

Yard Signs and Other Differences

A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

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I'd like to thank John Evans for buying this sermon at our Time and Talent Auction. It's always interesting to see what people want to hear about. Somehow, I heard through the grapevine, that John wanted to hear a sermon about "Republicans are people, too". It brought up a memory for me of an event in my old neighborhood in Atlanta, GA. This was an election many years ago. One day a Republican campaign sign went up in a yard a few doors up. About a week after the sign vanished. This was a pretty liberal neighborhood, so I had my suspicions. Then a few days after the sign went missing, my nearest next door neighbor hung an effigy of the Republican candidate from a tree in their front yard. This was more than I could tolerate and I was able to get them to take it down. But I know that yard sign battles are not unheard of – even if they should be.

As I sent the order of service off to print I also discovered that he was rather hoping that I would actually make the title "Republicans are people, too." I had some concern that someone hearing that might, for a moment, seriously think that there are people here who actually question it. And with this Sunday falling right on Valentine's Day – what better time to try to foster some bi-partisan love?

This is the perfect time for this topic. The field is already strewn with the bodies of dead presidential campaigns, we can feel the first waves of impact from the primary season, and the atmosphere is likely to get more rather than less heated.

Perhaps a two party system just has to get more and more polarized?

It's also true that when we human animals are amongst those we think of as "our people" we tend to take off the filters we may keep on in polite and mixed society. It may relieve some tension. Like teenagers who, at least in past generations, would filter their language around parents and other elders but, on their own, with peers, left to their own devices, would swear like sailors.

Here, at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, we are religious liberals. This means that we are non-literal, we are contextual, historical, and open-minded in our interpretation of traditional scriptures. Last week from this pulpit, the Reverend Scot Giles even spoke of the folly of literal interpretation when he described the use of simile, metaphor, and hyperbole in the Bible – particularly in the early language of Aramaic – in the words of Jesus. "If a man sues you for your tunic, give him your cloak as well," Rev. Giles quoted, then he laughed and I paraphrased him, "Really? Come on! If the followers of Jesus had done that don't you think that we would have found some passage somewhere about how they'd be traveling at least half naked?" Anyway – a religious liberal will allow that there are various ways of interpreting scripture and the truth and even various paths to salvation. It's a generous interpretation. And – even more -- a religious liberal very much believes in the good that can be found in faiths different from their own.

Sometimes people think that being a religious liberal automatically means that religious liberals are political liberals. And, what with the egalitarian and democratically based nature and history of our movement – both the Unitarian and the Universalist branches – it means that, like other western liberal religious traditions – like the Quakers

and the United Church of Christ – we do find our pews or chairs largely filled by Democrats and those who are often liberal politically as well as religiously. So it is, that sometimes, what with a preponderance of “coexist” and “god bless everyone – no exceptions” bumper-stickers, the Priuses, and the rainbow flags proudly displayed in and around Unitarian Universalist congregations – a political liberal or a Democrat – and those aren’t necessarily the same things – might think – “oh – everyone here is politically on the same page.”

When I spoke with John about the sermon he said, “I just don’t like labels. Really what I don’t like is the whole label -a -person- and- put -them- in- box- and- send- them off-to-storage.” I appreciate his sentiment – and here – where we are less literal and more liberal in our interpretations, here where we pride ourselves on inclusiveness (though there is always so much more to learn about how to do this well) here where we want to think of ourselves as curious and open-minded – here – where I bet that the majority of us read the labels on our food before deciding to buy it – I would hope and encourage us to certainly do no less with one another. And I am sure, that whatever short-sighted, perhaps even narrow-minded, and certainly ill-considered remarks are made here against people of one party or another – for example – against republicans by people who may think there are none to hear it... no matter what – this is a faith and a faith community that asks that we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person – and never to forget that every person actually means every person.

But I have my suspicions that, for the most part, candidates are not people. They are manufactured personalities. The race for the presidency seems particularly odd this time. The front cover of the New Yorker magazine last week carried this cartoon with past presidents looking aghast at one of the current candidates. Between the candidate and the image spinners around him or her – what we end up seeing is the persona they have created. And that persona, like the wrestlers and the fights of the World Wrestling Foundation – is prepared especially for public consumption. Like sugary, artificially colored, and flavored sugary cereal, it’s junk food made not to meet the needs but to shape the taste of the people who will consume it. The candidates, politicians, think tanks, and the spin machines shape the image of either party – so making assumptions about anyone -- Democrat or a Republican that one might meet – is increasingly unproductive. Each campaign we learn less about the candidate and more about the fantasies and strategies behind the scenes. They’re like caricatures: the tough guy, the good Christian, the man of the people, the straight-shooter.

So, when we encounter an actual Republican or Democrat for that matter, what we see isn’t the actual person – but caricatures that we have in mind. We turn pretty easily to our habits of polarization – it’s us versus them!

Those Republicans are either greedy, mean, and believe that the poor should be crushed if they can’t survive or they’re scared, manipulated, duped, and mistake the public populism of their candidates for actual heroes who will get them out of the endless struggle of modern economic life. Those Democrats are naïve suckers who want the government to do the hard work, to coddle everyone, and to pay for everything by stealing from hardworking people who have made good.

They’re gross caricatures and sometimes, at least to me, the difference between the parties seems murky at best – as though two wolves dressed up – one as a sheep and the other as a Bedlington terrier.

