



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Freedom is Not Free: A UU Perspective on Citizenship

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When I'm driving on the highway and get stuck behind a semi, I'll read anything that's written on the back of the trailer. Often it's an advertisement for the company, sometimes there's a notice that they're hiring drivers. There might be an observation scrawled in the dust that the trailer needs to be washed, or an invitation to call 1-800-eat-dirt if you have an opinion about the driver's style. One morning on my way to work, I saw written on the back of the trailer in front of me, "courteous driving is a civic responsibility." These words made me stop and think. Not literally of course, but I immediately recalled times driving when I was in a hurry, or in a bad mood – when I followed the car in front of me too closely, when I drove a little too fast, when I didn't drive with my full attention to what was around me. Times when I risked the safety of others by operating a ton of metal at high speeds in a less than safe manner either accidentally or intentionally. I thought about beyond just driving, how my individual freedom of choice can affect and even limit the freedom of those around me. And since I'm a seminarian, I naturally thought, "this would be a great topic for a sermon."

The phrase "Freedom is not Free" has been used to honor people who have made sacrifices in defense of The United States of America, and to preserve and further its ideology of "liberty and justice for all." The phrase has been used to justify military action, past and present. I use the phrase "Freedom is Not Free" today as a jumping point to explore the limits of personal freedom, to better understand the boundaries between civil rights and civil obligations, and between civil obligations and morality. I use the phrase "Freedom is Not Free" to mean "just because we're free to do something doesn't mean it's moral and right to do so."

I think it's common in today's society to think of personal freedom as the right to do anything we want, within the limits of the law. Freedom of speech means we can say whatever we want as long as it doesn't qualify as slander or libel or perjury. Freedom of religion means we can believe anything we want about God or the non-existence of God. The right to bear arms means people can own as many guns as they want. How many people have started legal action against another because it's in their legal right to do so, regardless of the extent of the wrong done? How many times have we heard "it's a free country" when someone's behavior is called out for being less than kind? When does freedom for one reduce the freedom experienced by more than the one?

On the insert in your order of service, I've pasted a section directly from the Department of Homeland Security's website. This section is targeted towards those applying for citizenship. It clearly indicates that there are rights of citizenship and responsibilities of citizenship. Having been born a US Citizen, I've often taken the rights of US citizenship for granted, and haven't had to specifically opt into the responsibilities of citizenship. Yet right there on the US Government's website it clearly says that along with the rights of US citizens come responsibilities beyond those that are legally mandated – responsibilities like participating in our communities and respecting the rights, beliefs and opinions of others.

Have you heard the definition of a Unitarian Universalist? Unitarian means one, and Universalist means everything, so a UU is someone who believes in one of everything. People commonly think that because UUs have no creed that they're free to believe anything. But that's not exactly true. Unitarian Universalism is a covenanted faith – we agree that we have the responsibility to treat each other and the world in a certain way. And the 7 Principles – which we just learned today - form the framework of the covenant we have with each other and the larger world. Shall we sing the 7 Principles now?

1. Each Person is Important
2. Be Kind in all you do

3. We're free to learn together
4. And search for what is true
5. Each person has a voice
6. Build a fair and peaceful world
7. We care for Earth's lifeboat

As Unitarian Universalists, we exercise our freedom of religion. As part of our covenant with each other, we agree to affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And with freedom comes responsibility. We also agree to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We are called to be aware of our effects on others - to be aware that when we exercise our freedom, we don't limit the freedom of others. We are called to fight for the freedom of others.

When the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776, the self-evident truths - that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness - those truths were merely aspirational. Many of those of African descent were enslaved. Only landowners were allowed to vote and women could not own land. Those who once lived on the same lands where the Declaration of Independence was penned and signed were called "Indian Savages" in that very same document.

