

Where Do We Go from Here?

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered November 13, 2016
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First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

■ Pastor Martin Neimöller

I often tell people that I don't usually talk much about what my upcoming sermons will be "about," because I usually don't know what they are going to be about until I actually write them. I usually have some idea in my head, often something I've been meditating upon for weeks or even months ahead of time, but what I actually wind up saying (or writing, when I do that) winds up being different than what I envisioned.

And sometimes, of course, something happens that might change what I had envisioned for a topic on a given Sunday. So I'll start off by saying that's what happened to me this week. I've had a concept of what I wanted to say this morning, a concept that began forming in my mind at least last summer after the national political conventions, and in this case the concept had actually formed into some pretty – for me – concrete ideas. But the most certain thing I had in mind, all summer and fall, is I wanted to

preach to you on *this* Sunday, the Sunday immediately following the national election of 2016. I wanted to preach to you this Sunday more than any of the other Sundays leading up to this election, because I thought what I had to say would be far more relevant in the aftermath of it rather than leading up to it. I wanted to preach to you this day about progress and democracy and inclusiveness and diversity and the intersections of liberal religion and liberal politics – and I thought I might also include some sort of celebration, that at the very least, we could from this week forward look forward to living in a country that had passed a symbolic milestone in our patriarchal history by having the courage to choose a woman as our leader.

Then something happened, and, of all the worries and anxieties that passed through my mind this week, one that seemed perhaps the most trivial was: “*Now* what will I preach on this week?” Yes, in a sense it was trivial, but in another, I think not. Because the question of what this Unitarian Universalist Minister will say from this Unitarian Universalist pulpit on the Sunday after the US election in 2016 might very well point to a defining characteristic and an historical moment in our over two-century tradition of liberal religion in America. Judging by all the chatter from my UU Minister’s social media networks this week, I’m not alone in feeling this way. (Promotion?)

So let me say at the outset something that wasn’t in my general conception of what I’d say on this Sunday following one of the most contentious national elections we’ve ever had. That something is in honor of the other national holiday we observed this week: Veteran’s Day. If we are going to embrace the practice of honoring civic holidays in this sanctuary – which I think we should do – then it is certainly fitting for us to

pay tribute to the countless men and women who have served this country honorably in our armed services. Having not done so myself, it is hard for me to imagine the difficulties and hardships of serving -- not only in active combat, but perhaps especially so -- but also serving in the capacity of readiness to give up a huge measure of one's personal freedom, autonomy, and comfort to defend our country and our constitution. I can only imagine this sacrifice to be great, and I do believe we owe all our veterans our most sincere gratitude and respect. Our prayers are with all those who have served -- living and dead -- and their families who have often had to adapt to their sacrifice in equally discomfoting ways.

It is perhaps fitting that Veteran's Day falls just a few days after Election Day. November 11, as most of us know, was first set aside as Armistice Day, celebrating the famed signing of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War, which was thought by many to be the end of war in the modern world. This turned out to be painfully naïve, of course, only a couple decades later. So it is perhaps fitting that the holiday originally meant to celebrate the end of war was transformed into a holiday acknowledging, among other things, its perpetuity.

I thought about veterans and their service to our country as I reflected upon the results of this election. People in uniform have pledged to fight for democratic elections, to be sure, but even more to the point, to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. All people in the armed forces, as well most public servants, take such an oath, as will, for the first time in his life, one Donald J. Trump this January. I hope and pray that he will abide by that oath, and that he is held accountable to it.

That may sound like a rather harsh welcome for a little preacher like me to say about the President-elect. I hope you'll pardon my cynicism. I have done my best this election year to perform my duty without weighing in with my personal opinions on the election, either for President or any of the other important offices and initiatives that were on our ballots. I've done this, of course, because our tax-exempt status as a religious institution forbids us from using the resources of this congregation in any way to influence the outcome of elections – although, it is important to remember, we do have considerably more leeway on ballot initiatives than elective offices. But I have also refrained from saying much – or at least I haven't said as much as I've wanted – because, simply, that isn't my job. We are a religious institution, after all, not a political one, and my job – our jobs – is to look after the spiritual health of this community and its members, not to advocate for certain outcomes in political elections. Religion and politics don't mix, right?

Or do they?

