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Sunday Sermon: “Being Conservative in a Liberal World”

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“Being Conservative in a Liberal World”

For much of what I hope will be the first half of my life I have been a Republican and a Conservative. As an Air Force officer, there wasn't much diversity, we were all Republican conservatives. During the Vietnam War some of our congregations had heated discussion about our presence in the war with many congregations working with youth who were in opposition to Presidents' Johnson's and Nixon's positions. They generally took liberal political positions. Many churches lost members over these issues. At the first UU congregation I belonged I was the only one with any military background except for the few veterans who were in the Second World War. The Vietnam era was one in which the military was seen as the problem and not a victim of the political system of that time. The UU community I was affiliated had many members who were employed at the local college. The post-Vietnam era displayed a general distrust of the military because the Vietnam experience was still alive in their minds.

While the members of the congregation were always polite, there was always a feeling that my positions had no validity. This is the problem with too much uniformity within our congregations and within our demographics. During the Vietnam era there were many far left leaning political positions held in our congregations; Many by lay leaders, but some by minister's. It was a contentious and divisive time throughout the country and our congregations mirrored these divisions.

After the Nixon-Ford presidencies The political tensions drew down until we saw the rise of the religious right politically. It was called the moral majority. I felt they were neither; moral not majority. Liberal churches were horrified because this religious organization was so political. The Unitarians and Universalists have advocated for their political positions for at least 100 years, from being abolitionist, universal suffrage to civil rights, gender and sexual equality. The Catholic Church has always advocated for their political positions. Yet liberal churches were notably afraid of the Moral Majority.

This was during President Carter's brief presidency when he publically shared his Baptist faith, but more importantly when President Reagan actively courted the Moral Majority for their vote. I feel we were so aware and afraid of this religious influence, because they were so effective. In other words we saw them as they had always seen us.

The religious right has been a political force since then. It also aligned itself with the political right of conservative business, companies like the Koch brothers. Later the religious right and the political right of business interests would co-opt the grassroots elements that which became the tea party.

Simultaneously in the late 70s, some conservative think tanks were distressed over the election that brought Jimmy Carter to the presidency. They developed a policy that has persisted in using language against liberal political ideas and the Democratic Party. The Berkley academic, George Lakoff, laid this out in his book "Don't think of an elephant." Now isn't that a brilliant title for book, it really lays out his whole hypothesis.

The basic theory behind this is to repeat metaphors so often in the media that the public will view these metaphors as fact. Now think of the book title, don't think of an elephant; can anyone not think of an elephant after you've heard the phrase? For example, Ronald Reagan referred to estate taxes as death taxes, and denigrated the idea of the federal government with the phrase "big government is bad government." He also made the idea of being a political liberal unacceptable. To this day politicians have been reluctant to accept the title liberal. They had to invent the word progressive.

You're probably asking yourself what has this to do with my topic of being conservative in a liberal world. I feel that understanding this history is important to understand why in our congregations we have and do alienate members who have conservative ideas.

When I brought this up in a discussion one day, and a member reminded me of the anonymous phrase, "*You are entitled to your own opinion. You are not entitled to your own set of facts.*"

Even this supposed truth needs some unpacking. What are facts? What is truth? Lakoff's study of phrases and metaphors reveals to us that repeated exposure to phrases in our minds can appear to be facts. Take the old phrase "big government is bad government." This I contend many people view as fact. But is it really a fact. I see it as a political hypothesis or theory that keeps getting repeated and repeated over and over again until people see it as fact. The US Military is big does that make it bad. Social Security and Medicare are large are they inefficient? A couple of phrases that I believe have mostly been disproved are supply-side, and trickle-down economics. Both of these phrases have been accepted as fact, yet they are just conjecture. So unpacking the member's phrase, I get, you are entitled to your opinion but you have to be careful of your facts.

Now I believe church ought to be a place where we can and should talk about values. I also believe that church is the place where we should act on our values. But how do you do that is really the question?

Our political structures are so extreme, that the real issues and the real solutions become obscured by seeing them as extreme. Let me explain with an example, many Unitarian Universalists see or vision Christianity as the Christianity that the religious right portrays, the Christianity that rejects marriage equality or women's equality. I've heard that we, UU's, can't be Christians because we don't believe the whole resurrection story. But who says that is what it is to be a Christian. When we think this way we are accepting a religious rights definition of Christianity and rejecting a liberal definition.

