



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Voting on the Side of Love
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6 November 2016
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Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for President of the United States on April 12, 2015. Donald Trump announced his presidential bid the next month, on June 16. So **if you feel like this campaign has been going on forever, it has been going for a year-and-a-half.** But as you may have heard a little something about, Election Day will finally arrive on Tuesday!

For now, on this Sunday before Election Day, when it is traditional to give an “Election Sermon,” I would like to invite us to reflect on what our UU 5th Principle calls **“The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”** Our Unitarian Universalist tradition highly values the right of each individual to follow their conscience: their inner sense of ethics and morally, of what feels right and wrong — especially if their actions and beliefs do no harm to others. And the democratic process (of “one person, one vote”) is an expression of the right of conscience in our governance.

Historically, the right of individuals to follow the dictates of conscience in matters of ethics and religion was — and in many ways continues to be — a hard won struggle. Likewise, to establish a democracy in this land, we had to fight a War of Independence from the king of England. However, as Pauline Maier has detailed in her excellent book American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence, it is interesting to note that less than a year before the Second Continental Congress would gather in Philadelphia to sign the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, **“Even**

the most radical members of Congress professed a strong preference for remaining in the [British] Empire” (21). As late as August 25, 1775, Jefferson himself, future author of our Declaration of Independence, wrote in a private letter that his strong preference was to mend ties with Britain. At that time, there remained hope that a middle way might be found so that the thirteen colonies would become free from the control of the British Parliament, but would retain an allegiance to the British Crown. But Parliament was unwilling to compromise: the colonists could be either entirely under Parliament, or they could fight to be outside the British system (23).

So we declared our independence with these opening words:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Consider how bold a claim that was. The U.S. may be a global superpower today, but 240 years ago, **Britain’s population was three times larger, the British navy was the military superpower, and Britain had far more financial resources** — whereas “The Continental Congress had no power to tax and consequently, little power to borrow.” Nevertheless, as Danielle Allen has explored in her important book, Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality, we — thirteen colonies with a Continental Congress that had been operating a mere *two years* — declared ourselves to hold a “*separate and equal* station” to a British political and legal system which dated back more than *seven centuries* to the 1066 invasion of William the Conqueror (119-120).

And that was just the opening sentence. Turning to the even more famous — and much longer! — second sentence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness, — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving

their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

That is all one sentence. I have taken the time to quote it in the midst of this volatile election season to remind us of some of our highest values: that **at our best in this country we have continued to expand the circle of who is included and who has access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.**

In that spirit, I want to invite you to hear just one more sentence from the Declaration of Independence, which also seems particularly resonant at this time in our nation's history. The Declaration's third sentence reminds us that our founders, who themselves wanted to avoid division from Britain, also **cautioned against further declarations of independence.** As we saw 150 years ago in the Civil War, this is no abstract concern. The Confederates States of America tried to declare independence from the union. But in the words of our original Declaration: "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed."

There's a lot more to say about the history and significance of the Declaration of Independence. I would love, for instance, to get into the details of how Jefferson's original draft was changed by both a drafting committee as well as the Continental Congress itself (67-76). I would also love to go into how **the bold claim that we have a "separate and equal station" to Britain was perverted by the Supreme Court's 1896 "Plessy v. Ferguson" decision to use "separate but equal" as a cynical justification for racial segregation.** But instead, I would like to invite us to shift our focus to potential parallels today.

We have been exploring the boldness of the fledgling thirteen colonies declaring themselves “separate and equal” to the British Empire. But I invite you to consider that the boldness we need today is *not* another Declaration of Independence. We are already too divided from one another, too separate, too individualistic. **We need a similarly bold Declaration of *Interdependence* that reminds us how much we need each other, helps us take better care of one another, and assures each of us that we will be taken care of.**

As one example of what such a Declaration of Interdependence might look like, I invite you to consider the nonpartisan **Higher Ground Moral Declaration**, collaboratively written in this midst of this presidential election season by many progressive religious leaders in our country:

We declare that **the deepest public concerns of our nation and faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, those on the margins, the least of these, women, children, workers, immigrants and the sick**; equality and representation under the law; and the desire for peace, love and harmony within and among nations. Together, we lift up and defend the most sacred moral principles of our faith and constitutional values, which are:

- the **economic liberation of all people**;
- ensuring every child receives **access to quality education**;
- **healthcare access for all**;
- **criminal justice reform**; and
- ensuring historically marginalized communities have **equal protection under the law**.

