

## **First Unitarian Universalist Church**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**A Still, Small Voice**  
**March 11, 2007**



Today is the fifth sermon in our series on the seven principles. It affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. Since election time is already heating up, it is especially hard to hear this principle and not think politics. It is difficult not to start pondering voter registration drives and presidential hopefuls and so on.

In fact, as I was writing this sermon I got an email from the Pennsylvania Council of Churches about an upcoming event: Democracy in the Keystone State: Challenges and Opportunities for Election Reform in Pennsylvania.

According to UU minister Earl K. Holt III, political and religious ideas interpenetrate. This is not a challenge to the concept of separation of church and state. However, in our religious history and the history of our country, politics and religion are not so neatly compartmentalized.

Unitarian Universalism has been shaped by the religious and political contexts in which it developed. In the American Republic, this has meant being strongly influenced by the ideals of democracy. Many of the founders of the Republic were also leaders in Unitarianism and Universalism.

Universalist Benjamin Rush, for example, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. UU minister and professor of UU history, David Bumbaugh says, “Rush insisted that Universalist and republican government were part of the same unfolding process, and that social action is an inescapable consequence of Universalist faith” (Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History). Englishman Joseph Priestley, who founded two Unitarian churches in Pennsylvania upon his arrival in this country, was a scientist whose thinking influenced Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

Unitarian Universalism was shaped not only by our founding fathers, but also by our Unitarian roots in the Puritan churches in New England. From them, we adopted a congregational form of polity. For us, there is no higher authority than the congregation. A congregation is autonomous and self-governing.

The idea that people have a right to govern themselves is rooted in theology. As Holt says, it arises from “a religious conviction that human beings have the capacity to shape their own destiny, that they are not mere puppets on a divine string.”

That ties directly to the first principle – to our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of each person. The use of the democratic process in church governance means that we believe people have the capacity and the right to govern themselves. We believe no one person or group is privileged above others. No one of us individually can be the final authority. Together, and collectively, we determine how we function. We all participate.

Democracy at its core means governance of all, for all, by all. It is rule by the majority. In our congregations, this can be seen in a number of ways. Each year the membership votes on a

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number of things. Not everything – but on major items, most of which are spelled out in the church bylaws.

For one thing, we vote on our annual budget. Any change to church bylaws must be made by a vote of the congregation. We vote on major social justice positions, like becoming a Welcoming Congregation, which we voted on in December. We vote to call the settled minister, rather than having one appointed by a denominational body. And congregations reserve the right to ordain ministers.

The congregation elects directors to its board. I hope by now you know we will be choosing three new directors in May. In May, we will also be voting on some preliminary plans for our capital campaign. We are targeting summer 2008 to begin construction. That's starting to sound pretty close.

Ultimately, those major decisions about leadership, building, bylaws, the minister, and public positions are all made by the congregation – by all of you. That's pretty significant. This doesn't happen in every faith community.

As important and crucial as these votes are, from time to time in UU circles I hear people talk about voting as if it were the only way we make decisions or practice democracy. Our democratic emphasis also includes representative democracy. Many decisions are delegated and entrusted to the board, minister, committees, staff, and individual volunteers. And we have lots of discussions and conversations. The point is to allow everyone to be involved in the process. At the heart of democracy is participation.

I have noticed in recent years we make more and more decisions by consensus. Consensus can be a useful decision-making mechanism, and it often makes us feel good. But it is not actually democratic.

As Rev. Brent Smith says, "It doesn't allow each person to exercise their right to act upon the truth as they see it.... It requires conformity of every person to one decision and one path, and subverts the subtle discernment represented in differing individual viewpoints."

The idea of honoring individual viewpoints brings us to the other half of the fifth principle: the right of conscience. Without the right of conscience, democracy is not democracy at all. Winston Churchill is well-known for having said, "democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

Even as democracy strives to ensure that decisions are made by the majority, it must also ensure the freedom of the individual. Democracy aims to hear every voice, especially minority voices, which might otherwise be silenced or ignored. There is a danger of having a tyranny of the majority.

Underlying the need to protect minority voices is the belief that privilege and inequality are wrong. Woven into the fabric of democracy are diversity and dissent. Democracy is designed to protect the right to disagree. It protects our right to think differently from the majority.

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One way we live this within our congregations is by valuing both the freedom of the pulpit and the freedom of the pew. The freedom of the pulpit is rooted in the Hebrew prophets who spoke their own conscience. This means that while a member may disagree with a position taken by the minister – by me, the minister can't be censured for her statements. In turn, there is freedom of the pews. If congregants disagree with what is said, they have the right to give voice to that disagreement.

The idea is not for us to enter into heated arguments. Or even to foster that kind of environment. We are not debating societies. But it is important for us to respect and honor, even elicit, a diversity of opinion and to allow for democratic expression.

