Hawaii is five hours behind eastern time. So 1:00 in the afternoon in Washington, D.C. is 8:00 in the morning in Honolulu. Imagine what it must have been like for us, a few weeks ago in Hawaii when Good Morning America was interrupted by a very serious Charlie Gibson for a special announcement from the President of the United States. In the house where I was staying everyone stopped – children getting ready for school, adults drinking morning coffee. Our hearts were beating fast, and that feeling in the pit of my stomach reappeared. We all feared the worst – another terrorist attack. But what the President announced in very somber tones in this interruption of regularly scheduled programming was his support of a Constitutional amendment stating that marriage is between a man and a woman. That was the White House’s emergency.

Meanwhile, there is already a federal Defense of Marriage Act, which by its very title promises that it is going to protect my marriage from gay men and lesbian women. Many states have already enacted legislation or are in the process of doing so.

In the midst of all of this, thousands of gay couples have gotten married as public officials in cities across the country have given marriage licenses to gay couples in acts of civil disobedience. Dozens clergypersons and civic officials have performed these marriages before the California Supreme Court took action to halt them and before other states put the brakes on this groundswell of action. Clearly, many gay and lesbian Americans want to have their relationships legally recognized.

Three short stories need to be interjected here. One is a recent editorial written by the Baylor University student newspaper supporting the right of gay persons to get married. It ended with the vote by the editorial board (5-2). It didn’t take long for the administration of this Southern Baptist University to close off this discussion, citing university rules. Pretty ironic that folks such as this administration want a Constitutional amendment against gay marriage but don’t support the Constitutional amendment guaranteeing free speech that we already have. Indeed, recent surveys of college students tell us that while most older adults oppose gay marriage, most college students don’t, believing that gay people should have the same rights as heterosexuals. That tells us that a generation from now, most Americans will probably believe that gay Americans should have the same rights as heterosexual Americans.

The second story is one which the late Howard Thurman often told. Howard Thurman was one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century; an African American theologian, a mystic and prolific writer and poet, he was the dean of the chapel at Howard University and he founded one of the nation’s first interracial churches in San Francisco. His grandmother, who had been a slave, was a great influence on him. He told the story of how his grandmother would have him read the Bible to her, but that she never wanted him to read any of the writings of Paul. When he finally got up enough courage to ask her why, she told him that when she was a slave on the plantation that the owner had his minister to come and preach to the slaves and inevitably they used the passage from Paul, “slaves obey your master.” Her feeling was that she had heard that enough and as a free person she could choose never to hear it again. The Bible can be used to liberate and it can be used to oppress.

The third story is a personal one. It’s a story only a few in my family knew until a decade ago, when my only aunt on my father’s side died. What we learned was that our great grandmother was Irish – her name was Jennie. She was married to a black man, except that in the state of Virginia it was illegal for a black man and a white woman to be married until 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that interracial marriages were legal in the Loving vs. Virginia decision. So they couldn’t have been legally married in Virginia and thus the silence in our family about Jennie.
It was not until the latter half of the 20th century that interracial marriages were legal, and in some places, they still are not accepted easily. There were interracial relationships in this nation for 300 years. Not all of them were desired by both parties, but some were. Those who wanted to get married were kept from doing so by those citing biblical passages, by those who talked about tradition and even by those who believed that black people and native American people were less than human and therefore that such relationships were akin to bestiality. We hear all those reasons for opposition to gay marriage or civil unions today.

(Next week: more on marriage and civil unions)