

The Natural Theology of Getting Married

June 10, 2012

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Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here
on beautiful sunny day
after a bright and beautiful week,
to worship, to approach the near summer's gifts
with grateful hearts,
and to claim for ourselves the transforming joy
of deciding to be honest and loving in our lives.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Sequence

Just because the waves will wash away my footprints in the sand doesn't mean I should never walk along a beach.

Just because an election comes out differently than I had hoped doesn't mean I need to toss my convictions in the waste basket.

Just because a relationship of love or friendship does not last forever doesn't mean that love and friendship have lost all meaning.

Just because life, as they say, is not fair, doesn't mean I have to stop living in such a way as to help make it more fair.

Just because cunning politicians are trying to roll back all of Dr. King's ideas about fair access for all, or are spending fortunes to effect the political process doesn't mean it's time for me to give in, give up, walk away.

Just because the glory river that historically, as the song says about the 60's, "washed us up and washed us down" – when women claimed their voice and their power, minorities gained the ballot box and power, and gender and sexually diverse cultures flowed into the mainstream doesn't mean that history has ended or the river has stopped flowing or yielding glory in our own era.

Just because songs are sung and words are spoken doesn't mean that silence isn't their equal in gifts for the spirit.

silence

Just because we are here doesn't mean that the rest of our lives exist only outside these walls. In our hearts – and thus in this room – are all whom we know and love, all for whom we grieve, all with whom we struggle. We remember them now within this sacred enclosure of silence, that our full lives might be touched by all that is said and done today.

naming

Just because we all have different voices doesn't mean that some of us can't get together and make beautiful harmonies full of power and vision.

Laura Nyro, composer and author of our anthem this morning, was a remarkable musician. Shy in person, eclectic in her musical styles, she was a bisexual, married to David Bianchini for three years, bearing her son Gil with another man, Harindra Singh, and living out most of her life with Maria Desiderio. This song comes from New York Tendaberry, my favorite album of hers.

The First Reading *this morning is an excerpt from the sermon offered at the Service of Thanksgiving for the Queen on this last Tuesday morning at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, by Rowan Williams, the out-going Archbishop of Canterbury. Because I had a hard time sleeping that night, I was up and got to hear it live on the BBC as the sun was rising in Columbus.*

There is something transforming and exhilarating about the prospect of a whole community rejoicing together – being glad of each other's happiness and safety. This alone is what will save us from the traps of ludicrous financial greed, of environmental recklessness, of collective fear of strangers and collective contempt for the unsuccessful and marginal – and many more things that we see far too much of, around us and within us. Its most lasting memorial would be the rebirth of an energetic, generous spirit of dedication to the common good and the public service, the rebirth of a recognition that we live less than human lives if we think just of our own individual good. Listen to St Paul: "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given us – the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Outdo one another in showing honour; extend hospitality to strangers. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.' Dedication to the health and well-being of a community is all this – and more."

The Second Reading *consists of writings about marriage by the late Muriel Davies. Muriel was active in the All Souls congregation in Washington DC which her husband A. Powell Davies served for many years. She helped him found several new congregations in the DC area, and after her husband died, she worked in one of those congregations as their Religious Education Director. She was ordained by that congregation when she was 100 years old, and was immediately named Minister Emerita. She died at 103 a few years ago.*

It used to be thought that marriage was part of the permanent structure of the universe, like the cycle of the seasons or the rising of the sun. Marriage is nothing of the kind. There is no such thing as a single pattern of normal marriage. Furthermore, marriage is not dependable, and, in spite of the storybooks, it is not like the nesting of birds.

Marriage is a very recent development – particularly monogamous marriage – a matter of an uneasy few thousand years at best against previous millions – and therefore extremely unstable. It does not work automatically at all. And it is not instinctive. Mating is instinctive, but marriage is not. And the difference is measured by the entire scope of civilization. It is not instinctive to be civilized – it has to be learned – and just as it is difficult to be civilized, so it is difficult to be married.

