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**“Why Religion Matters in the Quest for Gay Civil Rights”**

Sometimes—who knows why—it just seems that the planets are in alignment for a movement or a cause, and today it’s full civil rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. Why are we here in this particular moment, struggling with this particular issue? Why does religion play such a central role in this debate, and is that an appropriate role in public discourse? Who are the loudest, strongest voices coming from the religious community, and why are they so strident, unrelenting, and passionate? What does the Bible really say about homosexuality, what does it *not* say, and why does it matter in a secular state? What *is* the rightful role of religion in public discourse in a secular state? How does this debate about the civil rights of LGBT people relate to the other “isms” of our culture, and what is the broader context for discussion of human rights for all our citizens? How do we move forward in the never-ending search for the common good?

Before we begin, let’s just note for the record that I am male. I will never know what it is like to live my life as a female, and if this were a lesbian delivering this lecture, that would be a wholly authoritative perspective, and it would be different from mine. I am a white man. The experience of being gay in a community of color is different than mine, especially since these people experience a double discrimination that I can only imagine. I grew up in a family that was poor, uneducated, and deeply religious, in rural,

largely segregated Kentucky, where we were tobacco tenant farmers, living without running water or central heat, but unaware of how poor we were. All of that colors who I was, who I came to be, and how I understand my own story. Not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine a world in which we would be talking openly about homosexuality, much less having a national and international debate in which I would sometimes, reluctantly, find myself at the center.

I am a Christian. The fact that I am tempted to add “but not *that* kind of Christian” speaks to the powerful role the conservative Religious Right has come to play in this country and in this debate. While I believe Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah, the perfect incarnation of the Living God, I do not believe that Jesus is the sole revelation of God’s self to the world. I respect and revere all those who have come to know God through other faith journeys. But I can only speak out of my own context as a Christian, and I will trust you to make the connections and translations into the understandings of your own faith communities. After all, the challenge before us as citizens of democracies is to define our rights and responsibilities to one another no matter what our faith beliefs are.

Why are we here in this particular moment in the history of this country and in the struggle for human rights? Thirty years ago, American singer and former Miss America Anita Bryant was the poster child and spokesperson not only for Florida orange juice, but also for a movement to squelch fuller inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the society. And while we may now look back on her, and the views she represented, as being outdated, coarse and even a bit quaint, let’s not forget that thirty years ago, those views had a huge following.

Thirty years ago, most North Americans would have told you – honestly – that they didn't know any gay or lesbian people. If pushed, they might admit that there was weird Uncle Harry, a lifelong bachelor whom everyone knew was a bit different, or those two spinster ladies who had lived together down the street for as long as anyone could remember. But, did they know any out, proud and self-affirming gay and lesbian people? Probably not.

Fast forward to today. Is there anyone left who doesn't know some family member, co-worker or neighbor who is gay? The reason, of course, is that the last two decades have seen the unprecedented movement by gay and lesbian people to make themselves known – as gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender – to their families, co-workers and friends. This has, of course, proceeded at differing rates based on geography, demographics and culture. Certain regions of the country seem more accepting than others. Metropolitan areas, to which many gay and lesbian people have gravitated because of both anonymity and generally more liberal attitudes, were the vanguard of such public admissions of sexual orientation, while more secular, less religious, settings have provided more open and accepting environments for coming out. But the real shift in the culture has been the quiet, largely private admissions by sons and daughters, cousins and aunts and uncles, in families from Birmingham to Boise: “Yes, I too am gay.”

Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to serve as Supervisor of the San Francisco City Council – and who was assassinated in 1978 by an anti-gay colleague– once said that “coming out is the most political thing you can do.” He was right. It was the countless dramas, one at a time, of gay and lesbian people courageously sharing who they

really were at their core with those they loved or worked with, that have literally changed the world and brought us to this moment.

That's the way change always happens, isn't it. You have a world view that seems to work pretty well at interpreting reality—then bam! Something happens that doesn't fit into that view – something that your old world view is insufficient to explain. You're thrown into chaos and confusion, and it seems like nothing is certain anymore. And then, little by little, your old world view is reshaped to accommodate this new truth.

