



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Voting as a Spiritual Practice,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 4, 2012

A couple of months ago I was sitting in a waiting room, about to have some blood drawn for a routine physical exam. There were three of us there, plus a TV, blaring the latest from the campaign trail. One man spoke up: “Both of ‘em are the same, and just as bad. It doesn’t make any difference who you vote for.” Then he went on a little rant about term limits. The other person agreed, voicing an equally cynical response about the state of politics in our country. I considered saying, “Do you vote? Because if you don’t, you give up your right to complain.” But it was early, and I wasn’t looking to get into an argument, so I kept my nose buried in the magazine I was reading.

It’s the Sunday before election day, a good time to consider the state of political discourse in our nation. You sometimes hear church folks say, “You shouldn’t mix religion and politics.” I say that the church shouldn’t be partisan, allied with one party or the other. But how can we not be concerned with what happens in the public square? Mahatma Gandhi, who knew something about putting faith and values into action, said, “those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.”

I love going to vote to election day. The polling place where I vote is the middle school gym, and I love walking across that shiny maple floor where where my children once had their dreaded gym class. I love seeing neighbors outside, holding signs for the candidates they support. It stirs my heart to see the American flag hanging on the wall, the way singing our national anthem at a ball game does. It reminds me how much I love this country and how blessed we are to live here.

If this all seems a bit like a Norman Rockwell painting, then so be it. I wish I could hold up a mirror, especially for those who are cynical and shrill and dismissive of our democracy, and say “Look at what we have. Every four years we get to cast our ballots for president; one person, one vote. And that is the only poll that matters. We have the right to vote, a right that most people in the world dream of having. The only way your vote doesn’t matter is if you don’t cast it.”

Can you see the act of voting as a spiritual practice? As an affirmation of faith in our democratic system, even with all its flaws? A way to put your faith and values into action. So please, go vote this Tuesday. See it as a sacred responsibility to support those candidates who best express your values.

And what is the alternative? To stand back and throw stones? Who wants to go through life complaining about what's broken, but doing nothing to fix it? Not us--that is not what we are called to do as people of faith. We are called to be engaged and involved--isn't that why you are here? To be inspired and encouraged so you can go out and do your part to help heal our world?

I understand why people are cynical and jaded. The amount of unregulated big money in politics is disgraceful. There are ads on both sides, especially those produced by political action committees, that are mean-spirited and misleading. But you don't have to listen to them. That's why they invented that "mute" button!

The state of our politics is discouraging. It wouldn't be hard to criticize President Obama or Governor Romney for their failings, to say nothing of the Congress!

But I'm also sympathetic to our leaders. Can you imagine running for president? We expect our president to be a miracle worker. Every four years, we want a new messiah to come and save us, from our enemies and from ourselves. No one can live up to these expectations, so we are constantly disappointed, clamoring to "throw the bums out," and replace them with new, more promising, ones.

It's easy to blame our leaders for this sorry state of affairs, and the big money special interest groups, and the shallow sideshow that is much of cable news. But who elected our leaders? Who allows them to run shallow, divisive campaigns? Who prefers entertainment over journalism, the horse race over a substantive discussion of the issues? We, the people, do.

We are so easily distracted from what really matters. We watch the debates like they were a boxing match, cheering for our guy when he lands a punch. To the extent that we are uninformed and disengaged, we allow our leaders and the media to manipulate us.

People concerned about health and food safety remind us that every time you buy a food product, you cast a vote for what suppliers will produce and markets will put on the shelves. Likewise, we get the leaders we deserve. It's time for us, as individuals and as a country, to grow up, and begin to make the real and hard choices about how we want to live in this 21st century.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman observed that we have become a chronically anxious society. He cites five characteristics of an anxious system: reactivity, herding, blame displacement, a quick-fix mentality, and the lack of well-differentiated leadership.¹

The meanness, polarization and dysfunction of this election season support Friedman's view. People are reactive, angry and aggressive, often over small things. We seem to have lost our sense of humor. People tend to group together with those they agree with. One of the reasons I love the church is that it can be an antidote to this herding of like-minded people, if it welcomes and encourages real diversity.

¹ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), p. 53-54.

Friedman's third symptom is blame displacement, and it's easy to blame others, isn't it, rather than acknowledge your part of the mess? As is adopting a quick-fix mentality, and avoiding any kind of pain of sacrifice. Can you see that all these symptoms--reactivity, herding, blaming others and a quick-fix approach--are in ample supply these days?

Friedman says a cause and a symptom of our anxious culture is the lack of well-differentiated leadership. Too often our leaders follow polls and say what they think people want to hear, rather than having the courage of their own convictions.

This is not something we can change overnight, but we each can do something. Thich Naht Hanh, in our reading² this morning, reminds us that our actions do have consequences, that we need to work on ourselves if we ever expect there to be peace. Are you going to be part of the solution, or part of the problem?

Whoever wins on Tuesday, about half of the county is going to be disappointed. Are we destined to be divided and bitter? Does the current campaign truly reflect who we are, as individuals and as a nation?

This week we saw dramatic pictures and heard heartbreaking stories of the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy. We also saw people helping one another, and political enemies coming together to do what needed to be done. Think about your own family. When someone dies, people come together in spite of their hurts and differences. At a family funeral, do you get into a political argument with that uncle you always disagree with? No, because you understand that at times like this, there are things which are more important.

Good religion doesn't ask us to water down our beliefs or opinions, or hide them under a basket. But it does call us to a higher level of discourse. We in this congregation affirm the worth and dignity of all people and say that our diversity is a blessing, not a curse. We don't all see things the same way here. We are Republicans and Democrats and Independents; we are also Christian and Pagan, Jewish and Buddhist, God-centered, atheist and agnostic. The challenge is to be mature and confident in who you are and what you believe, and to hold open a space for others, especially those who are different. Thousands of years ago, the prophet Micah put it this way: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

² Thich Nhat Hanh, from *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*:

If we divide reality into two camps - the violent and the nonviolent - and stand in one camp while attacking the other, the world will never have peace. We will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence in ourselves. We must work on ourselves and also with those we condemn if we want to have a real impact.

It never helps to draw a line and dismiss some people as enemies, even those who act violently. We have to approach them with love in our hearts and do our best to help them move in a direction of nonviolence. If we work for peace out of anger, we will never succeed. Peace is not an end. It can never come about through non-peaceful means.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association put out a call for people to produce videos that promote our values this election season. Jim Ryan linked to the winner³ on our church Facebook page. Here's part of what it says:

It's not about fighting. It's about faith. It's not about who your friends are. It's about who your family is. Your big family. Your human family. It's about remembering that what makes people different is a lot smaller than what makes them the same. It's about turning a cheek and lending a hand. It's about lowering your voice and elevating the conversation. It's about love. And the power of love to overcome our differences and make the world a better place for all of us.⁴

Our Universalist faith is that we are all part of a great Love that will not let us go. However we understand it, whatever name we give it, we are called to live in harmony with that Love, to let it bless us and help us and heal us, so that we are its hands and feet in the world. To let it guide us, in these trying and anxious times.

As our nation goes to vote this Tuesday, my prayer is not for one candidate or the other. No, my prayer is for the people of this land, that we will experience casting our ballots as a sacred act, one that reminds us that we do belong to one another, that calls us to our better nature; that calls us to join hands and start building the land we dream of. Let this be our prayer: that we will do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly, together.

Amen.

³ Available online at <http://www.uua.org/love/279162.shtml>

⁴ These words by Elliott Cennamo, from the video he created, "Stand with Love."