

Freedom and Democracy

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**All Souls
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Sermon

7-1-07 Freedom and Democracy

Some political conservatives have had the habit of wrapping themselves in the American flag and trumpeting their patriotism. Many of the left have been suspicious of this posturing and see it as jingoistic. Nationalism can be a dangerous thing, when what is needed in our times is a global perspective and more world citizens, but we can make a difference in the world by acting locally and for our national welfare.

There have been times when I have refused to stand for our national anthem because I do not celebrate “bombs bursting in air” as a good thing, but I have also recently experienced great joy in this patriotic sentiment when participating in the swearing in ceremonies of our new mayor, but the point of true patriotism is not just pomp and posturing. It is the continual call for us to be the best country and the best people we can be.

Freedom is paradoxical. If we have political and religious freedom, we are in danger of losing them. Having freedom is no guarantee that it will continue. It is not inherited from generation to generation, but won again and again through the courageous acts required to keep the spirit of hope, democracy and civility alive in each age.

No one has yet better described democratic freedom than Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all *people* 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." *adapted*

UU minister Rob Harde puts it this way, "Thomas Jefferson makes the religious claim that freedom is a gift from God. Jefferson, a Unitarian, is drawing here on the *historic* Unitarian belief that all human beings are created in God's image. We each possess infinite worth and dignity. It's intrinsic to our human nature. Imbued with this holy potential, freedom is the latitude that our Creator has given us to fulfill that potential. To become most fully who we are supposed to become. As a gift to us from our creator, freedom should be ours for the taking. Right there at our fingertips. No questions asked. All aboard the freedom train.

But it turns out there's a catch. An irony that was present right from the beginning of human history, an irony that is dramatically illustrated in the life of Jefferson himself who could pen such spiritual truth and yet himself own slaves. The irony is that though freedom may be a gift, it is not self-perpetuating, which is to say, freedom doesn't exist just because God says so. It turns out that Creation has given us a gift, but it is ours to protect and maintain, or we lose it." *adapted*

As we approach Independence Day, the 4th of July, we would do well to remember that freedom and democracy only exist when we continue to exercise them. Our freedom, our rights as citizens and the strength of our constitution seem to be at risk since 911, but apathy and

malaise have been going on for some time. The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Awareness says of the 131 democracies in the world, the United States rates 103 in voter participation. Our voter turnout is often disappointing. City and county elections can draw as few as less than 20 %. By the time you split that for party differences, it can mean that as few as 10% or less of the voters elect our officials. Things are better in national elections, but our participation is no where near the 60-70% of some European countries.

There are many things wrong with our country now. We are in danger of losing the democracy we claim as so important to us. Some say that we get the government that our large corporations are willing to pay for. Some are quite willing to buy our politicians and they seem quite successful in doing so.

Our democracy is at risk. Recent moves by our current U. S. administration has led to the suspending of Habeas Corpus. People are being held by our government without charges and without legal representation. There is evidence that our country is exporting and supporting torture. Call it rendition, if you like, but our country is using torture in our interrogations. Our current U. S. attorney general says that the Geneva Convention is quaint and outdated.

We can now be placed on no-fly lists in the name of national security. No one knows how one gets placed on a no-fly list or assigned what degree of security rating. Once classified as a security risk there is no way to have yourself removed and no court of appeals to challenge the listing. Our constitutionally supported freedoms are in danger.

Cornel West in his book “Democracy Matters,” expresses concern about the spread of nihilism. Nihilism is the belief that nothing matters, but West suggests that it also be understood as the destruction of hope, meaning and love. Nihilism promotes apathy and despair. It reduces a sense of connection and human kinship. It reduces civility. When it is applied to the political world it leads us to despondency and an unwillingness to question our government or to challenge abuses of power. This is what has led to the creation of our imperial presidency, he suggests.

During the Vietnam War, when our country was willing to fight an unjust and immoral war, many cars and pickup trucks sported bumper stickers and window decals that read “America Love It or Leave it.” The implication was that either you supported the war in Vietnam and the foreign policy of our government or you should go somewhere else. Any many people of conscience were leaving for Canada.

Now, when we are again in an unjust and immoral war of imperial exploitation, we see bumper stickers that say, “United We Stand,” as if simply going along with our current foreign policy without question is patriotic. In fact, conformity and indifference has made these flawed and awful policies possible. It is called single super power unilateralism, which is a fancy way of saying a policy of world domination. This is not about democracy but about making the rich richer and the poor poorer. It is about blood for oil. Iraq was never about weapons of mass destruction.