That's the way it happens for families of gay and lesbian people. Parents believe the traditional view that homosexuals are immoral, sick, disordered and misguided – until a beloved child comes and says, “Mom, Dad, I'm gay.” The parents are plunged into the chaos of, on the one hand, knowing their beloved children, and knowing for sure that they are *not* immoral, sick, disordered, or misguided, and on the other hand, knowing what has always been said about gay people by the Church and by the world. So over time, they come to understand that their children are exactly the same children they've always been, only happier and healthier. The old world view about homosexuality is overhauled into a new understanding that allows parents to continue loving their children. They may not be out there beating the drum for marriage equality (although many of them are), and they may not be bragging to all their friends about their son's new boyfriend, but something deep and important has changed, some significant piece of ground has shifted, and the world isn't the same as it was. That is happening all over the world as we speak.

There is not a single nation, culture or religion that isn't dealing with the issue of homosexuality. Even those religions that are absolutely clear and unswerving in their condemnation of homosexuality are being challenged by their gay and lesbian members

to take another look at that condemnation. Some estimate, for example, the percentage of Roman Catholic priests who are gay to be between 40 and 60 per cent. The Southern Baptist Convention, which values local, congregational autonomy as almost sacred, has expelled some congregations for deciding locally to offer blessings to same-sex couples or call a gay minister. Conservative Jews have admitted gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rabbinical students to their seminaries. Evangelical Christians have been rocked by revelations that some of their own leaders have had secret affairs with people of the same sex.

Who would have thought we would ever see legal civil unions and even marriage for gay and lesbian couples? Who would have thought that a country like South Africa would write gay and lesbian civil rights explicitly into their constitution, or that a Catholic country like Spain would permit marriage between same-sex couples, long before the U.S.? Many Anglicans from around the world continue to call on me to resign my position as bishop, naively believing that if I went away, this issue would go away, and the Church would return to its quiet, peaceful existence--though the Church has never, in its 2000-year history, ever actually enjoyed such a time free of conflict. In short, this toothpaste isn't going to go back in the tube!

Why does religion play such an important role in this debate? Religion, of course, has always played a role in the public discourse of nations. But why the particularly virulent and passionate stances on this issue? And why can't we simply ignore the religious argument and have a thoroughly secular debate?

Religion makes its beliefs known on a variety of issues – from abortion to stem cell research, from environmental stewardship to capital punishment. But most religious

faith communities have people on both sides of these issues within their ranks – at least in part because you can't find too many definite proclamations in scripture either for or against these specific issues. One can read Genesis 1:28, for instance (“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”), and argue for good environmental stewardship. Or, using the very same verse and using different understandings of key words, you can argue for total exploitation of the environment. Abortion can be defended on the basis of our God-given personal conscience or opposed on the basis of the sanctity of life.

But the Bible doesn't seem to mince any words about homosexuality. Leviticus, for instance, seems to condemn quite specifically male homosexuality: “You [men] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (18:22) and “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death.” (20:13) (There are no same-sex proscriptions for women in these texts, by the way.) The fact that the Bible seems specifically to name homosexuality as repugnant to God and worthy of capital punishment makes religion particularly relevant to our understanding of this issue, in ways that are more compelling than with other hot-button issues.

The fact is, at least in Western culture, God's condemnation of homosexuality is assumed. It's in the air we breathe. And because of that, religious belief *is* relevant in our discourse about civil rights for gay and lesbian people.

Let's be honest. Most of the discrimination experienced by gay and lesbian people has come at the hands of religious people, and the greatest single hindrance to the

achievement of full civil rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people can be laid at the doorstep of the three Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It will take religious voices and religious people to undo the harm, devastation and discrimination wrought at the hands of religious people.

So, what does the Bible *really* say about homosexuality? I believe our traditional understanding of the biblical (and hence God's) attitude toward homosexuals is flawed and needs to be reinterpreted.

First, the philosophical and psychological construct of sexual orientation is a modern phenomenon. It was only at the very end of the nineteenth century that the notion was first posed that there might be a certain minority of people who are naturally oriented--affectionally and sexually--toward members of the same gender. In biblical times, and until the last hundred or so years, it's been assumed that everyone is heterosexual, so anyone acting in a homosexual manner was acting "against their nature." In other words, homosexuals were merely and only "heterosexuals behaving badly." Indeed, many recent evangelical translations of the Bible use the actual word "homosexual" to translate certain Greek and Hebrew words which may not be related to homosexuality *per se*, but instead to sexual exploitation and abuse of underage boys by older men, quite common in Roman and Greek culture, and to temple prostitution in neighboring heathen cultures. Yet reading one of these translations using the word "homosexual," you'd assume that the ancient Hebrew and Christian communities were talking about precisely the same thing we are talking about today. That's not the case. You can't take a twentieth-century word, insert it back into an ancient text, and proclaim that it means something totally unknown to the authors of that text.

