

Eldon Hay, "My Ministry with the Queer community,"  
The Unitarian Fellowship, Fredericton, NB, 22 January 2006.

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It is a privilege to be here, to be so warmly introduced by David Warman. I am very grateful to this community for its stand for queer (gltb) persons. The fact that there was a gay wedding here yesterday attests to the stance of this community in these matters. I loved, as well, the song sung by Nasnan Noqtok at the opening of the service. As you may know, I asked to be invited here; and I'm so gratified that I was invited!

I'm a minister, so there's a text. It's coming!

A few years ago, I was invited to give an address in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was to be on the Covenanters, I had written a book about the Covenanters in NB and NS in the past (The Chignecto Covenanters [Montreal & Kingston], 1997). The Covenanters were a small Presbyterian group, once active, now gone - and present-day Covenanters in the USA invited me to take part in a conference. I was thrilled. I prepared as best I could - I had that lecture ready weeks in advance. Well before the weekend, I was prepared. Flying out on Monday, I had my plane ticket in hand.

On Friday, I got a special delivery letter; I was uninvited. They did not want me to come. The reason - someone had found out on the internet that I was involved with PFLAG Canada, an organization that affirmed that being gay was okay - so - no way, Eldon Hay. The letter was followed by a phone call, to make certain I'd received the letter. The ticket was cancelled; Monday I had a car ride to Aulac, NB, not a plane trip to Pittsburgh, PA.

I was devastated. I emailed a close friend in Louisville, Kentucky - Sandra and her partner had been friends during an earlier time when they worked in NS. Sandra sent back a longish email.

"I understand your disappointment, you worked hard at that. But look at it from another point of view. Dear Eldon, you cannot expect to stand up for marginalised people, persons on the edge, folk who are despised and not be there yourself. If you're friends of gays and lesbians: and if gays and lesbians are hated and despised, then it should be no surprise that you, too, are hated and despised. Jesus asked his disciples to walk along side the least - those despised and excluded from normal society. And Jesus didn't just talk the talk, he showed in his everyday meetings and relationships that he cared for and was on the side of lepers, women, disabled, and others on the edge. As a result, he was despised."

"I invite you as a Christian to think about this, pray about it. You will overcome your keen disappointment; and look at the matter very differently. You know the beatitudes, of course. I type out a part of one of them: 'Blessed are you when people revile you, and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad'."

"Eldon I have a challenge for you. Use your understanding and, some day, unpack that particular blessing for yourself and for others. Right now, I have an easier question - you've always been

concerned about persons on the edge. Where did that get started?  
Blessings and peace, Sandra Mlinarcik.”

The text: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on falsely my account. Rejoice and be glad ...” (Matt. 5: 11, 12a). For some time that text has rolled round in my head, now I tackle it - ‘I believe it, help thou my unbelief.’ But I start with Sandra’s question: ‘I know you’ve always been concerned with persons on the edge. Where did that get started?’

It started - who knows where? I have a few clues.

1) my father. We lived in small place, Marvelville was a hamlet some 40 miles from Ottawa. All English, all United Church. Except a few French families, sort of on the edge. Even though we were all poor, the three or four French families were poorer. And everybody knew that we were better than the French. Everybody - except my father. He actually stood up for them in conversations. As a kid, I was embarrassed and ashamed of him, he must be wrong, everybody knows we’re better than the French. But my father persisted. He did something else unusual - he switched political parties. That meant that M.J. Coldwell (an early leader of the CCF) visited our home when I was a child.

2) My Sunday School teacher, Anne Wood. A nurse in Montreal, she came back to live in Marvelville to look after her elderly parents, living there with her bachelor brother all their days. She was my Sunday School teacher from when I was 3 or 4, til I left Marvelville. To her, doing the will of God was the most important thing in life. Of course, being unmarried in a rural community, earned her the title old maid: lots of snide remarks were said about her, behind her back, and sometimes to her face. She was often lonely. It wasn’t easy. To her happiness was not the goal in life: but to do God’s will.

