

**Sermon preached by Rev. John Shuck at First Presbyterian Church of Billings, Montana  
on the occasion of the commitment ceremony of Mike Gramley and Tony Stark  
August 7, 2004**

“[Love] knows that [it] will survive at the end of things and be gathered by Fate as a jewel from the slime, and be handed with admiration around the assembly of the gods. “Men did produce this,” they will say, and, saying, will give men immortality.”

E.M. Forster, *Howard's End*, pp. 139-140.

Today is a great day.  
This day, this hour, this moment is sacred.  
No one can take it away.

The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:  
“Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation, will  
be able to separate us from the love of God...”

This is your moment.  
This is our moment.  
Nothing will separate you from Love.  
Nothing will separate us from Love.

Tony and Mike, you are witnesses to that truth today.  
We are all witnesses to that truth.

Oh, there will be forces that will try to separate us.  
There is the slime.  
The slime of fear and ignorance.  
But the gods know Love when they see it.

Today they are passing around with admiration the jewel of Love.

Today is a great day.

“There are many To-morrows, my Love, my Love, -  
There is only one To-day.”  
~Joaquin Miller

It took some doing for this day to come.  
I don't know if it is possible to express how proud I am of these two men.

I want to share with all of you some of what it took for this moment to occur.

While most weddings are approved by our governing board with a sleepy nod, The blessing of this relationship required a bit more effort. It required that a request be made to the session and congregational dialogue followed.

I have never been more moved than when Tony and Mike addressed the session with their request.

They wrote out their request in the form of a letter. I wish to share part of it with all of you:

*“It has long been our belief that church should be the first place that an outcast should feel welcome. Unfortunately, most often, it is the last. For some of us, Church has been a place of judgment and ridicule. Some of our experiences have been that church is like a country club with limited, exclusive membership.*

*Most gay people we know have been so wounded by churches and religion that although we, too, may have spiritual and faith needs we don’t attend church because the fear of rejection scares us to death; not rejection from God but from [God’s] people. It scared us too until a bright light led us to First Presbyterian Church in Billings.*

*We remember the first day that we attended services together here at First Presbyterian Church. We were welcomed.... We were impressed! Could this be a church where all people are truly welcome?*

*We sat in the back enthusiastically anticipating the worship service that would soon take place as we saw friends chat, hug, and laugh with one another. We, too, desired fellowship.... It was a breath of fresh air.... We have learned that it is a real family and we are very blessed to be a part of it. We sincerely thank you for welcoming us into your fellowship.*

*Over time, we no longer sit in the back....*

*It is because of these feelings of welcome and family that we have the courage and trust to come before you and share with you our hopes and dreams.... Mike and I have been in a committed, monogamous relationship for over 14 years. During that time our parents have become close friends just like so many other families we know.... Holidays are spent at our home, we love to entertain with both sets of parents joining us for dinner, board games, a lot of laughs and good conversation.....*

*Our family which includes all of us; parents, siblings, and nieces and nephews are also there in the tough times. When I became seriously ill over two years ago and was hospitalized for some time, Mike never left my side. I’m not sure when he slept.... Why do we share this with all of you? To illustrate that we have the same joys, fears, hopes and dreams as anyone.*

[They then quoted Mel White, author of the book *Stranger at the Gate*]:

*“Like our heterosexual friends and neighbors, we gay people have the God-given right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; the right to live open lives, to develop long-term loving*

*relationships, and to have those relationships honored and recognized officially by our community.”*

Then they went on to say: *“We ask you, the session of First Presbyterian Church that we can publicly declare our commitment to one another and to God. We believe that Covenants are not made in secret, nor in a vacuum. Commitments require God’s presence and the presence of witnesses. We ask that we may declare this commitment to each other in our church home here at First Presbyterian with our family, church family, and friends as witnesses. We ask that we too may pursue the formation of happy memories made during “our special day.”*

*If we were to give a summary of us, our relationship, and who we are we would use this quote: “To the world you might be one person, but to none person you just might be the world.” That is what Mike is to me, I am to Mike and God is to both of us.*

*May the Grace and Peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all,  
Tony and Mike*

It took courage beyond what I can know, with humility and grace, to risk rejection, bare their souls, and make that request. They did it, because they are true men.

Cowards die many times before their deaths;  
The valiant never taste of death but once.  
~William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1600

Today is a great day.  
We have no idea what tomorrow may bring.  
It doesn’t matter.

Tomorrow may bring with it more persecutions.  
The struggle for human dignity is far from over.

But today is a great day.  
Today a light has broken forth that will never be extinguished.  
Today a celebration is occurring that will long be remembered.

Not only will this moment be remembered.  
In years to come, it will be treasured.

The Love between Mike and Tony will be inspiration to others.  
Their love will enable gay and lesbian people to accept and love themselves.  
Their love will enable parents to say, “Yes, my child is gay and I am so proud.”  
Their love will enable people to live open and honest lives.  
Their love will enable those who have been burned by church  
To instead be warmed by the presence of God.

Not a God of fear, prejudice and tribalism,

But a universal God of Love, Justice, Peace and Hope.

The memory of this celebration will be gathered like a jewel from the slime and be handed with admiration around the assembly of our descendants.

Our children and our children's children will say,

“Yes, the Presbyterian Church did produce this. At least on one occasion, our spiritual ancestors were a blessing. They did the right thing.”

But we are not here for tomorrow.

We are not here to celebrate the church.

“Trust no future, howe'er pleasant!

Let the dead past bury its dead!

Act, - act in the living Present!

Heart within and God o'erhead.”

~Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Psalm of Life*

Today is a great day.

Today is a sacred day.

We are here to celebrate the love God has given to our friends,

Mike Gramley and Tony Stark.

We are here to celebrate their joy, their strength, their commitment, their love,

The blessing they have been for us.

Today is a great day.

Today is the day for music, for laughter,

For celebration, for Love!

Thanks be to God!