At its best, democracy safeguards the right and exercise of conscience. The voice of conscience is what informs us of what's right or wrong. We say, our conscience bothers us when we do something to our neighbor that we feel badly about.

The voice of conscience can be likened to a still, small voice. It has no motive of personal gain. In fact, it is often acted upon to our own personal detriment. When we listen to the voice of conscience we are being called into deeper relationship with all life and called to act on behalf of a larger good. Conscience serves the common good.

For humanists, the voice of conscience is the voice of the human spirit emanating from within. For theists, the voice of conscience means hearing the voice of God speaking from within.

Conscience is deeply rooted and deeply felt. It isn't frivolous or based on a whim. It doesn't have to do with what we like or don't like. It arises from deep reflection and discernment. Conscience, says UU minister Ken Collier, "is not the voice of conventional morality."

When I hear the phrase, "speaking truth to power," which is sadly becoming an overused slogan, I think of what it means to do the right thing, another slogan, and to take the unconventional position. To speak truth to power is to bear witness on issues of conscience.

There are many examples. Many of you know about Henry David Thoreau's act of civil disobedience. Thoreau was arrested in 1846 for refusing to pay his poll tax as a protest against slavery and the Mexican War. When Emerson visited Thoreau in jail, Emerson said, "Henry, why are you here?" and Thoreau replied, "Waldo, why are you not here!"

People like UU minister James Reeb paid the ultimate price for their acts of conscience. He was martyred during the civil rights march in Selma. He had responded to Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to clergy. Having gone out to dinner one night in Selma, he and several colleagues were attacked and beaten. Reeb died as a result.

There are prophetic Unitarian Universalists to this day who commit acts of civil disobedience as part of this time-honored tradition. Our UUA president, Rev. William Sinkford, was arrested in August of 2004 in front of the Sudanese Embassy in Washington as part of a protest against genocide in Darfur.

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As part of the “Day of Conscience,” he preached at All Souls. He joked that, “It’s been too long since I’ve been arrested.” On a serious note, he said, “This is a day of conscience. We have come to stand in solidarity with persons who are suffering, who are starving, who are dying, who are being raped.... Although there are many things we cannot change, we can change what is happening in Sudan.”

In December 2005, 115 people including several UU ministers were arrested for civil disobedience in support of a “moral budget.” They were responding to the White House’s draft 2006 budget. The protesters were calling for economic justice for the poor, and striving to protect budgeted services to low-income families.

In 2003, UU ministers were arrested in New York for unlawfully marrying same-sex couples. They were not only officiating at same-sex ceremonies, a practice affirmed by this denomination in the early 80s. Theirs was an intentional act of civil disobedience. They signed affidavits declining that they were performing civil unions.

Civil disobedience is not for everyone. It is a dramatic and important tool for change and public attention. But not everyone is willing to risk jail or fines or worse. We can bear witness in other ways. We can hold lawful vigils and protests. We can lobby our representatives. We can write letters to the editor. We can write letters to organizations and politicians. We can work with community groups to try to create change.

For example, two weeks ago, the peace walk in Oley marked its one-year anniversary. I joined with about a dozen other people that day, including someone in our congregation, Carla Mannix, who helps to organize it. It was the first time I would be participating in the walk, and I was committed to going.

I have to tell you, that morning we were hearing reports of snow on its way. I was half wishing the walk would be cancelled. It wasn’t. So I went, somewhat begrudgingly. It was brutally cold. I was cold. About 10 minutes into the walk I was wishing I were home snuggled up with a warm blanket and a cup of green tea.

I was a reluctant witness that day. It wasn’t about my lack of commitment to the cause. By the time the first snowflakes fluttered down as we gathered in a closing circle, I was grateful to be there.

It wasn’t my first time as a reluctant witness. Before the war in Iraq began my partner Chris arranged for a van load of people to go to Washington to protest. I was among them. The evening before that, Chris got quite ill, probably a case of food poisoning.

By 3 in the morning when he was still in the bathroom, struggling to decide if the nausea had yet taken its course, I realized something. There was no way he was leading that group to Washington the next day. The van was parked in our driveway. Everyone was scheduled to meet early in the morning. I had imagined I would just be a follower that day. Instead, I had become the leader of the pack. And off we went the next day.

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In both cases, I could have chosen not to go, not to continue. But I didn't feel I had a choice, not one I would be happy with. Heeding the voice of conscience isn't always the thing I most want to do or the most comfortable. I find it is more something I am compelled to do or it becomes hard to live with myself.

Our conscience calls us to care about the world, to struggle together, to discuss ideas – come snow or shine. Our conscience calls us to participate so that we are in a position to influence the world, not just be influenced by it.

May it be so. Amen.