Second, our understanding of the word “abomination” is different from its original use. According to the Holiness Code in the Book of Leviticus, many things were an “abomination” to God, including the eating of pork. That was not to say that eating pork was innately wrong, but that abstaining from it was one of the ways Jews were constantly reminded that they were a separate, chosen people of God. Observing the dietary laws would remind them of this special relationship to God. They were also forbidden from eating shellfish, planting two kinds of seed in the same field, or wearing two kinds of cloth simultaneously. Tattoos were forbidden; those who cursed their parents were to be put to death. Yet you don’t hear leaders from the Religious Right upholding these as “abominations” or urging their compliance

Third, the ancient Hebrews’ understanding of the science related to reproduction and sexual activity was different from what we know today. Male sperm was thought to contain all of nascent life. The only contribution made by women in the reproductive process was a place for the fetus to incubate. A man’s sperm, or “seed,” contained everything necessary for human life, and therefore any “spilling” of male seed was tantamount to murder. Ancient Hebrews were a small minority, living in a hostile, heathen environment, struggling to reproduce, to build up its population and survive. So any waste of male sperm was antithetical to that survival and synonymous with not only murder, but a betrayal of the national interest. Under this same rubric, masturbation and even *coitus interruptus in heterosexual copulation (the so-called “sin of Onan”)* were prohibited because they wasted male seed and squandered the possibility of new human life. Today, we understand that both sexes contribute to the process of human

reproduction. Over-population, not under-population, is the problem. We believe sexuality to have purposes far beyond reproduction. Yet, these few verses of scripture are quoted as if nothing has changed in our understanding since biblical times. Note, of course, that all the other references to the “spilling of seed” have been reinterpreted to be acceptable, but not the proscription against same sex behavior.

Recent studies have yielded rich information about the culture in which these texts were written and heard. Much of the biblical scholarship in the past fifty years has focused on the sociological cultures that formed the settings for these scriptural texts, both the cultures of the ancient Hebrews and the early Church, as well as the competing and often hostile cultures surrounding them. We’ve come to know the deeper meaning of these sacred texts as we’ve become more knowledgeable about the cultural situations to which they were responses. Those who argue for a literalist reading of scripture often act as if none of this scholarship has occurred or makes any difference in a 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of those texts.

And though I believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, that doesn’t mean they are literally the “words” of God, virtually dictated by God through human media. And let’s not forget that the real “Word” of God is Jesus himself. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” begins the Gospel of John. Christians believe the Jesus “event,” – his life, death and resurrection – is the perfect revelation of God, not the Bible. The Bible is, I believe, the best and most trustworthy witness to that event, but it neither replaces Jesus as the Word nor takes precedence over Christ’s continuing action in the world through

the Holy Spirit. To elevate the words of scripture to a place higher than the revealed Word of God in Jesus Christ is, I believe, an act of idolatry.

Jesus says an interesting thing, in John's Gospel, to his disciples at the Last Supper, on the night before he is betrayed: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." It sounds to me as if Jesus is saying, "You are not ready to hear everything I have to teach you – things you cannot culturally comprehend right now. So I will send the Holy Spirit to guide you and teach you, over time, those things which you need to understand." As a Christian, I believe that the Holy Spirit has done just that.

Less than a century and a half ago, "good" Christian people were still using scripture to justify slavery. In the 1950's and 60's "good" Christian people were enforcing Jim Crow laws and blocking entrances to their schools to black children. I believe that the Holy Spirit led us into a deeper truth, about the equality, worth and dignity of every human being, regardless of race. And the culture changed. Not enough, of course, because racism is alive and well among us in the culture and in the Church. But many of us learned.

It is almost inconceivable to me that the Episcopal Church first allowed women to be deputies to our national General Convention in 1970, and only began ordaining women to the priesthood in 1976. Yet the largest Christian denomination in the world still does not open the ranks of the ordained to the women who form its core. Scripture passages from St. Paul about the inappropriateness of women holding leadership positions or making their voices heard in the Church are still being used to subjugate

women all over the world. All in the name of God as revealed in scripture. But the Holy Spirit unrelentingly keeps teaching and guiding us toward the full inclusion of women.

