

“Why Straight People Need to Hear Another Gay Pride Sermon”

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Rev. Erika Hewitt

I'm happy to share worship together with you today, before I take a couple of weeks of vacation. I'll be back here in three Sundays, after some restorative time on the Oregon coast.

I've been a quasi-resident of the Oregon coast for half my life – sometimes making several trips there a year – and have come to know many good people in Waldport, where my parents live, and in Newport, the larger town to the north. But I've never met Mr. James D. Gano, a Newport resident who came to my attention this spring. You'll probably never meet James Gano, either – but you'll hear about him this morning, because he reminded me how important it is to be a straight ally of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

On February 1st of this year, the state of Oregon legally recognized same-sex “domestic partnerships.” That legislation was less bold than California's legal triumph, which took effect at 5 p.m. on Monday: the right of gay and lesbian couples to legally marry. As many of you know, there was a joyful and celebratory mood across our state on Tuesday, as hundreds of long-time couples sought the constitutional right that had long been denied them. I was thrilled to be present at our Santa Barbara courthouse as a handful of couples – some of them together for two and three decades – took their first steps into married life.

And so, despite the fact that “domestic partnership” doesn't carry quite the legal and social cache as “marriage,” the gay and lesbian community in Oregon – and their allies – have held their own celebrations this year. Among the couples who filed their paperwork during that first week in February were Kae Bates and Jeanne St. John. These two women have been together for 25 years, and they happen to be members of my parents' church.

Let's pause there, just to fully appreciate the cultural divide between Santa Barbara – with its progressive politics, liberal congregations, and tolerant environment – and Newport, Oregon, a small town in a remote area of a very blue-collar state. Not every gay and lesbian couple who sought a marriage license in California this week was met with support and love; we need to remember that we live in a liberal bubble. Although gay and lesbian couples were applauded and treated civilly (pun intended) as they requested marriage licenses in Santa Barbara, that's not been true everywhere.

Within their conservative town, Kae and Jeanne were fortunate to find a safe and affirming spiritual home at St. Luke's-by-the-Sea Episcopalian Church. When that fact appeared in the *Newport News Times*,¹ along with the photo of the women receiving their “domestic partners” documents, James Gano wrote a letter to the editor (I told you we'd get back to

him) – a letter, no doubt, similar to many other expressions of protest that have been registered this year. Here’s an excerpt of Mr. Gano’s letter:²

God’s holy word is the standard for every life... [S]ex and marriage are only to be between a man and a woman... God clearly defines a domestic partnership or anyone who participates in one as an abomination. This is not my judgment or any made by man [sic]....

I encourage all who read this...to pick up the Bible,... and read God’s word for yourself. Call sin a sin, repent, and put your life back into Jesus’ hands. I also encourage the leadership at St. Luke by the Sea Episcopal Church..., where the two women... “are active in the congregation and feel accepted” to take a loving, but serious look at I Corinthians 5:9-12. I pray that more people, including myself, would look to God’s word daily, and trust it as the only good and moral guide....

We all know, because we’ve seen or read it ourselves, that James Gano is on the mild end of those who use their religion as a wedge for intolerance and discrimination. Hear this carefully: that in response to Mr. Gano’s words, I offer not an indictment of *Christianity*, but rather a careful distinction between faith and fundamentalism. I support the right of people of faith to live according to their religious values, and to voice their opinion. As a Unitarian Universalist, I don’t support the narrow interpretation of the Bible as a platform for intolerance.

In the words of Kae and Jeanne, in their own letter to the Editor,³

Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. Instead he directed his followers to serve the poor and hungry, to turn the other cheek... The Jesus we know loved extravagantly and refused to judge others... We hope Mr. Gano will come to know this Jesus and be freed from his need to judge and condemn others.

The next reason, then, that straight Unitarian Universalists need to reaffirm our role as allies and advocates of the GLBT community is that our liberal religious voice is powerful counterbalance in the chorus of Those Who Speak for God.

Our Unitarian Universalist theology draws from five centuries of liberal tradition, recognizing a God who embraces all; a Source of Life that views all people as cherished; a Mystery that delights in all forms of love and that accepts people as they are – “born right the first time,” as the bumper sticker says.

As most of you know, the name “God” is not part of my daily vocabulary, but on Tuesday I was able to say – to both couples embarking on married life together *and* quiet protesters:

“As a Unitarian Universalist, I represent a God who embraces all.” If people of faith insist on dragging religion into the arena of civil rights, we must be prepared to offer our own lived faith of acceptance and of justice.

If only gay marriage were the final frontier in the struggle for acceptance and justice – if only it were the icing on the cake (metaphor intended), instead of just a single strand of a web saturated with intolerance, injustice, and violence. Forget, for a moment, about the headlines of the week, and remember the headlines from four months ago.

