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May 23, 2012

My Own Evolution on LGBTQIA Rights

When I was a little girl, men dressed as women attended Sunday services at the African-American Baptist church where I was reared. They were always stylishly and tastefully dressed. No one spoke about them to me. I did not ask. There is a long tradition of “don’t ask, don’t tell” regarding issues of homosexuality in the African-American church. People usually knew who was who and what was what, but we did not speak of it.

I came to consciousness of myself as an autonomous individual—to the degree that one is ever truly autonomous—during the civil rights movement. Black liberation commanded most of the attention of our community. It commanded most of my attention. Integration, black power, violent rebellion in the cities, non-violent direct action, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Arts Movement, the Black Panther Party, James Brown singing: “Say it loud, ‘I’m Black and I’m proud”” were the background of my life. At the same time there was the protest against the Vietnam War, emerging feminism that would lead to the development of womanism.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I started to become aware of Gay rights. When I worked as a reporter at WXXI-FM in Rochester, New York, I had the opportunity to interview a Gay activist who told me about why he wanted to be able to live his life as a Gay man openly. He pointed out the ordinary, mundane things that heterosexual people take for granted that were not possible for him—a picture of his beloved on his desk at work, casual conversation about his beloved, the ability to touch and kiss in public. He talked about the fear people had that confused homosexuality with pedophilia. “I want a man, not a boy,” he told me.

Time passed. As a stay-at-home mom, attending what I call the University of Phil Donahue, I saw several interviews with same-sex couples willing to speak about both the social and legal challenges they faced. They were forced to hire attorneys to make legal agreements that served as protection for their relationships that were automatically given to heterosexual married couples. Because of the importance of the civil rights movement in my own life, I thought Gay people ought to have equal protection under the law. I did not think about what the Bible said because I remembered how the Bible had been and continues to be used to keep women as second class citizens both in society and in the church. I remember how the Bible had been used to justify slavery.

More time passed. Then came the AIDS crisis and Gays and Lesbians became more vocal about their lives, their rights and their health. However, AIDS was not only a Gay disease. It was also a disease that plagued drug users both heterosexual men and women. It was the year of Hurricane Hugo—1989—and I visited one of my elder other mothers from church every Friday in the hospital. She was in and out of the hospital, but while she was there, often flat on her back, she prayed for other people. She kept a card file with the person’s name and their prayer concerns and prayed them every day. (She filled up more than one card on me.) On one of my visits, she asked me to visit another patient in the

hospital who was dying of AIDS. I could not say no. It was not a pretty site. I told him that my friend had sent me, and I asked if it would be all right if we prayed together. He said yes, and we prayed. A few weeks later, he was dead, my friend was out of the hospital and she and I attended his funeral. I did not know how he contracted AIDS, but what I did know was that the love of God was present with him through my friend's love and care for him. I have no doubt that God's will for us was to show compassion, not judgment.

In the 1990s, working on my PhD at Temple University and teaching College Composition, at one point I shared an office with another graduate student who happened to be a lesbian. One day our conversation turned to the differences between our sexual orientations. (I do not remember how the conversation turned. We usually talked about our work in religious studies.) I enjoy the male physique, its muscularity and weight. I love to touch a man's beard, both when it is soft and when it is coarse. I believe in the gospel according to Blanche on the television show [The Golden Girls](http://scenteddemented.com/goldengirlsquotes.html) "I don't understand lesbians, I mean, a man has so much more to offer, know what I mean?" (23 May 2012 <http://scenteddemented.com/goldengirlsquotes.html>)

My lesbian colleague found the male physique off-putting. She preferred the female body. She fell in love with a woman. My opinion at the time was live and let live. To each her own. I was not about to judge her. I thought she had the right to love who she wanted in the various ways that she wanted. I did not think of the Bible. Whenever the issue of rights came up, I supported equal rights under the law.

