

“After the Election: Building the New World”

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The poet says, “Joy and woe are woven fine,”
and, boy, is *that* ever what it’s been like since the election last week!

For many of us here,
it has been beyond amazing
to witness the election of an African-American president.
Let me pause immediately and say,
we are a big tent here.
There are so many good and legitimate reasons
to vote for one candidate or another,
and let it never be said that we are the church of only one party.
Nothing could be smaller-minded
than to assume we will always agree about everything,
especially politics.

We *are*, however, a church committed to justice for *all* people.
We are a church committed to a vision of diversity,
where *all* are welcomed and valued.
We are also a church committed to the freedom of pulpit and pew,
trusting in the power that comes
when we all speak from our deepest convictions.
I will never tell you what to think or how to vote,
but I will tell you faithfully what seems to *me* to be true.

So today I want to lift up
that the election of our new president
gives me hope for the future of our country,
hope at a level so deep, it is very hard to put into words.
That our country, tainted for so very long

by the evil of slavery,
and by the long-fought denial of rights and dignity
to people of color—
that *this* country, so beautiful in its ideals and in our dreams,
yet so often mired in a reality of injustice—
that *this* country could elect *this* president—
that so many people
born into a nation that denied them the right to vote
today could cast their ballot for an African-American man
to become president of the United States,
and not *only* that,
but that African-Americans and white people and Asian people,
Latino people, Native American people
have come together in a common struggle,
drawn by a vision of *one* nation—
the hope that gives me for our future
is almost unspeakable.
That we should live to see this day—
that joy is so profound,
it comes to the surface not as smiles, but as tears.

And then, almost immediately,
came the tears of sorrow, frustration, and anger
over the passage of Proposition 8,
which we worked so hard to prevent,
and which now is wreaking its ugliness
in the lives of many people in this beloved community.
We worked and prayed so hard for justice,
it is very hard—
it is very hard to see it denied.
Many of us are hurting.
We look at the people we pass on the street,
we look at our neighbors and wonder,
how did you vote? And you? And you?
What are we to do with all this sorrow,

all this anger and hurt?

It's real,
and it is right to mourn and allow ourselves to rest for a time.
But let's not to stop there—
let's not give in to despair.
Remember this is just one moment in history.

Things are changing.
Our world is never going to be perfect.
On this earth, we will never build a society of perfect justice and love.
But we can get closer and closer.
How many people in 1850
would have believed women would ever win the right to vote?
But it happened.
How many people in 1950
would have believed a black man could be president of this country?
Well, that's just happened too!

Just a few years ago,
same-sex marriage was not even on the radar screen
for most straight people in our country.
But things are changing.
In 2000, 61.4% of the voters supported Proposition 22
against same-sex marriages in California.
Just eight years later, Proposition 8 barely passed.
Only 52.5% of the voters supported it.
I'm not happy it passed,
but I still feel hopeful
that support for this kind of fear-based, divisive discrimination
is eroding year by year.
Things are changing.
And I believe with all my heart and soul
that they're going to keep changing.
One by one, people's hearts are changing.

It's so easy to get caught up in the immediate moment and forget how quickly change can happen. But the history of this country shows us over and over: ideas that seem radical and revolutionary today often become the most commonplace, completely taken for granted by the next generation.

Let me give you an example from our own religious history. Theodore Parker was one of the most important, most influential, certainly one of the most famous Unitarian ministers of the 19th century.

We remember him today as a great antislavery activist. He led the main organization in Boston that helped fugitive slaves. He personally harbored fugitive slaves in his home. And the story goes, he kept a gun in his desk drawer in case slave-hunters came knocking on the door. Today we look to him as a trailblazer for justice, someone who showed us what a ministry of social action was all about. So many of us who came after him have been profoundly inspired by his example.

But in his own day, his Unitarian colleagues thought he was so far out, they actually tried to kick him out of the denomination. This was back in 1841. Parker had been invited to preach an ordination sermon for one of his colleagues in Boston. The sermon he gave, titled "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," is widely thought today to be one of the great statements of Unitarian theology. (We'll be discussing it in the Classics of UU Theology class two Wednesdays from now,

to which you are all invited.)
We think of it as a classic today,
but at the time it was extremely controversial.

Parker was preaching on the history of Christianity,
asking, what is really at the heart of our religion?
He looked back,
and he saw how Christianity had changed over the years,
not only in terms of rituals and how we worship,
but also in terms of very basic beliefs.
He said, “[N]othing changes more from age to age
than the doctrines taught as Christian,
and insisted on as essential to...personal salvation.”¹
One generation’s orthodoxy is another’s heresy.
And he said, “Men are burned
for professing what men are burned for denying.”²
As an example, he looked at what different versions of Christianity
have said about Jesus.
He said, every group has a different belief about who Jesus was.
Some say he was a man;
some say he is God;
some say he is both.
Every group claims their version is the right one, and furthermore
that their version is a fundamental part of Christian truth,
even though it’s perfectly obvious that no two experts can agree
on what exactly the truth is!³

And then he said something that was truly extraordinary for his day
He said, it doesn’t *matter* who Jesus was.
Whether or not he has some sacred, special personal authority
is completely irrelevant.
He said, Christianity is not about Christ.

