

Rooted in God's Love

Romans 8:35-39

Healing Minnesota Service—Plymouth Congregational

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*The Lone Wild Bird in lofty flight
Is still with Thee, nor leaves Thy Sight.
And I am Thine, I rest in Thee,
Great Spirit, come and rest in me.*

It was one of those beautiful stone churches that Episcopalians seem to have a knack for building. The pews were full with mourners who had gathered to say one last goodbye. With a space left open in the alto section, where she would have stood—and had on so many occasions before—we sang her home. After all her suffering, after all her pain, we sang to her words of healing and release. There IS a balm in Gilead.

None of us could claim bonds of blood or traditional kinship. None of us had any legal contracts or ones in the eyes of the church. Instead, all of us had gathered from every corner of the country because she had been chosen family. We had taken trips together, sang in countless concerts and done improv with her. We'd talked and shared every detail of our lives. Some said it was only friendship, but all of us in that church that day knew differently.

[pause]

It was one of those beautiful Meeting Houses that Quakers seem to have a knack for building. The pews were full of hundreds of friends and co-workers and relatives who had finally decided to give up their religious-borne fears. With a table filled with bread they had baked and wine some friends had made, they stood before us. They had been together for twenty-five years. They had survived too many friends to count. Their first date, they'd had to drive 200 miles for fear of someone in one of their congregations knowing they were gay.

And through it all, they were there for and with each other—baking and gardening, biking and taking dance lessons, working as pastors and journeying

with so many. In their vows, they gave thanks for all that had been and asked for God's blessing on all that yet lay ahead. And there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.

As I've been thinking and praying about tonight's service, I've been struck with two lies, a paradox and one powerful truth.

Let me start with the lies. We're already living in the midst of them but they will get more and more powerful and virulent in the coming year. The first is that only love between a man and woman is sacred and worthy of being called marriage. Anything else is lesser, unworthy or, worse, abomination. In challenging this lie, we may be guilty of perpetrating another lie that can have equally painful results. That lie is that only love that is sexual and results in a life-long covenant between two people is important.

But as I read our text from Romans and as I have celebrated this Thanksgiving weekend, I am so powerfully aware that God's love is embodied in so many, many ways. It is palpably present in the friendships built over years and years of running together, or sharing book groups. It is built and shared in the commitments to stand by and with each other in the face of illness and joy. When I sang *There is a Balm in Gilead* with the choir at my friend, Amy's memorial service, I felt in my body both the grief of having lost a part of myself but also that God had revealed to me in very real ways exactly what Love looks and feels like. When I sat in that Meeting House and watched my friends, two men of deep integrity and seeking to love each other as God had loved them, I had a glimpse of God's heart.

It is this experience of the love of God that leads me to stand before you and claim a paradox. I believe we must live in the reality that even as I know myself called to work and organize and act to defeat this marriage amendment, it doesn't matter whether it passes or is defeated. The statutes and the constitution of the State of Minnesota don't hold the power to determine whether any of us is beloved in the sight of God. And we must not cede our

worth or our power to any attempt to legislate who and how we are called to love.

A story told by Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, a mentor and teacher of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., illustrates, I hope, what I'm trying to say. He writes:

On one of our visits to Daytona Beach, I was eager to show my daughters some of my old haunts. We sauntered down the long street from the church to the riverfront. This had been the path of the procession to the baptismal ceremony in the Halifax River, which I had often described to them. We stopped here and there as I noted the changes that had taken place since that far-off time. At length, we passed the playground of the white public schools. As soon as Olive and Anne saw the swings, they jumped for joy. "Look, Daddy, let's go over and swing!" This was the inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face soon or late. What do you say to your child at the critical moment of primary encounter?

"You can't swing on those swings."

"Why?"

"When we get home and have some cold lemonade I will tell you." When we were home again, and had had our lemonade, Anne pressed for the answer. "We are home now, Daddy. Tell us."

I said, "It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. At present, only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and the policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of the white people in the State of Florida—it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how many weapons and how much power people are willing to use to control you and keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls. Your presence can threaten the entire state of Florida.

My friends, our experiences of justice and injustice are different. The struggle for LGBT justice is not the same as that for Civil Rights. Racism and homo-, bi- and trans-phobia live and act in different ways. I don't want to pretend to co-opt Dr. Thurman's experience.

But his wisdom of how we are called to live in relationship with laws and systems that seek to make us teach our children that we and they are less than our neighbors is a powerful lesson.

Especially in this Amendment Season, I want to urge all of us to never forget just how important we are. Not that we are better than our neighbors, because we aren't. But when we love each other, not because we must, but because we may; When we walk with each other over years, through good times and bad, not because we've made a contract recognized by the state, but because we have chosen to be friends, or lovers or chosen family; when we stand together as a community—even in the face of lies—I believe we are beginning to grasp the truth that Paul writes about in his letter to the Romans....

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor constitutional amendments nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.

And that, my friends, truly gives us something for which to give thanks.

Amen.