

Standing on the Side of Love--with Veterans
November 14, 2010

Thank you, choir. You know, last year for Veterans Day, our own Tom Bookout, dressed in his Navy whites, read Joel McCrae's *poem*, "In Flanders Fields," as a reading for the worship service, and Nathan Burnette and Julian Jimenez handed out little plastic poppies for people to wear, in honor of veterans of war. It kind of boggles my mind that a whole *year* has already passed since that last Veterans Day. Nevertheless, a year *has* passed, and it's that poem, "In Flanders Fields," that the lyrics to the song we just heard are from. If you don't mind, I'd like to read some of them again, though we just heard them, in case you didn't quite catch all the words:

In flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead, short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In flanders fields

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In flanders fields.

I myself have never been to Flanders Fields. I've only seen photographs--black and white photographs of mud, of trenches, of dead and wounded men; color photographs of white crosses, red poppies, green grasses, blue sky. Lots and lots of sky--from the photographs, at least, almost like a Texan sky.

And a Texan sky, I *have* seen, especially in the past few weeks. In the past few weeks I've traveled to Port Aransas, San Antonio, U Bar U, and last weekend, I traveled all the way to Lubbock and back. So no, I have never traveled to Flanders Fields, but I have been traveling. And even if my travels have only been around Texas, I have been keeping in my thoughts, especially in my drive to Lubbock, on the dead who, "short days ago...lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow," who "loved, and were loved," and

now lie in some field, somewhere. All those small towns I drove through. All that open land, open sky. The people from those places who for myriad reasons, signed up to help protect it all.

I want to talk to you more about that, about those small towns and my driving through them and thinking about the people who have lived there. But first, I want to correct myself and tell you that actually, I have been traveling further than just Lubbock. Today, for instance, I'm traveling to, hmmm, I'd say about 1974. You see, today would have been my father's 91st birthday. He, as I mention probably every Veterans Day, and other days as well, was a veteran of World War II. He died in 1974, so, in order to gather up memories of him I have to travel pretty far back.

And then, related to him, and to my childhood, this past week, thanks to the easy accessibility of the social network known as Facebook, I found a group of people from my very first school I ever attended, a radically progressive public school, called Metropolitan Learning Center, or, more affectionately, MLC. The group site is filled with old photographs of my schoolmates from 1970-1975, some of whom were also my neighbors, some of whom were my older siblings and my stepsiblings. Seeing such photos sent me deeper into a kind of time travel, to the years of the Vietnam war and its end days, to a time of *everyone*, at least in my

community, having long hair, and of the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s still lingering, if beginning to fade.

Reflective of both the Vietnam war and of the feeling of revolutionary liberation that was in the air, was an issue of *Time* magazine I very clearly remember seeing as a ten-year old child. I remember seeing it on the coffee table at my house, and picking it up curiously, if cautiously. The issue was dated September 8, 1975. On the cover was a photograph of a man, dressed in uniform, his last name visible on his badge, and his eyes peering directly into those of the reader. The caption read, “I am a Homosexual’--The Gay Drive for Acceptance.”

Do any of you remember that issue of *Time*? The man on the cover was named Leonard Matlovich. He was an Air Force sergeant, a recipient of both a bronze star and a purple heart, and it is his photograph, of him receiving a medal, and his words that don the cover of today’s order of service. “When I was in the military,” the words say, “they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.” This is the epitaph on Leonard Matlovich’s gravestone. He died in 1988.

Thirty-five years after Matlovich’s appearance on *Time* magazine and his discharge from the Air Force, 22 years after Matlovich’s death, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says to the Senate Armed Services Committee, quote, “No matter how I look at the issue, I

cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy which forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens.” The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff says this. And yet. And yet, 2010, despite our president’s promises, ticks away without the absurdity of Matlovich’s discharge being righted by the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.