Nothing matrimonial is absolutely certain. Different kinds of people make different sorts of marriages. For a good beginning, physical attraction and compatibility are about equally necessary.

A marriage without physical attraction is almost hopeless from the beginning. A marriage with *only* physical attraction becomes hopeless after a short time. Only upon the dual basis of attraction and interests and temperaments that can be harmonized is a marriage gradually built up.

Sermon

So it's 1979, and I am sitting in my office in the first church that I served, our San Francisco congregation. I get a phone call from my secretary Mary saying that a couple of guys she didn't know wanted to speak with me. I told her to let them in. So into my office walked two men I also did not know. They were in their late twenties, I estimated – my own age back then. I had them take seats. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"We want to get married," one of them said. His name was Lauritz, and he did most of the speaking.

"Oh." I said.

Now remember, folks, in 1979, *nobody* was talking about gay marriage as far as I knew. No one. No US presidents, especially. I never even heard the idea *once* in my decidedly radical seminary. I never saw any books calling for it as a "right" in the famous gay-oriented Walt Whitman bookstore two blocks from the church. I *could* find essays which offered blistering critiques of legal marriage as a narrowly heterosexual concept without one whit of meaning for same-gender folks.

Again, it was 1979. Dan White had murdered Harvey Milk only a few months earlier. His verdict hadn't come down yet. The only things sexual minorities were looking for in those days were a right not to be fired, a right not to be evicted, and a right to be able to teach, to minister, to police, to serve, and yes, a right not to be shot. Who had time for thinking about marriage with all that going on? I lived with my partner back then, but I don't remember us ever thinking that marriage described what we were doing. In fact, Phil didn't even like to *attend* marriage ceremonies, even for friends.

But here, within this context and history, were two men in front of me who simply asked me to do a wedding ceremony for them. I was taken completely off guard by their request. But I managed to say: "Well, I guess we can make that work somehow." I didn't know how I was going to do that, having never even seen an example of such a ceremony, nor having ever even imagined one. But I'd figure it out, I affirmed.

Lauritz told me that day he had been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, namely, he had been raised a Mormon. For him, marriage was not "til death do us part" but, as he said, for "time and eternity." I reminded him I was not a Latter Day Saint bishop, nor was our building a Mormon temple. But he insisted on that decidedly Mormon concept as *central* to his own understanding of marriage. This surprised me, since a few years earlier, he told me, he had actually requested his local bishop to convene a council of excommunication so that he could officially be thrown out of the church for being gay. He was. Amazing! I for one am *always* amazed by the ways people deal with the difficulties of their upbringing.

When I officiated at Lauritz and Michael's actual ceremony in the church, the two men on the chancel before me now vested in their simple suits, earnest, intent, it suddenly occurred to me what I was doing. And at that moment, tears dropped onto my cheeks as I said the words of the

ceremony. Afterward, I used my best calligraphy skills in those pre-computer days to craft them a wedding certificate, which I signed and dated, even though according to the laws of California it was just so much paper. But marriage, I realized on that day once and for all, is not paper.

When I told a friend about this wedding I conducted – a friend both gay and totally unreligious in any ordinary meaning of the term – he said, "Really? I don't think I would do such a thing if I was a minister. It seems so...so...I don't know, *unnatural* to me to think of two male figures on top of a cake, or to talk about 'two husbands.' Look, why not just let the straight folks do their thing, and we'll do ours. Whatever relationship I end up finding, I'm certainly not going to call it a marriage. Besides, what's the average length of a marriage between a man and a woman in America? Seven and half years? That makes it a tainted word for me. So I'm agi'n it."

I was a bit nonplussed by what my friend said, but I certainly didn't let it spoil my day. I remained moved by my first experience of conducting a gay wedding.

But since then, I have heard the same word my friend used – “unnatural” – used by all of the opponents of same-gender marriage – in North Carolina, recently – and here in Ohio when we passed our own local Defense of Marriage Act a few years ago. When President Obama came out in support of the idea, the word really zinged back and forth all over the media like crazy. The word is used as if everyone is supposed to know what it means. But, as usual, I'm afraid it's not that easy.