I recently had the pleasure of being at our UU General Assembly in Portland Oregon and witnessing our celebration of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the Pentagon Papers. It was amazing to hear the courageous testimony of Daniel Elsberg, Senator Mike Gravel and UUA President of that era, Bob West. It was exciting and inspiring to hear three people willing to risk, their lives, their reputations. Daniel Elsberg knew that he might be charged with treason, a crime punishable by life in prison or execution. He knew he was risking his life to defend our democracy. Senator Gravel knew he had senatorial immunity, but he too feared he could face charges or loss of his reputation. In the case of Bob West, the survival of our UU Association was at stake. Yet, he risked our UU Association in order to defend our democracy. He authorized the publishing of the Pentagon Papers by our UU Beacon Press.

These great leaders did draw parallels between then and now, but skipped over the war in Iraq and expressed fear that we are about to invade Iran. They called it the new cold war. Daniel Elsberg called upon people currently serving in the CIA, the State Department and the Pentagon to disclose our planned lies, and our plans and policies for the invasion of Iran.

Also, during the question and answer period someone asked Senator Gravel, whether members of the Senate knew that the pretext of going to war in Iraq over the weapons of mass destruction was flawed. He said that virtually everyone in the Senate knew it was a lie and voted to go ahead anyway.

I believe we need to debate the policies that have led us into Iraq. I doubt the nobility of our intentions. I doubt that our goal is or has ever been to establish a democracy there. These are not the necessarily the opinions of this congregation or this denomination nor do I insist that they be yours, but I ask now a few hard questions that they might lead us to engage one another in friendly debate over our current involvement the Middle East.

Did you know that our U. S. Embassy in Iraq is one of the largest buildings ever built in the world? I have heard that it is so large as to dwarf the palace built by Saddam Hussein. It is so large, says one report, that it can be seen from outer space with the naked eye. Does this sound like a plan to leave anytime soon?

Did you know that U. S. Executive Order 13303 issued in 2003 transferred the oil rights for the Iraqi oil fields from Iraq to the United States. A Seattle newspaper called it the single largest transfer of wealth in the world's history. It stripped Iraq of all rights to prevent or control its own oil exploration. It provided corporate immunity and stripped away all legal impediments to oil exploitation.

Did you know that the New York Times reported earlier this year that current estimates are that between 100,000 and 300,000 barrels of Iraqi oil go unaccounted for each day? With a conservative estimate of \$50 per barrel that means that about 3 billion dollars in oil resources has just disappeared each year since we returned these oil fields to active production, but I guess when we are investing over 500 billion dollars to wage our occupation, what's the big deal with a few billion dollars just disappearing?

We are maintaining our occupation with no bid contracts given to Halliburton industries. There is a known conflict of interest between Vice President Chaney and our nearly unchecked expenditures to Halliburton and other companies with whom Chaney is associated. To my knowledge Vice President Chaney has not yet completely divested himself of Halliburton. When challenged about which oil executives had visited his home to set our current energy policies our current Vice President refused to give up any of their names. Apparently, he believes he is above the law or above reproach.

So, our energy polices are made by oil company executives. Our health policies are made by the insurance industry. Our environmental policies are made by logging and mining interests, and we get the government we deserve or that our corporations can afford to buy. Our media that might be able to raise serious questions about the direction of our country is now owned by five large corporations. They own almost all of our print, radio and television outlets. This is a profound change from years ago when this kind of monopoly was not allowed and our various sources of news were owned by thousands of diverse businesses. Corporatism is gaining power in our country and is suppressing the power of our citizenry.

Earlier this summer, I bicycled across the state of Oklahoma with about 1,200 other riders, which included my son, Sam. As were riding through the outskirts of the Duncan and Chickasha communities, we passed warehouse after warehouse extending for miles. When we came along beside the first gate, Sam rode up quickly, curious to see what kind of corporation or business had such large

holdings. He bicycled back up to me and asked, “Dad, who or what is Halliburton Industries? And why do they own so much of Oklahoma?” What’s a Dad to say to a twelve-year-old about the privatization of our military supply system?

Cornel West says that it is political nihilism that encourages and allows an imperial presidency, a president that fosters a culture where any disagreement is viewed as unpatriotic. In fact, discourse, disagreement, reasonable debate is the process that establishes and maintains democracy. Without the freedom to disagree there is no democracy. I do not ask that you agree with me about my opposition to our occupation of Iraq. I do not ask that you agree with me that “single superpower unilateralism” is a failed and immoral foreign policy, but I do wish that we would debate with one another and our neighbors the integrity of our current foreign policies, our blood for oil attitudes, the tragedy of a failed health care system, or the nightmare we call our immigration policies.

