

## **ELECTION DAY SERMON 2008!**

Let me make it unmistakably clear that you can be a good, faithful San Dieguitan and vote Republican, Democrat, American Independent, Green, Natural Law, Peace and Freedom, Libertarian, Reform or any other party of your choosing. What we strongly discourage, yet still without excommunication, is your reluctance to vote at all.

In America, some may be called to serve as politicians, but all of us, with no exceptions, are called to be active wielders of say and vote. We must eliminate the passive voice from American democracy. We must continue to remind ourselves that in a free society, some may prove guilty of this or that, but all of us are responsible! As UU folksinger and minister Fred Small puts it: “Political action is like music, both dare not be left simply to the so-called experts!”

Look at the history of voting in this land. Initially, the United States Constitution gave the electors, citizens designated by the state, the vote. It took 50 years to lift property ownership and church membership requirements for voters. And then, despite, that, the vote was still the exclusive right of the white male. Have we forgotten the fierce struggle to get universal suffrage?

But the road remains long and hard, especially among young adults. There was a recent college graduate, 23 years old, who said: “I don’t care enough to care about why I don’t care!” Yes, we have work to do, for the best cure for the ills of democracy is always more democracy.

Many people explain their failure to vote by saying, “I’m just one person. My little old vote doesn’t make a bit of difference.” Folks, there’s tons of historical evidence to the contrary.

In 1645 one vote gave Oliver Cromwell control of England. In 1776, one vote gave America the English language instead of German. Later on, first Thomas Jefferson and then John Quincy Adams were elected by one-vote margins in the Electoral College. In 1868, President Andrew Johnson’s impeachment was defeated by a single vote. In 1923 Adolf Hitler became leader of the Nazi party of a one-vote edge. And John Kennedy’s margin of victor over Richard Nixon in 1960 was less that one vote per precinct.

Never underestimate the power of ONE.

There is material poverty and spiritual poverty in this land and both need to be squarely addressed by our political leaders, but there is also civic poverty, widespread cynicism and political withdrawal by our American citizenry, and that’s a deficiency that we the people can remedy. And one way to do so is by voting regularly, intelligently, and compassionately.

So, my friends, although I harbor strong personal views on the 2008 Presidential and congressional posts, as well as the propositions, I will refrain today from mounting a bully pulpit to push my particular positions (virtuous and correct as they are!). Why can’t I do this? I mean Pat Robertson does! I can’t, because one of the governing attitudes of our freethinking faith is conversation not conversion, dialogue not ideology.

Now, realizing that I’ll be getting into serious stuff in this sermon, let me start with a couple bloopers from the mouths of some “razor sharp political minds”, all from

yesteryear, since I don't wish to embarrass our current contenders any more than each has already done on their own.

--"I believe that this country's policies should be heavily biased in favor of non-discrimination." (Bill Clinton)

--"We're going to have the best educated American people in the world."  
(Dan Quayle)

--I didn't say that I didn't say it. I said that I didn't say that I said it. I want to make that very clear." (former Michigan governor, George Romney)

And not to leave progressive women out of the blooper parade, here's one from our own California senator, Barbara Boxer:

"Those who survived the San Francisco earthquake said, "Thank God, I'm still alive. But, of course, those who died, their lives will never be the same again."

That's enough levity for now. So, in the tradition of Election sermons throughout Unitarian Universalist history, let me raise a few of the issues that I consider ethically vital and spiritually germane. I will address my comments directly to the two male candidates running for President this November.

Dear Gentlemen:

I know you guys don't need any more advice, last-minute to be sure, and you may be duly suspicious of people trying "to measure your soul" all the time, but I'm going to give counsel anyway, since it's my duty as an American citizen and as a card-carrying member of a responsibly free faith.

First off, let me say that I appreciate your willingness to get involved in the messy, often grueling, quest for the Presidency. As theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, said:

“The real dividing line in ethics isn’t finally between good and evil; it’s between those who want to be pure and those who want to be responsible.” Each of you has been willing to leave the perch of purity to become a responsible politician, and I respect your chutzpha, even as I tender my advice.

Being a religious leader, my concerns will naturally cluster around the ethics underlying our political, economic, and environmental realities. In fact, we Unitarian Universalists think there’s a moral question behind and beneath every societal concern, and that those ethical questions must be squarely addressed in the name of creating a compassionate and sustainable world.

