

## ***Equal Rites: Celebrating Gay Marriage***

Stephen Van Kuiken  
North Congregational U.C.C.  
Columbus, OH  
June 8, 2025

*I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be. —Rosa Parks*

Ancient Witness: 1 John 4:7-8, 16b

This is Pride Week and so I thought that I'd preach about it today.

Now, I've been speaking on this topic for my 40 years as a pastor. Early on I was known for this and over 25 years ago, I was called to a congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio that was actively seeking justice and equality for gay and lesbian people in both the church and society. With my congregation's full support, I was officiating same sex marriages even though our denomination forbade it. In 2002 I was charged with disobeying the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church and put on trial in the church courts. A year later I was removed from my position as pastor at my church and stripped of my status as a minister. I lost everything. By the way, it was much more dangerous for the churches in the connectional denominations such as Presbyterians, Lutherans and Methodists to be Open and Affirming because they could lose their buildings and their pastors. At that time, same sex marriage was not legal in any state.

Even though there weren't any Open and Affirming churches in all of Cincinnati, the United Church of Christ in Southern Ohio and Northern Kentucky Association received me and gave me standing after I left the Presbyterian Church. By the way, it wasn't until 2015 that the Presbyterian Church finally decided to allow gay marriages in their churches.

And it was also 10 years ago (June 26, 2015) that the historic Obergefell decision came down from the U.S. Supreme Court. By that time there was a building momentum, and 36 states had legalized same sex marriages, and the landmark case made them legal in the entire nation.

Jim Obergefell and John Arthur were also from Cincinnati, and I remember meeting them a couple times. They were in a committed relationship for over 20 years, and they weren't activists at the time. When John was dying with ALS, they flew to Maryland and were married. After John died, the state of Ohio would not put "married" on John's death certificate. Marriage confers many important rights such as custody of children, survivorship and inheritance. So Jim filed a lawsuit, and it eventually made its way to the Supreme Court with other similar cases.

So, much has happened in the past 40 years, and over 30 countries now have legalized same sex marriage!

Now when we talk about Gay Pride, it is important to recognize that a sense of pride, of *self-respect*, of *self-worth*—is something that so many people take for granted. We must understand that the sense of shame and self-hatred is so destructive, that this act of claiming one's pride can be a matter of life and death. Gay pride is festive, but it is not frivolous. It is so important to help heal the deep wounds that our society inflicts upon so many lives.

And we must acknowledge also that the Christian church, as a whole, has often led the way in inflicting untold emotional and psychological pain and damage upon our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. Rather than bring wholeness and dignity, many faith communities continue to cause suffering to gay and lesbian people. This destructive behavior of our institutional churches means that Gay Pride Day should also be a national Day of Repentance for the church.

For in the majority of the larger church, gay and lesbian people did not have equal dignity and worth. Their ceremonies, recognition and rites were anything but equal. And because of this, the church has laid the foundation to deny basic human rights and protection in our society. The church has provided the theology to justify society's unequal treatment of gay and lesbian people. In other words, unequal *rites* in the church have led to unequal *rights* in our nations. I've worked for fuller protection and greater equality under the law, and for equal rites and recognition in the institutional church. They are connected.

In the 1990's, in many progressive churches the services for gay couples were called "holy unions," "commitment ceremonies" or "covenant services," that is, everything *except* "marriages." This was true even though *every one* of those services was clearly based and modeled upon the wedding service. Why?

Well, naming is a powerful thing, and if the institutional church or the government can force you into naming a central act such as marriage as something else, then they have done their job of diminishing you and designating you to a second-class status. My crime was that I refused to play those word games and called them marriages, deserving the same rights and dignity as other marriages.

I saw ordination of women and the marriage of same-sex couples as parallel. There are passages in the Bible that have been used to justify unequal status of women for generations. In 1 Timothy it says, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (2:12).

Now, when the mainline churches decided to move beyond the literal level of those passages when it decided to ordain women, as we should, it didn't call that ordination by a different name. It didn't use a second-class ceremony or an unequal rite.

In the same way, the church needed to move beyond the literal level of a couple verses that refer to marriage as being between "a man and a woman." *If we can ordain women, we can marry same-sex couples.* It is exactly the same process of interpretation; it is the same logic. I was just calling the mainline churches to be consistent. I said that gay couples should not be forced to have a second-class ceremony. We should be able to celebrate and recognize the fact that it is the same thing, not "separate and unequal." Same-sex marriages are first class in every way.