For instance, as far as I can tell, a plastic ball point pen is natural, that is, a part of nature, not unnatural. Yes, it didn't grow on a tree, or shoot from soil, but it's part of the whole we call nature, manufactured by people who are part of the natural world. A pen is certainly not supernatural. It's not a ghost. It's as much a part of the world, of nature, as are the folks who manufactured the thing, or you and me for that matter.

But I am sure when many folks use the word "natural" that is not what they mean. They tell me it's obvious to them. "Oh *you* know what I mean," they'll say to me. "Marriage is between a man and a woman and that's the way it's been since ancient times. All of this nonsense about same gender marriage is new fangled. And it's ridiculous because you don't find same gender behavior anyplace else in the natural world except among sin-perversed human beings."

Well, 100% false. 100%, not even 99%. Both assertions. Well-documented same-gender sexual and *even life-long mating behavior* can be found in all of the animal realm which engages in sexuality – cats, foxes, elephants, giraffes, dolphins, all kinds of mammals – owls, gulls, penguins, ducks, ravens – all kinds of birds, salmon, bluegills – all kinds of fish, all kinds of reptiles, all kinds of amphibians and insects all observed, documented in detail and written up.

And without even attempting to outline the lengthy history of "non-traditional" marriage in human history (from the men called in Chinese the Cut Sleeves of millennia ago, to the Boston Marriages between women a century ago), we can show from the Western scripture stories, much revered in most conservative institutions, that marriage cannot possibly be defined by religious tradition as between one man and one woman. Why? Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the great Patriarchs, all had more than one wife. King David, who had many wives, also had made a "brit" that is, a covenant – *the same word used for marriage* – with Jonathan, the crown prince. Nor can we say that Kim Kardashian is the low-water mark in disrespect for the supposed innate "dignity" of marriage, since the 8th century BCE prophet Hosea claims to have married a prostitute named Gomer who

continued her professional work apace *after* marriage – just so he could punch his preaching point home to his fellow citizens. For me at least, these stories yank the carpet out from under the proclamation that "one man and one woman has been the only natural marriage," throughout history.

Now St. Paul, in his decidedly influential Letter to Romans, uses the word "unnatural" in reference to same-gender sexual practice. This is what he meant by that. He believed (quite liberally for the day, I must say), that God can be found in the natural world just as much as God can be found in the Torah. So for Paul (who knew nothing about the same gender practices of those dolphins leaping beside his missionary boat), the reason that men are with men and women are with women in Greek culture must have something to do with their "unnatural" practice – *of carving statues and saying that these clearly fabricated statues in temples are God*. Divinity, he insisted, is found in nature *not carved*, but left alone in all of its un-tampered splendor – stars and trees and waters left undisturbed to be what they are, revealing the Creator's presence. So, he said, because the basic *religious* practices of the Greeks were unnatural – to wit, carving, painting and worshipping statues – it's no wonder people got confused about sexuality, and therefore, their same-gender activity was a sign of this religious confusion. We know now that it was Paul who was confused, not the Greek pagans.

Later, Paul's use of the word "natural" in Romans served as the foundation for what's called "natural theology" in both major Western branches of Christendom. Catholic Christians meant one thing by this phrase, Protestant Christians meant another. For Catholics, natural theology, or as its often called, *natural law*, means more of what Paul meant – leave things undisturbed. Don't try and stop pregnancy, don't try and ease a person's pain on their deathbed, and don't do anything that would get in the way of the natural course of childbirth – including same-gender sexual activity or self-pleasure.

For Protestants, and many post-Christian non-Christians like Thomas Paine, natural theology mostly had to do with being able to discover the divine outside of scripture and tradition. You didn't have to *read* about God, you can discover the Sublime by taking a walk in the forest, or noting the complexity of animal species, or staring at either an intricate spider's web, or the stars in all of their sparkling beauty...and from these not-textual observations, you can discern that there is a higher power, a God, behind it all.

