

Lent V

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"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Jeremiah 31: 33

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God promises a new and interior covenant, inscribed on the hearts of the people. Jeremiah's vision expands Israel's understanding of the covenant. No longer does God's promise belong exclusively to an elite group, to scholars or prophets. No longer is the covenant in a book or on tablet; now it's in the heart. The covenant of justice, mercy and hope is accessible to everyone. Everyone— regardless of education or social status. Regardless of race or ethnicity. Regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Well, Jeremiah may not have had that vision, exactly, But we do. The God whom we at St. John's try to envision – as Chris Yulo wonderfully said to me recently – the God whom we at St. John's try to envision has written that covenant on all of our hearts. The covenant of God's infinite justice, infinite hope, infinite inclusivity.

Today, this weekend, we join with churches and synagogues throughout the Commonwealth to celebrate Stand Up For Equality Weekend, sponsored by the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry. We display a new banner outside proclaiming our joyful support of Marriage Equality. We will take up a special collection to support RCFM's outreach work to defeat the anti-equal marriage amendment ballot initiative.

And in our hearts, God has written a new covenant. God has renewed the promise that we are God's people, and God – the God of love and justice– is our God.

I was working in my study earlier this week when I had a phone call from Deval Patrick. Deval is a solid supporter of marriage equality, and as we have read in the Globe he has run into some opposition as he voices his position in Black churches. He wanted some advice on how to talk about the issue. Part of the problem, he said, is that he thinks this issue is not first in the minds and hearts of most African American churchgoers in Boston. They are more likely to be concerned with crime, healthcare, schools, and a living wage.

I said I agreed with his analysis, and that I'd often wished, over the years, that we could get the question of justice for gay men and lesbians settled once for all so that we could go on to solve world hunger. But, I said, since the struggle for marriage equality went into high gear in 2003, I have thought and prayed my way to the conclusion that marriage is fundamental to human community. Our marital status is central to our self-definition— and please hear me well, I don't mean in a value-laden way, necessarily. Married is not superior to single unless we let it be.

But we fundamentally understand ourselves as single or coupled, don't we? It's part of our identity. And marriage is how most societies – for better and for worse – structure themselves. So marriage, and access to marriage, is vitally important as a human right.

Deval hastened to say – he knew whom he was talking to – that he did not mean to trivialize marriage.

He then said that a problem was that the black ministers he's talked to did not consider the quest for equal marriage as a civil rights struggle on a par with the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. I quoted Byron Rushing to the effect that African Americans have done themselves no favors by trying to promote their own struggles at the expense of some other oppressed group. And I said, "justices are not divisible."

Then he talked about the Bible, the explicit passages. I gave him the usual explanation the Bible is not a blueprint for living, that we are all selective proof-texters who choose to illustrate our beliefs and our passions with scriptural selections that support us. But I said...take the overarching Biblical themes of God's love, God's justice, and God's inclusivity, take Jesus' practice of eating and consorting with the outcast, the marginalized, and the despised, take his promise that he came so that we might have abundant life – take all this to our opponents, and talk with them about how these Biblical truths can inform our current social policies. What do these precepts invite us to consider about how we treat our fellow citizens, families, and children today?

Now, Deval Patrick is a politician, of course. And I'm not, though I do hear the criticism periodically that I am too political and that St. John's is too political. But I told Deval what I have learned over the years of doing this work for justice, what RCFM and indeed the whole Freedom to Marry movement has learned: argument and debate are not what win the day here. The Freedom to Marry Movement is not at heart a political movement; it's a social movement in which justice prevails – when it does – not because of theory or rhetoric, but because of people, their lives and their stories. Tell stories, I advised Deval. Tell about your friend or your nephew who is gay and how marriage has transformed their sense of security, well being, full citizenship, and personal happiness.

So when RCFM presents our book of testimony to all the Massachusetts legislators at the end of the month, we will not be offering them debate or argument. We will be giving them stories, accounts of personal transformation brought about by equal marriage. We will be giving them words of struggle and resolution, words of gratitude and hope – words from all of you. Here are some of those words as you have written them to me.

