

Voting Rights

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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That All May Be Heard

Given our denominational history of fighting for religious freedom and the right of our congregations to govern themselves, it is little wonder that one of our guiding principles is the use of the democratic process in our congregations and beyond. Since the earliest days of the American experiment, those who called themselves Unitarian and Universalist fought for the enfranchisement of all people. This is the story of one man who comes more recently in our history, but who stood behind the principle that when decisions need to be made, all people should have the right to speak.

Film: The 1965 Death of James Reeb

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was not a guarantee, but was a significant step toward the enfranchisement of all Americans. I suppose that after the passage of the 13th Amendment banning slavery some people thought equality had been achieved. And I suppose that after the 15th amendment giving black men the right to vote some thought all had an equal voice. And I suppose that the same occurred when the 19th amendment gave women the right to vote and the 24th amendment struck down poll taxes. Here is what one source I consulted said about enfranchisement in the United States:

In terms of suffrage, the American government has extended its views from a small powerful minority -- wealthy men owning a minimum amount of property, to a universal, more democratic view, englobing all of the people, including African-Americans and women. As this views expanded, so did the rights of these people. They increasingly became more equal, to become today totally equal.¹

Wouldn't that be wonderful if it were true? But it has never really been true, and more and more we are returning to voter inequality. This past June, the Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, effectively disabling the law. In the majority opinion, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote this, "Our country has changed. While any racial discrimination in voting is too much, Congress must ensure that the legislation it passes to remedy that problem speaks to current conditions."

I concur that our laws must reflect the current conditions of the country, but Justice Roberts seems to live in a different country than I do. Since 1965 Congress has overwhelmingly reauthorized the law four times, including as recently as 2006, and four

¹ <http://apushproject2012.weebly.com/enfranchisement.html>

Republican presidents have signed it. Under the law, the Justice Department blocked over 1, 000 discriminatory voting changes.² It was not an unnecessary or irrelevant law.

Within six weeks of the Supreme Court decision, six Southern states passed or implemented new voting restrictions. By November, Texas had passed voter ID laws previously struck down by the courts as unconstitutional. Just two weeks ago, a federal judge in Kansas ordered election authorities to help Kansas and Arizona require proof of citizenship of registering voters. In the span of a week, more than 10,000 Kansas voters had their voting rights suspended for failing to provide proof of citizenship.³ The restrictions, not surprisingly, tend to disenfranchise those from traditionally marginalized groups – blacks and Hispanics, the poor, and rural voters.

But disenfranchisement by laws is only one of the roadblocks would-be voters face. A second problem has to do with voter registration systems in the U.S., which tend to disadvantage students, renters, and those who move to new addresses. For instance, an election judge in Chenoa in 2008 observed approximately 12 first-time voters who were not on the precinct list and were unable to vote. Another election judge at Bone Student Center noticed that frequent calls had to be made to the County Clerk because dozens of first time voters who said they had registered months earlier were not on the rolls. Sometimes their registrations was confirmed after waiting 15 minutes, but too often their names were not yet in the system and they could not cast their ballot. Not a very encouraging outcome for a first-time voter.

The third area of disenfranchisement concerns voting procedures: processing of absentee ballots and provisional ballots, and long waiting lines at the polls on Election Day. Julie Prandi will share one such story from her personal experience.

At the Polls, Julie Prandi

The Fierce Urgency of Now

The principles of our faith call us not only to the use of the democratic process and affirmation of the dignity of each person, they also call us to recognize the interdependent nature of all existence. While we often take this to mean that we broaden our focus beyond the human, it includes the interconnectedness of all things within human experience. This means that we look for the connections between what might seem like separate issues we can offer uncover common roots for intertwining strands.

Take oppressions for example. It is no coincidence that what looks like discrimination against voters overlaps and intertwines with issues of institutional power, economics, and race. We know that oppressions are linked.

