

Where Do We Go from Here?

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered November 8, 2020
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Greetings from the pulpit of Kittitas Valley UU Congregation. It's good for me to be back here after some seven months speaking to you from my home, even though we are still not ready to all gather in this sanctuary together. I wanted to speak to you all from this place to remind us all – if we need reminding – that our community is more than a group of people who meet online every week. All fall, through all the tension and anxiety of this election season, I knew I wanted to preach to you on *this* Sunday, the Sunday immediately following the election of 2020, and I wanted to do so from this pulpit. 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 than leading up to it. I remember back in our last Presidential Election in 2016, I wanted to preach on that Sunday following 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 be 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. Alas, as you all know, that turned out to not be the case. But let's do take a moment now to celebrate that four years later we have taken the bold step of electing a female *Vice* President, which is wonderfully significant.

First of all, in this first Sunday after the 2020 election, I want us all to gather as well as we can, and to just breathe. For many of us, perhaps even more than we realized, this election produced tremendous anxiety,

and even though the bitter divisions that we're seeing in this country are in no way going to magically vanish now this election is over, I do want to invite us to breathe in peace, and exhale anxiety. Together.

I next want to invite – or perhaps allow would be more fitting – an attitude of celebration that this election signals the end of the Presidency of Donald Trump. (Amen?) I'm trying to not be partisan here, and I'll say more in a minute about what it is I'm aiming for with that statement, but for now I want to hold up in this virtual space the relief and even joy many of us feel knowing there's a change in our national leadership coming.

In this, I also acknowledge that there are likely many mixed feelings that this election was not a more decisive repudiation of a particularly vile politics and public ethics, and our discomfort around the realization that this divisive and toxic politics that is rooted in racism, sexism, xenophobia and other manifestations of white supremacy still enjoys such widespread support in this nation that many of us are trying hard to love. About what this bodes for the future, I wish I could be more optimistic.

I also want to acknowledge the other national holiday we will be observing this week: Veteran's Day. If we are going to embrace the practice of honoring civic holidays in this congregation – which I think we should do – then it is certainly fitting for us to pay tribute to the men and women who have served this country 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 many of you 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 its perpetuity.

I have done my best this election year to perform my duties as your Minister 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 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.* (Ghandi's motivation: not politics, but religion.)

My colleague Rev. Tom Schade has written 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 it was that when our last President was elected, we Unitarian Universalists were called into an unprecedented position to “resist” and to engage with the world as much as we could our religion of liberation. We talked of wearing safety pins so those who were most fearful of the new administration – immigrants, people of color, trans/queer folx, and others – would know we were on their side. We organized marches celebrating women, knowing that the day when rich and powerful men could abuse them with impunity was drawing to a close. And

we offered our hearts and sometimes our buildings as “sanctuary” for our undocumented friends and neighbors. We did all this because we knew, as Ghandi did, what religion means. It means to love all God’s creatures as oneself; it means to show this love to those who need it most.

(No More Deaths article, Susan F-G quote)

This religion of liberation is more necessary than ever because we have in the twenty-first century not just one demagogue-like politician but a mass movement built on the attitudes in direct opposition to our faith: 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 struggle 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 in 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, our mission in this religion. 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.

The title of my message this morning is “Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?” and is the title of Martin Luther King’s last book. I think it’s an appropriate question for us to have in front of us this morning – us as a nation and us as a faith community. I browsed this book this week, and a line stood out for me: “White America would have liked to believe that in the past ten years a mechanism had somehow been created that needed only orderly and smooth tending for the painless accomplishment of change. Yet this has not been achieved.” He was referring, of course, to the changes the Civil Rights movement brought to bear, knowing that none of them were the tools needed to really transform society and wipe out racism and oppression. Fifty years later, this is still the case. What we just experienced in this election was, in spite of our anxieties, an orderly and smooth tending of mechanisms that were established long ago, and those of us who engaged in this election to varying degrees did so in order to hopefully achieve the “painless accomplishment of change.” I don’t mean to belittle any of the work or votes in this election, but I believe our task will at some point call us to more drastic measures than just “winning” an election. The work of democracy goes on, the work of liberation remains to be done.

When I think of the struggles of people like Rev. King and his civil rights advocates, those 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 to practice a right that seems so obvious today and did help elect our first female Vice

President a hundred years later; 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 the toxic politics of the last four years at least and the realization that white supremacy culture is still alive and well and very powerful in our supposedly enlightened nation, 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. We will continue this struggle because it is among the most important of our spiritual and religious tasks. Yes, even if it means risking our beloved and undeserved tax-exempt status, we shall not shy away from speaking truth to power, holding up love as a light to drive out hate. Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.

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. So that is what we will do.

In a few moments, we'll hear a closing song by singer-songwriter Sara Bareilles that we have heard before, when we first went to online services at the beginning of this pandemic. I want to play it again for you (thanks Jan!) in the spirit that we are still here, still together in spirit even when we're apart, still united in our determination to live in this world with integrity and compassion, and to live, breathe, and spread love. Ms. Bareilles sings "I hope my love was someone else's solid ground." May all of us so love, and be grateful for the ground made solid by generations of people who made it so.



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