

June 26, 2008

Dear friends and family,

On Sunday, June 29th, a letter from the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be read to its California members. I've reprinted it here:

Preserving Traditional Marriage and Strengthening Families

In March 2000 California voters overwhelmingly approved a state law providing that "Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California." The California Supreme Court recently reversed this vote of the people. On November 4, 2008 Californians will vote on a proposed amendment to the California state constitution that will now restore the March 2000 definition of marriage approved by the voters.

The Church's teachings and position on this moral issue are unequivocal. Marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God, and the formation of families is central to the Creator's plan for His children. Children are entitled to be born within this bond of marriage.

A broad-based coalition of churches and other organizations placed the proposed amendment on the ballot. The Church will participate with this coalition in seeking its passage. Local Church leaders will provide information about how you may become involved in this important cause.

We ask that you do all you can to support the proposed constitutional amendment by donating of your means and time to assure that marriage in California is legally defined as being between a man and a woman. Our best efforts are required to preserve the sacred institution of marriage.

From an early age, my mother and father always encouraged me to bare testimony of the things that I know are true. On "Fast Sundays," dad would nudge and poke us (always the salesman—he'd strike testimony deals) until one of us would relent and stand before the pulpit. After a while, dad didn't have to poke anymore. I learned to recognize a different kind of nudge, a spiritual one, a voice that told me when something was true and when I ought to open my mouth and tell someone about it. But my parents also taught me that this whispering voice has another property. It also lets you know when you are in the presence of falsehood.

When I read the text of this letter, I am overwhelmed by very complicated emotions. There are things here that strike me as profoundly true. I believe that God holds marriage in the highest regard. I believe that children, wherever possible, are entitled to be born into a bond of marriage. I also believe that people should take action to affect political change in line with their beliefs. I believe all these things are true, and I want to bare my testimony of these things.

But there is also so much in this letter that is destructive. There are things in here that are not in alignment with the loving God I know. There are things in this letter that are bad for families, bad for children, and bad for society. I feel that I must bare my testimony of these things as well.

California's Proposition 22 (the initiative that led to the state law mentioned in the letter) and the similar laws that have been debated across our nation are often referred to as "Defense of Marriage" acts. I've come to understand that people want to ban same-sex marriages because they feel that marriage needs defending, that it's under attack. By a lot of estimates, they're probably right. The often-quoted statistic is that fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. As a teacher, I've seen a shocking number of unmarried pregnant teenagers (approximately twelve percent of the girls in our last year's graduating class). In a small number of instances, I've witnessed destructive marriages that transform into terrible forms of abuse against both spouses and children. In much larger number, I've seen a subtler kind of abuse where parents, failing in many areas of marriage and family, put their own needs before those of their children.

Marriage and families are threatened. But I don't believe that two men or two women who want to marry have anything to do with this threat. In fact, in today's world, the institution of marriage couldn't find better allies in its struggle for survival than same-sex couples seeking to get married. This is because same-sex couples who choose to merge their lives and form a family are doing so not because they want to change marriage or redefine marriage or hurt marriage in any way, but rather because they love each other and they love the very idea of marriage. We want marriage really bad. We want marriage as it is: a celebration of two people who want to work together to form a family. We love this institution and we want a part of it. We're confident we can help to make it better.

My partner Tripp and I are enjoying our fifth year together. A year ago last fall, we decided we were ready to commit our lives to each other, so we did the best we could. We applied for and were granted Domestic Partnership from the City of New York. This means that we have hospital visitation rights (as long as the sick or injured one of us is being treated in a New York City hospital) and that we are entitled to extend certain benefits to our partner (taxed as solid income at the state and federal level and only as long as one of us is an employee of New York City). It's not much, but it's certainly better than nothing. The process was a little dehumanizing, akin to standing in line at the DMV. We showed up at our allotted time, filled out a stack of paperwork, spoke to a gruff clerk, and handed over a twenty-five dollar money order (a marriage license goes for twenty-four). We got a piece of paper and were sent on our way. It was a joyous day for us, but it wasn't marriage.

My partner and I want to get married. We want to gather before our friends and family and boldly declare our commitment to forming a family of our own. We want to adopt children who are without parents and give them the opportunities to succeed that our own parents gave us. We want to teach them to love life, to act selflessly, and to make the world a better place. Mostly, I think we'll teach them the value of family since it's something we both value so much.

I can't understand how anyone could think that marriage needs to be defended from Tripp and me.

