

Fran Sermon Election 2007.03.25

Election Sermon, Rev. Fran Dearman Anchorage Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Sunday March 25th, 2007.

Good Morning.

What each one of us does, Election Day and every day, has the power to heal the world. We can make a difference, one person at a time. We can define our world by what we do.

I wish to speak this morning about creating a just, safe, and caring community.

I will be speaking first about elections and election sermons in general. Then I will examine some values underlying one particular issue raised in the election Tuesday week, namely the Advisory Vote. Finally, I will look at the impact of our personal choices day by day, beyond Election Day.

Now, an election sermon is very simple. If times are good, one says, It can't last! So pay attention! If times are not so good, one says, So pay attention! But this, too, shall pass! And whatever the times, one urges folks to get involved, vote, run for office, get out there and do something, and bring your best self and highest ideals to the task! Which I urge you to do, whatever party and whatever cause compels you.

The next important thing about an election sermon, is that it's not about the election.

We have on record an election sermon from the founder of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, delivered before the Executive and Legislature of the State of Massachusetts on the 26th day in May, 1830. When reading Channing's text, you could hardly tell that American politicians were turning themselves inside out over Fugitive Slave laws, pummeled alternately by the champions of property rights in human chattels, and the champions of abolition and human dignity.

I enjoyed reading Channing's 1830 Election Sermon. The language is seven generations removed from us, and sometimes it's an uphill struggle, but I enjoyed it. You'll find an excerpt from Channing's election sermon in our hymnal. At the core is a vision of spiritual freedom: a mind self-aware and seeking the right; a mind independent of public fashion or private habit; a mind moved by conscience, love, and compassion; a mind that sees the image of God in all humanity; a mind that is respectful, fearless, calm, and self-possessed.

Noble sentiments.

Of course, Channing was addressing slave owners, slave traders, and perhaps up in the gallery some women who could not own their own property or wages, let alone vote or hold office.

It would be a dozen years before Channing thundered out in *The Duty of the Free States* that a slave's right to his own freedom pre-empts the slaveholder's right to security of property and ownership.

But in his Election Sermon of 1830 Channing was addressing legislators who would permit fugitive slaves to be re-enslaved in Boston, with no apparent irony, about “the ennobling consciousness of belonging to the human family and of having a common interest with the whole human race”.

When weighed against the climate of the times, his words sound hypocritical. What fear compelled him?

I believe Channing feared that the issue of slavery would destroy the union, which he saw as the only guarantee of peace and freedom. As Channing speaks, that day in May of 1830, the War of 1812 is green in memory, and men perhaps still lived who froze at Valley Forge.

So, Channing’s election sermon is not about the election. What is it about?

He takes as his text “ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”. Channing urges us to claim a spiritual freedom through reason and conscience, and fidelity to the truth, unfolding in strength and power.

First, he urges justice, rectitude, and philanthropy as the basis of the constitution, and essential to human nature. Next, he urges his listeners to go beyond selfish interests, and respect as sacred the common good. He condemns the cynical ploy of fostering internal unity by fueling hostile feeling outwards. He predicts that such evil passions would not exhaust themselves abroad but rather inspire at home “domestic feuds and the madness of party”. He condemns sectional jealousies, local interests, executive patronage and corruption, lust for power, and bad law that no one is likely to obey.

In sum, Channing’s Election Sermon lifts up underlying values of humanity, liberality, philanthropy, and morality in government as a guide to right action that he lays before the powers and principalities of Massachusetts.

Let us now consider some values underlying one issue in our upcoming election Tuesday week, namely the Advisory Vote. I’m not sure I fully understand the Advisory Vote. It’s confusing in its presentation, but I believe that I have been able to grasp some of the underlying issues.

If I understand correctly, to vote no is to say yes and to vote yes is to say no.

Let me explain. To vote no is to say yes to support for employee benefits for gay families. To vote yes may eventually lead to some adjustment in the state constitution forbidding the payment of health care benefits for the domestic partners and children of gay and lesbian public servants.

