

Service and Sermon

Sunday, January 13, 2008

Third Unitarian Church of Chicago

### **Opening Words**

In slightly more than one year from now, the person elected to the highest office in the land will place their hand on a Bible and say that they will “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution . . . so help me God.” If this a collapsing of church and state, why has it persisted—and would the founders of our nation be pleased with where we are now? Those who would be president—where do they stand on the Almighty’s role in the government?

### **Reading**

Let’s examine the litmus test of all the candidates now standing for President. What they believe the electorate wants is, and let’s say this together, is what? *Change!* Well, I want more than your change, but enough about the offering. But how deep is the change envisioned by the candidates? The sermon today will deal with that topic in an area that’s of some interest to anyone who’s a member of any religion in this country—or anyone who isn’t. In the meantime, here’s a poem by Tony Hoagland that’s an appropriate reflection one week before we celebrate the birth of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## **The Change**

The season turned like the page of a glossy fashion magazine.

In the park the daffodils came up

and in the parking lot, the new car models were on parade.

Sometimes I think that nothing really changes—

The young girls show the latest crop of tummies,

and the new president proves that he's a dummy.

But remember the tennis match we watched that year?

Right before our eyes

some tough little European blonde

pitted against that big black girl from Alabama,

corn rowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms,

some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite—

We were just walking past the lounge

and got sucked in by the screen above the bar,

and pretty soon

we started to care about who won,

putting ourselves into each whacked return

as the volleys went back and forth and back

like some contest between

the old world and the new,

and you loved her complicated hair  
and her to-hell-with-everybody stare,  
and I,

I couldn't help wanting  
the white girl to come out on top,

because she was one of my kind, my tribe,  
with her pale eyes and thin lips

and because the black girl was so big  
and so black,  
so unintimidated,

hitting the ball like she was driving the Emancipation Proclamation  
down Abraham Lincoln's throat,  
like she wasn't asking anyone's permission.

There are moments when history  
passes you so close  
you can smell its breath,  
you can reach your hand out  
and touch it on its flank,

and I don't watch all that much *Masterpiece Theatre*,  
but I could feel the end of an era there

in front of those bleachers full of people  
in their Sunday tennis-watching clothes

as that black girl wore down her opponent  
then [beat her] but good  
then thumped her once more for good measure

and stood up on the red clay court  
holding her racket over her head like a guitar.

And the little pink judge  
had to climb up on a box  
to put the ribbon on her neck,

still managing to smile into the camera flash,  
even though everything was changing

and in fact, everything had already changed—

*Poof*, remember? It was the twentieth century almost gone,  
we were there,

and when we went to put it back where it belonged,  
it was past us  
and we were changed.

When the University of Alabama football team got beaten by USC in Tuscaloosa, in the early 1970's, a writer said that the star running back, a black kid named Sam Cunningham, did more for integration than Dr. King ever could. From then on, white students didn't stand in front of the registrar's door at the big southern schools. From then on, they cheered for-- if not much else—black men wearing the crimson and cream of Alabama, the black men whose grandparents were slaves.

When you look at *some* of the candidates for running for president in December, you think about how much has changed in this country. But looking at *all* the candidates on both sides, you'd have to admit how much in our country *has not* changed in any way.

When pointing to the blessings the Lord would in a miracle repay all the sufferings of His people, once they got to the new land of Zion, the Prophet Isaiah rejoiced. Then, he said, “then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.” Moderns like us doubt things like this can happen today, or if they ever happened at all.

But doesn't it seem almost the same for us, like the prophets of long ago, in wanting to see profitable businesses coming to the corner of Laramie and Madison; here in Austin, or to see people of all colors desire to send their children to the fine schools of Lawndale one day? For we think it unreal at this moment, a miracle of Biblical size, that this would ever happen, but in fact, is this not the change toward which we point?

### **Offering Thoughts**

Thanks so much for joining us this morning at Third Church! If you're a newcomer or a guest of a member or friend, please join us downstairs in the Robeson Room after this "Celebration of Life," and now, feel free to introduce yourselves as you would like, and tell us how you heard of us.

Later in today's sermon, I'll make reference to the roots of the liberal church in the Anabaptist tradition. It's also a part of that tradition to an altar call, and an offering, *after* the sermon. At another church where, like ours, they take an offering *before* the sermon, a disgruntled congregant said to the minister at the end of the service, "That was a mediocre sermon." The equally-disgruntled minister replied, "Just like today's collection"

We care about you, no matter what you give, and since we don't tie the collection to the sermon, there have been times when I feel like I've been saved. So let's both of us give to the congregation in love, as it's the depth of this, you and I and us together, that is what matters.

