

**GOD, THE UTAH LEGISLATURE, AND GAY MARRIAGE**

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With the Obama inauguration now history regardless of stumbling through the oath of office which needed a do-over. We want a president sworn to defend the constitution faithfully instead of faithfully defending the constitution. And regardless that the inauguration poem was the most forgettable inaugural poem I have ever heard (what was that about?). And regardless that the invocation ended with the Protestant version of the Lord's Prayer which alienated all Catholics, non-Christians, and non-believers... and regardless that the music performed by Itzhak Perlman and Yo Yo Ma was really a recording and they just "faked it" before the largest global audience ever assembled, and regardless that Aretha Franklin's hat...which almost over-shadowed the entire inauguration ...we finally have a new president ushering in a new day in our lifetime and new era in American history.

As we all know there is much work to do: The economy, the Middle East, health care and immigration are just a few of the immediate concerns facing the president and our country. Responding to these crises will require much debate, diplomacy, and sacrifice. But then we are also confronted by what are referred to as social wedge issues that divide Americans emotionally. They deal less with the *politics* of our nation and more with cultural biases that try to interpret moral behavior and subsequently decide who is to be extended their civil rights and who is to be denied them.

We cannot help but look back historically with disgrace at how we have withheld basic human freedoms and civil rights among people of color and women. We are saddled with same disgrace by how civil rights are purged from the lives of gay and transgendered people, much in the same way it was arbitrarily decided 150 years ago that a black man was only 3/5 of a person, therefore not deserving of rights. Are gays and lesbians and bi-sexual and transgendered fully human? If so, how can they be denied the same rights as every human being in our nation?

How is it possible in 21<sup>st</sup> century America to look a human being in the eye and rule that he or she can be fired from a job without any protection, can be evicted from their homes without any protection, cannot insure their family members... because of who they are? People's judgments about gays, lesbians, bi-sexual, and transgendered are rendered with impunity; the courts try to uphold civil rights for everyone because prejudice is not a legal position. But hate can overturn a judicial decision when votes in favor of denying civil rights outnumber the votes that wish to assure civil rights to everyone. The message is clear: The worth and dignity of a person can be voted upon, with a human being's rights hanging in the balance.

Any person with an ounce of commonsense understands that misconceptions about people occur frequently. We need the courts to rescue us from our own bias and self-deception. I like James Baldwin's take on the matter when he wrote: "If I am not what you say I am, then you are not who you think you are."

Never admitting to any prejudice, those who deny gay rights insist they are following the mandates of God. God has prescribed morality for all time. **Who can be so presumptive to know the mind of God?**

And here I want to return to the inauguration for a moment. In the controversy surrounding which clergyperson would invoke the spirit of God upon the president and the nation, Rick Warren was selected either wisely or not. Obama's hope to allow as much diverse opinion as possible under the same tent strikes a civil cord and probably is politically astute. However, is there not a limit to how civil one can be? The Rev. Rick Warren is notorious for comparing gay relationships to child abuse and pedophilia. A spokeswoman for Obama, defending the Warren choice, says that he has fought for people who have H.I.V./AIDS. As Frank Rich of the New York Times said, "Fighting AIDS is not a get-out-of-homophobia free card."

The first openly gay Episcopal bishop, Gene Robinson of New Hampshire who was a very early vocal supporter of Obama, which shows that more than Unitarian clergy wear their political stripes on their sleeves...Robinson, offered a very simple yet eloquent comment about the selection of Rick Warren. The punch line was this: He said – "The God to whom Rick Warren is praying is not the God I know."

This is not meant as a game of who knows God best. The discrepancy between the two theological viewpoints underscores either a predilection towards an inclusive God who loves all His children unconditionally and a God who loves His children selectively. Many in the latter camp maintain that they love the sinner but hate the sin. I never quite understood what that meant because the supposed "sin" is a person acting as he or she really is. It still makes love "conditional."

Rick Warren boasts that some of his best friends are gay. (Literally – that's how he defends himself against his denial of gay rights. Don't forget, he can read the mind of God. So he identifies himself as being gracious by numbering gays among his friends. My gut instinct tells me that a friend who denies you your civil rights is suspect as a friend. (Don't do me any favors).

Rick Warren wants us to overlook his prejudice because he boasts that he listens to Melissa Etheridge and has eaten dinner in gay homes. Well, Chris Buttars can practically claim the same defense when a week ago yesterday two gay activists stopped Buttars in his driveway to offer him some pumpkin bread. Buttars invited them plus two other gay activists inside his house for an hour of conversation. They talked to Buttars about two bills that would outlaw discrimination against gay and transgendered people in housing and employment. Buttars said he would 'consider' them.

I hear the echo of James Baldwin: "If I'm not what you say I am then you're not who you think you are."

Chris Buttars and his colleagues on the hill face a real challenge this session. The LDS Church which bankrolled the passage of Proposition 8 in California, the proposition which repealed the state's Supreme Court decision to grant the GLBT community the right to marry as guaranteed by their civil rights...the LDS church finds itself in a position similar to Rick Warren: Defining itself as not anti-gay, only wishing to stamp marriage as between one male heterosexual and one female heterosexual as God wants it to be, the church is vulnerable to a bit of hypocrisy. Not really anti-gay? Then prove it.

