

The Courage to Love
Sunday, February 11, 2024
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

This is the week of St. Valentine's Day. The legend is, as we heard earlier, that Valentine had such compassion or love for young couples under his care, that he defied the Roman Emperor and performed marriage ceremonies for them. Rome wanted the young men for soldiers not husbands, and according to the story, Valentine was jailed and then executed for his defiance.

Valentine risked and lost his life in order to follow his conscience. There are still those today willing to take risks for love and conscience. A United Methodist minister from my hometown of Lebanon, Pennsylvania was defrocked in 2013 for performing his son's marriage ceremony. NPR reported in June of 2014 that he was reinstated. They reported that, "A Methodist minister in Pennsylvania, who was defrocked last year for presiding over his son's same-sex wedding, has been reinstated by the church.

"A nine-person appeals panel of the United Methodist Church ordered Frank Schaefer's pastoral credentials restored, saying 'the jury that convicted him last year erred when fashioning his punishment,' according to The Associated Press.

"I've devoted my life to this church, to serving this church, and to be restored and to be able to call myself a reverend again and to speak with this voice means so much to me,' an exultant Schaefer told the AP.

"He said he intends to work for gay rights 'with an even stronger voice from within the United Methodist Church.'

"Schaefer, of Lebanon, Pa., was first suspended for having officiated at his son's 2007 wedding and subsequently stripped of his pastoral credentials after he refused to uphold the Methodist ban on clergy performing same-sex marriages," [Methodist Minister Who Officiated At Gay Wedding Is Defrocked : The Two-Way : NPR](#).

Schaefer is not the only one in this fight. In April of last year, the Religion News Service reported that, "When Matty and Myles Cafiero were married in January in Tupelo, Mississippi, the celebration of Communion was especially important to Matty. The United Methodist Church practices an open table, inviting everyone to receive the bread and wine.

"To Matty, 23, it's a connection with both God and the people around them. It's one of the things that drew them to Methodism.

"The wedding "was everything that we wanted," said Myles, 24.

“Then came the complaint.

“The two United Methodist ministers who co-officiated the Cafieros’ wedding, the Rev. Paige Swaim-Presley and the Rev. Elizabeth Davidson, say they were informed in late February a formal complaint has been filed against them, allegedly for officiating a same-sex wedding. They told Religion News Service they have been asked to surrender their clergy credentials or face a church trial in the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church....

“But Matty and Myles Cafiero identify as nonbinary.

“And Swaim-Presley and Davidson say the (United Methodist) Book of Discipline is silent on the topic of weddings between two nonbinary people, while, on other matters, it directs deacons and elders to act according to their consciences.

“In a paragraph about civil disobedience, the Book of Discipline recognizes ‘the right of individuals to dissent when acting under the constraint of conscience,’” [UMC clergy reportedly face complaint, church trial after marrying nonbinary couple \(religionnews.com\)](https://www.religionnews.com/umc-clergy-reportedly-face-complaint-church-trial-after-marrying-nonbinary-couple/).

These ministers aren’t risking their lives, but they are risking their livelihood in order to do what love and conscience tells them is right.

No Unitarian Universalist minister is going to risk anything within this denomination by officiating weddings, but we may have other risks we need to take for love.

On Monday this week, Timothy Snyder, a history professor at Yale University, was interviewed by Meghna Chakrabarti on the show “On Point” on National Public Radio.

Snyder said, “... democracy is rare. Democracy is hard and people who have seen democracy be challenged or collapse become very thoughtful about that. And so there's a tradition and the United States takes part in that tradition. Of having a kind of constitutional moment of reflection, where one recognizes that the horizon is not always bright and open, that there can be challenges, and that and as a response to those challenges, a constitution has to be able to defend itself.

“What happened in the United States between 1861 and 1865 was one of many world historical challenges to the principle of democracy. This is why Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg is so famous. Government of, by and for the people is coined as a response to that challenge to democracy and Lincoln's trying to define what democracy is....

“Historically speaking, philosophically speaking, the alternative to the rule of law is the rule of fear...

Chakrabarti noted that fear is currently rife in America and that some are saying certain things shouldn’t be done in defense of democracy because if they are there might be a violent response from some people.

Snyder responds by saying, “I want to say very clearly that everybody who makes an argument out of that motivation is taking part in an authoritarian transition.

That is exactly how you move away from having the rule of law, to having the rule of fear, when you anticipate that the other side is going to use violence. And you concede in advance... [Should Trump be constitutionally barred from the presidency? | On Point \(wbur.org\)](#).