Indeed, those who believe that the 2,000-year tradition against homosexuality argues against change forget that the Church has changed its understanding of some very important teachings that it has held for countless centuries. For instance, the Church for nearly 2,000 years took seriously Jesus' words that remarriage after divorce was adultery. Until the early days of my own ministry as a priest, divorced people were not welcome to take communion, and if one of them decided to remarry, that second marriage could not be solemnized in an Episcopal Church. But two things happened. We realized we were denying communion to people at a time they most desperately needed it. And we noticed that these second marriages were turning out to be a blessing to the couple and to the community. Indeed, God seemed to be showing up in those marriages and relationships and families. So, in spite of the explicit injunction against it from the mouth of Jesus himself, we began to offer the Church's blessing on these marriages. It was the work of the Holy Spirit, guiding us into the truth, just as Jesus promised the Spirit would.

All of this may seem hopelessly off-topic for issues related to gay and lesbian people, but I assert that they're all deeply related. We are talking about how we change our minds – as a culture, a nation and as religious communities – about something we've been very sure about for thousands of years. To some, it seems like the height of madness, and a willy-nilly discarding of ancient truths. To some, it seems as if nothing is certain anymore, or that the Church doesn't know *what* it believes. But to others, it seems like the kind of change that Jesus promised would be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Only through such a gentle and comforting understanding of the continuing work of God will people find the courage to change their minds about this issue.

But why is the resistance to change on this issue so vehement, so vitriolic, so deep? Why would two people who want to pledge their love and fidelity to one another for their mutual benefit and the benefit of society be seen as a problem? Why wouldn't conservatives applaud the pledge of faithful monogamy in gay marriage for the people they have always accused of being promiscuous and irresponsible? Why wouldn't conservative Christians want to see gay people stop entering usually-disastrous heterosexual marriages just to be happy and accepted? Why can conservatives in America and elsewhere use gay marriage as an effective wedge issue in political campaigns?

Or, in the Episcopal Church, why would my election as bishop of a reasonably conservative, rural and small-town diocese in New England become such a worldwide controversy? How could it spawn thousands of hateful letters and emails? Why would I, a Christian, called and elected by the clergy and people of a diocese to be their bishop, receive death threats from other religious people and have to wear a bulletproof vest for my own consecration? Why would people debate my fitness for such a calling, based not on my skills, experience and faithfulness, but solely on my sexual orientation – not just in metropolitan churches, but around the world, from a small theological school deep in the bush of Kenya to the remotest of Pacific islands? Why would some leaders in the Anglican Communion consider it dangerous even to meet with me, talk with me or be seen with me?

First, let's admit we've never been very comfortable talking about sex. The Puritans in American culture didn't help, nor did the Victorian Age with its often duplicitous sensibilities. The realities of our sexual lives are perhaps too frightening to bring to the light of day.

And yet, many of the moral issues that face us today involve sexuality. Abortion, fertility therapies, alternative methods of reproduction, the role of men and women, and the ending of half of all marriages in divorce signaling a crisis for the contemporary family all involve sexuality. We need to talk about these things, yet we have little experience in doing so. Parents still falter over what to tell their children about sex and when to tell them. Perhaps our near-obsession with homosexuality is a group denial mechanism for heterosexuals not to talk about their own sexual issues. If we can talk about *them*, then we don't have to talk about *us*. If we can focus on *their* problems, then we don't have to talk about our own.

In addition, most heterosexual people resist seeing the treatment of homosexuals as "their" problem. Gay and lesbian people have known for a long time that the problem here isn't gay and lesbian people's sexuality, but their ill treatment by a hostile society.

You may notice that I have not once used the word "homophobia." I think it exists in some people, but it's always a conversation stopper. Some claim they're not afraid of homosexuals so they're "not guilty" of homophobia. But aside from the hatred of homosexuals, which does exist, the further sin of which the secular society is guilty, is better labeled "heterosexism."

You know what an "ism" is: a set of prejudices and values and judgments backed up with the power to enforce those prejudices in society. Racism is not just fear and

loathing of non-white people; it is the systemic network of laws, customs and beliefs that perpetuate prejudicial treatment of people of color. I benefit every day from being white in this culture. I don't have to hate anyone, or call anyone a hateful name, or do any harm to a person of color to benefit from a racist society. I merely have to sit back and reap the rewards from a system set up to benefit me. I can even be tolerant, open-minded and multi-culturally sensitive. But as long as I am not working to dismantle that system, I am racist.