This attempt to restrict employee benefits feels like a violation of employer best practices and of equal pay for work of equal value. It feels like an insult to the state constitution. It feels like a denial of the worth and dignity of every human being.

Surely health benefits are a significant element in anyone's pay packet? Are we not told that seventy percent of all personal bankruptcies begin with a serious illness? Surely the state has a moral obligation to be a good employer, and a practical obligation to retain employees by supporting domestic stability and health? Surely health benefits are standard for any serious employer?

I recognize that universal health care for the United States is still struggling to be born. I recognize that the State of Alaska can't fix health care all by itself. But surely the immediate family of an Alaska state employee has a right to health benefits, whatever that employee's sexual preference. A broken arm is a broken arm. And a child is a child.

Where is Channing's noble and humane model of governance, when we deny benefits to the children and domestic partners of our public servants?

I believe in the worth and dignity of every human being. I believe in justice and equity in human relations. I cannot imagine depriving a child of health benefits.

I wonder, what does it feel like, to be told that you and your best beloved are children of a lesser god, that you are somehow unworthy of care and consideration, to be told that your partner of many years has no claim on your employee benefits? What does it feel like to experience such discourtesy and unkindness? Is this what philosopher Hannah Arendt had in mind when she spoke of the banality of evil, of everyday cruelties and contempt?

These are real people in real homes with real families. They are our relatives, friends and neighbors. They care for parents, children, and each other. They help knit together the fabric of a community. Their households need the same support as any other household. To deny their employee benefits harms living, breathing adults and children.

When we deprive a gay or lesbian domestic partner of health benefits or pension rights, we have not attacked an idea, we have attacked a human being.

I understand that the state supreme court has been very clear, that, absent the right to civil union in Alaska, gay and lesbian families of state employees are still entitled to employee benefits. Why is it so difficult to accept this deeply considered judgement?

Our congregation voiced its opinion on the underlying issues in this debate over a year ago. In January of 2006, at the continuation of the annual general meeting, our fellowship passed a resolution supporting the right for same sex couples to health care.

I am troubled that the discourse underlying the denial of such employee benefits is framed in terms of amending the state constitution, not to endow but to deprive.

If I understand correctly, there is now a clear commitment in the constitution, and I quote: "all persons are equal and have equal rights, equal opportunity, and equal treatment under the law". The sentiments opposing equal benefits for state employees in same sex domestic partnerships

seem contrary to those underlying values that Channing lifted up: humanity, liberality, philanthropy, and morality in government.

When I began to learn about Alaska, I heard again and again the story of beguiled winter travelers chancing upon a cabin in the wilderness, whose hospitality sustained them through the night. This reluctance to recognize employee benefits for the domestic partners and children of gay and lesbian state employees feels like slamming the cabin door in the wayfarer's face: not for you, not tonight, you can perish in the dark and cold for all we care.

How afraid of someone do you have to be, to reject their humanity so utterly? It seems a backward step, to target specific groups of persons, and to deny equal rights to such individuals. It seems unworthy of the people of Alaska.

We make many personal choices day by day. The election outcome does not define us. Election day is only one day out of a full year. It is an important day, and I urge you to make the most of it, as seems best to you. I also urge you to remember your best selves each day throughout the year. Change comes slowly, one step at a time, one day at a time, one civil conversation at a time.

Especially, I would remind you that your deeds and actions each day model your aspirations to those around you. When we maintain calm, despite frustration, we teach strength and serenity to those around us. When we persevere, despite opposition and insult, we teach courage and hope. When we cherish our friends and neighbors, all our friends and neighbors, we teach love, and find joy.

In conclusion, what each one of us does, Election Day and every day, has the power to heal the world. We can make a difference, one person at a time. We can define our world by what we do. I invite you to consider what that would look like, in your world. Some things we reach for, but many things are already within our grasp. Let us not fail to take them in hand, for the healing of the world.

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