3) A meeting with a Toronto headquarters man in my early days of ministry. His name was Rev. J.R. Hord. (When Lester Pearson okayed nuclear warheads on Canada’s soil, Hord accused him of being a puppy on a leash held by President Lyndon B. Johnson). I met Hord once, at a meeting. I remember a segment. A small group was seated around a table: “Being a Christian,” said Hord, “gives me elbow room. Being a follower of Jesus means I’m somehow free, I don’t need to think or dress or speak or be like everybody else. Look, I’ve got elbow room.”

4) Another meeting with a headquarters person, earlier than that with Hord. I was at a presbytery meeting, being visited by Rev. Dr. J. R. Mutchmor. He gave a talk. he told us he met one day at the Toronto airport by the then premier of Ontario, Leslie Frost: both about to board planes. The premier asked him, “Well Mutchmor, where are you off to, today, raising hell?” It’s okay to raise hell, in God’s service.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account - that means, falsely on Christ’s account. I believe from the bottom of my heart that God loves gays and lesbians, with the same love God loves straight men and women. There are those, of course, who from the bottoms of their hearts believe I’m wrong. The American Covenanters know I’m acting falsely, know that what I do is evil. We disagree on what God’s will is. I try to respect those who disagree; but it does not stop me from standing up for, and speaking out for God’s children - French persons in Moncton, or Jews, or women, or (what I am best known for now) gays and lesbians.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you: Blessed are you when people revile you. I often feel reviled, but I am not persecuted. I get hate mail and hate phone calls, and sometimes face-to-

face hatred. Okay, I'm reviled. But not persecuted. The United Church has never threatened to defrock me, or persecute me. No one has said: shut up, or I'll shoot you and your family.

Blessed I am when people revile me. I'm blessed because a lot of that reviling I never hear, it doesn't get through to me. Why? Because my friends absorb it, take it in, in their own hearts and minds. And they don't tell me what the revilings are. Thanks for not telling me. Because these revilings hurt.

I am blessed when people revile me. I pay particular tribute to Rev. Jamie Gripton, who was my minister for about a decade - Rev. Jamie Gripton - to whom this sermon is dedicated. Jamie Gripton died of cancer, not yet 50, early in December 2005. Blessedly, it has come to me several months before he died that he has been one of those who, because of his absorbing this reviling, has made my life a blessing. It was a remarkable facet of Jamie's ministry. He was able to listen to persons who disagreed with me profoundly. He listened: and yet he did not collude with these persons, in their sincerely felt and expressed opposition to gay rights. He listened: and refused to put such persons down or think of them as stupid or wrong. And yet, privately and in public, from time to time he stated his belief in what I was trying to do. Therefore, I felt consistently supported and upheld, blessed by that man's ministry. This is unusual in my experience. True, other clergy are occasionally supportive: they speak to me privately or send me emails expressing this. But few actually say so, in the pulpit or in public. Far more normal is the attitude expressed in a letter from one United Church colleague: "... Do you realize how abhorrent homosexual activity is to some people, and how utterly destructive to their mindset for worship is the specific mention of that sexual behaviour." I respect this statement: for it sets out clearly what I hunch many Christians think and believe, though few have the honesty to admit it.

Blessed am I when people revile me. The revilings come from all over the place. The ones that hurt me most are from fellow Christians, fellow United Church persons. I'm reminded of Lorne "Gump" Worsley, who at one time was goalie of the New York Rangers hockey team. The Rangers had a porous defence, and Worsley was a very busy goalie. One time a reporter, thinking of all the opposing teams - Boston Bruins, Detroit Red Wings, etc., asked Worsley, "Gump, which team do you fear the worst?" Without a moment's hesitation, Worsley replied, "The New York Rangers!" That's what it feels like. And it's often tempting to act on that feeling - but it's only a feeling. The reality is that there are always allies, supporters.

I am blessed in the reviling because I am never alone. Even in a hostile congregation or audience, large or small, when all the comments and questions indicate that most persons have little or no use for my convictions - after the meeting, over tea, in a corner, sometimes with low voices - "I'm with you." "I agree." "You won't say a word - I'm gay myself." There are revilers, but there are supporters too. I am never alone. I am also blessed by persons from minority groups. From my beginning days of human rights in Moncton, there have been a few members of Tiferes Israel synagogue who have early, warmly and consistently stood up for me. I am truly blessed.