Again, as someone who can't think of a single thing that is outside of the whole, outside of nature, neither of these two things speak to me. By the terms of the first, surgery is unnatural, so if your appendix is infected, or your new baby started to grow in your fallopian tube, you'll simply have to die. This is senseless.

And, the second way of looking at natural theology doesn't work for me either, for it arbitrarily treats the forest, or the web and stars, as if they WERE texts – texts referring to something else, namely God.

I can shiver in rapt wonder under the stars – in fact, I *always* do, no exceptions – but I don't want to confuse my personal biological shiver with Ultimacy, with God. I'm not debating the existence of God here – which is *always* a futile and silly thing to do in my book. I'm simply saying that natural theology doesn't help me when I think of ideas like either God, *or* same-gender marriage.

Marriage. Muriel Davies was right when she offered her own critique of natural theology in relationship to marriage: *It used to be thought that marriage was part of the permanent structure of the universe, like the cycle of the seasons or the rising of the sun. Marriage is nothing of the kind. There is no such thing as a single pattern of normal marriage.*

Exactly. Two men, two women, a man and woman – all normal. And she continues: *Marriage is a very recent development – particularly monogamous marriage – a matter of an uneasy few thousand years at best against previous millions – and therefore extremely unstable. It does not work automatically at all. And it is not instinctive. Mating is instinctive, but marriage is not. Different kinds of people make different sorts of marriages.*

As fine a statement about marriage as I have seen.

Is a marriage where one partner expects the other partner to always stay home, a marriage? Yes. Not my kind of marriage, certainly, but there is no central definition applying to all people that I can find.

Does it have to do with love? Well, sure, I suppose, but in the past, when marriages were arranged by families and not blessed by official religious rites, that "love" usually showed up toward the *end* of the married life, not at the beginning. It grew and developed.

And strangely for some, the Western Church wasn't terribly interested in marriage ceremonies till almost 13 hundred years after the death of Jesus. Virginity was favored by the church – not virginity in our modern, and I think, rather silly understanding of it as something merely biological, but virginity as a *way of life* for women and men outside the institution of marriage, marriage which the earliest Christians found mostly unequal, and often demeaning to the women.

And to be sure, for thousands of years, women were often simply sold as property in marriages, from ancient all the way to modern times. The English word "woman" itself comes from the two words "wife and man" – the wifeman. Remember how clerics used to say "I now pronounce you man and wife?" instead of husband and wife? It's changed now, but only in the last 30 years. A wife was mere property, and her meaning was found only in her relationship to the male of the species. She was the wife-man. This is something still found clearly in Latter Day Saint theology. Women can get to the highest of the three heavens only if they are married and "sealed for time and eternity" – to a man.

The first English ceremony, in the Book of Common Prayer of 1549, doesn't say a single thing about love. It mentions the giving of "earthly goods," and it uses the very poetic "with my body I thee worship," but it doesn't assume love is part of the picture, only physical affection and economic sharing.

Marriage was not a legal, state-run thing until after Martin Luther, who insisted it was not a religious thing at all. The idea of registering with city hall, or the marriage bureau is VERY recent, in fact. The churches, both Protestant and Catholic used to use the BANNS, meaning, a potential marriage was announced three times in church, and, if no one objected, that was legal enough.

