



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

The Courage to be Good Trouble

By Rev. Dr. John T. Morehouse, Senior Minister

Sunday, October 16, 2022

I first learned to vote when I was 9 years old. My father, for all his other shortcomings, believed in the rights of the people to determine their future. And so, with me in hand, he took me into the voting booth (over the objections of the poll workers) and showed me the rows of candidates. I knew enough to know we were liberal and so I thought he would pull the single lever for the democratic party. But he surprised me. “Always vote from your conscience” he said, “never from loyalty”. He voted for one or two democrats, a few from his own Liberal Party of New York and then a Republican Judge. “Why the Republican?” I asked. “I know her. She is fair minded and open to new ideas. Don’t assume every candidate follows the party line.”

My father who at that time worked for the New York State Education Department as Director of Secondary International Education, fought many a battle for democracy. When a Chinese Professor who sought asylum in New York was black listed by Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, my father stood by him. It cost him his job but the Professor stayed. When the World Trade Organization met in Seattle to hammer out so called Free Trade in North America and the Pacific Rim which would cost millions of jobs, my father served the finance ministers a “people’s arrest for crimes against humanity” for which he was handcuffed and taken to jail. I had to bail him out. My father was one of the first to challenge the idea that corporations were persons and thus afforded equal rights in his own fight against Union Carbide after their disastrous chemical spill in Bhopal India. He spent three decades trying to win some justice. He kept one share of Union Carbide stock so he could attend annual meetings to protest. He was always escorted out by security.

He had the kind of courage to be in the Civil Rights Leader John Lewis’ words, “Good Trouble”. While my prophetic witness is tempered by the need to be more considerate of my family and congregation’s emotional needs, I have had to search for courage to be good trouble in my own life; in fair housing in Maryland, equal rights for LGBTQ+ in Los Angeles, and equal pay for immigrant truckers in the port of Long Beach.

That kind of courage which so many of you have (and all of you have some kind of courage) begins in access to voting. When UUA President Susan Frederick Gray urged us as UUs to “UUtheVote” in the summer of 2019, our own team headed by Janet Lungo, sprung into action. We made hundreds of phone calls to NC, PA and Georgia, thousands of cards and letters and texts. And, we along with hundreds of other UU congregations moved the needle to protecting the rights of the marginalized in our country. We are doing it again with a big effort.

In the words of others: “Participating in our democracy is not only about our fifth principle. As UUs, our deepest beliefs are a life-giving, life-saving, life-sustaining alternative to the narratives and policies of domination, supremacy, exceptionalism, and exploitation that are on the rise. We are moved in our justice work and electoral engagement by principles of:

- **Interdependence:** We believe that all life is sacred and interconnected, and that human beings are radically dependent on one another and on our precious earth and its creatures. This interdependence calls us to build societies that care for all species, and to enact policies that privilege cooperation and solidarity over individualism and competition.
- **Democracy:** We believe that decision making must be done in a way that allows all communities to be heard, especially those who have historically been silenced. We believe all people should have a right to elect leaders and shape policies that directly impact the quality of their lives and their access to resources.
- **Inherent Worth and Dignity Across Difference:** We believe that all people are born from love, and that nothing a person is or does can separate them from that inherent belovedness. We believe explicitly that people of all races, genders, abilities, sexualities, nationalities, and religions deserve to have their inherent belovedness mirrored back to them by the societies, structures, institutions, and policies that shape their lives.
- **Pluralism and Diversity:** We believe in the teachings of the natural sciences that teach that the richest and healthiest ecosystems are those with the greatest diversity. While there are many commonalities that draw us together as humans across experiences and identities, we believe that our differences are fundamentally beautiful, and our diversity—of race, gender, belief, practice, culture, ability, sexuality, and more—is to be celebrated with curiosity and affirmation, not minimized or flattened.
- **Self-determination and Human Agency:** We believe that each and every person is an expert in their own experience and should have uninhibited access to the material conditions that ensure lives of belonging, safety, wellness, and joy. We believe that any system, structure, or policy that prevents people from making decisions about their own lives, or accessing what they need to be free.” (From UUtheVote)

The point of all this work is to live out our principles of the right of democratic rule and the inherent worth of all. As my colleague Ashley Horan offers us:

We say it, again and again,
 even when the proof lies somewhere beyond the horizon,
 beyond our reach, beyond our imagination.
 This is our faith: Another world is possible.
 Not somewhere else— another world, another lifetime— but here, and now, for us and for all.
 Another world is possible.
 There is no single path toward that world; no one strategy or approach that will restore
 balance, heal brokenness, sow wholeness, free creation. There are many routes toward
 liberation; toward freedom.
 But the abundance of options does not absolve us of the responsibility of acting.
 Another world is possible.
 The call—the duty— of each moment in history is to discern: Another world is possible.
 Who are we, and what can we bring with humility, integrity, faith?
 What is the context, and how can we address it with agility, resilience, skill?
 What is the vision, and how can we realize it with accountability, relationship, joy?
 Another world is possible.
 In this time of despair, of fear, of collapse— this time that is both like every other era and like
 no other time in history— It is audacious to declare our faith and to commit our work to a
 world that is more free, more just, more whole.
 But we are an audacious people in good company, with many kin, and we are ready to show
 up and work hard and stay humble and make friends and hold the vision starting here,
 now, today, with us and persevering— however long it takes— until that other world is not
 only possible, but Another world is here.
 – Rev. Ashley Horan, UUA Organizing Strategy Director

Indeed, as John Lewis has shown us, we have to continue to stand witness to the spirit of love over and over again. He championed civil rights legislation repeatedly throughout his long congressional career. Even in the face of a rightward turning politic, Lewis never wavered in his support for the rights of those who are marginalized by our society. He was audacious and kind, embracing a joy along with vision, he was Good Trouble.

