

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
Rev. Andrew Frantz
July 4, 2021

American Religion

Prayer for America

May god bless America.

Spirit of god, known by many names to many Americans, be here now.

Allah, Yahweh, Jesus, Mother Earth, Spirit of Life, divine good of reason within us, be here now.

Bless this country on this day of American celebration.

Bless our fireworks and our picnics, our beaches and our backyards.

May God bless the republicans and the democrats,

May god bless the fiercely patriotic and those who critique the government, laws, and history of this nation.

May every state and territory, every citizen and immigrant and refugee and visitor of this nation be blessed.

May liberty, equality, opportunity, and justice bless each and every one.

Amen.

I want to talk this morning about American values as expressed in American religion...especially our religion, Unitarian Universalism.

Happy Fourth of July. Happy Independence Day! On this day, I think about fireworks and picnics, but whenever I see the symbols of the USA, like my red white and blue Uncle Sam hat on the altar today, I think about politics. Politics divide our nation in a 50/50 split between Republicans and Democrats. That split reflects how we strive differently to define American values—what is “freedom,” what is “equality,” what is “opportunity.”

Catholic Vote: 3-to-1

I’ve been thinking about that 50/50 split and—now I want you to follow the math with me here--there was a 75/25 split recently in the Catholic Church. Maybe you saw this because it made national headlines at the time. When the Catholic Bishops gathered for their national conference a month or two ago, they took a vote that was very controversial. They voted basically to exclude politicians who are pro-choice from receiving the holy communion. Politicians like who? Joe Biden. They drafted this policy, and 75% of the bishops voted Yes, while 25% voted No.

I’m going to get to a vote that happened among Unitarian Universalists where 87% voted Yes and 12% voted No: a 7-to-1 split. So there’s a 50/50 split in our national politics about American values; a 3-to-1 split in the Catholic Church about religious values; and a 7-to-1 split in Unitarian Universalism....if you are following the math here.

I mentioned the Catholics briefly there and I'm not going to dwell on that. They have to have their conversation among themselves. The 1 out of 4 bishops who voted against that policy, hopefully they can have a conversation with the others.

I say all of this in the context of American values, because values are expressed through our religious institutions. Of course, the Catholics are a much bigger institution than the Unitarian Universalists, so they make bigger headlines when they have their votes than we do. But for the rest of my time, I want to talk about Unitarian Universalism, what our values are, how they're evolving and they are expressed. Especially I want to talk about General Assembly. This is our annual national gathering of UU's and it happened two weeks ago.

General Assembly

At General Assembly there are worship services and workshops and lectures—and separately there are business sessions where we have agendas and do voting, and I want to talk about some of the votes that we held this year.

Let me pause for a moment. I'm curious how many of you attended General Assembly. I know that there were 14 (including myself) from the UU Fellowship of Central Michigan. I don't know how many attended from the UU Fellowship of Midland. If you have your "gallery view" on, maybe you could raise your hand or wave to indicate if you attended GA this year....and now can you wave if you attended General Assembly at some time in the past? I see that some of you have. It's worth doing. This year there were more than 4,000 members who attended (virtually, of course); and when we did our voting, there were around a thousand voting delegates.

I want to give four examples of what happened this year at GA.

1. Ware Lecture

The first one has nothing to do with voting, but it was the Ware Lecture. The annual Ware Lecture is the keynote address of GA and is the most high-profile public event. Decades ago, Martin Luther King delivered the Ware Lecture. This year the speakers chosen were two African American voting rights activists, Stacey Abrams and Desmond Meade. They are working on voting rights in Georgia and Florida respectively. Stacey Abrams is famous for organizing Georgia voters this year; Desmond Meade spoke passionately about the sacredness of voting as a human right. He spoke about restoring the right to vote to people who were formerly incarcerated: returning citizens. He said it was a sacred right, a sacred expression of one's humanity. The choice of these speakers for the Ware Lecture, Unitarian Universalism's biggest stage, demonstrates the values of our denomination.

The other three things I want to lift up from GA all involve voting.

2. Action of Immediate Witness – Voting rights

This first one is connected explicitly to what I just said, because this is about voting rights.