Let's hear one of my favorite passages from a great teacher, Mohandas Gandhi: *To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.*

My colleague Rev. Tom Schade recently wrote in the UU World about the gradual shift that our religious movement has gone through since

our founding sixty years ago. Back in the fifties and sixties, we were defined primarily by our lack of creed – a church in which people didn't have to feel obligated to accept orthodoxy. But while mainstream religion and secular culture in America has generally embraced this idea so that it is no longer so unique to us, our movement has also found significant meaning – articulated well in our seven principles – as working against oppression and for liberation, particularly in regard to race, class, gender, ability, and other traditionally marginalized peoples. It would be fair to say that this is our religion – liberation for the oppressed.

So all this is to say that I think we have a problem here with our new President elect – at least based on many aspects of the campaign he just completed. Now that he is no longer in a campaign for public office, I can say that without risking this church's tax-exempt status.

Of course, like I also said, I'm quite aware that this church is not a political organization, and certainly is not a branch office for the Democratic Party. So I'm not going to spend the next fifteen minutes or four years or any significant block of time just criticizing our new President, Congress, or any other branch of government. But I am going to say that I think we do have a problem; a big, serious problem that directly relates to the work that our religious community calls us to do. We in the United States now have a President who was elected, against all odds and, yes, in a far-from-perfect electoral system, largely in spite of or even because of his many statements and actions that exhibited a shocking degree of racism, sexism, xenophobia, ableism, heterosexism, and many other forms of oppressive thought. Our concern here is not so much the President-elect, as much as

it is the pervasiveness of all these oppressions that run counter to a religious ideal that affirms and promotes the worth and dignity of all people.

Before I get much further into that, I'd like to clarify that this is *not* a sermon about politics. I'm not concerned here with any serious policy proposals Mr. Trump has made – if he has, in fact, made any at all. And I'd add too that there were some elements of his campaign that I thought were very poignant. Hearing him talk to and about the economic struggles of the disappearing working class in this country was a powerful experience, and I believe he connected to many voters who have lost faith in the traditional institutions and leaders in government. Indeed, even though I've never liked the guy since long before he entered politics, he spoke to me with some of these conversations. Aside from the serious immorality and injustice that he espoused, he has gotten one thing right this year: in spite of the howls of protest by the establishment media and politicians, he knew that the time was ripe for a serious undermining of all the rules in American politics. For that, and maybe some other stuff, I think we'll eventually wind up thanking him.

But the dark side of all this, I probably don't need to tell you, is what he – and, more importantly, many of his supporters – latched onto in the free-fall away from heretofore polite politics: racism, anti-immigrant xenophobia, misogyny, and downright cruelty toward the less fortunate. In spite of the ugly and inaccurate term coined by right-wing radio jocks some two decades ago – this is not about “political correctness.” The effort that has been underway for much of our history, and took a giant leap forward during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and a giant leap backward during the election of 2016, to further our creed of equality and wipe out

various oppressive measures against minorities and the less-powerful, is not about politics at all. It is about morality. It is about doing what is right and good. It is, as I said, much of what we're about here in this religious institution. We're here to uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and to dismantle the systems of oppression that keep some people from feeling less than human, less than free. It is the same struggle that characterized much of the work of Rev. Martin Luther King, of the Mahatma Gandhi, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Norbert Capek and the other Nazi resisters, of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. It is the work that is still required of us, now more than ever – not because we should despair that it has all been for naught just because one rich demagogue was able to scam his way to his most coveted position, but because it is still very much within our reach. As Martin Luther King said in our reading, the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.

When I think of the struggles of people like Rev. King and his civil rights advocates, those who were in some cases the sons and daughters of slaves who were legally nothing more than property, and who faced seemingly insurmountable walls of oppression from every corner of society, who were often publically lynched or beaten or thrown in jail for doing nothing more than speaking truth; when I think of people like Susan B. Anthony who campaigned for decades for the right of women to vote and yet who didn't live long enough live to practice a right that seems so obvious today; when I think of the native indigenous peoples of this continent who were systematically chased off their ancestral lands and sent to boarding schools to be indoctrinated into a wholly foreign culture against their will and yet still managed to hang on to elements of their sacred

traditions; when I think of all these people and the immense struggles they went through to claim and own their dignity and honor, I have no question that we, reeling from this painful election and the prospect of more blatant discrimination coming on the rise again, I have no question that we are up to the task. We will join with all people of good faith and common decency to proclaim that it is our moral right and responsibility to dismantle systems of oppression and work to make sure the least among us are treated as full human beings, with all the rights and responsibilities that those of us who never had to question them have enjoyed.

We will do this because our faith calls us to do so.