Time kept on marching. I had finished my graduate studies and was teaching Christian Ethics at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, and thinking about the morality of homosexuality, I taught that unless one is a homosexual, the Biblical prohibitions against it are of no concern. The question for heterosexuals is: what does God require of us? I thought the Golden Rule was the answer. But, I also told my class that the Old Testament speaks against homosexuality and I see nothing in the New Testament that abrogates this prohibition.

One fine day, the head of the UTS Doctor of Ministry program asked me to attend a conference sponsored by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. He told me that the conference would address matters of homosexuality. I planned to be in Philadelphia around the time of the conference, so it was no trouble to drive down to Washington, D.C. Before I left, I prayed with a group of friends from my church in Philadelphia that I would have the courage to speak what God would have me speak regarding the question of homosexuality.

I went to the conference ready to take a deep breath and say there was no Bible to support homosexual behavior or Gay rights. But, when I got to the conference, I was silent. Holy Spirit bid me to listen and not to speak. I heard the stories of LGBT people. I had breakfast with an openly Gay African-American minister who spoke of the hypocrisy of more than one African-American preacher who preached against homosexuality but would invite him to their hotel rooms for sex. I heard an elder African-American gentleman speak about his life. He had spent nearly his entire adult life in a heterosexual marriage. He was faithful to his wife. He had children and grandchildren, and all the while he knew he was living a lie. It was only now, in his old age, that he was willing to acknowledge the truth

of who he was. I heard a young African-American woman speak about her estrangement from her family because she was a lesbian. When people speak as if there is some deep division between African-Americans and the LGBT community, they fail to recognize the lives of LGBT African Americans.

However, the most powerful witness at the conference came from Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. My church in Philadelphia, the church where I reared my children is Grace Baptist Church of Germantown where Jeremiah Wright, Sr. was pastor emeritus and Mary Wright, Rev. Wright's mother, was a trustee, a missionary and a member of the choir. But, most important, she was an encouragement to me both as a mother and as a scholar. I had listened often to Rev. Wright, Jr. when he preached revival at Grace. I heard him often on the radio in Philadelphia. I trusted him both as a Biblical scholar and as a prophetic preacher committed to justice.

Rev. Wright spoke of a time in his ministry when one of his members, a young woman, was sexually assaulted, and she was estranged from her family because she was a lesbian. He told us that it was his pastoral responsibility to care for her and to aid her recovery. Further, he said that if he was going to be her pastor in Chicago, he had to be her pastor all over the country. His church welcomes LGBT people as children of God. Rev. Wright helped me to see that God calls us to justice, compassion and the ethics of presence, the moral obligation of being with the Other. This is the Biblical witness for which I ought to be searching.

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. is NOTHING like the caricature of a wild-eyed, America-hating, racist, extremist drawn by sloppy journalism and political opportunism in the 2008 presidential campaign. This sorry episode demonstrated the worst of both American journalism and of American politics. He is a man willing to stand with the outcasts of society and to give voice to their claims for justice.

In 2002, I moved and started teaching Christian Ethics at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. In 2004, the issue of same sex marriage was front and center in the state. For those of us who experienced that struggle, the current national debate feels like "déjà vu all over again." One Sunday in March of 2004, I was minding my own business in Sunday morning worship when I read an announcement in the bulletin about a "Unity Service in Support of Marriage." I knew immediately that this would be a service AGAINST same-sex marriage. I am a Sabbath-keeping Baptist, so I determined that I would follow my Sunday afternoon ritual, relaxing on the couch, watching movies.

To make a long story short, I found myself at the service, and I was grieved and appalled by the use of spiritual energy to enlist God in an effort to deny people respect and equal protection under the law. When I worked in theological education, I taught a course on the civil rights movement. Gay rights were a part of the class. Whenever we consider the Civil Rights Movement, especially from a theological perspective, it is important to consider the importance of worship to the movement. Before going out to face dogs, fire hoses, beatings, jail and possibly death, civil rights workers would gather in mass meetings usually held in churches to sing, preach and pray. It was spiritual preparation for their work for social justice and equality under the law. Now I saw spiritual energy used to energize people to stand against another group gaining respect and dignity under the law.

