

July 3, 2022 USH
Reading (Sermon Follows)

Why Freedom Is Important

In 1775, Patrick Henry saw the war with England coming and he delivered an eloquent speech at the Second Virginia Convention in favor of raising a militia. With grand oratory, but oblivious to the irony, he said “There is no retreat except into the chains of slavery.” Henry owned dozens of slaves, yet he declared that he himself would never succumb to being a slave to King George, delivering the famous line: “Give me liberty or give me death!”

What makes freedom so important that people die for it? The writer Emmaline Soken-Huberty offers ten reasons.

1. Freedom means freedom of expression. We can speak our minds, but we can also express ourselves non-verbally, in art or movement. Hate speech is generally not considered a protected speech.
2. Freedom means we can practice any religion or none at all.
3. Freedom means a free press, including radio, TV, and the internet. Without a free press, it is easy for corruption to run rampant.
4. We are free to vote, thereby protecting democracy.
5. Although there is still prejudice, we are free to love who we want. We are still fighting for the freedom to be in charge of our own bodies, whether it's the “right to choose” or to come out as LGBTQ.
6. Freedom isn't only about what you can do; it's about what you're protected from: things like slavery, discrimination, and harassment.
7. Freedom is linked to happiness.
8. Not all freedoms are equal. Of 38 nations surveyed in a Pew study, Americans valued free speech, freedom of the press, and the right to use the internet more than other countries did.
9. Freedom evolves over time. In the early United States, most people didn't believe “freedom” applied to everyone. It was limited to white, land-owning men. Things are different today, even as we continue to pursue full equality for all.
10. Freedom is political. For centuries, people have twisted the meaning of freedom to serve their political interests. Freedom for abolitionists and feminists is very different from freedom for capitalists and corporations. When listening to politicians, we need to ask, “Whose freedom are they protecting?”

Each freedom is charged with such deeply-felt emotions that, like Patrick Henry, people have risked and will always continue to risk their lives for liberty.

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Let Freedom Ring

USH Sunday sermon July 3, 2022

Judy Robbins

One thing that has been disturbing me lately is the notion that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. This mistaken view is popular among neo-conservatives who seem to equate Christianity with morality or basic goodness. While stewing over this idea, I came across the books of the late Forrest Church, the longtime minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan. Cornel West described Church as “a towering public intellectual and the leading Universalist philosopher of his generation.” Frankly, had I read that description ahead of time, I might not have read his books.

I needn't have worried. Forrest Church is quite readable and his congeniality and charisma comes across in his writing. Among his 25 books are three about the founding fathers, their liberalism and their battle for the separation of church and state. In these books, Church points out that America was founded as a godly nation but not a Christian one. This was not news to me...nor to most of you. The part that surprised me is that Forrest Church builds a case that America was founded on the principles of liberalism, just as our Unitarian Universalism is. Church died quite prematurely in 2009 at age 61 and it is with humility that I borrow from this “towering public intellectual” for today's service. I hasten to add that any errors are mine and I hope that the historians in the congregation will offer corrections or comments...but not until I finish!

Before we get to the liberal part, we have to spend some time with the godly part; otherwise we will miss the context. Things were very different 250 years ago. Virtually all people believed in God. If you were an atheist in 1770, you were silent about it lest you be tarred and feathered and run out of town. Not only did everyone believe in God, God was the cornerstone of their lives, the axis on which decisions were made. God made the world go round. God factored into everything. Listen to these famous words from the pen of Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

I had heard those words so often that I never stopped to actually look at how many assumptions are in that familiar line:

- The first four words “we hold these truths”...in other words, everything in this statement is capital T truth; and it goes on to say that
- People were created by God
- that God gave his people rights like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;
- not only that, all these ideas are self-evident...who wouldn't see these as true?
- Indeed because these rights are God-given, they are unalienable...we can't alienate them...can't give them away or have them taken from us.

This is what was unanimously believed by the founders. You might think that that singularity of thought would carry over into agreement on all the founding documents.

But, as we all know, that was not the case. There was a lot of discord and argument. And here is where we get to the liberal part.