Political differences *are* real. They may be muddied by the odd candidate for public office – but there’s a world of research that demonstrates that – while they may not fit in boxes – the parties actually are demonstrably different from one another. In 1996 George Lakoff published his book “Moral Politics” which studied the two parties through their use of the language of metaphor. He found that each party had a relationship to politics and power that paralleled the characteristics of relationships with father figures. He found for Democrats that that father figure was a nurturing, protective, tender figure – an extension of the care of families and communities. Democrats – or more precisely liberals and progressives, he claimed, place care at the center of their ethos and politics, believe that poverty is a failing of the whole society, and that with support and a leg up people will work hard to better their conditions and who believe that the more you bar the way for people the more they’ll despair and, ultimately be defeated. Lakoff found for Republicans that figure was a stern, structured parent who sees the state as an interference in the process of individual maturity, and that support has the danger of breeding dependence, weakness, and opportunism, that poverty is largely the result of poor choices and failure – which should be learned from or punished. Where Democrats, according to Lakoff, see people, at their best, as interdependent, Republicans see people, at their best, as independent. Lakoff argued that language has power and I agree there: For example – somehow a few years ago, things like social security started to be called entitlements. It makes them sound like something people just got used to feeling was owed to them and not actually something that they’d worked for and paid into for a lifetime. There was little protest at this – no one said – hey this is a retirement reimbursement. Lakoff’s advice to democrats and progressives was to more assertively express their core morality of compassion and take back the discourse.

Jonathan Haidt also described the differences between democrats and republicans and liberals and conservatives – but he based his analysis on 6 sets of characteristics that the morality of each group could be measured against. You can see them here – care vs harm; fairness – Haidt says the liberal notion of fairness is to give everyone an equal start – where the conservative notion is that everyone may start from a different place but has an equal chance; there is loyalty versus betrayal – but I wonder if the real terms here might be conformity vs. individual expression? The next is authority vs. subversion – which automatically makes the opposite of authority something negating authority – but it might more accurately be authority on account of position vs. authority on account of experience or expertise? Haidt’s liberty is opposed to oppression. He claims that the conservative definition has more to do with a lack of encumbrances by any other authority than the self – and the liberal definition has more to do with our freedom being the positive ability to live an authentic and healthy life in the context of the needs of other people’s freedoms as well. Finally there is sanctity vs degradation – but that would be a whole sermon.

Haidt’s model – much touted – and I know respected in this congregation, seems to me a little like a straw man – the standard created to get the outcome that the researcher wants to get. But this could digress into another sermon.

Still, Lakoff and Haidt are on to something. Both argue that we have ideas and we think that we are motivated by our ideas but are really guided by something deeper and more personal. To Lakoff we are really motivated by our early ideas and experiences of authority. To Haidt we are really motivated by deeper structures of morality that then

determine our politics and, in fact, our world outlook. I have to say that I sort of agree and disagree with both of them.

Our ideas are formed by social myths and personal experiences – we are shaped by family relationships, by moral experiences of loyalty or rejection, secure or insecure attachment, freedom, structure or neglect, by religious stories that we are told about power and authority – and where they come from and how we safeguard our own. But, fundamentally, when we relate to the state and the politicians who make the machinery of state turn – all these things relate to our hopes and fears about survival. That is how primal they are.

We may lean more toward care and mutual survival, we may lean toward independence and personal strength, we may express and vote our politics differently – but we're each motivated by primal hopes and fears. I believe that people often label each other without taking the time for empathy or compassion. We often label others without taking the time to find out what really makes them tick – perhaps because we might not want anyone to look too closely at our inner working for fear they might discover our own sense of vulnerability. But in any case, the human habit, all too often, is to make the opponent the enemy, to forget that they are motivated by the same deep human hopes and fears that we each have and that, perhaps, something valuable might be gained by listening to them.

That listening and understanding is far beyond our current experience right now. Reams of research tell us that although we are saturated with media, hooked up to the 24 hour news cycle, and surfing the web – we are more isolated than ever from those who are different from us. And the more that we're isolated from them – the less we understand – not only about them – but about our world. It's been my experience that, when I have formed a partnership with someone who is so radically different from me – we benefit from and compliment one another. When you get a group of leaders in a room together you make better progress when there is a diversity of skills. If you have a group of leaders in church who have vision and hold the sense of mission and spirituality of the congregation in their heads and hearts and as a budget priority, they will make better progress toward their goals if they are partnered with people who value building the endowment, caring for the roof, and paying the salaries. Rather than being in opposition these are things that can balance, inform, and enable one another. Sometimes working on a project at church people forget and start to argue – but here – more often than not I have seen people take the time to find a middle ground and something far better than any one could create alone is shaped out of our working together in respect and love.

People seem to have forgotten that the same was supposed to be true in the national community and in our political discourse. If you've ever overheard a conversation in which a broad generalization is made about your political party – and one which doesn't reflect your perspective or feelings at all – you probably know how painful, angering, and alienating that is. Maybe, if you are comfortable – you might be able to reasonably say – excuse me – but that's not at all what I believe.

We were meant to hear, learn from, and be changed by one another. Not knocked around. Democracy isn't that the majority rules – at it's best – and it is seldom at it's best -- it should be a national conversation, a dialogue rather than a shouting match; it should take place among statesmen and women rather than manufactured characters; and it should lead to wiser outcomes instead of stalemates.

This place, like every Unitarian Universalist congregation, can be better. Let this be a place where we recognize the nuance in one another and the humanity, the strength and the vulnerability. Let this be place where we look beyond labels to one another's hearts. Not only on Valentines Day but every day, let us be guided toward understanding by the principle of Love that is our inheritance through our Universalism. I'm not sure if this was what John Evans had hoped for, but I am reminded of a passage from a poem by Jellaludin Rumi, the 13th century Sufi poet:

*Out beyond ideas
of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field.
I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down
in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language
- even the phrase "each other" -
do not make any sense.*

So wrote the poet wisely so many centuries ago. Perhaps, here, with one another, during this political season, in love, curiosity, and mutual reverence, we can meet each other there.