

***No Matter the Outcome***  
**Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**  
**UU Church of Minnetonka**  
**November 2, 2008**

**First Reading**

***From An Election Sunday Sermon***

Reverend David Bumbaugh

November 1, 1992

As you may remember, Massachusetts was founded as a theocracy. This means that in the early years of that colony there was no clear distinction between church and state. Indeed, in many ways, the civil, secular government was understood to be subservient to and the expression of the religious vision...Because of this historic entanglement between church and state, Unitarians in Massachusetts, and to some degree throughout New England, took a great deal of interest in the political life of the community. One expression of this interest was a tradition called "The Election Sunday Sermon." On the Sunday before Election Day, the Unitarian clergy would mount their pulpits and deliver themselves of a sermon in which they sought to define the moral, ethical, religious dimensions of the issues to be decided by the electorate. Nor did they pretend to be non-partisan. In the struggle for a moral and just society, the church was called upon to be fiercely partisan, and so our religious forbearers did not hesitate to instruct the faithful concerning how they should cast their ballots.

**Second Reading**

***From Spiritual Freedom (1830)***

William Ellery Channing

The [Christian] scriptures continually borrow from nature and social life illustrations and emblems of spiritual truth. The character, religion, and blessings of Jesus Christ are often placed before us by sensible images. His influences on the mind are shadowed forth by the light of the sun, by the vital union of the head with the members, [and] by the shepherd bringing back the wandering flock...In our text...He speaks of himself as giving freedom, that great good of individuals and states;...Inward spiritual liberty, this is the great gift of Jesus Christ...

...I maintain that the highest interest of communities, as well as individuals, is a spiritual interest; that outward and earthly goods are of little worth but as bearing on the mind...I am firmly aware that in taking this course I lay myself open to objection. I shall be told that I show my ignorance of human nature in attempting to interest men by such refined views of society...that spiritual liberty is too unsubstantial and visionary to be proposed to statesmen as an end in legislation...and that to talk to politicians of the spiritual interests of society as of supreme importance, is as idle as to try to stay with a breath the force of the whirlwind.

I anticipate such objections. But they do not move me. I firmly believe that the only truth which is to do men lasting good is that which relates to the soul, which carries them into its depths, which reveals to them its powers and the purposes of its creation. The progress of society is retarded by nothing more than by the low views which its leaders are accustomed to take of human nature...

Useful and practical truth, according to its most improved expositors, consists in knowing we have mouths to be filled, and limbs to be clothed; that we live on the earth, which it is our business to till; that we have a power of accumulating wealth, and that this power is the measure of the greatness of the community! For such doctrines I have no respect. I know no wisdom but that which reveals man to himself, and which teaches him to regard all social institutions, and his whole life, as the means of unfolding and exalting the spirit within. All policy which does not recognize this truth seems to me shallow. The statesman who does not look at the bearing of his measures on the mind of a nation is unfit to touch one of men's great interests...statesmen have seldom understood the sacredness of human nature and human society.

***No Matter the Outcome***  
**An Election Sermon by Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

In print ads, on television, on website banner ads, in debates and in the wide range of news shows, we are told that this election year is a historic year. The Minneapolis Star-Tribune estimates that 80% of eligible Minnesota voters will turn out for the election. Each candidate tells us that the other is not telling the whole truth, each candidate tells us that they have the answers and the capacity to run this country, especially now when the stakes have never been higher, with the current mortgage crisis and our nation at war and the world in chaos. Even our Unitarian Universalist headquarters in Boston joined in this anxiety game. On the home web page of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the headline of the main article reads, "With the world on a precipice, we will be casting the most critical vote of our lifetimes."

Now, I am not really that old, but I've been through a few presidential elections. The first one I remember occurred while I was in first grade, between Richard Nixon and George McGovern. After that I remember some other "momentous" and "historic" elections – one between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, then another one between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Four years later as an 18-year-old I cast my first vote in what was called a historic election because Geraldine Ferraro, as Walter Mondale's Vice President, was the first female on a major party ticket. That election was also defined as historic because in the primaries, Jesse Jackson ran as the first black man to mount a nation-wide presidential campaign. He received 3.5 million votes that year, and actually won the primaries in Virginia, South Carolina and Louisiana.

I recall another "historic" election between George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot, the first time a third party candidate was so popular that five months before the election Perot held the lead with 39% of the public opinion, versus 31% for George H.W. Bush and 25% for Bill Clinton.

In the year 2000, another historic election took place, most notably for the fact that the president was elected that year only by a majority of the Electoral College votes, though he did not receive a majority of the popular vote.

