

All Souls Sunday
November 7, 2004

THE SERMON “No Less Holiness” The Reverend Victoria Weinstein

We lived through another presidential election earlier this week. More Americans voted than ever before, and there was no rioting and no bloodshed, thank God, although perhaps some between family members or friends that we'll never know about. I love the story of Luverne Messenger, recently departed to life in the spirit, somberly saying to her long-time friends from this church, Eleanor and Dick Gaudette, some time ago, “I have something to tell you, and you're not going to like it.” They couldn't imagine what she would have to say. They waited with baited breath. “I've voted Democrat,” she said. Eleanor says, “We didn't care! We were just so relieved that's what it was!”

This congregation has survived plenty of presidential elections. When it was founded, we were still governed by the King of England! It has stayed together through the Civil War, and the Depression and Vietnam and Civil Rights, and Watergate, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. It will survive Election 2004, too. I'm sorry that so many of you were deeply disheartened this week, as you had pinned your hopes on Senator Kerry to win the presidential election. Dozens of you have contacted me over the last few days and said, “I feel there's something wrong with our country. I feel so alone. I feel misunderstood and greatly rejected in my foundational principles.”

I'm sorry for this sense of alienation. I hope you are not offended if I don't share it. That's a luxury I don't feel I can afford. I am a Democrat, and I have disagreed with President Bush's policies in many areas. I'm going to disagree with him a lot in the future. He has his very clear vision of right and wrong and how to use America's power and wealth both here and abroad. I have a different vision of how to use power, and of what is right and wrong. He has a Christian faith that doesn't look anything at all like my own liberal Christian religion. But he's one human being who has come to his convictions through experience as I've come to mine. I wish those who do *not* support him would not elevate this race to the level of cosmic fight between Forces of Good and Forces of Evil. I

wish they would not decide to condemn millions of their fellow Americans as stupid. That's simplistic, it's not helpful, it disempowers those saying it. It's possible to say to one another, "I believe you're dead wrong, and I'm going to work to make manifest those things I believe are right and good" without being warped inside by hatred and alienation and sneering. Human nature informs us that millions and millions of voters went to the polls and cast their ballot *with mixed feelings* after having considered a long list of issues and priorities. In many -- perhaps most -- cases they didn't support their candidate's entire platform. Americans -- although you'd never know it from listening to talk radio -- are full of grey area in what is being marketed to us all as a black-and-white (or red and blue) political world. ¹

I have been hearing from political progressives this week that they feel very oppressed by this re-election of President Bush. And I have been saying to them with all pastoral love: wait -- let's remember who's really oppressed in this country and be mindful of how we use that word. To be in the minority is not automatically to be oppressed. It is to be in the minority. It means to be far less powerful in being a change-agent than you would have been if you had more representation. It means getting up earlier in the morning and going to bed later at night to assure that those things you care about happen, when there is not broad support from national leadership to make them happen. It means going on every day even when you fail to achieve your goals, and to communicate them with passion and care to others who share them, and to make coalitions and organize to make more progress next time.

As for me, I was fairly amazed to find that morality is now considered the number one reason our nation's voters support a candidate. But it validates something I've been thinking to myself and saying to UUs since at least the Reagan years : religion is the most powerful "coin of the realm" in this era of American history. Those who want to sit at the table of policy-making should be conversant with religious ideas and Biblical morality, and be prepared to defend

¹ I commend to you all the Ideas section of the Boston Sunday Globe of November 7, 2004, which has a map that includes "purple" states, to highlight the reality that we are not so polarized a nation as the red-blue maps of recent days would have us believe.

their own vision of progressive policies from that reference point. This is not to condone the use of the Bible in making policy, it is to acknowledge the reality of how to speak to power in this era.

President Bush holds a very high opinion of churches, and he and other conservative leaders have long encouraged churches and other faith communities to address the needy of their communities. Many of you, and I, might wish that the government would strengthen their existing programs and resources for the poor or struggling but our leaders have said quite clearly, "We don't think that's the role of the government." So we know that's not a priority. Alright then, we know what we have to do! As the union activists used to say, "Don't mourn; organize."