Today when we say “liberal” our first thought is politically liberal; the opposite of politically conservative. We know that liberals are Democrats and Republicans are conservatives. But that’s now. The meaning of *liberal* 250 years ago, was closer to the Latin root it shares with liberty and liberation...in other words: freedom...free from the bonds of hierarchy, oppression, taxation without representation and in fact, any laws we did not have a vote in imposing. Not just free *from* but also free *to* ... free to have ideas of our own and argue for them without fear of retribution. Free to live where we want, think as we want, act as our conscience dictates; free to be judged only by our peers; free to protest. Although our founders agreed they wanted to establish a liberal...free...country, there was no agreement about **how** to go about establishing that country. And they had a very ambitious task -- creating a country freer than any before in history.

The disagreements of the founding fathers made the 1770s ring with a cacaphony of raised voices, dissenting opinions, impassioned speeches, full-throated argument and a lot of butting of famous heads. But, like the Chinese character that signifies both crisis and opportunity, out of all of this noisy disagreement grew the basis for a liberal democracy that has had 250 years of staying power...so far. In fact, the noisy disagreement itself was the key to developing that democracy. Let’s call that noisy disagreement *civil discourse*. Although frustration, *even rage*, ran rampant during the 1770s, these men were civil...they respected one another. Civil discourse can be heated, but *fear* is not a factor. If discourse is civil, no one is afraid of being shot for their opinion. Each person lays out their case the best way they can. In the process, ideas morph, change, combine and, slowly...painstakingly, a few ideas rise to the top. Everyone gives a little. In 1776, agreement was finally reached to create a republic by the people, for the people and of the people.

The history courses we all took tell the story of America’s beginnings so there is no need to repeat that. Instead, to illustrate the liberal process of our founders, let’s zero in on two famous exemplars: Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. And we’ll take just one issue, the separation of church and state.

Jefferson and Adams were opposites in many ways. Jefferson was younger than Adams. Handsome and born into wealth, he had a large plantation, was easily elected governor of Virginia and was successful seemingly at whatever he took on. Adams was short, portly and balding. His father was a shoemaker and farmer in Braintree, just outside of Boston. Adams tried a law career but failed at it and eventually found his calling in politics. For all their differences, both had fine, creative minds; they respected each other (in today’s jargon, they might be called *frenemies*). They shared a common goal: creating a viable republic for America.

Both Jefferson and Adams were religious liberals, but that meant something quite different 250 years ago. Adams was a Unitarian but Unitarians identified themselves as part of the Christian community then. (An interesting aside is that the Braintree Unitarian Church, which Adams attended is called the church of the presidents because both John Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams, are buried there.) Although we share the name Unitarian with that old Braintree church, we sitting here

today would not recognize the Sunday service. As mentioned earlier, the entire service would assume that we all believed in the same Christian God. Adams was old-fashioned, even in his time -- a throwback to his Puritan and Pilgrim ancestors. He believed that if we established America as a Christian country, God would favor us. He would "shed His grace on thee." Adams believed that the sacred and the secular should rest on the same foundation; that without the Christian commandments, liberty would lapse into license.

Jefferson was coming from a very different place. Adams may have called himself a Unitarian but Jefferson was the more modern and liberal of the two. Jefferson subscribed to the Age of Enlightenment thinking, a world view that celebrated reason over revelation from God. Jefferson was a Deist. Deists believe that God created this remarkable world and left it to us to see what we would do with it. Jefferson believed that people didn't need a religious authority. He thought that if people spent one day in rational observation of the natural world, then we would automatically believe in God. In other words, he found God self-evident. But he did not find Adams' Christianity particularly digestible. Jefferson took the bible and cut it up, pasting the parts he agreed with into a separate book, tossing out all the miracles and the things that he didn't think Jesus would have said. The Jefferson bible is still available today. You can buy one on Amazon for \$5 or read it for free at the Smithsonian's website. It is a popular gift for those going into the UU ministry. Unlike Adams, Jefferson argued that in order for there to be liberty and justice for all, church and state should remain separate. Government attempts to impose Christianity as a state religion, would violate freedom of conscience. He believed men would be moral without the imposition of religion and that God would favor us no matter which religion, or none, that we followed.

