For some reason, my parents knew an awful lot of childless heterosexual couples when I was growing up. Whether these couples wanted children and could not have them or not, I cannot say. It's not important. All I know is that my parents never once suggested that I should pity them, or think their life was tragic or lacking. We knew single people too, divorced folks, and elders living alone, and families where no one was related by blood. Not once did my parents ever apologize for any of these people in advance when we went to visit them, or suggest something was wrong.

So I am convinced Stephanie Salter is right. The shape of the family in this nation is varied. Condemning family shapes and forms, while ignoring the national debt, addiction and alcohol problems, domestic violence, health insurance debacles, gaps between rich and poor, and catastrophic ignorance about race, class and cultural differences, is outrageous. These are the true threats to healthy, multi-shaped families. But what does the state want to do instead? Define as a major threat to the family two men who love each other or two women who love each other. The absurdity of this infuriates me so much I get exhausted just carrying that much wrath around all the time.

So you see, in the end, I just don't care what the state does. It hurts too much to care. Fighting against the tidal waves of biblical literalists who have taken over our national culture, removing science *and* their own children from the public schools, pushing over and over again in public the view that all human beings are entirely worthless without God's grace....this requires an exhausting and constant energy for each of us to face every day without paralyzing exasperation. I confess it leaves me weary. So part of me, for health's sake, has to simply give up and not care, and live my daily life deliberately outside the range of their pitying smiles and protests of "Don't you know we only say this because we love you?"

Sorry, telling me I am worthless both by nature and by reason of my love is not at all a way to say you love me. It's a way to dismiss me completely as a human being.

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Ah, but you know, I do care.  
I do give a damn.  
I care a lot, and I grieve deeply and am sad.  
This is the other side of my coin, and I need to address that, too.

Let me do that by outlining my own history of solemnizing same sex marriages.

I did my first such ceremony at First Church in San Francisco in July of 1979. I had never seen such a ceremony before, so I created one from scratch. As I processed up the aisle to the altar in front of the two men, I wept. I felt as if I had lived to see the dawn of what some Jews call the Messianic Age, and what the New Testament refers to as the Realm or Empire of God. I felt that the whole world was created anew, and that justice actually had a chance to exist in reality, not as an abstraction.

Later, when I found out that Harry Scholefield, minister emeritus of that very church, had performed such ceremonies back in the 50's when no one could even think of such a thing, I wept again for the sheer compassion and courage he showed without anyone around him to support him.

I officiated at twenty more such weddings before I left San Francisco for Hayward in 1980, my first solo settlement as a parish minister.

Hayward was a culturally mixed, working class community, very different from upscale San Francisco. I was not sure how open the lesbian and gay community in Hayward was. Things seemed much more restrained there than in the big city. Nevertheless, two women in the community, not church members, asked me to officiate at their ceremony, and I was glad to say yes. Like many Hayward residents, they were working class, barely so. They chose to have a potluck reception since they could afford little else. They were so poor, in fact, I did not charge them to do the ceremony. I did like them immensely and looked forward to the wedding day.

On the day of the wedding, when I arrived at the simple Meeting House we used, I fell into shock. They had put a gaudy cross up in front on the altar, even though neither of them claimed any Christian faith. One of them was dressed in a black tux, the other in white gown...they were the traditional bride and groom. They had given me no indication of their arrangements during our counseling sessions. The bride was walked down the aisle by a man dressed as "the Father." The groomsmen and bridesmaids spread out in borrowed tuxes and pastel chiffon. A friend of theirs hauled in an electric organ to play the traditional *Wedding March*. I was appalled. I had never seen such a thing at San Francisco, where every couple I married slaved for months over "meaningful" and "unique" ceremonies with *all* traditional references deliberately expunged.

Nevertheless, I just kept my mouth shut and did the ceremony we had agreed upon. But I did decide to go to the reception, something I hardly ever have time to do. I didn't have time that day either, but I was now interested in finding out more about what I had just seen.

The potluck reception was held in the large back room of a smoky bar. Men and women of all colors and cultures gathered there, the exact demography of Hayward in miniature. African Americans, Americans of Haitian, Samoan, Chinese, Korean or Japanese descent, Euro-Americans...all were there. Women in wheelchairs, grandmothers with walkers, children running wild, and folks of every sexual orientation chowed down on the Swanson's macaroni and cheese and trays of cured salami. Then came the dancing, with hunched and happy 78-year-old Japanese men dancing jitterbugs with leather-vested lesbian motorcyclists in t-shirts. There was joy and more joy everywhere. It was a portrait of the Hayward working class in miniature. It was also a portrait, I thought then, of the Millennium, that Jewish Messianic Age I mentioned before, that New Testament vision of a divine Age of Justice and Peace, the so called Empire of God. It was, in short, a portrait of how the world could and should be....a rainbow of joy, of love, of gladness.