In our country we're still far from all being equal. Native Americans are still denied the right to control whether oil pipelines run across land given to them by the US Government after the same government forcibly took ownership of their ancestral lands. Slavery may be illegal, but illegal slavery still exists in the shadows, and people of African descent are still jailed at higher rates, earn lower wages, go to schools that have fewer resources, and get lower quality health care than those of European descent. People are still denied jobs, loans and rentals on the basis of their race, gender or sexual preferences. Black men and transgender people are still killed at an alarming rate. Women are still not free to make decisions about their own bodies. And I'm sure I don't need to tell you that

limits on freedom don't end at the US border. And neither does our responsibility as Unitarian Universalists. We not only have a civic responsibility, but a moral imperative to fight for the freedom of our global community. Our sixth principle states that we affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Because we know that as Maya Angelou says, "The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free."

Over the past few decades much of the political discourse has been focused on individual rights. The focus on individual rights has led to a lot of social reform such as civil rights and gay marriage. But the US wasn't founded on individual rights. The US constitution starts with "We the People" for a reason. We **all** have the obligation to build a more perfect union. And that means working towards life, liberty and justice for ALL.

Working towards freedom for all might seem like a monumental task. Luckily we're not doing it alone. The first shift away from the focus on the individual is to realize we're all just parts of an interdependent web. What we do matters, but only in combination with others. In fact, an understanding that we're all in this together is the first of Parker Palmer's 5 steps to Heal the Heart of Democracy.

The second step to Heal the Heart of Democracy is to appreciate the value of "otherness." Appreciating the value of "otherness" goes beyond tolerance. It means shifting from an us **vs.** them to an us **and** them mindset. It means acknowledging that we as US citizens, as Unitarian Universalists, as one of whatever culture we identify with, don't have all the answers. It's only through ALL sitting at a table with all of our diversity of experience, tradition and knowledge and realizing that it is all of those messy differences themselves where we will spark creative solutions.

I mentioned messy differences, didn't I. The third step to Heal the Heart of Democracy is to be able to hold tension in life-giving ways. None of us is perfect. The work of healing democracy and bringing freedom to all is big work, and it will likely not be finished in our

lifetimes. This is a marathon, folks, not a sprint. And the work itself is messy. But in that space of mess and tension and stress and imperfection is exactly where the magic happens. If it doesn't happen there and doesn't happen now, where and when will it happen? These moments of tension are when vulnerability and deep connection happens and when the truth comes out. I know we are all strong enough to sit with the tension and doubt and messiness and passion. We just need to learn to sit in those difficult spaces and realize that it's fertile and holy ground.

The fourth step to Heal the Heart of Democracy is to know that we all have a personal voice and agency. We're not the audience any more. And we can't afford to wait until we figure out the one perfect thing that's going to bring freedom to all. The power for change lies in each of our hands. We can speak up. And more importantly we can amplify the voices on those on the margins who need to fight to be heard. We can change small things and together that adds up to big things.

The final step for Healing the Heart of Democracy is what our story for all ages is about. We have the capacity to build community. Nana and CJ could have spent their afternoon after church in many different ways. But they chose to open themselves up to people they met on the bus – to truly see them - and to spend a couple hours feeding people who were struggling to meet their daily needs. Instead of living individually for an afternoon, they acted to build community. Our hearts are found in community, and only there can the Heart of Democracy can be found.

Fighting towards freedom for all starts with a small shift. Our task is to understand that the decisions we make on a daily basis matter. How we use our freedom matters. How we see others who don't have as much freedom matters. Since seeing those words about courteous driving on the back of the semi, I drive more courteously. Sometimes I intentionally set down my phone when I'm in public so I can be aware of what's going on around me, and help out if someone is having a hard time. I pay attention to ways I can build community and leverage my individual freedoms towards communal freedom. And

if we all make small changes, what a big change that can be.

Four days ago I was driving to work and I found myself behind a semi. It was as if the Universe itself knew I was writing a sermon on the metaphorical and moral implications of safe driving. For on the back of that semi's trailer was written "Good driving makes a difference." So I am here before you today to tell you that good living does make a difference. Nelson Mandela once said, "... to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." So as a daily practice I invite you be more conscious of how you use your freedom, and make a small shift towards using that freedom in a way that grows communal freedom. Only through acting together can we all hope to free.

<https://www.globalonenessproject.org/library/articles/five-habits-heal-heart-democracy?fbclid=IwAR0LSYnVx5vjo47RXDdtU0XZGpKfjea0EqIN6MANVizmHb23nOri47pIsv0>

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