On February 12th, exactly one week after Kae and Jeanne’s twenty-five year relationship was finally recognized by the state of Oregon, a gay fifteen-year old in Oxnard – who had also expressed nontraditional gender identity – was shot in the head by a classmate. Earlier that week, Lawrence King had allegedly asked his shooter (also a boy) to be his valentine. Lawrence was declared dead on February 13th,⁴ and his shooting has been deemed a hate crime.



From where it sits on my home altar, Lawrence’s photo haunts me. His cherubic smile reminds me, every time I see it, that the stakes in this struggle for the right to be who they are, and love whom they will, are ever so much higher than we’d like to think.

Lawrence’s photo reminds me, as one of *you* reminded me this week, of the tremendous loneliness, isolation, and trepidation with which gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons live their lives – never knowing who, in their community, is fully accepting of them, and who is merely tolerant.

This photo reminds me that GLBT issues enfold two intersecting realms of identity: the struggle of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals to embrace, and authentically live out their sexual orientation in relationship; and the struggle for transgender, transsexual, and questioning individuals to embrace, live authentically within, their gender identity.

I’m reminded that even in our liberal Santa Barbara bubble, some people (of all ages) are frightened by the idea of gay and lesbian individuals: of a sexual orientation beyond the straight and narrow.

I’m reminded that some people are moved to violence by their fears of those whose gender expression, and gender identity, fall beyond the strict “male” and “female” labels that our culture demands. I’ve learned, from friends and parishioners who are transgender, that some of them wish to dwell in the “middle space,” floating between “male” and “female” without claiming either, while others wish only to cross simply and cleanly from one side to the other.

I also keep this photo as a reminder that not all children will grow up to be straight. I try not to assume that all of the boys in our congregation will grow up to marry women, or that all girls will grow up to marry men. I remember that not all children will grow up to clearly identify with their born gender.

This photo reminds me that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning people of all ages – even 15 years old – have legitimate reasons to fear coming out, or living authentically. The haunting comes in when I wonder how much of the violence and intolerance that are exacted upon GLBT individuals rides on the coattails of others' silence.

Silence will not do. Bland “tolerance” is not sufficient. I’m not satisfied to be merely “supportive” of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning people. “Acceptance,” I believe, is the bare minimum of what we’re called to do.

I’ve come to understand that straight people like me need to find *active* ways to serve as allies of, and advocates for, that community: breaking silence, making the invisible visible, standing up to be counted when strength requires numbers, and using our liberal religious fluency when the language of religion is invoked.

To remind you that it needs to be neither “radical” nor drudgery to actively serve as straight allies of, and advocates for, the GLBT community, I close with a very sweet footnote to the story of Kae and Jeanne (the women who registered as domestic partners in Newport) and the uncharitable letter that James Gano wrote in response.

If you’ll forgive me for this act of personal privilege, here is one last letter to the Editor that was published⁵ in the *Newport News Times*. It was written by my father.

As a member of St. Luke[’s]-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, I am grateful that Mr. Gano has correctly understood our congregation in at least one sense: we do, indeed, enthusiastically welcome all persons who are seeking to find grace and love in the setting of prayer and preaching. This openness to all kinds of folks even includes cranky sourpusses and wickedly judgmental types. Come join us, Mr. Gano. We’ll give you communion, treat you to a great sermon and afterwards, give you a cup of Oregon brewed coffee and a hug. Reading between the lines of your mean-spirited letter, we think you could benefit from all four: holy communion... a whiz-bang... sermon, a cup of coffee and, especially, the hug you seem to need so badly.

[Signed,] C.M. Kempton Hewitt
Unofficial Central Coast Chaplain to the Homophobic Community

Ours is a weighty and earnest task, my friends: the sacred work of bending the arc of the moral universe towards justice. We will not turn away from that task, as we're called into active roles as allies and advocates.

But as we trace the long arc of the universe towards justice, my good people, may we offer grace and love to all – and may we do so with good humor, as well as good faith.

May it be so.

Endnotes

1. "Domestic partners registering in Lincoln County," by Elizabeth Chapman. Feb. 7, 2008.

2. In *Newport News Times*, March 26, 2008.

3. In addition to Kae and Jeanne's letter of response, on March 29th the *News Times* published a letter written by the priest of St. Luke's and all six members of the Church Council (which, in the interest of self-disclosure, includes my mother, Fawn Hewitt). Among other things, the letter said,

Mr. Gano invited us to look seriously and lovingly at scripture. We assure you that we do just that as we follow the teaching and actions of...Jesus... He was often at odds with religious authorities who ostracized and condemned people who differed from them. We strive to follow Jesus' Great Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."... Jesus says nothing about homosexuality but he certainly speaks out against those who abuse the powerless. He also recognizes that we are all in need of God's love and forgiveness.

4. See www.rememberinglawrence.org.

5. On April 1, 2008 – but don't read into that date!