The fact that we are married (not civilly unioned, mind you) has provided a common language with which we can describe our relationship to others. "You know how you fell in love?" We can say, "Well, we fell in love." "And you wanted to create a family as an extension of this love?" "That's why we became parents." "And you know how you wanted to declare this love in front of family and friends so everyone might know how you feel and pledge their support?" "That's why we had a religious blessing of our

relationship?” Finally, we can now say, “And you know how you wanted all the legal protections and benefits that come from being civilly married – to help you care for this family you managed to create?”

“Yeah, we did too. And so we did.”

I do not expect the state of Massachusetts to “bless” these unions. In fact, I do not expect the state of Massachusetts to “bless” anything. I do expect the state to guarantee “equal protection under the law.” Don’t confuse the issue. Don’t put my son and his partner in “the back of the bus” again because of bigotry and prejudice. Allow Massachusetts to stand proudly as a beacon of hope and the first to get it right

By extending marital rights to same-sex partners, the Commonwealth had said something profoundly courageous and moving to the nation and the world about the people who call Massachusetts home. Although we’ve had the courage to remove one more “other” from our law books and acknowledge that the responsible and loving impulse should be valued and honored, we have also had to face how lonely and frightening it is to stand up for social justice. My family and so many others like us ask our legislators to remember how good it felt to say same-sex marriage is not about the rightness or wrongness of the life choices of others, it is about a simple matter of justice and dignity for your neighbors who, like you, put their pants on one leg at a time and try to survive each day with as much dignity and grace as possible.

I could write at length at why we need marriage. I could go on about adopting our children and needing to move out of New Hampshire to do so I could write about Social Security and health insurance. But I didn’t marry her twice because I feared our health care proxy would be challenged. I married her because I love her. I feel honored to be her wife.

But the bottom line is, I am a New Hampshire girl, a liberal with a conservative streak formed by thirty plus years in a libertarian minded part of the country. And the truth is I don’t feel the need to beg for marriage. I am tired of that. I am married. The burden is on the other side. They have to justify-they have to prove- why my marriage is harmful to the greater good. I trust the people in Massachusetts, no matter how uncomfortable they may be with the changing definition of marriage, will not go lightly into the business of creating laws to deny civil rights.

On April 10, 2004 we were married in a civil ceremony in the Rectory of our Episcopal parish in Jamaica Plain. We took a short walk down the road to attend our regular Sunday church service where, during the course of the service, we had our civil marriage blessed in the eyes of God and in the company of our church family and friends. While this was not the first time we asked for God's blessing on our eighteen year relationship, it was the first time that we could ask for this blessing as equal partners with all those who have had the right to legally marry for ages.

. Our marriage was a joyous, sacred and blessed event that continues to resonate for us and for all who joined in our joy that day. Everyone should have the right to marry and share in this happiness and blessing.

Many years ago when we never expected to see the day that our relationship would be affirmed and offered equal status, we asked for God's blessing upon us at a private commitment ceremony. That day, one of our mothers went up to the priest and asked, "Is this legal?" Fifteen years later we could say, "Yes, mom, we're legal now."

June 18, 2004 will live in our hearts as one of the most significant and important days of our lives. On that date, we were married by our Rector Anne Fowler, in the sanctuary of our home congregation of St. John's Episcopal Church in Jamaica Plain, before God, our two children, families and friends. While that date is a profound moment, our marriage has affected our family in many positive ways. We believe our children know that our marriage, and consequently our family, is as valid as any of their friends. They speak of our marriage in a matter-of-fact manner, and do not feel ashamed, bashful or shy about it. We believe that it has helped our children's self-confidence and esteem, as they are on "equal footing" with other families. They don't really understand all the political and legal ramifications of being married, but they do understand the societal importance of marriage. We also believe that our marriage will instill in them a respect and reverence for the institution, and hopefully they will enter into this solemn covenant with their future spouses with the same awe that we do.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Amen.