The Fifth One

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Asheville
March 22,2020

INTRODUCTION

Welcome again to worship at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Asheville. This is the beginning of April, and with the return of blooming trees and birdsong we are exploring this month the theme of Liberation. Today, to continue our walk through our seven principles Minister of Faith Development Claudia Jimenez and Lead Minister Rev. Mark Ward will offer stories and reflections on our Fifth Principle: affirming and promoting the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.

It is odd in this time when the world around us is opening up and new life is emerging that we are closing in, sequestered in our homes and neighborhoods while we adopt the discipline of social distancing. Like all disciplines, this practice is intended to focus our thoughts and actions in a way that benefits our lives and orients us to our larger humanity and the larger world, so that we may serve it and ourselves well.

To begin, I offer this poem by Ada Limon, “Instructions on Not Giving Up”

More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out of the crabapple tree,

more than the neighbor’s almost obscene display of cherry limbs

shoving their cotton candy-colored blossoms

to the slate sky of Spring rains,

it’s the greening of the trees that really gets to me.

When all the shock of white and taffy,

the world’s baubles and trinkets,

leave the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath,

the leaves come.

Patient, plodding,

a green skin growing over whatever winter did to us,

a return to the strange idea of continuous living

despite the mess of us, the hurt, the empty.

Fine then, I'll take it, the tree seems to say,

a new slick leaf unfurling like a fist to an open palm,

I'll take it all.

From Rev Claudia:

Today's Time for All Ages is a story based on an event from our country's history:
Be A Good Boy By John Micklos Jr

August 18, 1920. Harry Burn fidgeted in his seat in the Tennessee House of Representatives. He touched the red rose on his lapel. Wearing that rose showed that he was against giving women the right to vote. Supporters of women's voting rights—or suffrage—wore yellow roses. In Tennessee, the struggle for women's suffrage became known as the War of the Roses.

Burn reached inside his jacket and touched the letter he had just received from his mother urging her son to "be a good boy" and "vote for suffrage." What should he do? What would you do?

Many states had already passed the 19th Amendment, giving women across the country the right to vote. Only one more state was needed to make it official. Tennessee could be that state

The Tennessee Senate approved the 19th Amendment. Now it was up to the House. 48 members of the House were for it 48 were not. A tie vote was a no. People from across the country—both for and against women's voting rights—filled the room. They sat silently as each representative called out his vote.

Sweat poured down Burn's face. At age 24, he was the state's youngest representative. Yet soon his vote might affect the entire country. Thoughts raced through his head:
Many people don't think women should vote, but women work as hard as men. Why shouldn't they have the same rights? My mother knows more about politics than most men. She should be allowed to vote. I know I should support women's suffrage. But what will other people think?

Burn's name was called. The moment had come. He paused. His mother's words ran through his mind: "Be a good boy; vote for suffrage." Burn raised his hand. "Yea," he said. The

amendment now had enough votes to pass. Women had won the right to vote!

Supporters cheered. Opponents were angry. Why had Burn changed his vote? Afraid, Burn ran from the room. He thought the angry anti-suffragists might hurt him. He climbed up into the attic of the state Capitol and waited for people to calm down. The next day, Burn addressed the legislature. He calmly defended his decision to change his vote. He said it was his chance "to free 17 million women from political slavery" and that "a mother's advice is always safest for a boy to follow." He will always be known as the person who cast the deciding vote for women's right to vote. Burns was brave wasn't he? It isn't easy to do the right thing when you know some people won't like it. But he chose to vote based on his values.

This year is the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote. Recalling the stories of its passing is important, it reminds us to appreciate the progress our country has made. And, it is also an opportunity to learn about the stories of those that have been overlooked. After the 19th amendment passed not all women were able to vote, black women were still facing barriers to register to vote: poll taxes, literacy tests and other racial barriers. Their white sisters needing the southern vote compromised with White Supremacy Culture to pass the amendment. They were not advocating for universal rights. The assumption was that white, middle class women were the beneficiaries. Voting rights based on gender could not be denied, but there were no guarantees. Although there were courageous, outspoken black women **like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,** a Christian minster who was active in the Unitarian Church; **Charlotte Rollin and Mary Church Terrell** engaged in the struggle for voting rights, their stories have been ignored in the telling of this story.

So, while we are grateful for Burns' courage let us also acknowledge that there were many black women whose names are unknown to us who spoke up for the right to vote. That it wasn't until many years later that barriers to voting for black women were outlawed. During this month when we talk of liberation Harper's words are still relevant. She spoke to an audience in NY in 1866 at the National Women's Rights Convention reminding them that rich or poor, black or white, "We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity"[1] We are all in this together, and all our voices matter. I wonder in what ways we are called to be courageous and "walk the talk" of our UU principles?

I also wonder if you are curious to learn more about some of these courageous women? You can find many of them if you google African-American women suffragists. Their stories are inspiring.

[1] https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1866-frances-ellen-watkins-harper-we-are-all-bound-together/

From Rev. Mark:

The Unitarian minister Theodore Parker grew up the last of 11 children on a farm on the outskirts of Lexington, Massachusetts, a sleepy, little town of around a thousand in the early years of the 19th century. As the baby of the family he was often excused of household chores, and so had ample time to wander the countryside, often unsupervised.