### **Reading**

The text for the sermon is a statement by the agnostic and Socialist Robert Ingersoll in 1876, and he said, "Our fathers founded the first secular government that was ever founded in this world. The first secular government; the first government that said every church has exactly the same rights and no more; every religion has the same rights, and no more. In other words, our fathers were the first men who had the sense, had the genius, to know that no church should be allowed to have a sword; that it should be allowed only to exert its moral influence."

**Sermon:**  
 “The All-Powerful and the Almighty”

One of the reasons I so enjoy going through the offices files is not just to see who gave what in pledging say, twenty or fifty years ago, or but just to see what I can find. Like the old Universalist hymn says, “Here My Free Spirit Onward Leads.”

I told my mother this week that one key achievement next year on our strategic plan, which is coming out soon, is not to start rebuilding the backyard play space, not to start building a new RE wing, but to put together a church cook book. What church with a history doesn’t have a cook book?

Just like every church seems to have some scandal in its past, some skeletons in its closet, every church I’ve been a part of has a cook book. I’ve gone back in those closets here. While we might have both, I can’t seem to find hard proof of either.

I am going to change this, this glaring lack of both. This is a warning sermon, and so be warned. First, the minister is going to run off with the music director this summer. If he’s willing, the incoming board president will join us! But not to be exclusive, you, too, can come—*if* you’re willing to climb the tallest mountain in Maine.

Second, after I return from my sabbatical leave in December, I’m going to collect favorite recipes from you for a book. The basis of this could be the meal we have at our Auction. What a great way to pass along what we cherish—the way we nourish the ones we love?

An historian who’s doing a history of food and women in America has spent hours looking at several hundreds of church recipe books. She wrote last week, “What a repository of cultures we have in these congregations, be they Christian, Jewish, and now Muslim!”

The oldest she has dates back to 1725. These books, often done as a way to raise money, are another sign that it was the women, as much if not more than the male clergy, who did the heavy lifting at the local church—another barely-concealed secret!

At the church I served in Wisconsin, a cook book carried a recipe called, “Biscuits of the First Amendment.” The author said, “The minister’s wife tells me these biscuits are his favorite. I named them after the same sermon he preaches every year, on the First Amendment. It’s not *my* favorite sermon, but I assume it’s his.”

And yes, it seems in the archive of the UU churches I’ve been a part of, now numbering six, there’s no shortage of sermons on the separation of church and state.

Every last one of them hits the same point: the wall of separation that Jefferson famously wrote in a letter to Baptists in Connecticut, the separation enshrined in the Constitution, must be defended. It protects minority religions, like ours. And because the preacher is responding to some threat, local or national, to the separation clause, he or she talks how Unitarians and Universalists both led successful fights to divide church and state. And we did.

Ready for a civics quiz? What’s the separation clause in the First Amendment? *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*

So I am no different than my ministerial predecessors this morning. I got upset when I listened to the entirety of Governor Romney’s speech, given early last month, entitled, “Faith in America.” I then read the text on his Web site.

I do not want to attack the governor's overall politics, to confirm or reject his candidacy. To do so would be like the church's endorsement of another candidate—which would be another violation of the separation clause!

In fact, I sympathize a bit with Governor Romney's need to clarify his stance on religion. But I wish he didn't have to.

The holidays weren't long ago. You remember your obnoxious cousin saying, "What's a Unitarian?" If we were running for the highest office in the land, we'd have to do the same thing.

And--to lift up the principle we have defended for entirety of our denominational history, all of us who speak from this pulpit can attack or support *positions*, say, like being against the war in Iraq. But we cannot as a congregation, or to have me as a minister in this pulpit, promote one candidate over another. That would be partisan. You and I can do that on our own time.

In his speech, Governor Romney quite rightly likens himself to President Kennedy, who some 47 years ago thought it critical to speak to the issue. And why? Because both were in minority religions in America when they spoke.

Remember that every President prior to Kennedy was Protestant. And even though about 25 percent of the electorate in 1960 was Catholic—36 million of voting age—he feared a backlash.

He was right. It's hard to imagine he was on the defensive because of his religion, but two months before he gave his speech in Houston on the "so-called religious issue" to a group of Baptist ministers, one such preacher in Texas told a large audience on the radio that "Roman Catholicism is not only a religion, it is a political tyranny." Polls showed that all across the country, people believed it.

As you know, Governor Romney is a Mormon. Mormons have long been suspected, and reviled, by mainline and conservative Christians. They're not Christian, evangelicals say, and they're worse, or so the thinking goes, for attempting to say they are.

Much of this has to do with disagreements about basic texts, and denominational history. For example, the Mormon faith is sustained by revelations translated from gold plates dug up in Palmyra, New York by the founder, Joseph Smith. Like us, the Mormons don't hold an orthodox view of the Trinity.

Another controversy comes from what Joseph Smith called, "celestial marriage," which is to say "plural marriage." This practice was a major reason why Mormons were ostracized and killed, here in downstate Illinois, in the 1830's, and were persecuted in Utah later in the century. In time, Congress passed laws banning it.