This year is notable for a number of reasons. This is the first time in U.S. history when both major party candidates are current sitting senators. And with a female Vice Presidential candidate in one party, and a Presidential candidate of mixed race the other party, the outcome of this election will be a first.

So is this a historic election? Absolutely. Is it the most important election of our lives? Hard to say. I haven't finished living my life yet. But since I have lived through a number of

presidential elections in my lifetime, I suspect that no matter who wins on Tuesday, our country will still exist on Wednesday morning. Of course I have my personal biases, but I suspect that no matter who wins, the sky will not fall, the world will not collapse, and we will still need to work toward a vision of a government that is fair and just, and a world at peace.

The Reverend David Bumbaugh, one of my seminary professors and a wise mentor who gave the sermon at my ordination last spring, is also an astute Unitarian Universalist historian. David Bumbaugh reports that ever since the time of the Puritans – our ecclesiastical forebears – ministers in our tradition have given an election Sunday service. The election sermon was a symbol of the Puritan sense that religion ought not be restricted to the private sphere, but must address public issues. Over time, the Unitarians came to embrace the position advocated by the Universalists – that the separation of Church and State is necessary precisely because it frees the church to be more honest in its critique of the political and public realm, and that the duty of religion is to inject moral and ethical issues into the struggle for power.

In his 1992 election sermon, David Bumbaugh says, “In a democratic society we may give much to politicians and elected officials [but] the one thing we dare not give them is our trust. No elected official is ever to be trusted. I say this not because I believe that politicians are, by nature, immoral or unethical. Quite the contrary...[But] because they care so much, elected officials are always tempted to believe that they are so much better for the people than the opponents that a little lie, a small betrayal, a modest accommodation is not too high a price to pay to keep the scoundrels out. It is this identification of personal and party good with the public good which infects the political system and it is for this reason that we dare not trust any politician. Politicians are to be watched, not trusted.

“This is why the men who framed the Constitution of the United States put into place a system of ‘checks and balances,’ because they understood very well the seductiveness of power, and the tendency to identify personal success with the public good. ‘A system of checks and balances’ is another way of saying do not trust elected leaders; watch them. And that is the reason that an appeal to trust as the basis for choosing a candidate in this year's election fails to move me.”

162 years before David Bumbaugh gave his election sermon, one of our great and revered Unitarian theologians, William Ellery Channing, gave a sermon in 1830, called “Spiritual Freedom,” in front of the Governor and the politicians of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Channing, a Unitarian Christian, spoke about the spiritual liberty preached and lived by Jesus Christ. Reading #592 in our hymnal is taken from this sermon. Channing also spoke about being unmoved, but in his case, he was unmoved by objections that “spiritual liberty” would be “too insubstantial and visionary to be proposed to statesmen as an end in legislation.”

In front of a statehouse full of politicians, Channing preached that, “Useful and practical truth, according to its most improved expositors, consists in...knowing that we have mouths to be filled, and limbs to be clothed; that we live on the earth, which it is our business to till; that we have a power of accumulating wealth, and that this power is the measure of the greatness of the community! For such doctrines I have no respect. I know no wisdom but that which reveals man to himself, and which teaches him to regard all social institutions, and his whole life, as the means of unfolding and exalting the spirit within him. All policy which does not recognize this truth seems to me shallow.”

This is one of the great ends in the institution of the liberal church: to exalt the spirit within, to let the light within each life form shine forth in all its living reality and glorious potential. My emphasis and desire to increase congregational commitment and a deeper sense of

corporate identity arises from an understanding of the power of the people. My understanding is that members confer authority on both lay and spiritual leadership not as an abdication of power or from a dumb and blind allegiance, but out of a recognition that the entity of a congregational institution can better serve the individual spirit within, and may better speak to the moral and ethical issues without.

The separation of Church and State is a crucial boundary to maintain. As a spiritual being and as a spiritual leader, I resist placing myself in a position of compromise, in a position where I am beholden to political powers. A long time ago, a great Jewish teacher also knew well the necessity for the separation between a spiritual community and the political state. In an attempt to catch Jesus in a trap, and to elicit an illegal anti-government response, the high priests once asked Jesus whether Jews should pay their taxes to Rome. In response, Jesus asked the priests to show him a Roman coin, the coin of the occupying force. Then he asked the priests, "Whose face is on that coin?" and the priests answered, "Caesar's." Then Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's."