Similarly, sexism is not merely the denigration and devaluation of women; it is the myriad ways in which the system is set up to benefit men over women. It takes no hateful behavior on my part to reap the rewards given to men, at the expense of women. But to choose not to work for the full equality of women in this culture is to be sexist.

So, the sin we are fighting in this country right now in the secular sphere is the sin of heterosexism. More and more people are feeling kindly toward gay and lesbian people, but that will never be enough. More important is the dismantling of the system that rewards heterosexuals at the expense of homosexuals. That is why equal marriage rights are so important. That's why "don't ask, don't tell" is such a failure and such a painful thing for gay and lesbian people, even those who have no desire to serve in the military. They are ever present reminders that our identities, our lives, and our relationships are second class – because the very system of laws that govern us discriminates against us and denigrates our lives. Over one thousand rights are automatically granted to a couple who marries. Britney Spears received those one thousand rights on the night she decided on a lark to get married in Las Vegas--yet the gay couple who has been faithfully together for 30 years is denied them.

This systemic heterosexism affects gay and lesbian people in countless ways, large and small. Because my partner's parents didn't accept our relationship, we had to draw up documents that would prevent his parents from making all his medical decisions if he became sick and incompetent, or from taking his body away from me if he were to die. When Mark and I return from overseas, while every other family on the plane is asked to fill out just one immigration and customs form, we must fill out two, as if we were strangers, or mere traveling companions--as if the twenty years we've been together doesn't qualify as family. It's a little thing, but it is mightily symbolic of the way the system is set up to devalue us as people and as families. The problem here is not just homophobia, it is heterosexism.

Lastly, this issue fits into an even larger context. I believe with my whole heart that what we are up against in this struggle is the beginning of the end of patriarchy. At their root, heterosexism and homophobia are expressions of misogyny, the hatred of women. The "sin" of a "man lying with a man" in Leviticus is apparent in the next few words: "as with a woman." The sin is that a man, favored by his status as a man, would allow himself to be treated "like a woman." The classic defense in a gay bashing case is "he made a pass at me." Can you imagine how empty the streets would be if we locked up every man who had ever made a pass at a woman? That's "normal." But for a man to allow himself to be treated like a piece of meat by another man is to defy the privilege that comes with being male. In ancient times, it was not uncommon for one army, when it had prevailed over another army, to rape the vanquished soldiers. In the ancient mind, nothing was so degrading, nothing was so symbolic of victory over another, than to treat another man like a woman. There is even some evidence that those passages in

Leviticus refer not to the insertive partner but to the receptive partner in anal intercourse - because only he was acting “like a woman.” At least the insertive partner was still acting “like a man.” It seems that the reason female same sex behavior is only mentioned once, and then only in the New Testament, is that women are already at the low end of the status totem pole. It is the usurping of male privilege and status that seems to be the “abomination” – defying the gods.

If you doubt the currency of this misogynistic attitude, go to the video store and rent any movie with a football storyline. At some point, in every single one of these movies, when the team is about to lose the big game, and the coach needs to pump the players up, the coach will belittle, anger and presumably empower the team by calling them a bunch of girls. Why does that work? Because no insult could be worse!

But patriarchy is beginning to erode in society and in the church. For a very long time now, most of the decisions affecting the world have been made by white, heterosexual, educated, Western men. Ever so gradually, people of color have been invited to the conversation; then women, and now gay and lesbian people. And things are never the same when the oppressed get their voice. It’s no wonder the resistance is so fierce, given that we are changing a patriarchal system that has been in place almost forever.

But how do we now move forward? And what is the rightful role of religion in this public discourse? Unlike some issues that have faced us in the past, the movement forward in the civil realm is tied intimately to moving forward in the religious realm. There is perhaps no other prejudice, ensconced in the laws of the land, so based on sacred scripture, so entwined with our theological understanding of the nature of humankind and

the sexuality which proves to be both its blessing and its curse. No other attitude in the body politic is so tied to an attitude stemming from a particular Judaeo-Christian teaching. Change in no other social attitude in the secular culture is so tied to change in religious belief.