Here's one thing I would have said no matter the outcome of this election: racism and sexism and homophobia and xenophobia and ageism and ableism and classism and all the other oppressions we work to dismantle are not going to be dismantled by political means. They will be dismantled by human beings answering the call of love. They will be dismantled by all of us. I don't want to minimize the enormity of the task to overcome this latest setback, but I have no doubt that it will be overcome. I don't want to minimize the impact that unhealthy politics can have on this effort, but at the same time we need to think bigger, and act more broadly and boldly.

Many of you have heard about and maybe latched onto this idea that in the wake of this election we – those of us who consider ourselves allies of the oppressed – should wear safety pins on our clothes as symbols of our commitment to offer safety to those who live in fear. This is a fine thing – we need all the symbols and tangible actions we can find in order to solidify our commitment, and there is no doubt that many people are living

in a heightened state of fear now. But I also want to join with others who have called this safety pin movement into question – first by saying emphatically to not wear one unless you mean it. Don't wear one just to make yourself feel good, if you're not willing to engage in the risk that offering true sanctuary entails. If a person of color or an immigrant or someone you don't know runs to you, running from the police or a gang of thugs, what kind of safety are you able and willing to offer? What kind of sacrifice are you willing to make to live in true solidarity with those who are oppressed? That's the problem with a safety pin – they seem so safe, almost unnoticeable until you get up close. One commentator has said that if you want that safety pin to mean something, then attach a big "Black Lives Matter" button to it or something, and take a more proactive step to declare out loud your commitment to helping the oppressed. People of color, he said, don't need more timid and quiet white allies, they need white allies who are able and willing to step outside their zones of comfort and meet them and their oppression face-to-face.

I live in a neighborhood in which most of my neighbors are Spanish-speaking. When I moved there I had big plans to learn Spanish myself so I could be a good neighbor, but, as often happens with people like me, I kinda got busy and haven't made that enough of a priority. So to my neighbors – most of whom seem like wonderful people who love their families and contribute to their communities – I usually just smile and wave and exchange a few botched pleasantries. I don't know their stories for the most part, though I have made the effort to hear stories of many immigrants and Hispanic families in this community. But when I took in the election results this week, knowing that our new President has vowed, among other

things, to build a wall across the desert and to actively deport some eleven million people, it came to me that my own neighbors may very well be living in a higher state of fear today than they were yesterday. So I've made a personal commitment to step up my efforts to be a good neighbor, and maybe wearing a safety pin is a good first step in that effort. But I need to do more than just that.

One small thing I'm going to do is go to the [celebration of our local non-profit La Casa Hogar](#) this Wednesday evening, and to step up the support I give to this local agency that actively works to welcome vulnerable people into our community. That welcome is not just about removing barriers or enacting laws that *allow* people to come into our community, but actually *engaging* by conversing, educating, and building relationships with real human beings. It is not enough for us to sit in the safety of our own protected homes – or our own safe sanctuaries – and tell *ourselves* how open and welcoming we are. We need to tell those who live in fear that we are with them.

Another thing I'd like to explore with you all is the possibility that this church can become a part of the [new sanctuary movement](#). This is a program modeled on the religious communities who, some three or four decades ago, made a commitment to offer a safe place for refugees from civil war in places like Guatemala and El Salvador. The new sanctuary movement is a network of congregations offering a similar place for people who are at risk of being deported. As a religious home, we can offer a place of protection that is legally recognized as a true sanctuary. While we don't know yet what this new administration and congress will do or not do to follow through on much of this rhetoric, I think it's clear that many people

in our own community are living in a greater state of fear today than they were even last week. This could be an important ministry for us to offer to this community – even if, God willing, it never gets utilized.

So yes, today's sermon came out much different than I had envisioned, just as this week many of us feel like we're living in a different country than we were last week. But we're not, we're just living in a country in which the unwritten rules of politesse have changed. And yes, the written rules still might change in ways none of us can predict. But it's the same country, the same community, the same people as we've known before. More importantly, our faith does not change. So much of what I had thought I'd say today I haven't, but I will – I think it will come out in other sermons in the weeks and months ahead. I had planned to revive an old series of sermons on the UU seven principles this winter, which I'm going to do beginning later this month. And it seems all the more important to me now, that we come back to the basics of our faith, and together re-commit in bolder and braver ways to live the faith that promises so much for so many, promises to lift the barriers of injustice, and, as this banner so aptly attests, to not stop until justice rolls down like waters, and peace like an ever-flowing stream.



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