

“HOW YOU SHOULD VOTE NEXT TUESDAY”

Rev. Scott W. Alexander

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

Sunday, October 31, 2010

“Dear God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight.” Ancient Jewish prayer found in the Old Testament

I don't know about you, dear friends, but as this election season ends (and I assume many-if-not-most of you as attentive and engaged citizens have already voted early, making next Tuesday a bit of an anti-climax!) nevertheless as this election season comes to an end as an American citizen, I am more disheartened by both the tone and the content of the national political discourse than I have ever been in my adult life. I feel that America – the nation of my birth...the nation I so love – is in a very bad place right now. It's in a very bad place because it is in a terribly divided place...with far-too-many Americans eagerly engaged in a pitched and bitter battle with one another from angry (and exaggerated) ideological extremes...angry and exaggerated ideological extremes which paint all those who disagree with them as dangerous, ignorant, evil and un-American.

As I speak to you this morning, I genuinely fear for the future health and wholeness of the nation. It seems as though many of us (as American citizens, one to another, in what feels to me – sadly – like an increasingly fragile democracy) are losing our ability to speak with one another rationally and respectfully about the issues that matter most to the nation. Consensus-building and compromise (that is finding civilized common ground in American politics) seems like a distant and lost art...a quaint practice that may not survive in these strident times. Just listen to all the poisonous and exaggerated attack ads (many of which are rife with outright lies and distortions) that have been filling the national airwaves with their name-calling, smears, and angry denunciations.

Somehow, together, we Americans need to TAKE A STEP BACK from this deep chasm of a divide we have tragically allowed (over recent months and years) to develop between those who label themselves “conservative” and those who choose the “liberal” label...take a step back... and begin genuinely conversing (again, rationally and respectfully, without waving fists or placards or guns at one another) conversing about how we can together shape the future of our nation for the benefit of all.

Over recent weeks as a voter, I have (in equal measure) absolutely hated listening to:

- First, all the conservative-sponsored television ads on the one side which imply that “liberal Americans” are reckless “socialists, communists and freedom-hating tyrants” hell-bent on abrogating the constitution, violating individual freedom, and destroying the free-market economy.

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- And, at the other end of the spectrum all those ads from the left which (granted while not as egregious as those from "The Right") imply that "conservative Americans" are greedy and callous individualists for being concerned about the reach of government, the level of personal taxation, the mounting national debt, the persistence of high unemployment, and the yet-unknown costs of moving toward universal health care.

It is my belief that (even though truthfully, as I confessed last Sunday – day in and day out – I personally am much more persuaded by perspectives from the liberal end of the political and social continuum) it is my belief that, of course, neither liberals nor conservatives all by themselves consistently have "*the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*" America (social, political, and economic historians will alike tell you) America has always been the healthiest, wisest, and strongest when it has managed to BALANCE the life of the nation between its liberal and conservative instincts...while always trying to keep its eye on the common good for the people as a whole.

I take it on faith that both liberals AND conservatives love America, want to do the right thing, and are (in fact) so passionately engaged in the political process right now precisely because they deeply care as citizens about our national future. Because this is so, believe there should be no "VILLIANS," "IDIOTS" or "FOOLS" in American politics. Somehow – and, Dear God, I wish I saw clearly right now how America might quickly find its way to a new, and more productive level of political discourse, but I honestly do not – somehow we Americans no matter where we personally fall along the political continuum must begin to re-frame and re-cast the ways we engage one another as citizens, as we strive together to wisely shape public policy and the future of the nation.

So the first thing I want to say to you this morning in this pre-election sermon is that I pray we will all do our part as we participate in the American democratic process to improve and elevate the level of political and social discourse in this nation...and refrain from diatribe, hysteria, and vitriol. As I suggested last Sunday, maybe over coming months and years, this building, which, as you know, houses both the Emerson Center and our Fellowship, can become a safe and reliable public place here on the Treasure Coast where citizens can come together to grapple with the great issues and controversies, in increasing trust, respect, and genuine dialogue...let's work to make that so.

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That said...I want to quickly move on this morning to talking about this particular national election, and what I believe is at stake for all of us as Americans. Now let me (at the outset) assure you that (of course) I have ABSOLUTELY NO INTENTION (as my rather provocative sermon title this morning teased I might) of telling you how to vote next Tuesday --not at least in terms of partisan party or candidate preference. To do so would not only be illegal (and more on that important aspect of the American principle of the separation of church and state in a moment) it would also be arrogant and disrespectful of me (as a leader of this religious community) to try to impose my political perspectives and prejudices on all of you perfectly intelligent people.