The prophetic tradition is the tradition that calls us as religious people to demand an accounting, to call our society to be its best and not its worst. It is the tradition of Amos who said “May justice roll down like might waters and righteousness be like a mighty stream.” The prophetic voice is of the tradition of Isaiah who asked us to loosen the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to feed the hungry, to cover the naked, to heal the afflicted.” It is the prophetic voice that reminds us that the greatest love is the love that demands accountability, that names wrong and rights injustices, that heals wounds and makes amends.

When members of our church challenge staff or lay leaders about the direction of our church or decisions we have made, I

remind them that this criticism should be understood as the highest form of care. It says the person offering it is deeply interested and invested. Thoughtful questions and dissent are gifts.

No, we don't have all of the answers to the despair of our times, but we do offer our UU Forum ten months of the year, where civic issues and public debate are entertained. We do offer our UU Documentary Series on most Tuesday evenings, where cutting edge video footage brings us news and understandings of our world that just about can't be found any other way. Yes, we do support participation in the democratic process by registering voters. Yes, we do support racial and economic equity by our vigorous participation in the Gamaliel Foundation's local affiliate, MORE squared.

Yes, we are a community with a religious center and a civic circumference. If we want to maintain our freedom then it does fall to us to defend it. The world may well depend upon what we do or choose not to do. In honor of our Independence Day, send one email to an elected official; contribute to someone running for office that you do support, or risk disagreeing with a friend on an issue about which you have deep concern.

Ours is a freedom worth practicing; ours is a freedom worth living; ours is a freedom too many have died to defend. It is far too precious for us to allow our democratic freedoms to be lost. The future of our democratic freedoms depends upon the courageous acts of people in our time defending and maintaining them. What we do is up to us.

Opening Words

What sacrifices are we willing to make to again create a climate of freedom, liberty, equity, and justice – to again establish our democrat ideals?

“Freedom is not a given, it is won by struggle. *We* die when *we* refuse to stand up for that which is right. *We* die when *we* refuse to take a stand for that which is true.” – The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“They have rights who dare maintain them.”

■ Unitarian poet, James Russell Lowell

Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must undergo the fatigue of supporting it. – Thomas Pane

“We don’t owe the president our unquestioning agreement.”

Sen. Richard G. Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, in a Senate speech that called the chances of success for Bush’s troop surge “very limited,” and advocated the reduction of U.S. forces in Iraq.

THE LIMITS OF TYRANTS

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground.

They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.

This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical.

Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will.

Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them.

The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

Fredrick Douglas

First Reading

"Equal and exact justice *for* all. . . of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none. . . Freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of person. . . These principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us, and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and the blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment. They should be the creed of our political faith, the text of civil instruction, the touchstone by which to try the services of those

we trust; and should we wander from them in moments of error or alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty, and safety.

Thomas Jefferson

First Inaugural Address

“We have frequently printed the word Democracy, yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests of out which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue. It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.” [Walt Whitman](#) , 1871 [Democratic Vistas](#).

Nihilism is pervasive in our culture. It appears in many forms, including political nihilism. This is the destruction of hope, of dissent, and free thought. Political nihilism seeks to do away with all dissenting views, and set up the commander-in-chief as the unquestioned, and unquestionable, leader of the nation. In his new book *Homegrown Democrat*, Garrison Keilor denounces this type of leader who seems hell-bent on replicating the Gilded Age of the nineteenth century. “There he is,” Keilor writes, “standing there as if Babbit had never been written. Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, H.L. Mencken, E.B. White, and Norman Mailer have been taking shots at this guy for a hundred years, and there he stands without a dent in him.” From “Democracy Matters” Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder, November 7, 2004

Second Reading

An Unlikely Affair

I had preached a strong sermon against the war in Viet Nam. For five years I had opposed the conflict – speaking at demonstrations, organizing a draft counseling service, and founding an underground railroad for deserters. My feelings ran deep.

Suddenly, a voice in the sanctuary asked to respond to my remarks. It was Carlton Burr: a graduate of Harvard University, an officer in the Navy during World War II, a distinguished businessman in southeastern Massachusetts, and a member of the Republican Party. I invited him to speak from the pulpit.

We were two different people – in our birth, our education, our politics – in almost all of our life experiences. Yet we had been friends from the very beginning of my ministry. He was warm and generous. He was open and direct. He was honest and dedicated. Carlton would never abandon the church – even if he stood alone on every issue. He was a Unitarian Universalist in the finest tradition.

So he appeared in the pulpit with a short rebuttal. He defended the policy in Viet Nam. He exonerated the President and the military. He claimed that his minister was mistaken.

I was very proud of Carlton – even as I thought of the misery and destruction of the war.

Was that so wrong?