Yes, I set high standards for our President, because, to my mind, an American President sits in position of great privilege and power where weighty moral leadership can and must be exerted. Much is expected from those who have much.

I’m reminded that at the height of United States involvement in Southeast Asia, William Sloane Coffin was one of group of liberal ministers who urged Henry Kissinger to withdraw American troops. Kissinger pressing them on the complexities of such a proposal, asked, “Well, then how would get our troops out of Vietnam?”

To which Bill Coffin, turning to the prophet Amos in Hebrew scriptures, responded, “Mr. Kissinger, our job is to proclaim that justice must roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Your job is to work out the details of the irrigation system!”

That, Mr. Potential Presidents, is my posture as well. If what I say this morning sounds idealistic and visionary, so be it, it should. I major in the pursuits of ideals as a

religious leader. You're running to become the chief political leader of our nation. You'll need to work out the details of the irrigation system. So here goes.

For starters, I believe that our American President needs to focus on making our country more just and merciful for all its citizens, but not stop there. Our President needs to set an exemplary ethical witness in working with leaders from other lands as well, but not stop there. For our President needs to be demonstrably respectful of the entire global environment. Our democracy and the Bill of Rights seem to halt with humans, as if Nature has no rights. That dualism is destructive; for, in truth, we humans are but parts of what we religious folks call the interdependent web of all existence.

Let me go on. I simply want a good government and a good president who will motivate the rest of our citizenry to be good. I have long ago given up the illusion that Presidents must be perfect, or even great.

Dwight David Eisenhower, when he was our high priest, said: "America is the mightiest power which God has yet seen fit to put upon his footstool. America is great because she is good." Well, sometimes we're good, sometimes we're only morally mediocre, and sometimes, alas, we're demonic. In any case, America surely has no corner on goodness. According to my reading, "God bless America" is found nowhere in the Bible.

Gentlemen, we'd be far better off, if we quit focusing upon all the hype about America being great and just work on being a pretty good country, needing to get better. And I mean "good" not as in power or splendor but in practicing justice and freedom at home, and when we've sufficiently cleaned up our own side of street, then being good in our willingness to model our message abroad.

For example, to counteract terror, and this idea isn't original with me, let the United States under your Presidency, initiate and take the lead in getting all the advanced industrial societies to participate in a Global Marshall Plan that would dedicate hundreds of billions of dollars each year for the next thirty years to the cause of eliminating hunger, homelessness, inadequate education, and insufficient health care in under-developed countries.

Let the United States setup an international body of recognized spiritual leaders, academics, health care workers, economists, educators, and community organizers to supervise the expenditures and guarantee that they aren't siphoned off by selfish national leaders and are used instead to promote creative and constructive strategies. And with all the talk about possible reinstatement of the military draft, I say let the United states require that every citizen give at least two years of national service to be spent in delivering services, providing training, education or otherwise assisting in the implementation of said Global Marshall Plan.

That, gentlemen, is something of what I mean by being a good nation. Let's stop worrying about leading the world, and let's start by joining it.

I believe that the President we get is the country we get. Effective public leadership cannot be severed from the trustworthiness of personal character. Hence, ethics and integrity do matter, and not just superficially. Our leaders need to be believed. You have to engender trust not only in your policies but also in your judgment, and yes in your character. Our American President must lead by behavior and never merely by rhetoric.

Clearly, there's evidence that you're each caring men in your own fashion and in your personal lives. But that's not enough. I challenge you to exhibit the same concern you show in family circles, among cronies in the public realm, and in the shadow of international corporations...to exhibit that same concern in ever-widening spheres of compassion.

I challenge you to practice your principles even, make that especially, when they prove politically inconvenient. In short, I challenge you to be moral leaders rather than political survivalists always tacking with the wind on abortion, foreign policy, handgun control, gay marriage, racial justice, environmental health, and fiscal responsibility. I challenge to you to be "unpurchasable men"—unswervingly committed to doing the right thing, whatever the political cost.