Indeed, some of you may have already taken umbrage that I have chosen, this morning, to deliver something called “an election sermon” in the first place...which is why it is so important for us, together, to accurately understand the American principle of the separation of church and state – both what it prohibits and, of at least equal importance to my mind, what I passionately believe it must NEVER constrain.

Many Americans do not understand that – historically and constitutionally speaking – the time-honored principle of the separation of church and state – the principle that was written right into first amendment to the Constitution of the United States by our nation’s founders – was intended to protect religious organizations from government, not the other way around! The first amendment simply states that congress [and now I quote] *“shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech.”* That is the only thing our national constitution or any other of our founding documents says about church and state and how they should or should not interact...a straightforward prohibition of the STATE from either establishing or abridging religious expression....period.

It was not until 1954 – and more on that important year in a moment – that anyone said anything about protecting the state from religion. My reading of our national history leads me to state with clarity and conviction that the original American principle of “the separation of church and state” was NEVER established to protect the state from religious expression, influence or interference. Religious people have always been free in America to speak their truths to those who govern them.

Many of you may not know, for example, that after the nation’s founding in 1776, clergy of many American faith traditions, including the early Unitarians and the Universalists regularly delivered what were called “Election Sermons” – both to the members of the congregations they served before elections...and after

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elections, to the newly-seated legislatures in states like Massachusetts to instruct the newly-elected representatives on what the church believed were the great moral and social imperatives of the day.

Many Americans today incorrectly believe that the principle of “the separation of church and state” means that both the church and state should stay entirely out of one another’s business...but nothing neither could nor ever has been be further from the truth...with one notable exception.

My guess is that very few of you know that it was not until the year 1954 that the Congress of the United States – at the urging, incidentally, of freshman Senator Lyndon Baines Johnson who was upset that a non-profit organization... not a church, but a non-profit organization...had opposed his candidacy – it was as recently as 1954 that Congress amended the *Internal Revenue Code* to henceforth prohibit non-profit organizations which enjoy the privilege of tax-free status – INCLUDING RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS LIKE THIS ONE – from endorsing or opposing political candidates (or parties) at election time. This means that from the founding of this nation in 1776 until 1954 – almost 200 years! – there was absolutely nothing in U.S. law or practice which prohibited ministers or congregations for that matter from direct partisan electioneering. Indeed today, many conservative religious leaders still insist despite the rather clear and established IRS rules that they have the right, indeed the moral duty, to engage in barely-veiled partisan electioneering from their pulpits, and have done so over recent days and weeks.

Here, for example, is the ***2010 Christian Coalition Voter Guide*** for Florida, which is no doubt being passed out in hundreds of Evangelical congregations around the state this morning. This document which pretends to only be focused on the key issues that concern voters but in fact all but directly endorses every one of the conservative Republican candidates which share the coalition’s conservative views.

Now the churches which are passing these “voter guides” out this morning, may get away with this electioneering (in terms of the IRS not taking them legally on) but let me assure you, in THIS building this morning, you will get no thinly veiled “voter’s guide” passed out to you in your pew telling you whom to vote for. As a liberal religious leader and citizen of these United States...I happen to emphatically agree with the Internal Revenue Service’s one, clear and limited, 52 year-old restriction against partisan electioneering on the part of tax-exempt religious organizations. I do not believe that either ministers as employees of congregations or congregations as organized religious communities should, at election time, endorse or oppose particular candidates on a partisan basis.

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But –and please hear me loud and clear on this one – this does not mean – and must not mean – that religious congregations and individuals ought to feel in any way constrained from directly bringing their most deeply held religious beliefs and values to the political process, including into the voting booth with them on election day.

The reason, of course, that religious people – like us here at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach – must actively address and engage political and governmental issues at American election time **IN THE LIGHT OF OUR RELIGIOUS VALUES** is that it is EVER AND ALWAYS in the political and governmental spheres that the shape and quality of our shared life as a civilized society is to a large extent determined.

How would it be possible – I ask – for any seriously religious person or any seriously religious congregation to ignore current political and governmental issues, like, for example, whether or not our nation is going to extend health insurance coverage to every man, woman and child? If we as Unitarian Universalists care about life and persons and the quality and justice of American life on all its levels and of course we do, then we must care about elective politics and what happens next Tuesday across America. How people vote, will in large measure determine the future shape of American public policy and life, and will determine whether or not we as a people succeed in living up to our highest national ideals, aspirations and duties.

So...how should you vote on Tuesday? I believe with all my heart and soul and will affirm without hesitation or caveat that we should be voting our Unitarian Universalist values next Tuesday. I'm telling you to unashamedly and unreservedly those of you who haven't already done so take your religious values with you into the voting booth when you vote...just like you will your sample ballot...how could anyone serious about their faith do anything less???