Let me say here that there is difference between being value driven politically and partisan. As a non-profit organization we are not allowed to be partisan but we are allowed to speak of our UU Values in the public square.

‘Progressive people of faith can be powerful and prophetic without being partisan. We can engage our neighbors, educate our communities, mobilize voters, rally around ballot initiatives, and shape the public discourse with values-based framing, rooted in our theology and principles. Electoral cycles offer heightened opportunities to engage and inspire people, mobilize around key issues, and to strengthen democracy, and win real advances on key issues on the ballot’. (From UUtheVote)

In other words, we can be a liberal religion without necessarily being a religion of liberals. I am always reminded of what the now Rev. Julio Torres our intern some years ago said when someone said his preaching was too political. “Politics” he said, is about the exercise of power, as UUs we are concerned about that power being used to help others. And for those of us like me, as person of color, politics is deeply embedded in my spirituality. To deny me that lens is to deny me my spiritual identity. Was MLK too political to be a minister?” (paraphrased from a conversation with me)

I will have more to say about this dynamic in my first sermon in November but for now, consider at least our civic responsibility to encourage the vote. Can we do that? Can you do that?

Ultimately, its about respect. The respect of other’s right to self-determination. The respect of people to live in peace and health. The respect of those who are marginalized to come to the center with us. Voting is an act of respect. Becoming a Good Trouble congregation is a sign of respect.

The necessity of respect extends to the entire community. Respect entails an involvement in the life of this or any community. You come because by coming you respect not only the speaker but the church who counts you as among them. You come out of respect that you might actually learn something new.

In the desert, the old shamans teach us that you must be respectful of what the desert offers. It offers life and death. So, it is here and in our own lives: we offer many paths to spirit. Some teach us how to live, others teach us how to die. Our lives bring us joy and struggle, we will grow in respecting that others who we meet also know joy and struggle. Respecting suffering, teaches us that what we cannot change we accept. Respecting joy teaches us that what we can change we do. Respecting one another keeps us an honest liberal religion, even if not all of us are liberals in the same way.

Having the courage to be Good Trouble reminds me of meeting a UU Border Agent in AZ many years ago. We spoke about the unprecedented number of children being sent by their parents across Mexico and into the U.S. to unite with immigrant relatives here. Over 53,000 children have been detained since last fall, and those are the ones who are caught. He spoke of the

unimaginable humanitarian crisis that this represents, not only because parents are so desperate as to send their children on such a dangerous journey but also because the border patrol has no real experience or capacity to handle all those kids safely. He told me that while the news is making the border patrol to look like a cold and inhumane bunch of sadists, most are fathers and mothers like him who do the best they can to deal with all these children, some literally starving to death. What he told me next was illuminating. He said that he is called to this work by his UU values; that while he hopes someday that we will have a more humane immigration policy, he believes that rules must be followed to maintain an orderly society. His UU values tell him that justice cannot occur without order and it is possible to be compassionate even in the midst of an unjust system. He acts as a shaman in the desert, pointing out life when what we most often see is death.

We are shamans of civil society. Brave enough to step out into the world and claim the rights of all to a voice.

“Beyond mobilizing voters, Unitarian Universalists can be especially positioned to have the courageous but necessary conversations that change hearts and minds within our own social circles and neighborhoods. For many people, the most effective messenger is someone we already know and have a relationship with. That means our justice ministry is not just mobilizing unfamiliar people on a list but actually engaging in our relationships to move them over time toward a more caring worldview and/or more active civic life.

“Especially for UU’s who may live in places of economic and racial privilege or segregation, your access to your neighbors, other parents at your children’s schools, colleagues, and others can be one of the few things that pierces the filter bubbles that shape people’s lens of the world and otherwise reinforce divisions and disparities.

Feminist theologian Elizabeth Schussler Florenza coined the phrase “kyriarchy” to describe the many interconnected systems of oppression and domination that define our world. When we talk about “the kyriarchy,” we’re referring to white privilege, patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, ableism, transmisogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, sizeism, and more—and the way all these systems work together to place power in the hands of a few at the expense of the many.

Because the kyriarchy is everywhere, even our organizing is shaped by the systems of domination we seek to dismantle. Elections, voting, and civic engagement are no exception. In many ways, working for systemic change through the electoral process is a form of harm reduction, rather than the path toward liberation and justice. We must understand electoral work as one strategy among many that can counter injustice and shift the balance toward freedom and flourishing. And, in every single one of those myriad strategies, we who work for

justice must also be humble and self-reflective about the ways the kyriarchy can shape our mindsets and our work, even without our conscious awareness.

We Unitarian Universalists have been grappling with the uncomfortable gap between our aspirational values and our current practices for some time—a struggle which has been hard for many of us, but has also brought deep clarity about our non-negotiable commitments to justice, to solidarity, to humility, and to repair.

When I brought my own children into the voting booth, I reminded them of their grandfather's blessings and wisdom. We can do that now for all of our children, those present and those yet to come.

Amen.