

Parashat Tetzaveh
Shabbat Freedom to Marry
February 14, 2003
Rabbi Lisa Edwardsat BCC

Thanks to Billy Ray Williams, I got to go to a dinner last weekend honoring BCC's dear friend, the Reverend Troy Perry, founding minister of Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) and some say also founding minister of Metropolitan Community Temple (aka BCC). Troy let us know that this afternoon, along with Philip, his partner of 16 years, he was heading to a city court house to try to get a marriage license. Tracy and I and some other clergy couples tried the same thing a few years ago during this same "Freedom to Marry Week" (which is, btw, deliberately calendared during the week of Lincoln's birthday and Valentine's Day). We even went with our state of Vermont Civil Union certificates in hand. I haven't talked to Troy yet today, but I have reason to believe they got turned away, just like Tracy and I and our friends did.

No marriage yet, though there is Domestic Partnership registration, which I want to encourage you again to take advantage of if you haven't already. It's the best we have so far in California. And it is a good thing - California Domestic Partnership registration gives us 12 legal rights that we wouldn't otherwise have. But let me remind you that even with 12 legal rights, "domestic partnership registration provides same-sex couples with access to less than one percent of the laws that exist to protect married couples," [f2mca website]. Let me also remind you that, "[C]urrently, same-sex couples cannot marry anywhere in the United States - and therefore do not have access to thousands of state and federal laws that provide protections and define responsibilities for families through civil marriage." [ibid]

So why, you might well ask, are we looking so cheerful here on this Valentine's Day, Freedom to Marry Shabbat? (at least you were looking cheerful until I launched into my statistics, eh?) Well, maybe it's because our friends at Lambda Legal have been writing a bill - the "Domestic Partner Rights and Responsibilities Act" -- that our friend State Assemblyperson Jackie Goldberg introduced in the State Assembly last month, which would confer on same gender couples the same approximately 4,600 rights that married couples have in the state of California.

But maybe also because, apart from our state and federal governments (which are giving us plenty of other reasons not to be cheerful lately), we do, here in this sanctuary tonight, have a number of reasons for cheer. We've already had a glimpse of some them: A visit from our friends Carol and Clair who moved to northern California a while ago, are here tonight celebrating not only a visit with us, but also: [their list] their 8.5-year anniversary The legal changing of their last names so they will match (court date 2/10!) And looking forward to the arrival later this spring of their baby!!

And speaking of babies (new and old), Shoshana and Ashira are being visited this weekend by a whole bunch of family including their very new cousin Mira, daughter of Tara's sister, Beth. And not exactly in the same category as celebration - we're happy to offer tonight a tefilat haderekh blessing for a safe journey to our fairly new friend, Todd Henry, who

will shortly be heading to Seoul, South Korea to do research for his doctoral dissertation. Tonight we welcome Todd's mother, who came from Wisconsin to see him off. See any connections between all these "reasons for celebration?"

I see "Family." We offer a blessing for family nearly every week here. Sometimes a longer version, sometimes a shorter, our prayer always includes the line: "in whatever way it comes into our lives, we give thanks for the blessing of family." "In whatever way it comes into our lives" is not a line about the magic of love - the ways we meet partners, or the ways especially in our community, we get children. The line, "in whatever way it comes into our lives" invites us each week to consider who is our family, it's meant to remind us that our family may include people and other creations for that matter, that are not usually listed on the census form. And that line invites us to consider each week how families change, how our lives change, how people and creatures might come into our family - or leave it.

We've been focused, by virtue of our visitors tonight, on what we might call "nuclear families" -- mother and son, 2 partners about to be mothers, 3 mothers with their daughters and some of their parents and siblings, and nieces and nephews - you know, family we all easily recognize. And on Valentine's Day and during Freedom to Marry week it's easy to get focused on "traditional family groupings" (though looking at these groupings tonight, we do add our particular spin to "traditional families", don't we?). Still, our focus so far tonight seems to presume, as Valentine's Day and Freedom to Marry Week seem to presume, a universal desire for monogamous couplehood. We fight for freedom to marry to protect our couples and their children. As well we should.

But what about those among us who do not have partners or do not have children - whether by choice or circumstance - should freedom to marry and Valentine's day make them feel simply bad or sad - simply "without"? I often worry that in our struggle for civil rights, for so-called equal rights, we've left out a significant segment of our population. And I don't want to. I want an inclusive community, a non-judgmental community, a community that doesn't assume partnership and parenthood are the only ways to go, or even the preferred ways to go. I'm not comfortable assuming that everyone who doesn't have a partner wants one. Or that everyone who isn't a parent wishes they were. Or that being single is just some sort of waiting room, where we dwell while waiting for true fulfillment.

In the prayer we offer for children each week, we use Marcia Falk's words: "may you be who you are. May you be blessed in all that you are." Is that a prayer we mean only for children? Do our assumptions for ourselves and one another change when we get to adulthood? I hope not. I want us to keep in mind that freedom to marry is only one of the many freedoms we deserve. Generation after generation of readers of this week's Torah portion, Tetzaveh, have been struck and puzzled by the lengthy and detailed instructions God gives for the clothing of the priests and the method of slaughter for the animals of sacrifice. Not topics most of us see as key to the Judaism we know and live. What's all that detail doing there, who needs it? We don't of course know for sure.

But many commentators point out something that many others overlook. God says, do all this, create this very particular place of meeting, in order that I can come to live among you, live among the people. And when I do, says God, then "they will know that I am

Adonai their God, who brought them out from the land of Egypt [in order] for me to dwell among them” [Ex. 29:46].

Bible scholar Richard Friedman [p.273] says that God’s central point in all of this is to say: I want to come and live with you, and be your God, and I want you to know that I am your God and that I dwell with you. Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (12th Century Spain) notes that this verse means that “the purpose of My bringing them forth from the land of Egypt was only that I might dwell in their midst.” Rabbi Bradley Artson uses these interpretations to suggest that God not only wants a relationship with us, but that God needs human love and human relationship. He writes, “God’s passion and loneliness find expression and resolution only in the reciprocal love of human beings.” And he continues, “Our tradition teaches us that we are made in God’s image: just as we have been created with a drive to love and be loved, so our Creator, whose image we reflect, needs to give love and to receive it.” [internet d’var torah 2/14/03]

God gives love and receives it in many different ways, in many different relationships. It is not just in couplehood, not even just in couplehood with the Jewish people. God comes to dwell among us, that is what God desires, and as many of our teachers say, we feel the presence of God in the relationships we have with one another - all of the sacred relationships each of us has with other people, not just the one we might have with a spouse or partner or lover.

Is freedom to marry important? It is indeed. We need to advocate for it in whatever ways we can. And we ought to take advantage of it whenever the laws do offer us rights, even if that’s step by step, right by right, instead of all them - and all of us - at once. Coupled or not, the rights offered to a married couple are important to us as a community. But they are not all that is important to us as a community . . . or as individuals, or as Jews.

Rather, those rights are but a few amidst a long list of what is important to individuals - like us -- who choose to live in community, who choose, as God chose, to live among human beings; who choose, as God chooses, to live in relationship, to share our lives with others; and who know, as God knows, that many kinds of relationships are sacred and worthy of our care.

shabbat shalom

BLESSING FOR FAMILIES/children

call up todd, weinreichs, carol and clair

tefilat haderekh and then marsha’s yiverechecha