People took sides, lining up behind either Adams or Jefferson. During the debate about ratification of the constitution, many mainline Christians, especially in New England, and particularly among Puritan descendants like Adams, were furious at the omission of religion. They complained loudly to George Washington who took Jefferson's side, replying that true piety did not require government intervention.

When they were together, Adams and Jefferson sparred with great passion. When apart, letters went back and forth as fast as horses could carry them. We know how the story ends. Jefferson prevailed and Adams, like a true gentleman, conceded publicly. Privately he remained skeptical that this non-Christian approach would stand the test of time. He had another 50 years left to see how it worked out. Toward the end of his life, Adams had a change of heart and wrote to Jefferson saying how much he had enjoyed and benefitted from their parrying over the decades and that Jefferson had been correct; separation of church and state had been the right way to go. Ironically, both Jefferson and Adams died hours apart on the 4th of July 1826, exactly 50 years after the publication of the Declaration of Independence which Jefferson had written and Adams had edited.

As it turned out, religion thrived here in America largely because the state did not meddle in its domain. Despite leaving Christianity out of our government, our founders were unanimously Believers and they wove a moral code into our founding documents. George Washington was right; we don't need a *specific* religion to tell us

how to be good people. All we have to do is be good Americans, saluting the lofty goals of our founding documents: that all people are created equal and we all have rights.

Without realizing it, Adams and Jefferson, with their bantering back and forth, modeled the “how” to create a liberal institution. By engaging in what the late UU minister and poet Ken Patton called “the full and undivided conflict of opinion,” they went back and forth listening (as best they could) and then arguing their own points of view. When we have a respectful “full and undivided conflict of opinion” (in other words civil discourse) new ideas can arise, experiments can be created, opinions morph and change and everyone grows in the process.

Think about how this parallels our own liberal religion. We do not subscribe to a common spirituality but we *do* respect all opinions and we understand that the way we figure out what we ourselves believe comes from listening to others, even sometimes debating the merits of their points of view. We are a liberal faith in that we are free: free from dogma, free from constricting traditions or a dominating religious hierarchy. We are free to engage in civil discourse, not only with each other but also with the governance of our denomination. This makes for a dynamic faith. We UUs subscribe to the creed of our own conscience while at the same time subscribing to the American creed outlined in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Patton’s “full and undivided conflict of opinion” no matter how *civil*, is a messy process. It’s slow and frustrating and demands the engagement of all its citizens. We all want to pull our hair sometimes with the way democracy operates, but the alternative is autocracy...dictatorship. Autocracy is easy. An autocrat like Putin...or the Pope...can make crisp, speedy, uncontested decisions. The burden of responsibility is lifted from the shoulders of the citizens. Someone else calls the shots and all we have to do is go along. Like sheep. But that is not liberal...not free. Either in religion or government.

In his more pessimistic moments, Adams said: “Democracy doesn’t last long. It soon wastes and murders itself. There was never a democracy that didn’t commit suicide.” Elmer Davis said that “this nation will remain the land of the free so long as it is the home of the brave” while Garrison Keillor calls America “the land of the free and the home of the brazen.” And Ben Franklin publicly wondered if enough citizens would stay engaged to sustain the democracy.

Today when our democracy seems more fragile than it has in 250 years, I have to wonder if Adams was right. Will I live to see democracy murder itself? Richard Nixon may have been a crook, but he did not interfere with the peaceful transfer of power. Deadlocked and refusing to budge, today’s Democrats and Republicans cannot respect each other enough to govern. Once upon a not-so-distant time, John McCain and Joe Biden went at each other tooth and nail on the senate floor and then went out to play a round of golf together. That’s the model of civil discourse. Civil discourse is how America was founded and it is what keeps democracy living fully. It is also what keeps UUism fully alive.

But civil discourse seems to have fallen by the wayside. We are not good at passionate engagement anymore, much less a full and undivided conflict of opinion. We seem not

to be able to separate issues from personalities. We've devolved to using fear tactics: harassment, name calling, even outright threats. In this era of instant gratification, I wonder if we even have the attention span for true democracy anymore.

It is my fervent wish that we Americans see the opportunity in this current crisis. I want us to affirm our liberal American dream along with Martin Luther King. In his Lincoln Memorial speech in 1963, King said:

"I say to you today my friends that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the meaning of its own creed."

Amen and blessed be.

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