Years later he used to tell this story from that time as a pivotal moment that shaped his eventful ministry. It seems that one summer day he was walking along a lake, swinging a stick at the tall grass, when he noticed a turtle, sunning itself on a rock. He had seen older boys using sticks to hit or tease animals. So, he thought he would take his stick and knock the turtle into the lake. He raised the stick and took aim, but then something stopped him. It bothered him. I didn't seem right.

So, he dropped the stick and walked home. Greeting his mother, he told her about the incident, and wondered about that powerful force he felt that persuaded him to stop. "Theodore," she said, "that force inside you was the voice of conscience. It is your moral compass that points you in the right direction. Honor your conscience, and you'll never go wrong in this world."

So, what exactly do we mean when we say we affirm the right of conscience? And why do we pair it with the use of the democratic process? Well, to begin with we affirm that conscience is a thing. Along the line of Parker's story, we affirm that we each have some sort of inner guide that we can rely on to act as a kind of moral compass and point us in the right direction.

But more than that we insist on a "right of conscience." We are saying that we affirm each person's right to personal views grounded in what we believe our conscience dictates, that we should be respected for those views and that we should not be compelled to assert or affirm anything against what our conscience declares.

The image I have is of that famous moment when the priest Martin Luther rose before the Diet of Worms in 1521, and refused to recant his writings that contradicted the church, saying, "Here I stand. I can do no other."

Facing the church with its awesome power and centuries of tradition, Luther declared that he would follow the dictates of his own conscience. It was a seminal moment in the Protestant Reformation, which challenged the church's right to dictate matters of faith to its followers, that insisted on the right of each believer to discern what his or her faith declared.

It is a central tenet of our tradition as well. We offer you no dictates of faith. We trust in your capacity to decide for yourself what is right and good.

Parker was perhaps the most widely heard Unitarian minister of the mid 19th century, drawing thousands to Sunday worship weekly in the 1840s in a massive public lecture hall in Boston. He was an influential member of the Transcendentalists, arguing that religious authority came not from scripture or tradition but from our own deep sense of what was true.

As the nation started lurching toward war he became an increasingly vocal advocate for political reform, especially the emancipation of slaves, and was a critic of how American democracy was functioning. In a famous sermon in 1846 on what he called "the Perishing Classes," he complained of growing poverty in Boston and criticized the failure of political leaders to bring about what he felt true democracy demanded, which he described as, "government of all, by all and for all."

Fifteen years later Parker's words were borrowed and adapted by Abraham Lincoln for his Gettysburg Address. As stirring as Lincoln's address was, though, Parker's formulation had pushed the concept further, when he argued that democracy demanded a government of, by and for ALL the people.

Remember that Parker coined the phrase in a sermon that complained of people being shut out of all the bounty that democracy made possible. He was arguing essentially that democracy was, or should be, a means of liberation, a way for people to realize their full humanity.

Parker had preached that sermon shortly after he returned from a tour of Europe, where he was reminded how the oppression of kings and princes constrained people's rights. He returned with a new enthusiasm for what he called "the American idea" the idea that everyone has equal rights.

In many respects, it is the legacy of Theodore Parker that is speaking in our fifth principle. For Parker felt that liberal religion had a stake in the success of democracy, which he considered a natural consequence of our commitment to uphold the integrity of every person. And the way we do that is to assure that each person has a voice and a vote.

This is the promise of our democracy, but from the very beginning we have failed to meet it. Jefferson's declaration that "all men are created equal" flatly omitted women – half the populace – and essentially pretended that thousands of others – enslaved African Americans – didn't exist. The 15th Amendment, adopted in 1870, after the Civil War appeared to give African-Americans the vote, but the poll taxes, literacy tests and intimidation of Jim Crow quickly snatched it away from them.

Women managed to wrest the right to vote with the adoption of the 19th Amendment in 1920, 100 years ago. But it wasn't until 1965 that the Civil Rights protests

in Selma, Alabama, persuaded the government to protect the voting rights of African-Americans. But even then, the victory was short lived. Nearly 50 years later, a Supreme Court ruling disabled the tools in the law to enforce voting rights. And so here we are today with voting rights advocates working to claw back those hard-won protections.

It remains as true today that it was with Theodore Parker that liberal religion has a stake in the success of democracy. Like him, we hold that everyone, all of us, is owed equal rights and with them the opportunity to exercise her or his conscience and contribute to the common weal, the good which is the consequence of our common endeavor.

So, this is why we make space in the principles that speak to our common mission in the world for the right of conscience and the democratic process that puts our common dreams as a people to work in the world.

CONCLUDING WORDS from Rev. Mark:

Thank you once again for being with us in this online service. It's hard that we can't be together. I miss you and hope you are well. Huddling in our homes it's easy to feel isolated and let anxiety build. Now that we hear that the infection rate of CLOVID 19 is expected to peak in a couple of weeks it's all the more important that we get into rhythms that can sustain us for a time.

Lately, when I can pull myself away from the news, I've found comfort on the Internet in the offerings of many musicians. Among those I heard one song that I'd like to commend to you. It's called "You Can Do This Hard Thing", by Carrie Newcomer. The chorus goes like this:
You can do this hard thing. You can do this hard thing. It's not easy, I know but I believe that it's so you can do this hard thing.

So, take care, friends. Be well. Be brave. Hold onto hope.

See you next week