I believe that it will take religious people and religious voices to undo the harm that has been done by religious institutions. While we are seeing a decline in the number of people who experience and express their spirituality in and through a formal religious institution, it is still a powerful force within the culture, generally working against progress in the inclusion and full civil rights for gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. It is time that progressive Christians rescue the Bible from the Religious Right which has held it hostage and claimed it as its own private territory for far too long. It is time that Christians and Jews actually read their holy scriptures they claim as the basis for their beliefs, instead of simply believing what others tell them it says. It's time we use reputable scholarship, sound reason, and thoughtful exploration to understand what the words of scripture meant to the person who authored them and what they meant to the people for whom they were written, before deciding whether or not those words are eternally binding on those outside that ancient cultural context. It's time that progressive religious people stop being ashamed of their faith and fearful that they will be identified with the Religious Right, and start preaching the Good News of the liberating Christ, which includes all God's children.

I also think it is time that religious people start demanding separation of church and state! Now that may seem obvious to you, but obvious in only one direction. The church and other religious institutions are constantly worried about infringement by the

State and secular culture on the Church. But in this case, do we not have an infringement of the Church on the State? It is time for religious people to stand up for the notion that the Church should not impose its views on the secular society! The Church is free to think and believe whatever it wants about homosexuality and same sex relationships, but is it right for the Church to force the secular State into its own beliefs and discriminations? As Americans, we believe discrimination to be wrong. Period. And this movement is about ending discrimination. Why would we let a majority Judaeo-Christian belief system dictate what America will do about equal protection under the law – even if they don't like it? Would we allow an Islamic or other faith system to do so? I think not. And it's time for Christians and Jews to make that public argument.

But what is a good, positive and appropriate way to voice one's religious convictions in public discourse? It is, I believe a simple shift in focus from the public to the private in these expressions. I am free to express my own personal and religious reasons for coming to the opinions I express, but the minute I start arguing that you must come to those same opinions because my religious truth must be your truth too, then I violate the divide between private and public. Most alarming of all is when "my" truth becomes "the" truth, applicable to everyone. James Dobson or Pat Robertson are perfectly free to tell me about their religious beliefs that compel them to oppose acceptance of gay people, but when they claim that their beliefs are right and true for all of humankind, they move from democracy to theocracy .

Similarly, if I am going to make arguments for the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people in society, I must do so on the merits of my argument, not on a claim that my understanding of God is right and true. I must make my

arguments based on decency, compassion, democratic principles, and a constitutionally-based notion of the common good – not on any reading of any sacred text to which I might subscribe.

We need to separate, as best we can, the civil realm from the religious, especially in the struggle for equal civil marriage rights for all citizens. Clergy have long acted as agents of the State in the solemnization of marriages. Because a priest, or rabbi, or minister acts on behalf of the State in signing the marriage license and attesting to the proper enactment of the marriage, we have lost the distinction between what the State does, and what the religious institution does. In fact, the State affects the marriage, while the Church pronounces its blessing on that union. In France, everyone is married at the mayor's office; those who are religious reconvene at the church for the religious blessing. Those who don't desire such a blessing are still fully married according to the laws of the State. In such an arrangement, it is clear where the State's action ends and the Church's action begins.

We need to make a clear distinction between civil rights (R-I-G-H-T-S) and religious rites (R-I-T-E-S). It may take many years for religious institutions to add their blessing to same-sex marriages, and no church or synagogue should ever be forced to do so, but that should not slow down progress toward the full civil right to marriage, as executed by the State, for the benefit and stability of the society. New Hampshire legalized civil unions beginning in January 2008, and my partner of twenty years and I entered into such a civil, legal union last June. Our service began with a procession to the back of the Church, where our female, Jewish lawyer solemnized the legal, civil union, surrounded by our families and friends. That's the civil part, accountable to the

State. Then we processed back up the aisle to the altar of the church for prayers of thanksgiving and blessing for that union, which is the purview of the Church. Such a separation of the roles of Church and State might be helpful in lots of ways. Perhaps it is a separation that ought to be made for all couples, heterosexual and homosexual alike.

I am hopeful about the future. Christians are hopeful by nature – not because we have any special confidence in the desire or ability of human beings to do the right thing – that is mere optimism; but because of our confidence in God to keep prodding, inspiring and calling us to do the right thing – that is hope. My faith tells me that God is always working for the coming of the kind of Kingdom in which all are respected, all are valued, all are included. I believe that the Holy Spirit is working within the Church and within the culture to bring that full inclusion about, and in the end, God will not be foiled. In the end, God wins; and God's justice wins. In the meantime, we need to work with all our might, intellect, dollars—and all our hearts – to bring that new world into existence.

Thank you