Our moral traditions have a firm foundation upon which to stand against the divide-and-conquer strategies of extremists. We believe in a moral agenda that stands against systemic racism, classism, poverty, xenophobia, and any attempt to promote hate towards any members of the human family. **We claim a higher ground in partisan**

debate by returning public discourse to our deepest moral and constitutional values.

The “Higher Ground Moral Declaration” is an attempt to start *not* with defending a political candidate (or defaming a political opponent) — but instead to start with discerning the moral and ethical values that our conscience calls us toward, and then allowing individuals to use those values, in whatever way feels right to them, to determine which candidate to support.

To translate this perspective into a more explicitly Unitarian Universalist language, we talk a lot about “Standing on the Side of Love” or “Answering the Call of Love;” so **what might it look like to “vote on the side of love?”** Here’s one response that transforms the UU Seven Principles into questions for political candidates:

- Do your policy proposals reflect the inherent worth and dignity of every person?
- If elected, how will your everyday decisions demonstrate justice, equity and compassion in human relations?
- How will you encourage acceptance and growth in one another across party lines?
- What insights have you learned from your own search for truth and meaning that will guide you as a political leader?
- What ideas do you have to improve our democratic process?
- Within our international community, how will you work towards a goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all?
- Acknowledging our interdependence, how will your decisions impact our planet and future generations?

There may well be other factors that influence your choice of candidate, and that is your right. But the Higher Ground Moral Declaration and these questions for “voting on the side of love” are ways to factor our UU values into our discernment of conscience and our democratic process.

At this point, it may be helpful to say a few words about how the “separation of church and state” relates to the long history of Unitarian Universalists being on the front lines of progressive social reform. After all, if you read through our [Seven](#)

Principles (which are printed on the back of each week's Order of Service), it is clear that making progress on those goals involves activism in the political sphere. And **historically-significant social change has often come from activists motivated by their religious and spiritual values.** If you are interested in the details, the UUA has a free twenty-one page guide available online titled "[The Real Rules: Congregations and the IRS Guidelines On Advocacy, Lobbying, and Elections](#)," but here's some of the most important highlights:

There is *no limit* on the amount of time, effort, or expense congregations may devote to working on general issues such as civil rights, civil liberties, economic justice, the environment, or peace.

Some of the many acceptable activities include:

- advocating positions in the media and to elected officials;
- educating and mobilizing congregants and the general public, and
- working in local coalitions or partnerships on issues of social justice.

What we can't do is spend a "substantial part of [our] activities attempting to influence legislation." What would constitute a "substantial" amount of lobbying has only been vaguely defined. But it is clear that, "lobbying activity constituting 5% or less of total activities is acceptable." Basically, the government doesn't want lobbyists dressed up in religious clothing. We have no worries on that front. We do so much more than occasionally gather interested members of this congregation to lobby for the passage of a bill that feels particularly in alignment with our UU Principles, such as the legalization of Same-Sex Marriage. So even as there is much more than social justice work, "acting for peace and justice" remains a vital part of our mission as a congregation — along with encouraging spiritual growth and building a beloved community.

Another limitation that I should be sure to mention is that, **"Congregations and their representatives can do nothing that advocates for or against candidates for public office or political parties."** An important caveat is that this restriction only applies to a "congregation as a legal entity, or to a person or group speaking in the name of the congregation. **A minister or congregation member may freely engage**

in these activities as an individual.” So you will never hear me advocate for or against a specific candidate or political party from this pulpit as an official endorsement or denunciation of a candidate.

Relatedly, UU congregations have a strong tradition of a “free pulpit” in which the minister is free to speak as an individual. And that is precisely what I am doing today and each time I enter this pulpit: speaking freely for myself as an individual. Because **even as UU tradition affords the minister a free pulpit, UU tradition is equally clear about the freedom of the pew: the congregation’s “right of conscience”** to interpret and respond to whatever is said in a sermon as your conscience dictates.

As I said earlier, ministers dating back to the colonial period in this country developed the tradition on the Sunday before Election Day (or even sometimes on Election Day itself) of delivering an “Election Sermon” about the moral values that should influence elections and elected officials. And it would be an abdication of my responsibility as your minister if I failed to speak about the ethical values that are at the heart of our religious tradition that should inform the ways we live out our Fifth Principle of “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

As The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his book [The Strength to Love](#):

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the **conscience of the state**. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. **If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.**

In the words of the High Ground Moral Declaration, recapturing our prophetic zeal for such a time as this means taking action for causes such as “economic democracy, equality in education, healthcare for all, criminal justice reform, and equal protection under the law” — though ultimately the details are left up to the discernment of your conscience. In that spirit, on Election Day and beyond, may we each continue to discern how we are called to act for peace and justice in the world.