² <http://www.thenation.com/article/175090/new-strategy-voting-rights#axzz2b6jU3EH9>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/07/us/politics/texas-stringent-voter-id-law-makes-a-dent-at-polls.html>

Is it mere coincidence that 18 days after the Supreme Court decision to take the teeth out of the Voting Rights Act, George Zimmerman was found not guilty of murdering black teenager Trayvon Martin, and that Martin was found guilty in the court of public opinion? Is it a coincidence that one month later, the Governor of North Carolina signed a repeal of the state's Racial Justice Act of 2009, which allowed inmates facing the death penalty to challenge their sentences on the basis of racial discrimination, and that state lawmakers made drastic cuts to social programs and education? Is it coincidence that laws prohibiting convicted felons from voting determine that 1 in 13 African Americans is currently unable to vote? I think that it is no coincidence at all that new voting and voter registration laws disproportionately affect minority communities.

The Rev. William Barber, NAACP North Carolina president, speaking about the assault on voting rights said that, "In some ways, these tactics are not Jim Crow. They do not feature Night Riders and sheets ... This is in fact, James Crow, Esq. Jim Crow used blunt tools. James Crow, Esq. uses surgical tools, consultants, high paid consultants and lawyers to cut out the heart of black political power."

We could well bring into this conversation ecological issues like the placement of hazardous waste dumps, economic issues like the minimum wage, healthcare issues like opposition to the Affordable Care Act, educational issues like defunding of schools, public safety issues about gun laws and funding for fire and police services. These issues are not wholly discrete and have common roots in a corporate system that places profit over human decency and a political system that places power over human welfare.

Yet, as maddening as much of this is, I do not want to give you the idea that the situation is a hopeless one. While our institutions may be structured to place profit over compassion they are staffed by good and decent people who can move the arc of the universe not only toward justice, but also toward compassion. While our systems of political power may tilt away from human welfare, we are participants in that system. Each and every one of us that has the power of the vote can exercise it. Each and every one of us that has the power of the vote can join those who do not in saying this is enough.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. This means not only that when one suffers we all suffer, but that if we have the vote we must use it to enfranchise others. If we have adequate healthcare we must make sure that others do too. If we were the recipients of a quality education and benefitted from free libraries we must make sure that others have those same opportunities. When we enter into spiritual community, when we recognize the interconnectedness of all existence, we can want no less for our neighbors than we have for ourselves. Our dreams for ourselves and our children widen to encompass all people, all people's children.

T. E. Lawrence once said that "Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity; but the dreamers of the day are dangerous, for they may act their dream with open eyes to make it possible." Our dreams

are possible, and that's what makes our vote powerful and dangerous to those who would place profit before decency, humanity and compassion.

On February 8, between more than 1,000 Unitarian Universalists, including our own Associate Minister Rev. Rosie Rimrodt, joined a coalition headed by the NAACP in Raleigh, North Carolina, to claim our power to make our dreams reality. The Mass Moral March is just one event in the Moral Mondays movement spreading throughout states affected by new and discriminatory election laws. Check out the UUA's Standing on the Side of Love web site or Google Moral Mondays to get involved. Or just look locally at all the things you can do.

Speak to your local representatives. In 2008, voters complained to Dan Brady that they were struck from the rolls after moving from Bloomington to Normal or vice versa. Brady had the State Board of Elections investigate, problems were found and an agreement struck by election directors to transfer records between the two towns.

Become an election judge. When one resident of Normal was struck from the rolls for no apparent reason they were told that if they cared that much they should become an elections judge. So they did!

Most of all, use your vote. This is the real American Dream, not a big house and many cars, but exercising your right to participate in the common good through democracy, to have a voice in governance and to make that voice one of compassion that includes all people.

Farai Chideya wrote these words: *Our dreams are the North Star by which we navigate. In hard times, they should get bigger rather than smaller. I think of Africans in America standing on the auction block, someone's dirty thumb checking their teeth as if they were horses. They dreamed of freedom, and passed that dream to children and children's children until some modicum was achieved. Today we face another freedom struggle. It is time to retake, and remake, American democracy.*

We have the power to remake American democracy, to make our dreams come true. Let us not cede our power to apathy or fear. In the words of Marianne Williamson:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
 Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
 It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.
 We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
 talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?
 You are a child of God.
 Your playing small does not serve the world.
 There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other

people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of
God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people
permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.

Namaste.
Por lo tanto puede ser.

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