The Mormons fought back and took their case to the Supreme Court. The court, in contravention of the First Amendment, said they could *believe* as they chose, but could not *practice* as they wanted. In interpreting the separation clause—remember "make no law prohibiting the free exercise thereof?"--the Court bent to public opinion.

After the ruling, our government convicted and jailed thousands of Mormons—some of whom had nothing to do with polygamy—in what one historian calls the “most coordinated campaign of religious repression in U.S. history.” In order to save their faith and their community, Mormons renounced plural marriage.

And so this is why Mitt Romney spoke: to calm the fears of people who don’t understand Mormonism, those who confuse its past with its present. This is unfortunate. He protested this, rightly, when we said that making a candidate explain his faith recalls the religious test forbidden by the laws and traditions of this country.

It would have been powerful enough if he stopped there; powerful enough for him to say that he believed in individual rights, even if he believed those to be sacred, as others in the White House have said, and of the ability of the responsible leader to put to trust her or his own conscience in acting for the good of the nation.

This is precisely what John Kennedy believed, and then did as President. He said, “Whatever issue may come before me as President--on birth control, divorce...or any other subject--I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.”

This was bold, coming from a Roman Catholic in 1960. Remember that this is before Vatican II. If the church is intolerant of abortion or divorce *now*, what was it like *then*, when Rome officially saw other religions as doomed?

But Governor Romney then used his speech to convince religious conservatives he was just like them, more or less. Why else did he say that he believed that “Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of Mankind?” Why else did he say that God should, and I quote, “remain on our currency, in our pledge, in the teaching of our history, and during the holiday season, nativity scenes and menorahs should be welcome in our public places?”

Not only that, but he attacked the one condition that makes freedom of religion, and no religious test for elected leaders, possible in our society.

He said, “In recent years, the notion of the separation of church and state has been taken by some well beyond its original meaning. They seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God. Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in public life. It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America – the religion of secularism. They are wrong.”

To be honest, I can’t believe that more people of *every* faith in this country, particularly the less popular ones, aren’t shocked by this! This is a statement from a candidate who, while he is struggling at the moment, might still win his party’s nomination for President!

For three centuries, up until now, the Chief Executive of this country has defended the separation clause in the manner Jefferson did. Secularism allows freedom of various religions. It means state neutrality, which is one reason we exist, and why Kennedy was elected in a dominant Protestant culture.

And what did the Founders *really* think? The research is *against* Governor Romney. Jon Meacham, in the book *American Gospel*, writes, “The Founding Fathers had ample opportunity to use Christian imagery and language in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, but did not.

At the same time, they were not absolute secularists. They wanted God in American public life, but, given the memory of religious warfare that could engulf and destroy whole governments, they saw the wisdom of distinguishing between private and public religion.”

It is those same Baptists—who were once protected against persecution in Virginia by a statute written by Jefferson himself—and the other conservative Christians, such a large force in today’s electorate, to whom Mr. Romney wishes to endear himself.

But it’s those same Baptists that Kennedy stood before in Texas and said, “I do not intend to disavow either my views or my church in order to win this election,” and he didn’t in the process of winning that election.

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”* This is a reminder to anyone who thinks there is some kind of official sanction for Christianity in the Constitution, and to the atheist who thinks the same document outlaws *any* sign of religion in the public sphere. Both are wrong.

You may have come here this morning seeking words of assurance and comfort. And I am assuring you, that if we want our ways of comforting each other to remain intact, we have to speak out. We’ve had almost a decade of government’s encroachment on the private sphere, and vice versa, because some powerful so-called Christians have wanted it that way.

Here's my Midrash on what Jack Kennedy said in 1960 about church and state:

“I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish--where no public official either *requests or accepts instructions on public policy*; [watch out, there's Bill Hybels talking to Bill Clinton] where no *religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials* [that means you, Focus on the Family]--and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all [so get the IRS off the backs of the Episcopal priest who condemn what we're doing in Iraq, and stop the wiretapping of mosques!]

I'll end where I started. “Our fathers founded the first secular government that was ever founded in this world. The first secular government; the first government that said every church has exactly the same rights and no more; every religion has the same rights, and no more.”

In the sermon hymn we sang, “Down the ages we have trod, many paths in search of God; seeking ever to define, the Eternal and Divine.” That's a distinctly American theology for you, born of pluralism, and mothered by a secular state.

A tolerant, pluralistic democracy in which religious and secular forces continually contend against one another may not be ideal, but it has worked well in this land of ever-wider diversity of religion. Secularism, and the privilege of no religion over another, makes it possible. We have to work, now more than ever, to make sure it stays that way

**Closing Words**

“Faith of the free, what e’er our plight, thy law, thy liberty, thy light,  
shall be our *best* possession.”