And therein lies my re-entry to last week’s trip Lubbock. Now, just as an aside, I don’t want paint very broad strokes of assumptions about the community of Lubbock. After all, I was there to preach at a Unitarian Universalist church--a church that has been in Lubbock since the late 1950s! Still, I will be honest that most of my information about the town comes from the lyrics of a Dixie Chicks song called “Lubbock or Leave It,” in which lead singer and Lubbock native Natalie Maines sings about being ostracized by that community after her statement expressing shame about being from the same state as the president who sent this country to war in Iraq. Other than that, the only other thing I really know about Lubbock (aside from Mac Davis and Buddy Holly) is that Texas Tech is there, and that they have a very competitive football team.

And it’s that football team I want to talk about for a moment, because last weekend, the same weekend I was preaching at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Lubbock, was homecoming weekend at Texas Tech,

and the game was against the University of Missouri, who at that time were 7-1. So I was intrigued, on Saturday night, to watch the game in my hotel room. Being that Veterans Day was a few days away, the Texas Tech team was wearing special uniforms. The trim of their jerseys and their pants, as well as their cleats, were all done in the pattern of camouflage. And rather than sporting their last names on the backs of their jerseys, all the players wore the same one word, in bold capital letters: Freedom.

Now I think I understand the intention of this gesture. Wearing the word *freedom* is a reminder to us all that men and women in the armed forces are out there fighting for our freedom and the freedom of others. I understand that, and honor that. Still, I can't help but feeling, I hope not cynical, but cautious, about a mass of young men shedding their own names to wear this one word we've been throwing around for quite some time now without often enough asking ourselves what we mean by it. What does freedom mean, after all?

This is what I struggled with as I drove from Kerrville to Lubbock last Saturday, through towns like Junction, Menard, Eden, Paint Rock, Ballinger, Bronte, Fort Chadbourne, Blackwell, Sweetwater, Roscoe, Wastella, Inadale, Hermleigh, Snyder, Dermot, Justiceburg, Post, Slaton, Posey, and finally Lubbock itself. It was a struggle, because as I drove through these towns, I saw little churches, and being a clergy person

myself, I wondered what was preached in those churches, all alone out there, and I wondered, being gay myself, what it would be like to grow up gay in such a small town, going to a church that might not preach quite the same message as a typical Unitarian Universalist Church. On a different level, I struggled because I realized how central the land must be to people's lives in these small towns, and that notions of freedom must be so much more tied to the land for people so tied to the land themselves, as compared to someone like me, who looks through the lens of a city dweller. Living in a city, there is more diversity, more interaction, forced or chosen, with people of different backgrounds, more focus on how we can live in such proximity to one another and get along while doing so. So I want to protect my freedom and the freedom of my friends and family, and a resident of Ballinger or Justiceburg wants to protect his freedom, and the freedom of his friends and family, and we're all living in the same country that proclaims liberty and justice for all. And yet, it feels like we're living in different universes. So what does it mean when we talk about freedom? How do we protect it, and who gets to protect it? In partial answer to the question of who, I can tell you that according to the *Washington Post* "Faces of the Fallen" project, over 500 Texans have died in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan--16 from Austin, 7 from Lubbock, one from the tiny town of Ballinger, one from the town of Roscoe, one from Slaton, like a web of the dead, guiding me on my trip.

As for how we protect our freedom, the oath that officers in the United States armed forces take makes clear that the way members of the armed forces protect freedom in this country is by protecting our Constitution. In fact, the Constitution is the one and only thing they swear to protect. “I...do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic...” OK. That seems pretty simple. But what constitutes the Constitution to make it so central? The Constitution constitutes the means by which, “We the People of the United States...form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”

Ah, general welfare and the blessings of liberty. Tell me, was Leonard Matlovitch, recipient of a bronze star and a purple heart, revealing himself as an enemy of the Constitution of the United States, or simply seeking his own welfare and the blessings of liberty when he, who had killed two men and been rewarded for it, came out as loving one man?

