

LOVE

A homily by Sara Barker and Kathy Murphy

Given at Wildflower Church on January 4, 2009

Sara and I have been asked to speak to the topic of love. We've been together 28 years and this may by itself qualify us to speak on the subject. We have actually learned some things about love as we've forged a life together. The first being that the length of a relationship does not equate to the love found in it.

We have had to work hard to make this life partnership work. In the beginning, just being brave enough to "be in love" was a difficult thing -- for me especially. Coming out is stressful. Even if the outcome is positive, the anxiety leading up to the process is difficult. Generally, lesbians and gays are rarely validated in their relationships by the larger community. So learning how to be in a loving healthy relationship is not easy to do.

We tend to take things for granted, especially when we're part of the dominant culture: We assume that our family members and coworkers will be happy to hear that we've met someone special, as long as that person is of the opposite sex. In 1987, seven years into our relationship, I was diagnosed with breast cancer, which is terrible for any couple. All Kathy and I wanted was to grow old together. We were suddenly less willing to do that in hiding.

I remember when we were in a large gathering of mostly gay women, at our 10 year mark, when we happened to announce it publicly. The applause was thunderous and I realized then how powerful validation is. Many of those women didn't actually know us well, but they were jubilant just knowing that a long term relationship was possible in a world that stacks the odds against it.

The issues faced by any two people in a relationship are more the same than they are different. Where will we spend the holidays? What color couch will we buy? Where

will we set the thermostat? Compromise and consensus are always needed, and can be more difficult without the support of the culture.

Loving someone and committing to each other is incredibly wonderful, and incredibly difficult. Loving someone infuses your whole life. When I experience something incredible, the first thing I want to do is to share it with Kathy. Partners of any gender get the best -- and the worst -- of each other. We get each other's whole past, all the experiences that have made us who we are -- the good, the bad and the ugly. We also get all the relatives. As many of you know, Kathy has a twin sister, and I used to joke about starting a support group for spouses and significant others of twins.

So another 18 years have passed since we declared our love to a room full of women and what have we learned? We absolutely believe that for love to be sustaining and for a relationship to grow, it must be nourished by the gift of freedom. Sara and I have learned the hard way - that we need to give each other the right to follow our own paths. Once we gave up the notion that we had to be fused together and had to experience life the same way, we began to grow individually and then as a couple. The more we gave each other permission to explore separate friendships, interests, have alone time, the more we found ourselves valuing our time and life together. We call this "Yours, Mine, and Ours." This is hard to do for couples. Many couples often fuse and somewhere along the line, one or both of the people in the relationship realizes they've stopped being the person they once were. They've acquiesced so much that they've become either someone else, or more like the other person in the relationship. Sara and I see our lives together as two separate paths that continually intersect and those points of intersection, for us, is where we get nourished.

We mean "yours, mine and ours" literally. We're fortunate that our home is large enough so we can have my space, Kathy's space and our space. It's also about time. We recently spent a week apart, me in Maine and Kathy in Austin. I looked forward to getting away and being alone in a place that I love. But as much as I loved being there, I

missed sharing it with her. We found ourselves talking on the phone almost every day, as if we had just met. A sweet surprise for us both.

In October 1996, Sara and I became members of First Unitarian Universalist Church here in Austin. After years of being non-churched, and for me, being godless, this was big. In the past twelve years, our relationship has been affirmed by our Unitarian faith in so many ways. When Sara and I joined Wildflower in 2003, we fondly recall attending a get together for new members at Gary and Ginger's house. That same week, the last remaining [anti-homosexual](#) sodomy law had been invalidated by the U.S. Supreme Court decision [Lawrence v. Texas](#) . We walked into Gary and Ginger's house and in every room we entered was the jubilant chatter surrounding this event. We were stunned. We had simply never been with so many like minded straight people in our life. It was glorious, it was affirming, and it was the first UU principle in action: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

From the very start, the people of Wildflower Church treated us as a family unit, just like any other couple. It think it's impossible for someone who has not had their relationships marginalized to understand how that felt and what it has meant to us.

So in our 28 years together we have had to work at this love thing, but we've learned how to do it better as time has gone on. We get credit for this. But you get credit as well. That we stand before you and can talk about our life together is a gift which we do not take for granted. It should be possible across the land, but it is not. That we have just been able to share it with you, we say Amen and Hallelujah.