Then it hit me. I had been suffering from a class prejudice. I had forgotten that the reason upper middle class and well-to-do folks *of any sexual orientation* spend so much time putting meaning and creativity in their wedding ceremonies is because *they can afford to. Money wise, time wise, education wise, support wise.* They are often self-determined, self-confident, and do not need to turn to *others* to grant them their own validity.

But among the disenfranchised, there is rarely such support. There are no invitations to self-realization and all the fancy words we use for self-determination: "I will do as I choose." Instead, we have a reality, not of independence, but of plain ordinary dependence. These two women, I realized, were unsure of what they were doing, *not emotionally, but socially.* They were not sure if they had the right to do such a thing. So they chose to use all of the common assurances of so-called "traditional marriages" to bestow social legitimacy to what they chose to do. A father, a cross, a tux, gender specific dress...all of this legitimized their love for each other in the eyes of the world...their world.

They were in no way mocking traditional weddings as I had foolishly first thought. *They were only borrowing the signs and symbols of legitimacy.*

It was then I knew how sad I could be. That's when I knew how much I care about this subject.

That's when I knew I wanted to help make a world where self-determination, and the stubbornness of purpose and self-assertion I can afford to feel, is available to everyone. No one should have to beg and submit in order to live with the person they love. No one.

And no one should be turned away from hospital beds where their partners lie sick, or have half of their furniture hauled away from the house by the parents of a deceased spouse, who won't even speak to them. No one should have to pay insurance twice, or pay gigantic legal fees to arrange to get the rights a heterosexual married couple gets just by having the law on their side. The laws around committed partnership are either equal for all, or they aren't laws but legalized harassment.

And let's not have a discussion around the word "marriage" either. That whole language issue is just a red herring. There will always be lots of important words that folks use differently for compelling philosophical and personal reasons. Arguing about them with rancor and righteousness is just what the congresses and assemblies of this nation would like you to do. If we fight each other about final words, fight each other about whether the word "marriage" is too patriarchal or outmoded or controlling or whatever, they know they can sit back and rest, because they're smart enough to know that circular arguments siphon off energy best. I say, let's use a hundred words. But let's *do* a hundred things as well, to confront this issue because we care enough about our children and their children to try and hand them a better future. A future, I pray, different from the present, where I have to spend at least part of my time not giving a damn just so I can get through the day.

And what about the title of this sermon? The pearl of great price? Oh that's just the old fashioned translation of the title of the parable I read earlier. A pearl merchant gives up his whole stock so he can own this wonderful, perfect, expensive pearl. "The pearl of great price," as they elegantly said in King James's day, (King James who himself fancied only members of his own gender.)

But Jesus told that parable for a reason. Think about it. That pearl merchant may love the gorgeous baseball sized pearl he bought one day, but in the end he will have to sell it back and return to his stock of little, more ordinary pearls. Why? So that he can buy and sell and exchange them at an ordinary rate. The pearl merchant cannot, after all, eat the expensive pearl, or sleep under it. He can only look at it and admire it. He cannot make a living with it. That requires ordinary human exchange.

The same thing is true of same-gender marriage. I tell you truly, one day the states that make up this great nation of ours *will* bless same gender marriage. Oh, not for many years. Italy and Germany will pass laws before we do. Even Brazil and Argentina. Holland, Belgium, Germany and the Scandanavian nations are already years ahead of us in this regard. But make no bones about it, one day, same gender marriage will be a reality.

And when we get that pearl of great price, what will we do with it? Will it bring us perfect peace? The Messianic Age? The Realm of God? Hardly. You see same-gender marriage is not really much different than mixed-gender marriage. As I said, whether you want to use the word "marriage" or not does not concern me a great deal. No matter what word you use, when folks live together with commitment and

love, still, someone has to take out the garbage, someone has to walk the dog, or put the kids to bed, or have conferences with the teacher. Both parties have to kiss and make up, fight and play, struggle to understand each other and struggle with insecurities. In the end, Jesus' parable helps us remember to think things through. The pearl of great price...the great gift of same sex marriage... will have to be replaced with the smaller less expensive pearls of everyday life, the exchanges and compromises and little conversations that make love and life what it is.

But you know, that's all I really want.