Jesus was well aware of the limitations and restrictions of operating within any government-supported institution. Jesus knew that he was not ultimately accountable to Caesar, or to any politician. His accountability was to broader and deeper things. Both William Ellery Channing and David Bumbaugh echo this deep awareness. To paraphrase Channing, "I know no wisdom but that which reveals to us our deeper humanity and exalts the spirit within. All politics and all policy that does not recognize this truth seems to me shallow."

So today, when our politicians talk about lipstick on pigs, or denounce their prophetic spiritual leaders, or when they quibble over a few dollars for the cost of health care, or when both candidates refuse to recognize or find legitimate the deep humanity of love between people no matter what sexual identity or gender we may have, and when discussion about our female politicians revolves around whether they are "hot" or "frumpy," then these politics and policies seem to me calculated and shallow.

As people of faith, we are called to harder work and deeper care than our politicians would lull us into through the window dressing of fear, patriotism or change. It's not that I believe people in public office don't have in mind the good of the mass of the country's people. It's simply a matter of the constraints of democratic power in a two party system. I remember a time when Bill and Hillary Clinton attempted to work on providing universal health care. After political conservatives demonized Hillary, and the alarm of "socialism" went ringing down the halls of democracy, Hillary spent the majority of her remaining years as first lady reading stories to first graders and ceremonially opening shopping malls.

Make no mistake, though. I love this country. In my lifetime I have lived in eight different states, and I have visited 49 of them by bicycle, car, train, airplane, kayak and by foot. I lived in remote and rugged western mountains and also in crowded and challenging eastern cities. I wore suits and ties working beside professionals in New York City, and I wore hiking boots and jeans while repairing barbed-wire fence beside a farmer in Idaho. I know and love this country as well as any citizen could know and love any country.

But I do not let my love for the land and the people of this country prevent me from wanting to uphold the structure and vision of our United States Constitution. The framers of our Constitution, in updated intention and parlance, believed that all humans are created equal, and that we are endowed by the universe with the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Similar to my feelings about our own organized Unitarian Universalist religion, my feeling about

our United States government is that I feel less commitment and loyalty to the institution itself than I do to the values and ideals this institution seeks to serve and embody.

But a great difference exists between the United States of today and the English colonies of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Our country began as a small band of revolutionaries, led by an even smaller band of wise intellectuals. We threw off the mantle of the global British Empire and, fortunately for our nationalistic identity, history described us as righteous. But today, though we retain this story and national identity as a righteous David confronting a global Godless Goliath, the reality is that we have now become, in fact, the global imperialist Goliath. It is not much of a leap to compare the United States of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with Great Britain prior to World War II, or even the Roman Empire of 2,000 years ago. Witness the global impact of our nation's mortgage crisis. And like all empires that govern with imperial pride, as our reach exceeds our grasp, we will fall from this sin of pride and greed as all empires inevitably fall.

I also do not let my love for the land and the people of this country blind me to the interdependent web of ecosystems and humanity around the globe. Our accountability may be to our children and our grandchildren many times removed; our accountability may be to the land and the web of existence that allows for creative evolution and creaturely engagement among all life on this planet; our accountability may be to the laws of science or to the ever-widening call of God. But our ultimate accountability is not to one candidate or political party.

Today, politicians bicker over health care when millions of people are dying or remain chronically ill because they cannot afford to go to a doctor or visit an emergency room. Today we may cheer for the dreams of one politician who vows not to raise taxes, while simultaneously \$700 billion in government money flows into the coffers of banks and lenders, with reports beginning to trickle in of that money being spent on bonuses for top executives.

William Ellery Channing preached years ago about the seduction of heightened anxiety or the shallow policies of self-preservation camouflaged as national interest. "I call that mind free," he said, "which does not cower to human opinion: which refuses to be a slave or tool of the many or of the few, and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world...I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering: which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children...I call that mind free which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, though all else be lost."

I earnestly desire, with every fiber of my being, that no matter the outcome of this presidential election, that all will not be lost. But if we are to live up to our calling as religious liberals, then no matter what happens this Tuesday we will still set no bounds on love, and we will still recognize in all people the inherent worth of each human being. No matter what the outcome is of the election on November 4<sup>th</sup>, the real measure of our freedom will occur on November 5<sup>th</sup> and November 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, and next week and next month and next year.

The real measure of our commitment and manifestation of our accountability will be the depth of our engagement with the democratic process between elections. It will be the words we speak for those without a voice, the homes we create for the homeless, the schools we build instead of prisons, the shields and the safety nets we put in place for those without money, the compassion we show for the least among us. The real vision of our government and manifestation of our faith will be in the world we build for our children.