I was trembling upset. I ranted in class. I asked for prayer in worship service. In the end, I knew I would have to say something. I decided to write a letter. But, I needed Bible. In John 14:26, Jesus says: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things I said to you." I told Jesus: "I need Bible."

All that Sunday School when I was a child, all that vacation Bible school, all those choir rehearsals and Bible studies and prayer meetings, all those Sunday sermons and revival sermons, all those sleepless midnights and praying tears splashing upon my open Bible as I held onto the Word for dear life, trusting that the Word of God was true and "weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning." The Bible is the source of my wisdom and of my comfort. I needed the Bible to make my case.

When I prepared the letter I ended up writing to the members of the Boston clergy listed in the program of the Unity Service, God did give me Bible. I heard the words of the song "Great is Thy Faithfulness" singing in my head: "morning by morning NEW mercies I see. The Bible was how God is able to do a new thing and that God is not pleased when we stand to subvert a person and h/er just cause. (Lamentation 3: 35-36). Many of the arguments that I make now in support of LGBTQIA rights I made in that letter in 2004. I also said that I recognized that we were on different sides of the issue. That one side was in error regarding our understanding of the will of God. I wrote:

Erring is always a possibility. I say that if we are going to err, let it be on the side of the oppressed. Let us err on the side of the marginal. Let us err on the side of acceptance. Let us err on the side of equal protection under the law. Let us err on the side of compassion and mercy and humility. Let us err on the side of justice. Let us err on the side of the Golden Rule. Let us err on the side of radical love.

My position on same-sex marriage then was that the state ought to have one law for all, and since the concept of marriage is so loaded with religious significance, that the state ought to recognize civil unions for all. This was my position until just a few days after President Obama announced his support of same-sex marriage. I made this case in an essay for the Washington Post On Faith site. (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/post/civil-unions-for-all/2011/06/24/AGvVM8iH_blog.html)

I have never understood why LGBTQIA people insisted upon civil marriage. Why would not equal protection under the law called by the name civil unions suffice? They want the word, the concept of marriage. At least some do. It is important to recognize that some LGBTQIA people consider marriage too flawed an institution tied to an oppressive political economy that seeks ownership of people. Human beings become cogs in the machine and too often traditional marriage becomes a trap. Civil unions for all seemed to me to be a reasonable compromise. Everyone would be treated equally under the law, and marriage would retain its religious significance so that faith communities who did not want to celebrate same-sex marriage could do so and those who do want to celebrate them would have that right.

Then, I saw Andrew Sullivan's tears. I heard and read his words. There are some aspects of a person's feelings and experiences that we cannot know from within the context of our own privilege. As an African-American woman, there are many forms of disrespect that I know. However, there are some forms of saying to an Other that they are not equal that I do not know. As a heterosexual woman, I take the ability to marry and to speak of my own marriage and divorce for granted. However, President Obama's statement in support of marriage equality had an impact on LGBTQIA people that I did not imagine. It had an impact that they themselves did not imagine. Andrew Sullivan witnessed to his own reaction on The Chris Matthews Show. He said: "I watched our president tell me that I am his equal. I did not know how important it would be until it happened. That I'm no longer outside; I am fully part of this family."

There was something in his tears that I recognized. There was a deep emotional relief of acceptance that resonated from his humanity to mine. And I thought that if naming his relationship marriage within the context of law will make him feel more fully a part of the American family, then so be it.

Ethics asks the questions: what is right to do? How do we know? Sometimes we know what is right to do from the face to face encounter we have with another human being. It is not only the face to face encounter that is important, but it is also the communication that happens through conversation. We hear the stories of the Other, and there is something in what they tell us that speaks to our humanity. The late French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote of ethics as the first philosophy, and he says that "morality lies in the Other." He thinks we all have a responsibility for the Other that takes us hostage.

I say the spiritual mystery, the essence of Being beyond language, the life-force connecting all existence places a demand upon our humanity. That imperative is a mutual responsibility with other human beings who have the power of decision-making to enhance the sustenance and joy of all other human beings, all of nature and creation.