And, just so you don't think I'm simply holding a 35-year grudge by asking this question, here are a few other facts. Since the establishment of the Don't Ask Don't Tell in 1994, long after Matlovich's discharge, 13,500 gay men and lesbians have been discharged from the military. Women have been disproportionately discharged. For example, according to an

August 2010 article in the conservative website, Free Republic, in the Army, “lesbians accounted for 48 percent of 195 discharges under the don't-ask, don't-tell policy, even though women make up only 14 percent of the force.” Also, the website reports, in the midst of two wars [Iraq and Afghanistan], the military continued to discharge highly trained service members in mission-critical areas. Among those ousted for being gay: seven combat engineers, eight linguists, 20 infantrymen and 16 medical aides.”

Sixteen medical aides! If you were a young soldier desperately needing medical attention, would you refuse the help of a nurse or doctor because of their sexual orientation? A November 11 *Washington Post* article states that, “More than 70 percent of respondents to a survey sent to active-duty and reserve troops over the summer said the effect of repealing the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy would be positive, mixed or nonexistent.”

So what's the problem? What's the big deal? Let me tell you a little story about my drive back from Lubbock. Somewhere around the town of Post, I think it was, I came to a traffic light and there in the next lane was a big pickup truck donning two bumper stickers. On the left was an Air Force bumper sticker, and on the right, appropriately, was a bumper sticker, black with white lettering that said, simply, “Extremely Right Wing.” This truck and I traveled alongside each other all the way past Abilene, about 122 miles.

And it was this truck that, once I was (safely) back home, compelled me to return to the book, *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to Democracy*, to revisit the passage you heard Jeff read earlier. “If the fundamentalist front were to have a seminary, it would be the U.S. Air Force Academy.”

Now, understanding that the primary oath of anyone serving in the United States military is to protect the Constitution, my qualm is not so much with that end of the correlation, but with the first part: the fundamentalist front--the allegedly religious force that drives chaplains like Major Warren “Chappie” Watties to scream through a bullhorn that those “not born again will burn in the fires of hell,” that brings guest speakers in to tell soldiers that the “only solution to terrorism is to ‘kill Islam.’” Because, my understanding is that the very first amendment of the Constitution, which members of the armed forces are sworn to protect, states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” So who is a threat to the oath of office? Who is a threat to the strength and the purpose of the armed forces of the United States of America?

And who is standing on the side of love? Remember what I said in my prayer. The division between right and wrong, justice and injustice, is not

always clean, not always easy to discern. I do not want to paint a black and white picture. Leonard Matlovich, after all, was a converted Mormon. Still, knowing that we gather as Unitarian Universalists, it is essential that we adhere to the values we proclaim. The Unitarian Universalist Standing on the Side of Love campaign states, “This is a time of great hope and possibility, yet our communities are threatened by the increased prevalence of acts motivated by fear and hate. No one should be dehumanized through acts of exclusion, oppression, or violence because of their identities.” The statement continues, “religious people stand on the side of love and call for respect, inclusion, and compassion.”

Both the poem and the song, “In Flanders Fields,” include these haunting words:

To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In flanders fields.

Can we take up the torch and hold it high for those who have struggled before us? Can we keep faith with those who sacrificed their own welfare, in hopes of guaranteeing our welfare, our blessing of liberty? Can we stand on the side of love with veterans of war, specifically, though not exclusively,

can we stand on the side of love of those 13,500 people who made an oath to protect our Constitution, and then were forced out of service unconstitutionally?

This December 5th, at our semi-annual congregational meeting, we will vote on whether to adapt the Standing on the Side of Love mission as our own statement of conscience. I ask you now to consider what it takes to truly stand on the side of love, and I ask you now to be a part of a people who vow to build a land where we bind up the broken, where sisters and brothers, anointed by God, and by one another, can then create peace. In memory of Leonard Matlovich, in honor of all who have served, may it be so.

Amen.

#121 We'll Build a Land