This, I feel, is analogous to what Lakoff says about the political metaphors. And when we use or accept extreme language that in its own way defines extreme positions we are doing a disservice to ourselves and to our community.

Likewise when we vision in our minds the conservative philosophy of someone like Ted Cruz and think this represents all conservatives, that is a disservice to conservatism. John Taft, the great-grandson of U.S. President William Howard Taft and grandson of Senator Robert A. Taft and the CEO of a Wealth Management company and a Republican said. "There is more than a passing similarity between Joseph McCarthy and Ted Cruz, between McCarthyism and the Tea Party movement. The Republican Party survived McCarthyism because,

ultimately, its excesses caused it to burn out. And eventually party elders in the mold of my grandfather were able to realign the party with its brand promise: The Republican Party is (or should be) the Stewardship Party. The Republican brand is (or should be) about responsible behavior. The Republican Party is (or should be) at long last, about decency.”

But I find this is not the conservative or Republican that I hear the liberal railing against. But I suspect this is a Republican that many UU Conservatives and Republicans share their political belief.

Likewise a friend who I disagree with about the need for guns in our society. Now I admit a lot of my thinking about gun ownership in society comes from my years living in England where there is little private ownership of handguns. But I will admit when I talked to him it is easier to think about his position as being the extreme NRA position of arming teachers after the tragedy of Newtown. But I know his position isn't that extreme. I think this is because it is easier on both sides of our political system to define the opposition as something very different from who I am or what I believe. We hear this politically all the time.

Our current President Obama is a long way from extremists on the left. The last President Bush did much to combat the health problems in Africa. Yet neither one of these ideas are very often expressed in our media.

Now how is it to be a conservative in a liberal world? I feel in our congregations I have been associated it is difficult to be a conservative with our congregations. This is not a problem I feel that conservatives have, but how the political liberals think of conservatives. I was told within the last two weeks, that when I come to the congregation I want to be able to express my liberal bias in a safe place. Shouldn't our conservative members be able to do the same? I feel that the only way we can be together as conservatives and liberals is to balance that politicalness against our seven principles. When you have agreed to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people, it becomes difficult to demonize others, no matter who they are. This is difficult when immigrants, gays, poor people have all been demonized by the tea party wing of the Republican Party. But listen to me now, because the left has done some of the same things.

In the recent Ferguson troubles which led to the Black Lives Matter movement, many liberal cast all conservatives as racist bigots. This I believe is unfair. The

practical solution to this is to have a covenant of right relations that we can all try to live up to when we talk about politics in the congregation. I found one in Canada. Now Canadians are well thought of as being polite and reluctance to get involved in arguments. They are not. Their political system has become as divisive as ours, they just don't argue about health care anymore. Here's what I found:

“We, the members of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg, confirm our Covenant of Right Relations. As members, we seek to make our church a safe space for everyone.

We acknowledge that we are different from each other. We recognize that we are enriched by our diversity and that our differences will sometimes be a source of conflict. We acknowledge that we are all responsible for our own words and actions.

In this light, we covenant to:

- Nurture a safe and welcoming community.
- Honour each other's inherent worth.
- Assume good will on the part of each other.
- Listen to each other with care.
- Speak to and about each other with respect.
- Be honest with each other.
- Talk directly to each other even if differences exist.
- Ask for help when conflict is too difficult to handle alone.”

Now I think that this covenant of right relations is easier to write than to live. But it does state our seven principles in a way that becomes action. Just as our three readings affirm that real truth has to come from within, to be in community those real truths must be expressed with respect for another's real truth. We are going into very divisive political year. Three of the top four politicians in both parties are touching a constituency based on anger. The basic anger from both the right and the left has been based on a large segment of our population not being part of the American dream. Both sides are finding scapegoats to project that anger on;

immigrants, refugees, the top 1%, and people of us Islamic faith. Many of the facts don't support these opinions.

Just as our salmon and bear must have an agreement, neither will survive without the consent of all parties within the community. So too must our church communities.

In an ever evolving and never-ending world, amen.