How do we interpret the model of marriage, I wonder, as Lisa Miller wrote in a feature story for Newsweek: Shall we look to Abraham, the great patriarch, who slept with his servant when he discovered his beloved wife Sarah was infertile? Or to Jacob who fathered children with four different women (two sisters and their servants)? Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon, and the kings of Judah and Israel – all their fathers and heroes were polygamists. The New Testament model of marriage is hardly

better. Jesus himself was single and preached an indifference to earthly attachments – especially family. The apostle Paul (also single), regarded marriage as an act of last resort for those unable to contain their animal lust. “It is better to marry than to burn with passion,” says the apostle, in one of the most lukewarm endorsements of a treasured institution ever uttered.”

Clearly it is hard to read the mind of god. Is the Bible what straight people really want to hold up as a model? Monogamy didn’t become the norm in the Christian world until the 6<sup>th</sup> century? As biblical scholar Alan Segal puts it: The marriage arrangement in the Bible was between one man and as many women as he could pay for. If you believe that the Bible was written by men and not handed down in its leather bindings y God, polygamy was the way of the world back then. The fact that homosexual couples cannot procreate has been raised as a biblical objection because did not God say ‘Be fruitful and multiply?’ But the Bible authors could never have imagined the brave new world of international adoption and assisted reproductive technology, and besides – heterosexuals who are infertile or past the age of reproducing, get married all the time.”

This all begs the question: Where do evangelical churches and more specifically to us – where does The LDS Church stand in the modern world? Can anyone reasonably claim in this day to know the mind of God and vouch for the fact that the eternal heavenly embodiment of love and hope condemns gay marriage?

The LDS church, sensitive to critiques charging them with discrimination, still maintain their basic theological position – which is fine and their right – but they have publicly stated they harbor no ill will towards the sinners - -just their sin. Thus the LDS Church has actually pronounced (publicly) its support of gay civil rights on everything excluding marriage. Quite logically, Equality Utah (the leading advocacy group for GLBT rights) rejoiced at the LDS church’s willingness to support civil rights for gays and transgendered, and drafted the Common Ground Initiatives for the Utah legislature to adopt.

The LDS Church may claim that it wields no influence in the legislature, yet with 90% of our state representatives looking to the LDS Church for moral guidance in political decision-making, we can only hope that there will be a meeting of the minds between church and state that endorses civil rights for all people with no exceptions. In other words, you can hate the sin all you want, but when it comes to loving the sinner, why then we share “common ground.”

I hear a call reminiscent of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said: “You can’t make them love us, but you can stop them from lynching us.” Likewise, William Sloan e Coffin stated that we can’t force people to love the poor, but we ought to be able to stop starving them to death.

The Common Ground Initiatives basically say: You don’t have to love us, but (taking a line from Obama’s Inaugural Address: “If you unclench your fist we can shake hands.” Here are some bills the legislature must pass unless it is willing to go on record that not all people are created equal in the state of Utah:

\*Mandate that public employer insurance plans cover an employee’s partner and every family member.

\* Add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of characteristics that employers may not consider when making decisions about employment

\* add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of characteristics that landlords may not consider when making decisions about eviction.

\* The sudden death of a loved one is painful. When someone dies because of negligence or malpractice the partner and family must be able to stay in their homes by removing existing barriers to inheritance and insurance.

\* Apart from marriage, Utah can do much more to help committed couples in Utah care for each other by creating a domestic partner registry that will attach rights of inheritance, insurance, and fair housing.

The magnitude of calling for gay rights far exceeds the narrow-mindedness of legislators on the hill. An unprecedented declaration seeking to decriminalize homosexuality won the support of 66 countries in the United Nations General Assembly last month. Shamefully, the United States refused to support the non-binding measure as did Russia, China, and the members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. (Aren't we in good company?)

The declaration, sponsored by France with broad support in Europe and Latin America, condemned human rights violations based on homophobia, saying such measures run counter to the universal declaration of human rights. Isn't it a bit scary that getting human rights to be adopted for gays and lesbians in Utah feels as daunting as adopting these rights around the world? But by passing the Common Ground Initiatives, the LDS Church and our state legislature can validate their rhetoric: we are not anti-gay and uphold their civil rights.

I don't think anyone is holding their breath until this passes, but there is huge hope for the future. In the past week, the Salt Lake Tribune disclosed two statewide polls that indicated a strong support among voters for gay civil rights. The polls revealed an exceptionally strong support among young people, including those who follow the LDS faith.

I want to close with a lovely piece from scripture. King David and his friend Jonathan were as 'one spirit.' King David loved Jonathan as much as he loved himself. When Jonathan dies, King David rends his clothes and in grieving writes the following song:

I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;

You were very dear to me.

Your love for me was wonderful,

More wonderful than that of women.

It all comes down to love, doesn't it? And what goes on in private should be far removed from the tentacles of judgment. Love be praised for it feeds the human soul. Love is not accountable to a theological position. Love is accountable to the partner we cherish. For who can honestly claim to know the mind of God?

There's no prescription for love as there is no transcendent definition of who gets to love "legally" and who is to be excluded. In a world that is in need of much more love and kindness and care and joy, we pray that love reigns wherever hearts find each other, and that this love be supported with all the rights proclaimed in our constitution for all people with no exceptions made. Amen