Vaclav Havel, the eminent author and former President of Czechoslovakia, who was imprisoned by the Communist regime, claims that the leaders of a country must live in the truth, and that what finally matters is not power but "decency, reason and tolerance." Those are explicitly moral concepts that provide, it seems to me, marching orders for our President and citizenry as well. Or, as Thomas Jefferson, one of our own former Presidents, said: "The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest."

Again, I say to our Presidential aspirants: is it too much to ask that you be decent, reasonable, and tolerant servants...in short, live in the truth, as Havel urges? I don't think so.

Another issue of mine. Since our President will be straight and male, at least this time around, I have some moral concerns for you to address during your term of office.

It's fair for me to raise them, because I shared these two conditions as, and like each of you, I benefit from these categories of unwarranted privileged.

Normative masculinity in American remains aggressive and dominant—reflecting a need for situational control and emotional limit. So, I ask each of you: are you willing, upon becoming President, to break the male stereotype and to exemplify qualities of gentleness and flexibility, wielding power alongside not over other men, women, and children of our land? Will you, in your presidency, aspire to forswear the destructive ways of hyper-masculinity?

Another crucial issue is the separation of church and state—our American way of protecting both religion and government from abusive collaboration.

Gentlemen, we must continue to bring up our children in the belief that one may worship or not worship as he or she chooses and that whatever the choice, one can still be a first-rate American. The First Amendment remains the very cornerstone of all our freedoms. The Wall may be embattled but dare not be destroyed whether the issue is school vouchers or school prayer or any number of related issues.

Our most distinguished Founders didn't believe that the Bible was anything other than literature. God was to them nature's god, an impersonal form of providence. Most founders believed in the human power of reason to run the world without church intervention. Hence, the separation of church and state.

Additionally, let me say that we liberal religionists are as pro-life, pro-family, and pro-morality as the fundamentalists, and we will enter the political fray during your Presidency and promote vigorously, yet tolerantly, our views of human freedom and dignity. For we're convinced that good religion and good government mean promoting a

sense of pluralism not favoritism, a sense of persuasion not coercion, a sense of mediating moral language not alienating jargon, a sense of humility not arrogance about ultimate values.

Furthermore, some of us believe that to achieve and sustain these ideals for our nation, we must subordinate ourselves for the good of the whole—in other words, *sacrifice* some. Sacrifice through taxes to properly education our young. Sacrifice through community service as volunteers. Sacrifice social security entitlements when we don't need them. Simply sacrifice some of our personal freedoms in service of a healthy environment and just society.

What if, before we entered the voting booth, someone was there to say: “Please raise your right hand, citizen. Do you solemnly swear to vote for the common good of this land over your private interests, so help you God?”

Presidential aspirants, some of us Americans even believe that we must relinquish, perish the thought, some of our fierce American individualism and replace it with compassionate mutuality. That in order to create and sustain a good society, we must be committed to the good of all citizens—especially the weak and marginalized, the sick, the elderly, the hungry and homeless, the mentally challenged and the historically oppressed.

Former vice-president Hubert Humphrey, nearing death, addressed Congress with these profound sentiments, and I pass them on, gentlemen, for your edification: “The true, moral test of a country is what we do with those at the dawn of life (our children), those enduring the shadows of life (our oppressed), and those entering the twilight of life (our elders).” Is it too much to ask our President to meet Humphrey’s moral test?

You may contend that I'm asking a lot, indeed too much, of my President. But why not ask a lot?

These are times that require large-spirited, morally awake, and socially responsible leaders. These are times that demand that our President be the pacesetter in creating and sustaining a good society rather than trying to go down in history as a great individual. These are times that call for a President who will quit demonizing opposition within and beyond America and cease practicing self-righteousness. These are times that call for a President to commit to a quilt of many colors and lifestyles, where the hurting and disenfranchised, minorities, women and the unemployed who have a direct stake in a better America, will be deeply listened to and compassionately included. Such diversity is the strength of our democracy, not its weakness...its treasure, not its burden.

Well, that's an earful from one lone reverend in the southwestern corner of this majestic land. Let me close by saying that whoever's elected, you can count on me to join forces in helping to create and sustain the good society I'm recommending, whether or not, you take the moral lead.

And whether I become your supporter or adversary, or a mixture of both, I vow to be an honest and honorable and involved American. Starting with the day after the election.

My chosen faith won't allow me to be anything else!

Tom Owen-Towle  
November 2, 2008