"From Riots to Rights,"
a sermon given by the Rev.Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on June 6, 2010

Earlier this week, I had a conversation with one of you about the fact that we're having a gay pride service today. He said, "Gay folks are very well integrated into the congregation already. Why do we need to have a special service?" I should point out that the person who asked this is himself gay. He wasn't opposed to the service, he just wondered if we needed one.

Maybe we'll have one again next year, and maybe we won't. But the question is a fair one—why this service, and not one for another group in the church? I told him that I know a congregation that has a women's service every year, and though some women in the congregation think it actually marginalizes them, others really love it. The ironic thing, I said, is that there are more women in that church than men. The truth is, we shouldn't have services here for any group—the service belongs to you, the worshipping congregation, the people who show up on Sunday morning. My job is to try to assure that every week we will offer something that is worthy of you, and of our tradition, and that allows us together to experience the presence of the holy.

A reason to have a service recognizing our support of and commitment to equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people is that they have been marginalized and oppressed in our society. More specifically, they have often been ostracized and abused by the church. It is important for us to stand up and say that our Universalist understanding of a God of Love means that everyone is loved, no exceptions. Nobody left behind. We're not the only denomination that affirms and welcomes gay folks, but among religious traditions, we have been a leader.

Where I went to seminary, there was a real focus on anti-racism work. Race was a lens through which we looked at lots of issues. This doesn't mean we thought race was the only issue, or even the most pressing one. It just provided a poignant way to look at issues of oppression and liberation. Audre Lorde, one of the people pictured in the visual meditation we saw a few minutes ago, said, "There is no hierarchy of oppressions." In other words, there's no good in saying, "My oppression is more important that yours." The truth is, oppression of one group often undermines and hurts other oppressed groups as well. Sometimes oppressed groups get pitted one against one another, which leads to even more oppression. Today we don't say that sexual orientation is the only issue, or even the most important one, but it is one that we as a church have wrestled with, and done so successfully, and this is something to celebrate. It should give us hope that we can tackle other kinds of oppression too. Not to say the fight for gay rights is over—far from it.

My vision of the church is of a community where people can experience and know they are loved for who they are, and knowing this, being liberated themselves, are then

compelled to love others and to work for justice. Where I went to seminary, there was a mission statement that said the purpose of the school was to educate leaders "who serve and advance God's mission of justice, compassion, and reconciliation." The understanding was clear there, that to be doing God's work is to be working for justice, showing compassion, and fostering reconciliation.

Sometime in my first year there, my family went down to Baltimore to visit my in-laws. My father in-in law, a lifelong Catholic who hadn't been to church in a long time, was interested in what they were teaching us. I could tell from his questions that he thought I was being indoctrinated into the beliefs and practices of the institutional, hierarchical, and patriarchal church that he himself had known. I loved my father in law, who died a few years ago, and it was an honor to give the eulogy at his funeral. But we were politically pretty far apart, and over the years we had some lively arguments. As I got older, and hopefully a bit wiser, I learned there were times I should just bite my tongue. I don't remember how I answered his questions about what they were teaching us in seminary, but if I had been completely honest with him, here's what I would have said: "My experience of seminary isn't anything like what you imagine. If we're being indoctrinated into anything, it's how to overthrow the government."

You see, there I learned that religion isn't meant to maintain the status quo. It's always supposed to be challenging principalities and powers, calling for and working for a more just world. At that seminary I experienced first-hand people who were deeply religious and equally committed and passionate about justice. Some of they were gay and lesbian folks who had left a church tradition they loved, because it told them they couldn't be both homosexual and serve God.

In the anti-oppression work we did there, we were challenged to name and claim our own social location, whether we were black or white, male or female, gay or straight, young or old, and how these things shaped our perspectives. I learned that being a straight white male gives me advantages in the world. And I felt bad about this, about the privilege that I had, which I had mostly taken for granted. I wrote something about my feelings of guilt in a paper in my first semester, and the professor wrote in the margin, "Guild is an immobilizing emotion. What are you going to <u>do</u> with your privilege?"

We talked about what it means to be an ally to those who are marginalized. I remember a friend of mine, an African-American woman, talking about the privilege she had as a heterosexual woman and the ways she was an ally to gay folks. When we lift up the issue of rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks today, we aren't saying theirs is the only cause worth fighting for. There is no hierarchy of oppressions. We are saying, we are with you in the struggle and in the celebration.

Though there is plenty to do for gay rights--marriage equality across the land and in the eyes of the federal government, full inclusion of gays in the military, changing our culture so people who are different no longer need to live in fear, there is also plenty to

celebrate. The Boston Pride Parade, which is observing its 40th anniversary this year, is calling this year's celebration "From Riots to Rights." As you saw in the video presentation a few minutes ago, the modern struggle for gay rights in this country began with a riot at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Over the past forty years, the ground has shifted under our feet. There are now five states, plus the District of Columbia, that issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Attitudes have changed as well, particularly among younger generations.

When he was running for president, then Sen. Barack Obama would quote Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as saying, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Dr. King did say those words, but what plenty of people don't know is that he was quoting the Unitarian minister of the 19th century, Theodore Parker. Here's what Parker said: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

Parker was a fiery preacher and a fierce abolitionist. Because of his work to protect slaves who had found freedom in Boston from being returned to the South under the fugitive slave act, once he was indicted for harboring a fugitive and inciting a riot. It's said that he wrote his sermons with a loaded pistol sitting on his desk. Still, there is humility in his words. "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways." He expresses the truth that we don't often understand the unfolding of events; nor do we always get to see the fruits of our labor. At St. Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians, "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part…we see in a mirror, dimly (1 Cor. 13: 9, 12). That's part of what it is to be human. And though Parker says he can't see the shape of the moral universe with his eyes, still he boldly proclaims, "I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

This is faith in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, who felt called by God to speak truth to power, on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Who trusted that there was a day coming when, as the prophet Amos testified, justice would roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream (Amos 5:24).

You could look around at our world, and all the bad news—the environment under siege, wars and threats of war, poverty and disease, and closer to home, in our own lives, heartbreak and loss and grief and suffering. And you could be discouraged or dismayed, even ask, "What's the point in struggling? The world's problems are so big and I am so small. Sometimes I can't even handle my own troubles."

Like I've said to you before, I couldn't do this work if I thought it was all up to me. If I didn't believe there was a force for love and for justice at work in the world, a God whose other name is Love, who has a particular fondness for the weak, the oppressed, the outcast, the heartbroken. That spirit of Love is with us, now and always. And we

have one another. And we are upheld by those who have gone before us, that great cloud of witnesses, whose spirit companions us still.

So take heart. And take courage. The arc of the moral universe is long. But it does bend toward justice. We are each called to do our own part help that bending toward justice, to build the land that we dream of, to hasten the coming of that day when all of us, when all God's people, shall be free.

Amen.