

# Voting for Democracy

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## Readings

Amos 5:21-24

I hate, I despise your feasts,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,  
I will not look upon them.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Micah 6:8

He has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice,  
and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

from “Don’t Give Up on America”

a recent column in the New York Times by the novelist Marilynne Robinson:

This country would do itself a world of good by restoring a sense of the dignity, even the beauty, of individual ethicalism, of self-restraint, of courtesy. These things might help us to like one another, even trust one another, both necessary to a functioning democracy.

This country was, from the outset, a tremendous leap of faith. We tend not to ponder the brutality of the European world at the time our colonies formed and then fledged, so we have little or no idea of the radicalism not only of stating that “men,” as creatures of God, were equal, but of giving the idea profound political consequences by asserting for them unalienable rights, which were defined and elaborated in the Constitution. Our history to the present day is proof that people find justice hard to reach and to sustain. It is also proof that where justice is defined as equality, a thing never to be assumed, justice enlarges its own definition, pushing its margins in light of a better understanding of what equality should mean.

There is much to be done, more than inevitably limited people can see at a given moment. But the other side of our limitation is the fact that it carries with it a promise that we still might see a new birth of freedom, and another one beyond that. Democracy is the great instrument of human advancement. We have no right to fail it.

## Sermon

A long New England tradition in many of our congregations is the so-called Election Sermon. It is a tradition I have often honored... as I do today. Here we go:

First, to quote a Pete Seeger song: We must not give up or give in.

We must not give up on what has often been named the American experiment in democracy. Or give in to those who say this experiment has failed, we're done, we are doomed to continue a slide into ever more stark polarization, vitriol, hate, and calcified, centuries-long inequities and injustices.

And we must not, cannot, give up on the critical effort to slow global warming and mitigate the effects of climate change, the central issue of our time; instead we must continue seeking climate justice.

As poet Denise Levertov wrote years ago, in words printed in our hymnbook and more relevant than ever: "How could we tire of hope / so much is in bud... So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture."

Of course, it may not seem or feel at all these days as if anything much good is in bud. Indeed, many fear that if the election doesn't go their way, all hope is lost.

We must not be in that number. Sure, we can name that fear, that worry that has been plaguing many of us at two in the morning... or 24/7.

We can name it, not ignore it. But we must not succumb to it. We must not. For there is too much to be done to ensure that justice will "roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." And how could we ever stop striving to heed the prophet who told us millennia ago to "do justice and to love kindness"?

For isn't that how we want to live? As best we can, each of us as imperfect as our American democracy is imperfect.

After all, how could it be otherwise than imperfect – created and sustained as it is by imperfect human beings?

Marilynne Robinson, one of the most perceptive American writers and thinkers of our time, named the challenges facing us as an "inevitably limited people." But at the same time, she wrote – outrageous as it might sound to some – that "Democracy is the great instrument of human advancement. We have no right to fail it."

I titled my sermon "Voting for Democracy." And as you might surmise, I'm not just talking about actual voting – which I imagine most of you have already done, just as most American voters across the land have already done, exercising this fundamental democratic right.

No, I'm talking about "voting" – if that's the right word – not just with our ballots, but also with heart and soul and hope. "Voting" through financial support if we can of candidates or organizations we feel are aligned with our values... "voting" if we've been helping to get out the vote with postcards or calls... "voting" by signing petitions or sending emails about issues of deep concern to us... and "voting" simply as we talk with friends and neighbors about all that must be done to right wrongs, to help fellow Americans, to help our nation live more closely aligned to ideals affirmed in the preamble of our American Constitution: "to form a more perfect

Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...”

Pretty good words.

Look, we know very well, even though maybe still not well enough, the legacies of injustice in our nation: genocide of native nations, slavery, Jim Crow, and on it goes... to this day, yes with real progress on some fronts, but so much still to be done. All the more reason to keep on voting for democracy with hand and heart.

After all, as Unitarian Universalists we see this as not only a civic duty, which it is, but as a calling of our religious heritage and our stated Principles.

Our Principles? Well, our fifth of seven Principles is:

*The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large...*

How is it that “the democratic process” is among our religious principles? Simple really. Our first Principle affirms “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And though we can have conversations as to just what that means, since we see some people behaving badly, to say the least, it is clear to me that this is a religious or spiritual affirmation, not all that different from affirming, as some faith traditions do, that we are all children of God.

Well then, isn’t a logical extension of the principle of inherent worth and dignity “the right of conscience and use of the democratic process”? This, partnering with others or our principles that affirm the importance of seeking justice – just like Amos and Micah and all the rest of the Hebrew prophets and religious sages of all times and all faiths.

Anyway, it is likely that I don’t have to convince you of any of this... but I know it helps me to be reminded of the deep *spiritual* roots of democracy, whatever form democracy takes, from Iroquois councils to New England Town Meetings to the halls of Congress. In other words, to be reminded that though “church” and state must always be separate, we are called at the same time by our religious principles and spiritual values to bring those principles and values into not only our personal lives, but into our civic and political lives as well.

Of course! For we are not divided into a spiritual self and a political self. We are, each of us, one self – called to live our values and principles, to live the wisdom of our hearts... beginning with our families and circles of friends, and extending outward to our communities, our nation, the world.

Of course!

So, though I don’t have to exhort you, of all people, to vote and to participate in the democratic process in whatever ways you are able and that suit you, I do find it helpful – and maybe you do too – to remember that this participation is an interwoven part of our religious and spiritual lives.

Similarly I name what needs no naming, that we are living in and through a crisis of our imperfect American democratic experiment, and that our participation in helping to see us through this crisis is essential.

First to help us return (as Marilynne Robinson wrote) “to a sense of the dignity, even the beauty, of individual ethicalism, of self-restraint, of courtesy,” things that “might help us to like one another, even trust one another, both necessary to a functioning democracy.”

And second... because there *is* so much in bud: from the rising for racial justice to the rising for climate justice to the need for good health care for all, immigration rights, equal access to good education, and so much more... so that the children and grandchildren of our time will have a democratic nation to inherit, will live in a country of greater equality and a shared ethic of mutual care, and will have a habitable earth on which to live in time to come.

May this be so because we help to make it so, each of us just doing the one next thing we can do, speaking the next word for justice, sending the next dollar to a cause we support, sending the next letter or email – none of us have to do it all, but together... well that’s another matter... if we don’t give up and don’t give in, offering helping hands to one another all along the way – for we are on this journey together.

May it always be so.

Amen. Blessed be.