And lest you think that marriage was only a Christian custom, Jewish marriage has a complex history too. It was always on Wednesdays or Thursdays, and always took place outdoors, *never* in a

synagogue. The ancient ceremony of the breaking of the glass was common from the second century on, but it wasn't a religious rite, but a rite of mourning for the loss of nation and temple, a rite, as I said to the children this morning, blessing the couple for daring to partner in a world where the center of meaning can be torn down to rubble just like that. The ceremony needed family elders, but rabbis were not essential to the ritual until the 19th century. Interestingly one of the ceremonial customs that was dropped in this century was the Mazol Tov, now reduced to a congratulatory shout, where the bride danced, one-by-one, with all the women who had come to the ceremony. Again, the only paperwork was the *kethuvah*, the marriage agreement between the couple and their families. The state wasn't interested in regulating marriage and handing out privileges on paper until modern times. In fact, even as late as the 1980's common law marriage – that is marriages entered into privately without ceremony or legal paper work, were the norm in some states. According to the way the laws were written, in fact, even though I was partnered with a man for 16 years, I must have been *legally* married to him according to the common law practice. Those laws were changed within my own memory in most every state.

And so here's mostly how it's been throughout history, men with men common law, women with women common law, and men with women common law. Often, communities knew about these arrangements, and throughout history, many same gender couples were welcomed into society without incident, although mostly we hear the opposite story.

And I think the Archbishop of Canterbury touched on this social element in his marvelous, if controversial, sermon for the Queen last Tuesday. ("Too liberal!" the conservative press whined.)

"There is something transforming and exhilarating" he said, "about the prospect of a whole community rejoicing together – *being glad of each other's happiness and safety*. This alone is what will save us from the traps of ludicrous financial greed, of environmental recklessness, of collective fear of strangers and collective contempt for the unsuccessful and marginal – and many more things that we see far too much of, around us and within us."

He then spoke of the "common good" which he styled as a "rebirth of a recognition that we live less than human lives if we think just of our own individual good." "Listen to St Paul," he says – and when he said that, I found I didn't want to, since this is the same St. Paul who in the same Letter to the Romans, completely misunderstood same-gender sexuality as well as the word "natural," thus gumming up theology for a couple of thousand years. But, after realizing it was arrogant to hold Paul to modern discoveries, I decided not to turn up my nose in superior righteousness and listen, and this is what Paul wrote: "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given us: the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness ... Outdo one another in showing honour ... extend hospitality to strangers ... Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another ... take thought for what is noble in the sight of all."

These words of Paul well-summarize the theology that propels me to support same-gender marriage in every state, in the whole of this nation. To recognize, echoing the archbishop, that when we concentrate on serving the common good – that is, good *that is for everyone, not a few* – we put greed on notice...since greed lifts some above others. We put fear of strangers on notice, since no stranger is outside the human race; we put environmental recklessness on notice, because the natural world is a common home for all, not the private profit domain for some; and we put contempt for the marginal on notice, since in a world where everyone belongs, nobody can be marginalized.

Same gender marriage is simply the right step in the right direction, leaving behind us, in its wake, its distorted forms: arranged marriages, forced marriages, ownership marriages, single-race marriages, single ethnicity marriages, and every form of marriage which keeps some people marginalized and subservient.

The first same gender couple I married, Lauritz and Michael, are no longer alive. They fell during the early HIV years. But their simple ask in my office 33 years ago, "We want to get married" will live in my heart for the rest of my days.

Offering

All may participate in the life of the congregation with the gifts of their mind and hearts, their skills and time, their wisdom and their vulnerability, the gifts of their livelihood and the gifts of their commitment. Whether on Sundays at this time, or on Wednesday afternoon, whether by electronic means or gifts in a wicker basket, we offer of ourselves to make community happen.

Closing Prayer: Love Feast for Pride Week

Let everyone come from east and south and west and north to sit together at the table of tomorrow's feast. This morning through word, silence and song the table has been set, and so now I offer you the sweet, sweet foretaste of equality, the enticing bread of life that is to be shared with one and all without exception, the fruit of letters, legislations, grass roots efforts and impassioned writing and giving, the brimming cup of life which remains ever fresh and full to those who admit their thirst. The full plate of love's nourishment I here-by offer to all. Taste and eat, the supper is ready.

Blessing from UU Ray Bradbury 1920-2012

The world is more fantastic than any dream. 1953

The universe created us. We are an audience for miracles. 2008

A life's work should be based on love. 2008.