¹ Theodore Parker, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” in Conrad Wright, ed., *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 122.

² Parker, p. 122.

³ Parker, p. 129.

It's about the moral truths that Jesus taught.
He said:

It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity
rest on the personal authority of Jesus,
more than the axioms of geometry
rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes.
The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers,
...must rest on the truth of his words,
and not their truth on his authority.⁴

Well, I think we can all see the connection to our own situation.
In this election we have been lifting up our kind of religion
that says, don't just accept what you read in the Bible;
don't just accept what your church tells you,
or even what you think Jesus said.
Think about it and decide for yourself if it's true or not.
This was Parker's way, and it is his gift to us.

But at the time, his colleagues thought this was beyond the pale.
Three Trinitarian ministers were in the audience
on the day Parker preached this sermon.
They published a newspaper piece about it,
attacking him and challenging his fellow Unitarians to say
whether they considered him a real Christian.
And in spite of our tradition of freedom of belief,
most of Parker's colleagues concluded that he was too far out for them.
They stopped exchanging pulpits with him on Sundays.
Even his relatives treated him like some kind of criminal.⁵

Finally the Boston association of Unitarian ministers called him in
and tried to guilt him into resigning his membership in the association.
They said they couldn't consider his beliefs to be Christian.

⁴ Parker, p. 129.

⁵ Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker," available online at the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/theodoreparker.html>.

One of them said, it's your *duty* to resign.
But at this pivotal moment, Parker said: I will not.
He said, the basic principle of freedom of conscience is at stake,
and I will not resign.

And do you know what?
They backed down.
They all said, well, OK, thanks, anyway, I guess you can stay.
Parker was so relieved, he burst into tears and ran out of the room.⁶
And that was the end of that.

Our tradition had reaffirmed its commitment to freedom of belief,
barely,
and within the next 10 years,
Parker became the minister of the one and only Unitarian megachurch
we have ever seen in our history.
He regularly preached to crowds of 2000 people or more.⁷
In just a few years, Parker's ideas about religion,
which had seemed so radical,
became very accepted, part of the mainstream of our movement.

I tell you this story today to give you hope.
Our society is changing, and changing rather quickly at that.
We as a society are becoming more open and more just.
And you and I have a part to play in building this new world.
In the words of our responsive reading,
part of religion is being dissatisfied with the world as it is,
being called to serve what is true and right
even when it is not yet made real in our midst.

I have hope that our vision of life—
our respect for all people,
our affirmation of love wherever it is found—

⁶ Conrad Wright, Introduction to *Three Prophets*, p. 42.

⁷ Grodzins, "Theodore Parker."

is spreading even now and is going to *keep* spreading.
You know, one of the political commentators this year
said this election was all about what he called

an America not yet mythologized,
a country that is struggling to be born—
a multiracial country
whose greatest cultural and economic strength
is its diversity.

And he said,

[This] is...a country with a much greater potential
for justice and creativity...
than the sepia-tinted version of Main Street America.⁸

I believe he was right, and furthermore I believe this is *our* country,
the country that we in this church
have long dreamed of and worked for.
We are learning how to be a country that is not only multiracial,
but multigendered, relishing our diversity in every way.
We are learning,
and we are getting closer to that imagined country every day.

Now, maybe I don't really have the right
to stand up here as a straight person
and tell you that it's OK, things are going to get better.
It's easy for me to say;
I get to go home to my husband
and we don't have to worry
about people having a problem with our marriage.
But we are here together, we are one people,
and when anyone here is hurting, we are all hurting together.
So my pledge to all of you today is that we will keep going, together.

⁸ Joe Klein, "The American Myth," *Time*, September 22, 2008, p. 33.

And that precious word “together”
doesn’t just mean us right here within these walls.
The folks who share our vision
of what this country can be—
they come from all different religions and all different races.

I have been concerned that we’re starting to see the media
blaming different demographic groups for passing Proposition 8,
especially African-American people.
The stereotype seems to be that African-American people
don’t support equality for gay and lesbian people,
and as is so often the case, it’s just a *stereotype*.
Some voted yes, and a lot more than you might think voted no.
We have seen some very prominent African-American leaders
putting their reputations on the line to *support* equality:
Julian Bond, John Lewis, the late Coretta Scott King.

Closer to home, to cite just one example right here in California,
the Rev. Francine Brookins
of the African Methodist Episcopal church
spoke at a town hall meeting in Oakland in favor of marriage equality.
She told the crowd she was afraid her church might remove her
from its Judicial Council,
because she was publicly taking a stand against Proposition 8,
against her own church’s official position.
Yet she spoke out anyway.
And she is just one of so many brave leaders.

What we need now is to come together
and *support* those folks in communities of color
who believe in marriage equality.
We need to be asking, how can we support *each other*
on this road to justice
which we know is long,

but which leads us on.

Indeed, as Dr. King and our own Theodore Parker proclaimed,
The arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice.

And so today I charge you: believe in your power to create justice.
Believe in our power together.

Look around and see how far we have come.

Believe in the future and all that is yet to be.

Believe in our vision of a world where everyone is free.

Let us go forward and build that beautiful world together.

Amen.