Democracy requires being there for one another, having care, may I even say love, for one another. Government of, by and for the people means that people need to stand up for and stand by and with one another. Perhaps you know the quote attributed to the twentieth century German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller. A page on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website notes that, “Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) was a prominent Lutheran pastor in Germany. In the 1920s and early 1930s, he sympathized with many Nazi ideas and supported radically right-wing political movements. But after Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, Niemöller became an outspoken critic of Hitler’s interference in the Protestant Church. He spent the last eight years of Nazi rule, from 1937 to 1945, in Nazi prisons and concentration camps.” You likely know the quote. “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

“Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

“Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

“Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Today in our nation some are erasing black history. Are we speaking out? Some are taking away reproductive rights. Are we making our voice heard? Some are rolling back rights for people who identify transgender. What, if anything, are we saying?

All it took for slavery to remain in the South for as long as it did and for Jim Crow to come in after slavery and remain for another century was the silence of people who thought it wrong. Yes, it was fear that kept many silent. There was reason to fear. Forty-one names are inscribed on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Forty-one martyrs to the cause. Most of those people were black. But two white Unitarian Universalists have their names inscribed there, Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb, [Civil Rights Memorial - Wikipedia](#). They and the others put love before fear.

What enabled Hitler to oversee the atrocity of the Holocaust? The fear that kept people silent. The state of Israel uses the term the Righteous Among the Nations to refer to non-Jews who for totally altruistic reasons worked to save their Jewish neighbors from the Nazis, [Righteous Among the Nations - Wikipedia](#). Not all those who helped survived. There were good reasons to fear.

But remember the words of Professor Snyder, “I want to say very clearly that everybody who makes an argument out of that motivation (fear) is taking part in an authoritarian transition.

“That is exactly how you move away from having the rule of law, to having the rule of fear, when you anticipate that the other side is going to use violence. And you concede in advance...”

Nelson Mandela, the South African anti-apartheid activist who served as the first president of South Africa after apartheid, said, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave (person) is not (the one) who does not feel afraid, but (the one) who conquers that fear.”

St. Valentine we are told sent a note to his jailer’s daughter before he was executed signed “Your Valentine.” His name means “strong”, “filled with valor.” This St. Valentine’s Day don’t let it be all about chocolate and teddy bears. May we each be someone’s Valentine in the sense of the strong, valiant person who will be there for them and not be silent.

In May of last year Rev. Li Kynvi wrote this piece for the weekly UU Braver/Wiser email. It is my favorite UU email because people share their personal stories.

They begin with this quote, “Let me say right now for the record: I’m still gonna be here asking this world to dance. Even if it keeps stepping on my holy feet.”

—Andrea Gibson in their poem [“The Nutritionist” \(YouTube\)](#)

Kynvi then writes, “They told me I was a ‘girl’ when I was born, and every day after that. I tried so hard to be that, for so long. But I’ve been out of place in ‘women’s’ bathrooms my whole life—it’s usually the gasp; the horrified stare; the obvious double-checking the sign on the door. Sometimes it’s, ‘What are you doing in here!?’ or ‘Get the hell out of the women’s bathroom!’ A dozen times I’ve been physically handled, shoved out the door, or groped roughly by women trying to ‘prove’ their point.

“Entering a sex-segregated bathroom requires courage, every single time. My heart races. My mouth dries out. I lower my head, move as fast as I can, pitch my voice high if I have to speak. Although I’m clear it doesn’t work, I try to put on emotional armor in an attempt to protect myself.

“Last fall, at a concert, I was preparing to use the bathroom and when I saw the all-gender restroom sign, I grinned wide and exhaled.

“And then.

“In the bathroom, a woman gave me that horrified stare I know so well and half-screamed, ‘This is the women’s bathroom!’

“‘This is actually an all-gender bathroom,’ I responded, hoping we could end it there. I’m kind of glad I don’t remember the rest, only that it hurt more because I thought I was safe. I went outside for the rest of intermission and cried the tears I needed to cry. (I’m grateful not to mind crying in public.)

“My humanity is not up for debate, and neither is yours, I imagine saying to the stranger in the bathroom. I also imagine saying, I wish for you the sensitivity and grace to take ten seconds before you enter future bathrooms to remind yourself you could encounter someone non-binary

or gender-bendy. I invite you to remember how much courage it takes for them to be there at all. I invite you to simply assume that everyone in the bathroom knows where they are.”

Kynvi ends with a prayer.

“May we breathe into a moment of gentling. . . May we whisper to each other of belonging—of *I belong* and *you belong* and *we belong*, just as we are. Amen.”

Be braver. Tell each other that we all belong. Tell the world that acts as though we don't, that we all belong. Happy Valentine's Day.