One thing that the voting delegates can do in the business session at GA is to vote on Actions of Immediate Witness. Not everyone who goes to GA is a voting delegate: we get a number of delegates relative to the size of the congregation, and for the UU Fellowship of Central Michigan we get two delegates. I also get a vote as a minister.

This was one of the Actions of Immediate Witness that those of us voting voted to affirm, and I think the vote for this one was over 90% in favor. Let me read from the statement itself:

This action calls on the UUA and its congregations to work in partnership toward theologically grounded understanding and meaningful action on democracy matters -- eliminating voter suppression, restoring the right to vote to formerly incarcerated returning citizens, ensuring fair districts, protecting the right of protest, demanding transparency with respect to money in politics, supporting D.C. statehood, and more.¹

Again, this is an excerpt from the statement of voting rights that we voted to affirm. When we take votes like this, they become (more or less) official policy of our denomination nationally. These are things that we can point to—ministers like myself, if I’m called to speak publicly about voting rights, I can point to this and say, Not just me, not just my congregation, but nationally we took a stand for this.

Here’s another excerpt from the statement:

we understand democracy in the U.S. as a hope, a promise, an aspiration toward a body politic something like a Beloved Community, recognizing that the sacredness and power of each voice and vote depends on the functioning of the whole;

Here’s the theological grounding, right? There it is: when we vote, the body politic is “something like a beloved community.” There is “sacredness and power” in voting. This is theological grounding of a political statement.

In religious terms, it is sacred to vote. In religious terms, if you’ll go there with me, therefore it is “ungodly” to suppress voting. It is “ungodly,” if you want to express it that way, to abridge the right to vote. Not all Unitarian Universalists use that kind of “god” language, but what I’m saying is that we affirm it as a religious principle, the right to vote.

We are an American religion, and we express our values in the public square through voting like this at General Assembly.

¹ “Stop Voter Suppression and Partner for Voting Rights and a Multiracial Democracy” action of immediate witness, 2021. <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/stop-voter-suppression-and-partner-voting-rights-and-multiracial-democracy>

3. Statement of Conscience – Anti-Racism “Undoing White Supremacy”

I said there were four things I wanted to mention from General Assembly, and the next two that I want to talk about are about anti-racism. For time, I’m skipping over another one: we also voted for a strong statement about transgender rights and advocacy. I encourage you to read that for yourself.

The last two I want to talk about are about anti-racism, and one message I heard during General Assembly that I’m leaning into is that being anti-racist and anti-oppression is at the core of being UU. Our challenge is to grow from being a liberal religion to being a religion of liberation – of collective liberation. This is what Rev. William Sinkford asserts, and I agree with him.

The statement has more weight because it went through a more rigorous process at GA – it was voted on twice, at two GA’s, with amendments and revisions in the intervening year. Here is an excerpt from the Statement of Conscience called “Undoing White Supremacy:”

Systemic white supremacy is a direct affront to every one of our principles. Most egregious, we are losing lives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color all across this nation—from long-standing ills of police violence, to hate crimes, to emerging crises of the pandemic—due to the evil of systemic white supremacy.²

This is part of the language that we voted on and overwhelmingly approved—those of us who voted. As I continue to read this, I’m asking you to consider in your heart, Do you agree with this? Would you vote for this?

Are we good so far? The language of “long-standing ills of police violence, to hate crimes?” This statement also calls on us to:

denounce injustices such as police brutality, theft of native lands, environmental racism, mass incarceration, cruel responses to immigration, ableism in all its forms which discriminates and harms disabled people (with variations of body and mind), fat discrimination, criminalization of poverty, restricted reproductive rights, transphobia, lack of health care and education, and more.

This is far-reaching, right? This is not just saying that we’re anti-racist. This is saying that white supremacy as a *system* contributes to all these things—including fat discrimination; criminalization of poverty; restrictive reproductive rights; transphobia. So, are you still with me? Is this something that you would support, would you vote Yes for all of this? I’m saying that this is an expression of our UU values—and it’s radical, and it’s far-reaching.

And there’s even more. This is also from the Statement of Conscience “Undoing White

² “Undoing White Supremacy: a Prophetic Call to Action” 2021 statement of conscience. <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/undoing-systemic-white-supremacy>

Supremacy:” It calls for

not only engaging in action beyond the denomination, but also internal work within the denomination to overcome the ways in which systemic white supremacy is woven into our group cultures, interpersonal relationships, and individual ingrained biases.