Maybe it shouldn't surprise us, but through the years, advances for equal rights for gay and lesbian people didn't come from the churches; they came from civil courts and legislatures. Far from being the engine of social change, the church was often the caboose.

In 1993, when the Supreme Court of Hawaii declared that same-sex couples had the right to marriage, the U.S. Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which barred federal recognition of same-sex marriage and allowed states to do the same. After that, 37 states

adopted their own Defense of Marriage Acts, defining marriage as only between a man and a woman and banning same-sex marriages.

I remember debating Ohio State Senator, Bill Seitz, the sponsor of the ban on same-sex marriage that became an amendment to the Ohio's Constitution in 2004. All the reasons for the ban were religious and biblical. I asked him for one reason that was ethical, not theological. He couldn't give me one.

And this is the test. If we make laws that apply to everyone, they should be based upon broader ethical thinking, not theology. So, it seemed to me, the ban on same-sex marriage was about legislating theology (and bad theology, at that). It was about enforcing a narrow religious viewpoint on people with different or no religious viewpoints. This is certainly not a way to treat one's neighbor as oneself!

And so some of us believed that the love between two women or two men is just as real, just as true as the love between a man and a woman. It is not second-class. My faith told me that the celebration of an intimate, life-long, committed, loving, marriage between two of the same sex is not second-class, and it takes a "back seat" to no other marriages. For me it was about following my own religious convictions to celebrate and give thanks to God for the love these couples have for each other. It is a gift from heaven.

And one person that came to my mind was Rosa Parks, that mythic figure of our civil rights movement. Rosa Parks' *personal act* of claiming her rightful place in the front of the bus was a highly charged *political act* to many. She claimed her truth—that God's love for her, and the love she had for herself, the pride that she had for herself, was not second-class. She did not have to take a back seat to others who were white. She said:

*I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.*

Acting on the outside in a way that is consistent with the truth we hold deeply on the inside—this is what the life of faith and worship is all about. If our ceremonies and rites cannot be authentic, they become worthless.

And when we are able to share our deeply held truth, when our rites and rituals are authentic, this brings healing and wholeness. In the words of Holly Near, "When we tell the truth, it's good for the world." When we claim equal rites, it's good for the world.

You know, I can remember my grandmother playing the piano and teaching us songs to my sister and me. The words of one of those songs have grown in meaning for me through the years:

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

You know, as a follower of Jesus—and I believe this is true of other religious traditions as well—one is expected to let one's light shine. In the last chapter of Matthew there is what is called the "great commission": "Go therefore, and make disciples of all people... and teach

them...” In other words, go, let your light shine! It’s good for the world, good for you. Don’t let anybody blow it out. Let it shine!

In our tradition, when we do weddings we make a proclamation. We declare that the sacred and Holy Presence of is in the midst of our lives, and that this presence is an incredible, amazing thing. And we see glittering flashes of this divine presence in the lives of couples that marry. It is certainly not the only place we see this presence, but it is one unique place. We can trace the hand of God in their relationships in their devotion, their commitment, their tenderness, their respect, their laughter, and their tears. We’ve got a message to share. We’ve got a light, and we’re gonna let it shine!

At its heart, this is about religious expression. And the government has no right to interfere with that. The government has no business recognizing and declaring some marriages as sacred and others not sacred. So this is a matter of standing up for civil rights, but it is also a matter of standing against religious imperialism and theocracy.

In the first letter of John it says that “God is love,” and “if we love one another, God *lives* in us.” In spite of the heartaches and struggles, in spite of the hurts and anger, as we look at married and committed relationships, when we can see love, we know that God is alive in them. What a remarkable statement! How important that we should remind ourselves of this.

Now I know, it is not easy to let our light shine sometimes. There is so much darkness in the world, so much violence, war, hatred and bigotry. It can be overwhelming. But as JFK would say, “Better to light a candle than curse the darkness.” Sometimes it’s best just to let our little light shine and not worry about all the rest. At my trial I quoted Martin Luther, who said, “My conscience is captive to the word of God. Here I stand; I can do no other.”

Letting our light shine is no small thing. Sharing our truth can be scary. And sometimes circumstances in our lives cause us to suddenly find ourselves in the spotlight. Shall we shout it at the top of our lungs or shall we be quiet? Shall we let our light shine or shall we hide it under a bushel?

This is our little light: *God is alive in all loving relationships*. God is alive in love between a man and a woman, between a woman and a woman, between a man and a man, between a person and a person. Equally. There is no second class. And for any who choose a life-long commitment to each other, may we proclaim equal rites for all!

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*