I am blessed in the reviling because I believe that what I stand for is what God stands for. Of course, as my friend Sandra said, Jesus walked with the unclean, the unliked, the unpopular. We have Christ's example. "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who is against us?" (Rom: 8.31). The ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius' views are helpful to me. Confucius is not considered

a great believer: but he had a distinct sense that the conscience within persons accorded with the moral order of the universe. (H.G. Creel, Confucius and the Chinese Way [Harper's, 1949], 117). Likewise, I am sustained by a belief in the goodness and the grace of God, whose love is at the centre of the universe; and whose love, we believe, is made most clear in the life and death of Jesus. Those convictions are kept alive by prayer, by spiritual guidance, by worship - especially by the hymns of the Church; they are nourished by empathetic allies and friends, by my dear partner, Anne Pirie.

I am blessed, even though reviled, upheld by a belief in God. However, it is not my practice to speak or write a great deal using religious language. First, though the example of Jesus is before us, that witness has been tainted by an ages-old creedal conviction. Jesus is reported as asking, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mk. 10:18). The perfection of Jesus is a great theological mistake, I've long since abandoned it, but it lingers on in my mind and the minds of many others. So I use the example of Jesus sparingly. Nor do I often quote the Bible. A few times, I've played with scriptural passages, and swiftly drawn the wrath of some Christian friends.

Dare to follow Jesus: the 'dare' is not necessarily served best in our day by pointing to Christ: Jesus lived a long time ago, in a different time and culture, he died young. I look to more recent figures, Christ-like in their behaviour - some of them Christian, some not. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Christian standing against the culture of his time. Are there Canadian heroes? Pre-eminently I look to Henry Morgentaler. A man imprisoned in Germany and in Canada. A Jew, who is a self-declared humanist, an atheist. For decades, he has persisted as a provider of safe abortions for many Canadian women. I look up to him for he is not always a nice person - that's a solid comfort, neither am I. He was recently awarded an honorary degree by the University of Western Ontario, London. A professor who had spent his career there said, "I have always been proud of my University, today I am ashamed." For me, Morgentaler stands tall, and firm; even if persons despise him and his work. Another recent fleeting example: I see the tall, gaunt, wispy face of Chuck Cadman, spurned by his party, running as an independent, sick with cancer, standing alone, to vote. A few weeks later, dead.

Blessed I am when reviled; and in the company of some of my fellow Canadians I more fully rejoice. I go to church and to church events, to community and regional happenings. There's always friends and allies there. But where Anne and I feel really at home - wanted, cherished and loved - is in the gay lesbian bisexual and transgender community. Sometimes, we are the only senior couple there - at weddings or gatherings for new babies, for instance. Recently, in Halifax, at a small chapel, two lesbian women greeted us warmly at the door, and the one we knew best said, "Sit up close to the front, we don't know how many people will come." That woman's parents did not come. There are other more colourful, even raucous gatherings - Pride marches and the like. Gays and lesbians are no better and no worse than other Canadians - but, thank God, in their midst, we are welcomed, accepted, loved, we're at home. Revilings there have been and there will be again. But in that company - we rejoice; we are glad - thanks be to God!

Blessed I am when reviled. If God be for us, who can be against us? God loving, gracious. Love is the first word for God; but the grace of God is first, last and always. I'm aware, particularly in my relationship within the church, in congregation or in presbytery that there were and are hurts,

disappointments, misunderstandings, commitments called for, commitments broken - the stuff and substance of what we call brokenness - sin. I have often fallen short: sometimes I feel I might just as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. Sin I commit: but grace more abounds. So I count utterly on the grace of God. Our first Prime Minister, John A. MacDonald met a person who said, "I'm your supporter. I'll support you every time you do right." MacDonald replied, "Hold on a minute. I've got lots of support when I'm right. What I need are persons to support me when I'm wrong" (Will Ferguson, "Lessons from Sir John, eh?" Maclean's, 11 Jan 2002). I experience God as supporter in and through the good and the bad, the cheerings and revilings. We are not alone, we live in God's world. We rejoice, we are glad - thanks be to God!