The First Presidency letter states that the “California Supreme Court recently reversed [Proposition 22,] this vote of the people.” This is false. The California Supreme Court has no power to reverse votes; that’s not one of its constitutionally-granted responsibilities. Rather, the Court ruled that the legislation resulting from Proposition 22 is *unconstitutional*. This means that the law itself is illegal, running contrary to the California Constitution, the highest law of the state. This is why there is a battle about to rage. Those who oppose same sex marriage know that the only way they’ll be able to end it is to amend the California State Constitution, to place the text “Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California” (or something similar) directly into the highest law of the state.

If California were to pass such an amendment, it would be somewhat unprecedented. Constitutions, by and large, concern themselves with two things. Firstly, they define the basic functions of the various branches of government. Secondly, they set in stone the permanent civil rights of the people. To add text such as that listed above into a constitution is to hearken back to a darker time in our history when rights were doled out unevenly, for example, by class, gender, or race. This is “discrimination” in its truest sense of the word: *differentiation* among various groups of people. (These rights for you. Those rights for you.) Our country has spent the last two hundred years working to remove discrimination from our constitutions, allowing non-landowners to participate in civic life, women to vote, and African Americans to lead lives outside of slavery. We do not have a history of *adding* discrimination (differentiation) into our constitutions, and we never should.

I was a senior in high school during the campaign for Proposition 22. I had told my parents I was gay four years earlier, and throughout high school had been struggling to define myself as a gay Mormon. This is because I valued so much of what I had been taught in the Church, but I knew that my sexuality was neither something wicked nor something to be fought against. I was struggling to reconcile these facts and working hard to hold onto my family in the process. As is often the case with my generation, my parents probably struggled more with my coming out than I did. I had the benefit of gay role models. They were alone and terrified. After four years of pulling their hair out over what to do with a very aggressive gay teenager, they were at wit’s end.

The LDS Church’s involvement in Proposition 22 nearly tore my family apart. I’ve always wanted to get married and be a father. Early on, I discovered that my best partner in those endeavors, the person I would collaborate best with, would be another gay man. Proposition 22 happened at a time when all my cousins were starting to get married. It felt like my turn was looming just over the horizon. The church’s involvement felt very personal, like it was aimed specifically at me and my generation. I had been primed for marriage and then told that the best I should ever hope for was the lifelong companionship of a close female friend. I was very hurt.

My parents were at a loss with what to do. They knew how much the issue meant to me, but they couldn’t support me. My mother told me that she feared losing her temple recommend if she did not participate in the campaign. Whether or not that was true, she certainly feared the social and

societal ramifications that would come from ignoring the directives of the church leadership. She was a wreck for weeks. Ultimately, she decided to do nothing and say nothing. My father insisted that he had no opinion on the matter and that he'd simply stay out of it. I campaigned heavily in the opposite direction.

Months after the crushing blow that turned Proposition 22 into law, I was involved in a documentary film about politically active teenagers with pioneer roots. They asked me to gather old family memorabilia for footage. I pulled a ladder up to the cabinets high in my father's closet where my family stores important items and documents. I sorted through dusty pictures of grandparents, my father's old missionary nameplates, and the coin collection he and I had kept when I was young. Eventually, I came upon a letter dated from the previous spring. I was shocked to discover it was from the local leadership of the church thanking my father for providing his offices as call centers from which LDS volunteers could carry out the work of the campaign. I was equally shocked that my mother hadn't told me anything about it.

I felt deceived. If my parents supported Proposition 22, the initiative that bore the slogan "Defend Marriage," it meant that they wanted to defend marriage from *me*, that they saw me as a threat. But I didn't feel like a threat. If anything, working for marriage felt like the best way for me to affirm the values they had instilled in me: I wanted to get married because they were, because my grandparents were, and because I liked what I saw in both cases. My parents and I drifted heavily after that.

I didn't realize how bad it had gotten until several years later while I was teaching in East Africa. During a break, my friend Judd and I traveled to Rwanda to do some research on the 1994 genocide. We'd spent the day visiting schools and churches still piled with the corpses of victims. At one church, we met an eleven year old boy who'd managed to escape the killers but had lost every member of his family before it was done. When the day was over, Judd found the only telephone in town and dialed his father. He needed to check in. I headed across the way, sat on a pile of stones, and began scrawling in my journal. Suddenly it dawned on me: why wasn't I on the phone with my dad? I did a little calendar counting and realized to my surprise that I actually hadn't spoken with my father for more than a year and a half. Before that, it had been not much more than words and grunts. And my mother? We talked sometimes, but not about topics much more interesting than the weather. How could it have gotten so bad?

