



SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

History is Listening: The Moral Imperative of Democracy

By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

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We elected Barack Obama on the sails of hope. We placed upon him the mantle of a savior. And then, as with all leaders, we realized that he was not a savior, but a human being dealing with a complex and fractured world. Still, much was done to alleviate the suffering of our country. The passage of Health Care Reform, as imperfect and inadequate as it is, brought a bit of the dream back. But the Republicans stood in the way of almost every effort at change, and many of us hoped that Hillary Clinton would be elected and help us to reinstate the democracy once dreamed by our founders. We now know how short-sighted our hope was. Money has only further corrupted politics, turning our democracy into a plutocracy bordering on a fascist state.

The election of Donald Trump was not an anomaly, it was a result of a deeply divided country with an even deeper caste system. As Isabel Wilkerson explains, we are a country deeply divided: “caste is the infrastructure of our division ... A caste system is an artificial construction a fixed ranking of human value that set the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups... race does the heavy lifting of our caste system... the language of race being its expression... we have trained in the language of race and our caste system is our underlying grammar (In Caste, 2020).

The election of Barack Obama was, in the eyes of our caste system, a terrible aberration that needed to be corrected. No black man (nor woman) should be above a white man. That sense of disorder to the standing caste system of our country led to the election of Donald Trump, not the cause but the system of our failed democracy.

And that failure has only grown bigger with the control of our government by a minority party that uses gerrymandering, voter suppression and an attack on the efficacy of the election itself to stay in power. Brutal capitalism has married raw racism, and given us this desperate time in which we live.

Especially after that debacle of a debate this week, most of us, by far the majority of Americans, are living somewhere between disgust and desperation in reclaiming our democracy. Our job as religious progressive people is to do all we can to act for democracy.

Our spiritual theme this month is Deep Listening, and friends, make no mistake about it, history is listening. Our children’s children will measure us and the history we are making by how we answered the call to this grave threat. Democracy is more than politics.

Politics is about power, but the ideal of democracy is more noble. It's ideal is a moral imperative for us as UU's. Not just because it is in our fifth principle but because democracy holds up the inherent worth and dignity of all people in a political structure.

To be fair, as Rev. Susan Frederick Gray has written:

"Democracy in the United States has always been compromised. At the Nation's very founding, participation in governance was almost entirely limited to white male landowners. Wealth was created from those excluded: land seized from indigenous peoples who were forcibly assimilated or removed and/or exterminated; and labor exploited from enslaved Africans, indentured servants, immigrants, prisoners, the working poor, and women and children. Compounding this corruption is the existential threat of a global climate crisis that our current federal government is failing to address. The impact of this crisis will fall most heavily on low-income communities of color. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., echoing Unitarian minister Rev. Theodore Parker, said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." We can no longer wait for that to happen. We must act to bend that arc now or face the unthinkable consequences of a destroyed environment and unlivable planet. If we are to rise to the moral challenge inherent in the climate crisis, we must embrace the struggle to achieve an uncorrupted democracy.

"As people of faith committed to 'the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large,' we must continuously strive toward uncorrupted democracy. As a means to an end, democracy organizes decision-making among diverse people and preserves stability while balancing competing interests. But democracy is not merely a means. It is an end in itself, an ethical ideal, a moral and spiritual way of relating to one another. Sadly, many of our democratic institutions have been corrupted into being merely a means for giving powerful interests the appearance of legitimacy. The promise of democracy is for a life that fashions us as the people we want to be." (UUA.Org)

Democracy is not only a series of rules and systems, it is the culture and commitments of the people and of those entrusted with carrying out the will of the people. Democracy is more than a system of government. It is moral orientation to our world. In its truest form democracy upholds the rights of the few in the service of the many. But it also acknowledges that the rights of the many should prevail. That sense of fairness, most eloquently expressed by the philosopher John Rawls: "democracy is supposed to ensure that each citizen is free and equal and protected by basic rights and liberties...Justice then is happiness according to virtue." (From A Theory of Justice)

Today we are on verge of this virtue slipping away from us. Democracy needs saving. Democracy needs our courage, our ability to walk into fear. We need to work for the vote and we need to exercise our rights including demonstration, regardless of who wins in November. And we are the ones to save it, locally and even nationally, despite our fears, we must now and always strive for that ideal, that principle of justice we know to be true.

This is why the UU the Vote program is so vital. We cannot change the narrative entirely, but we can give democracy a fighting chance.

In closing, our work is large.

Clint Smith is an African American poet who I have been following for some time:

"When People Say, 'We Have Made It Through Worse Before.'"

(Reading) "When people say we have made it through worse before, all I hear is the winds slapping against the gravestones of those who did not make it, those who did not survive to see the confetti fall from the sky, those who did not live to watch the parade roll down the street. I've grown accustomed to a lifetime of aphorisms meant to assuage my fears, pithy sayings meant to convey that everything ends up fine in the end. But there is no solace in rearranging language to make a different word tell the same lie. Sometimes the moral arc of the universe does not bend in a direction that will comfort us. Sometimes it bends in ways we don't expect. And there are people who fall off in the process. Please, dear reader, do not say that I am hopeless. I believe there is a better future to fight for. I simply accept the possibility that I may not live to see it. I've grown weary of telling myself lies that I might one day begin to believe. We are not all left standing after the war has ended. Some of us have become ghosts by the time the dust has settled."

Before we are ghosts, let us find our distant shore and head there now.