I would like to briefly refer you now, please, to the FRONT PANEL of your orders of service...where you will find listed (as you will every Sunday) the 7 principles that guide us Unitarian Universalists. These are the principles – THE VALUES, COMMITMENTS DREAMS AND BELIEFS – that should guide us in our work lives...in familial lives...in our lives as neighbors, citizens, and members of local communities...AND IN OUR POLITICAL LIVES AS CITIZENS OF AMERICA. How, for example, can I say I believe in *“the inherent worth and dignity of every person”* or *“Justice, equity and compassion in human relationships”* or *“the goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”* or *“the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,”* and not take those values with me

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into the polling place when I vote for my elected representatives? It cannot be done.

If you are serious about being a Unitarian Universalist, you cannot somehow leave your religion and your values at the door when you enter a polling station...in fact you must fiercely and intentionally take your faith and everything you believe about what is best for humanity and this troubled planet of ours into the voting booth with you, and vote for candidates who you believe will best defend and serve your religious and moral convictions – as well as your other convictions.

So...while as I have already said I have absolutely no intention of violating or skirting I.R.S. law by endorsing overtly or covertly any particular candidates or parties from this pulpit this morning (for, as I have already affirmed, I will not show you – as an intelligent and engaged voter – any such disrespect) what I am going to do this morning before I close is speak briefly about how I believe our faith as Unitarian Universalists challenges us to vote in this particular election.

In a nutshell, here it is, good Vero Beach friends. I believe that our Unitarian Universalist principles – the outward looking, humanity-and-creation-affirming principles of our faith – challenge us with rather profound clarity **NOT TO VOTE** in this, or any election cycle **NOT TO VOTE FOR THE MAXIMUM PRESERVATION OF “OUR PERSONAL LITTLE POCKETBOOKS” ...BUT RATHER FOR THE PRESERVATION OF “THE LARGER COMMON GOOD.”** Many are the strident voices in this particular election cycle, screaming – literally screaming – about the “evils” of taxation... the “evils” of government programs directed at the disadvantaged and distressed...the “evils” of the new national health legislation whose goal is to provide medical care for every last man, woman, and child in this nation...and the “evils” of “cap and trade” proposals that would have us as a nation begin to deal with the danger of global warming. Many are the voices calling us back to a privatistic, individualistic America where we only care for and look out for ourselves, and our own immediate sphere of personal concern.

But few are the voices (you know this is true dear friends) few are the voices challenging America to live up to its best and largest and most compassionate heart. Few are the voices quietly-but-insistently reminding us that the taxes we pay, which incidentally are the lowest in the developed world, are not some terrible, sinister imposition that robs us of freedom or wealth, but rather are **THE REASONABLE PRICE WE AGREE TO PAY FOR LIVING IN A GOOD AND HUMANE AND CARING SOCIETY.** Few are the voices reminding the American people **THE ENDURING TRUTH** that when we are at our best as a people, we come together and **WILLINGLY AND GENEROUSLY INVEST** in one another... bringing our

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resources to bear on the problems we share...and make the sacrifices, some of them financial, so that all Americans can together pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

Many of the ads running on television right now assume that the very process of taxation of us as citizens is somehow inherently evil, oppressive, un-American and wrong. Now of course, and please everyone hear this – whether you are economically liberal or conservative or somewhere in-between, of course taxation must – in all healthy economies – be reasonably limited so as not to suppress consumer spending and entrepreneurial investment – we cannot tax ourselves – even the very rich – “to death.” But neither can we afford to deny taxation’s noble role in helping us to create a good and safe society for all.

So this election – Tuesday if you have not already done so – I hope that when you step into the voting booth, you will be willing to vote for those leaders and parties who promise lead this nation and this state in ways that serve THE COMMON GOOD, not just PERSONAL SECURITY AND WEALTH. Maybe some religions somewhere do not speak clearly to the quality of the social order...but I believe with the full passion of my being that the outward-looking, people-and-justice-affirming principles of our Unitarian Universalist faith call us to be citizens committed to a compassionate and caring society – a social order where no child is left behind...where the homeless are not abandoned...where the hungry are not turned away from the kitchen door...where the historically oppressed are not ignored...where the unemployed are not shunned...or where the sick and dying are not left untreated.

Our faith – Unitarian Universalism – calls us to be citizens committed to “THE COMMON GOOD” ...to an America that actively cares for those citizens least able to care for themselves...and asks all citizens to share in the investments necessary to building America...AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL...beautiful from sea to shining sea.

AMEN.