We at First Parish are going to have to give more serious attention to the needs of our own struggling families in this and surrounding communities, and also to nurture a creative, visionary spirit among our youth and young adults. Whatever is coming is theirs to inherit, and they will come of age with different challenges than the graduating classes of the last decade or so have had. Them's the facts, and we're really very fortunate to be in a position to educate, to help, and to be a life-giving community for those who might otherwise fall through the cracks. I am proud of your creative spirit, your intense caring for the condition of our world, and for your ability to run this church in such a commendable fashion. I believe we will take up the call of the present day and be remembered as a praiseworthy generation of this congregation, which has lived through literally *every* era of our nation's history.

One final thought on the election: I realize now that when it comes to Marriage Equality, Massachusetts was more than out in front – we were *way* out in front. I can't tell you how proud I am to have signed the marriage license of four same-sex couples who have been married in this church since May, and how sure I am that the rest of our nation will eventually see the goodness, righteousness and strengthening of community that comes with this expression of justice. *The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.* Please consider, in those moments when bitterness or fear fills your heart, that emotional energy is a precious resource. What we *feel* can either help or hinder our ability to *do* those things we feel are ours to do.

Annie Dillard says,

“There were no formerly heroic times, and there was no formerly pure generation. There is no one here but us chickens, and so it has always been: a people busy and powerful, knowledgeable, ambivalent, important, fearful, and self-aware: a people who scheme, promote, deceive, and conquer: who pray for their loved ones, and long to flee misery and skip death.

... There is no less holiness at this time ... than there was the day the Red Sea parted, or that day in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as Ezekiel was a captive by the river Chebar, when the heavens opened and he saw visions of God.” (*For the Time Being*, p. 88)

Today we celebrate all of those dear ones now gone who in many cases lived long enough to understand that life is a struggle, and that its moments of pure happiness are fleeting and therefore very precious. I think of them observing us from the vantage point of eternal peace and eternal wisdom and smiling gently at us. Maybe some of them are slapping their thighs. I don't know. These were not world leaders; not one. They were ordinary men and women, many of whom shouldered great responsibilities within their families and our immediate community -- some beyond -- but most of whom would have laughed uncomfortably if they were called great. They would say, as do those of you who get up in the morning and do what needs to be done to make a contribution to the better world you envision in your fondest dreams -- “I'm no hero. I just doing what I think needs to be done.”

Again, I think of such women as Luverne Messenger, who passed away from us this summer, who applied so much of her time to a wide variety of social causes, poring through the papers every day from cover to cover, acting on her concerns about conservation, corporate greed and corruption, world peace, the equality of all people, and expressing her sense of legislative priorities to elected leaders, making contributions of time and money to worthy causes. This, of course, in addition to caring for a family and running a successful business.

Many of you do likewise – you are leaders in many different arenas and of every stripe – going to meetings, handling committees, on the phone, on the computer, attending events, making policy and letting your voices be heard. Caring, sweating, shouting sometimes, disagreeing and then returning to the table for more negotiations, angry, hopeful, hard-working, engaged. And I would say, *alive and awake*. God bless you for it. For many in this congregation, to do such things is simply part of being a responsible citizen. You have learned this virtue from those who went before. Our democracy relies and depends on such ordinary, passionate people.

The Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka writes this beautiful thing: “this common world I love anew, as the life blood of generations who refused to surrender their humanity to an inhumane world, courses through my veins. From within this world my despair is transformed to hope and I begin anew their legacy of caring.”

It is their legacy of caring we have inherited. Let us not forget. In the words of the hymn, “What they dreamed be ours to do...” They are our saints, whose soul force courses through our own veins, whose wisdom is available to us still, and whose love for this world bids us treat every part of it, and especially our fellow humans, with consideration and care. I invite all of you now, as you so choose, to form a circle around the sanctuary for our Circle of Remembrance.