This is a further challenge. Not just “there’s something wrong out there” and we’re going to go fix someone else, but what about the way we do our committee meetings, what about the way we do our worship, what about the way we interact with one another during coffee hour—where is white supremacy present? That’s our work also.

Are you still with me? Would you have voted for this language?

Finally, I want to share this language from the Statement of Conscience, which calls on us to

Fulfill our UU role as a spiritual anchor to BIPOC UUs. *Our UU role as a spiritual anchor to BIPOC UUs requires the financial and administrative support of the spiritual healing systems within the UUA infrastructure and programming that serves goals of BIPOC-only efforts. With the concept of reparations still in discussion nationwide, we can be a model for how to consider, with each social justice gesture, how to always consider the singular healing needs of BIPOC UUs when planning any event or effort.*

My paraphrase of what that just said is that as a form of reparation, we as a majority white congregation need to pay special attention to Black, Indigenous, People of Color in every decision we make: in social justice, in the events we plan...and to give resources to efforts that are BIPOC only – spaces that are Black only-- we need to support those things---all of us—if we’re going to be truly anti-racist.

That’s why I’m saying this is so far-reaching, so radical, and so challenging. – and why maybe not everybody is fully on board with all that stuff. Yes, it was voted on by a little more than 90% at General Assembly. Are you with me? Would you have voted for this? Does it go too far?

4. Contested Election

The last thing I want to talk about, the fourth and final thing from General Assembly, is related to that. There was a contested election.

Remember I said in doing the math that there’s a 50/50 split in the country; there was a 75% / 25% split in the Catholic Church; and there was an 87% to 12% split in this contested election at General Assembly.

As a background, for most of the positions on the ballot at General Assembly there’s only one person running. Just like when you go to vote and it says “County Clerk of Courts” or something obscure like that, often there is only one candidate...and occasionally there is more than one candidate, and then you have to do your homework and figure out who do you want to vote for for the Country Clerk of Courts...it’s like that here.

This was a contested election for a position on the board of trustees of the UUA, and I had to do my homework as a voter. And as I did, I quickly saw that one of them was aligned with a movement in Unitarian Universalism called the Gadfly Movement. That's what I'm calling it, and I'm paraphrasing.

At General Assembly in 2019, a minister published a book called The Gadfly Papers.³ It was controversial and caused a big splash, and I'm mentioning all this because my reading of that person and others in that cohort is that they are pushing back against the radicalism and how far-reaching that language is that I just read.

There are some who are going to read that Statement of Conscience and say, *Isn't that going maybe a little too far? Yes, I'm anti-racist, but all this stuff? Now we are anti-fat discrimination—how is that white supremacy? People may read this and say, Is it really appropriate or necessary that we have to consider the needs of BIPOC-only groups in every decision we make? Is white supremacy really present in our committees and in our worship structure? Isn't this maybe going a little too far?*

I think the Gadfly Movement (and I'm using that as a shorthand) gives voice to the concerns of those who think that this kind of thing is too far, too fast. And that we don't want to villainize white people with this broad brush of white supremacy.

So there was a contested election, with two candidates, one of whom was associated with this school of thought, the Gadfly Movement. The vote happened and that candidate got 12% of the vote. That's 1 out of every 8 votes.

Maybe that means that 1 out of 8 in this congregation has the same concerns, who similarly feel that we're going a little too far with how radical and far-reaching this anti-racist denouncing white supremacy work is. And if so, we need to have that conversation.

Just like in our national politics with the 50/50 split, we need to have some conversations across those lines; just like the Catholics, with 3 bishops voting to exclude Joe Biden from the holy communion and 1 out of every 4 voting against that, they need to have their conversation; we need to have our conversation also.

I believe in the radical vision of anti-racism and the far-reaching call to undo it in ourselves, in our UU practices and spaces, and to listen first to BIPOC in how to do this. And, I honor and love the 12% who voted against me in this election: they are UUs too and we are better if we are all in dialogue. I'm ready for that dialogue, and I'm ready to keep moving forward for justice and love, to be a religion of collective liberation, not just a liberal religion.

May it be so.

³ Eklof, Todd. The Gadfly Papers: three inconvenient essays by one pesky minister. 2019.