I knew I had to do something. I began sending my parents letters, piles of angry words airing old disappointments, frustrations, and perceived injustices. They fired back. We railed at each other for weeks, spewing awful, hurtful things. It felt great, not because we were hurting each other (that part hurt!), but because for the first time in years, we were *communicating*! We realized that the vast majority of our misunderstandings were just that—misunderstandings. We realized that we each had had a part in driving the wedge that had formed between us. We remembered how much we like each other and also how much alike we are. Mostly I loved hearing from my dad. I missed him terribly, though I think I was too hurt to admit it back then. I think he also must have loved hearing from me. My father is a proud missionary. When he tells stories of his two years abroad, his expression, his

stature, the very timbre of his voice changes to reflect the life-altering experience it must have been for him. There in East Africa, I was serving a different kind of mission, but it was an act of service nonetheless, so on some level I think he must have enjoyed getting letters from his missionary son. It's funny how as I look back now, I regard those crazy weeks, sweating among the gruesome remains of the Rwandan genocide by day and crying over letters to and from my parents at night, as some of the best weeks of my life.

In places like Rwanda where people have been so awful to each other that there is no real way to right old wrongs without igniting another round of atrocities, one solution has been the much-publicized "Truth and Reconciliation" commissions. The idea is simple: we state our grievances, admit our crimes, accept responsibility, note the many ways we're similar, and then move on. If we continue to refuse our mutual culpability and blame each other, to insist that we remain on opposite sides of a war, the war continues and children continue to lose their families. My parents and I have long ago sought truth and reconciliation. It was hard, but it was worth it. We did so, because we value our family so much. We don't want the fighting to continue.

It's now 2008, and the fighting is about to resume. We're all about to choose our sides (or decide not to choose) and see how things figure out come November. Before you do, I'd like to ask you to pause and consider. I'm confident that you know at least a handful of gay people. If you'll indulge me, summon these people up in your mind—not "gay people," not the mass of faceless entities that you know or think you know from television or literature, but the actual, real, individual gay people you know and are friendly with. Look these people over in your mind. When you consider each one, can you honestly say that he or she is inherently bad for children? That a family he or she would create would be destructive? That he or she poses a threat to the institution of marriage?

I was taught that I have certain rights as a child of God. I'm not talking about civil rights here. I'm talking about the right to personal revelation. I was taught that God takes an intimate interest in each of us and is willing to speak to us individually, especially if we vigorously study the things that are troubling us in advance. When Joseph Smith was faced with difficult questions, he turned to the Epistle of James: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God." I believe that we all lack wisdom on this issue. I know that I do. It's a newish one that our society is just beginning to face. It's gray and quite complicated, and it's only going to get worse as the summer heats up and the forces on both sides begin spewing rhetoric. It's a tricky issue, and like the First Presidency, I believe it's an issue that God is pretty interested in.

Because what's at stake here really *is* families. It's the family that I came from and the family I'm trying to create. It's the family of the Church that keeps encouraging its gay and lesbian members to marry opposite sex partners and start families that are based upon inherent falsehoods. It's the family of our state and the family of our nation that must always endeavor to protect our children, not from same sex couples, but from adult selfishness and from those who would seek to fill our constitutions

with formalized discriminations. It's about your gay family members (some of whom you know, some of whom you don't, most of whom have not yet been born) and the families that they will one day create.

I beg you to study, to pray, and to seek personal insight from God before you enlist in either side of this campaign. Please do not simply follow the urgings of the First Presidency, donating your means and time without giving full consideration to what it all actually means. Please study, inform yourself, and seek *personal* revelation. I have a testimony that God likes questions. After all, what father doesn't like to hear from his children?

And if, when you're done, your answer comes back different than mine, I'll respect and honor your decision to join the effort to stop Tripp and me from marrying. If you fundamentally believe that preventing us from starting a family will protect the institution of marriage that I love, how can I fault you for that? I'll probably even still invite you to our wedding.

I've often wondered what truth and reconciliation would look like if the two sides of the gay marriage debate would stop for a moment, sit down, and speak to each other. I have this sinking suspicion that at the end of the day we'd like each other and come to realize how very much alike we are. After all, we all want the same thing: happy families.

Love,

Frankie-Terry Rolapp