

ASUUC Sermon: DEMOCRACY: IN PERIL, by Reverend Roger Butts

What fascinates me about this is that within our Unitarian Universalist principles, democracy and the democratic way, is embedded in our principles. Democracy was counted so precious and important that they ended up in our principles. They were written in the late 1950s and early 1960s, so it is not much of a surprise.

We value democracy. We put in the language of our deepest values.

Right now, in the United States, we are having a moment where democracy seems very precarious. Very fragile.

Democracy is too large of a question to take on in one sermon. So I'd like to focus on one piece this morning.

Mutual Toleration. The other side is hyper-fragmentalization, hyper polarization. Democracies require mutual toleration. Democracies die in the face of hyper polarization.

The reason I believe that democracy is embedded in UU principles is that we start from a place of: the inherent worth and dignity of every person. If the person in front of me and I disagree, but I start with the premise that the person in front of me is endowed with inherent worth and dignity, mutual toleration is the natural outcome.

For a variety of dynamics—evangelical Christians flocking to the republican party, a heavy dose of migration from the 1960s on where most of the newcomers flocked to the democratic party, urban centers full of rainbow coalitions flocking to the democratic party, and rural and predominantly white folks flocking to the republican party, Republicans and Democrats are operating in two different worlds, with different languages and images and metaphors. In 1950, Democrats and Republicans kind of looked the same, acted the same, varied only on policy questions. Those days are gone.

And now, when the other side wins, it is catastrophic. Whole identities are at risk. So much so that folks are worried that their children may marry into the other party. This is not the land of mutual toleration.

When the other side winning is catastrophic, parties and leaders become impatient with democratic norms. The biggest democratic norm is that your opponent is an opponent not an enemy. No matter what we recognize that they love our country and want what is best for it.

It is tempting to demonize the other, dehumanize the other when there is radical polarization. And the fact that democracies don't allow for it, but rather lift up mutual toleration—is probably why we have that idea of democracy in our UU principles to begin with.

Another democratic norm is no violence and no encouragement of violent rhetoric. This is obviously a most dangerous slippery slope. When we loathe one another, instead of engaging in mutual toleration, then we become comfortable with allowing the occasional violent rhetoric. This is the greatest danger. When party leaders allow for mainstreaming of violent folks, we are in deep trouble.

Another democratic norm and one that is very tough right now, is that parties and leaders have to be good losers. The rule is that if you lose, you go back to the drawing board, as a party, you find new leaders, new strategies, and you wait to compete another day. After January 6th, after the thwarted attempt to kidnap the governor of Michigan, we are experiencing the erosion of this norm.

Another democratic norm is institutional forbearance. Especially after Watergate, there was a recognition that all of our democratic institutions could be used for political gain and we needed to put in safeguards that politicians wouldn't do that. We are very close to a full erosion of trust in this safeguard.

The decline of mutual toleration encourages politicians to abandon forbearance and other safeguards and thus, you get radical gerrymandering, radical voter suppression, radical purging of the voter rolls. Winning at all costs is the death knoll of democracy.

What we need is a really strong Republican party, that will disallow demagogues to have access to the presidency and to other seats. We need a strong Democratic party, that will safeguard democratic norms and not join in their erosion. We need healthy and strong parties that can stand up against our basest instincts.

The scholar who has just published on how civil wars start has this incredible line. You might think that super diverse places are most at risk of civil war. It is not true. It is how that diversity is related to power that matters. If diversity is divided up into political parties, and if those factions tried to eliminate the other from power, then civil wars were possible.

We should probably end the electoral college. We should end the filibuster. We should re-imagine political maps. We should double down on democracy. We must demand greater access for all adults to the voting booth. We must demand greater commitment to democratic norms.

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But at the end of the day, I am a pastor. I am your pastor. I could have taught history somewhere if I had wanted. I could have stayed working on capitol hill. I could have been a permanent community organizer instead of an occasional community organizer. No. I did not head for American University's law school. I headed for Wesley Theological Seminary, on the campus of American University. So, I'm a pastor. I look at these things through a pastor's eyes.

I invite us to a broad lens to look at these things. I stay focused on the beloved community, that vision of King's and Rabbi Heschel and James Cone, that liberatory vision where all are free and all are invited to flourish.

So, I don't know who wrote this. I think it might be Terry Williams tempest.

But I leave you with this. Because what we can do best to stand up for democracy is to practice is right here in this church, right where we are.

And so, hear these words:

The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions:

Can we be equitable?

Can we be generous?

Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds?

And offer attention rather than just opinions?

And do we have enough resolve in our heart to act courageously, relentlessly without ever giving up—
ever, trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy.

We are all in this together. Let's come together.