

Marriage Rites or Rights? *By the Rev. Laura Rose*

As an ordained minister in United Church of Christ (UCC), I have had the great honor of being able to preside at religious rites affirming the lifetime commitments of same-gender and different-gender couples. During each one of these sacred ceremonies, the couples have looked into each others eyes and said their vows before God and their community of faith.

These holy unions have been equal in all respects in terms of their level of devotion and their commitment to a lifetime of love, honor, respect and self-sacrifice. The only critical difference, which is what the equal marriage rights debate is really about, is that same-gender couples do not enjoy the same legal protections -- more than 1,138 federal and state rights -- automatically given to heterosexual couples as soon as their legal marriage license is signed.

These include basic human rights that heterosexual couples can easily take for granted, and when denied, lead to extremely heart wrenching situations. Imagine not being able to visit your spouse in the hospital and not being able to assist in making critical medical decisions. Imagine grieving the loss of your spouse and at the same time being denied survivor benefits. Imagine being forced to leave your family and friends behind and move to another country because the person you have committed your life to cannot become a U.S. citizen. Denying any group of Americans basic civil rights goes against the vision of our nation's founders and the provisions for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness woven into our Constitution. Much of the public discourse about this topic has been waylaid by the debate about whether homosexuality is moral or immoral, natural or unnatural. This kind of discussion has so muddied the separation of church and state that the real issue at hand often gets eclipsed.

Let's be clear. As Americans who strive to remain faithful to our founding fathers' ideals, the real issue is that history is repeating itself: one particular group of Americans is being segregated and denied the basic civil rights guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution.

Let's be clear about another thing. Making same-gender marriage legal will in no way undermine a religious institution's ability to choose, based on its own conscience and belief system, whether or not its ministers should conduct marriage ceremonies for same-gender couples and whether or not its houses of worship should welcome and affirm homosexual people. The Constitution will continue to protect the freedom of religious expression.

Wherever you are on this issue, I encourage you to take a moment to think about the thousands upon thousands of same-gender couples who, despite lack of societal and legal support, have committed themselves to one partner for life. Surely these stable, highly committed and loving relationships only strengthen and honor what the institution of marriage is supposed to be about. I take heart in the fact that there is evidence that time can and does change things. As hard as it is to believe, in 1967, a majority of the people in our nation thought interracial marriage was an abomination in the eyes of God and should not be legal. The arguments used to defend against it were very similar to those being used today against same-gender marriage. Thankfully the boundless love, freedom and equality that God intends for our world is stronger and more persistent than the human tendency toward fear and exclusion.

The Rev. Laura Rose is the senior pastor at First Congregational Alameda, United Church of Christ. The UCC recently adopted a resolution advocating equal marriage rights. To find out more, go to www.ucc.org or www.fccalameda.org.