"Democracy is Essential"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
February 4, 2018

Imagine . . . if you believed democracy is essential. Not just a "choice" among variations of how to govern a group of people, but an essential structure. This is the claim authors Frances Moore Lappé and Adam Eichen make in their new book, *Daring Democracy: Igniting Power, Meaning, and Connection for the America We Want*. They write:

> Creating democracies truly accountable to their citizens is essential to our very survival—to the flourishing of societies supporting human life, and now, because of climate change, to the survival of the Earth as we've inherited it.
>
> This is a colossal claim, we know. But there's one point on which human history makes us absolutely certain: it's not the magnitude of a challenge that crushes the human spirit. At our founding, farmers, shopkeepers, laborers, and slaves defeated an empire. Since then, black Americans risked their lives to fight against the subjugation of slavery and then for their democratic rights. Women fought for seven decades to secure suffrage.
>
> ... No, it is not a huge challenge that kills the spirit. What most defeats us is feeling useless—that we have nothing to say, nothing to contribute, that we don't count. (4)

Imagine that each of us could play an active, meaningful part in shaping the world we want to live in. Imagine a system in which the citizens share power. *All* the citizens—without limit or ranking according to race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or the amount of money in their accounts.

Or, maybe we should imagine instead what it would be like to not live in a democracy. In some ways, it's not too hard to imagine. Perhaps like me you have a fondness for period TV shows and/or for historical fiction? Any other fans of the PBS show *Victoria*? Over the years, there have been many such shows depicting life under a monarchy. I watch mesmerized by the beauty of palaces and gowns, feasts and gardens. And yet, I wonder . . . why do such portrayals of inequality of wealth and power have such a draw to me and to so many others in our democratic nation?

On a recent episode of *Victoria,* the young Queen decides to visit the French king. Although the English Prime Minister seems wary, Victoria confidently exclaims that she would think that a self-made King should be very pleased to receive a visit from an anointed Queen.

© Stephanie May 2018

I know its just TV, but think about Victoria's attitude. What she says reflects the centuries-long belief that the authority to govern came from God, the Universal ruler. Anointing a ruler was the sign of this divine blessing, this divine choice. So, this offhanded comment of Victoria's reveals her clear bias that a ruler chosen by God would be better than a self-made ruler.

Yet, what is democracy if not a collective of self-made rulers? At its best, the democratic process allows citizens to "rule" themselves by sharing the power of governing—either through direct vote or by the election of representatives. Choosing how to share power, how to govern, is of course the purview of politics. And yet, underlying these political choices are assumptions about who or what is the source of authority and power. In other words, underlying the choices of politics are ideas about human nature and the nature of the universe. Such ideas reflect religious commitments about the ultimate nature and purpose of existence.

For example, if the God of your understanding is an all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of the Universe, then the source of all power must be understood as coming from that God. God holds the power and can divvy it out to those God chooses. This theological point of view supports the notion of the Divine Right of Kings that *Victoria* alludes to in the dialogue I mentioned. Such a view of God as a power *over* others, who is due allegiance and obedience by 'His' creation, generates an acceptance of *hierarchal* power as the natural order of the universe. And, when one accepts hierarchy as natural, the application of the same principle among human beings can be vast. Aristocrats with land are better than landless peasant. Men are higher than women. Whiteness is superior to people of color. And so on.

Now not all views of God support such a hierarchal understanding of power. For some, God may be all-powerful, but God created humankind as equal. In my own training in feminist Christian theological discourse, I learned to rely heavily on Galations 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In this view, God remains unquestionably superior to humankind, but among humans there is the expectation of equality. Indeed, this kind of just society is the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity.

And what of us as Unitarian Universalists? As inheritors of a Unitarian legacy, we hold fast to the individual capacity of a person to make moral and religious decisions. We have faith in our reason and in our ability to do good. And, as inheritors of a Universalist legacy, we claim an inclusive vision that values all persons . . . in a love that embraces people universally. Together these threads of individual capacity and universal inclusion emerge

© Stephanie May 2018

in our fifth principle: the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregation and in society at large.
Our commitment to the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process emerge because of a long religious tradition that values the worth and dignity of every person. When we take these values as foundational to our understanding of how the world *is*, this is a religious claim—a claim about the universe where human lives are equitable in value as well as capable of perceiving what is moral and meaningful. It is a worldview that has faith in the human capacity for moral choice and so believes in the right of conscience. It is a worldview committed to the worth and value of every person and so promotes the use of a democratic process to share power equitably.

So this may sound pretty philosophical—meaning its a bit conceptually dense and perhaps also in the colloquial sense of seeming a bit irrelevant. The density I'll not argue—that was tough to articulate in a few paragraphs. But, I'd like to explain why I think understanding a commitment to the democratic process as a *religious* commitment matters.

Day after day in our country there are people who are suffering because of the actions of our government—a government that acts in our name. Families are being separated through deportations—including long-term, tax-paying residents without criminal records. Black families must give 'the talk' to their children because of persistent patterns of racism that threaten the safety of unarmed black men and women. And, today children will go hungry in our country, our state, our town. These are not problems that began with the current administration. Under Republican and Democrat leadership these problems have existed. It is not partisan politics to name these issues. These are moral issues impacting human lives everyday. And yet, I sometimes fear that if I mention these issues from the pulpit they will be perceived as 'political' and not 'religious'.

I believe that religion is bigger than politics. I believe religion is about answering the biggest questions about who we are as fragile, fierce creatures; about where we find ourselves in this complex, beautiful, maddening world; and about how to navigate the ever-shifting dynamics of being who we are in the world in which we find ourselves. I believe religion is making sense of life by naming the landscape of how things are and values that will help us chart a course. And, I have chosen to be a part of the Unitarian Universalist religious tradition that values the individual capacity for moral choice as well as the dignity of each life. I have chosen to be a part of a religious tradition that promotes equity in human relations and the use of the democratic process in an effort to share power.
And it is from the basis of these moral commitments, these religious commitments, that I then take political action. It is from the basis of my humanity, my effort to craft a

© Stephanie May 2018

meaningful life in a shared world that I engage both my religious life and my political action.

And so I think that as religious persons and as a religious community we can engage in actions that seek to shape the kind of world we want to live in. We can promote and support issues that align with our inclusive values of human worth and dignity, of equity and justice in human relations, of the use of the democratic process in our larger society. We can live our values and religious commitments through our actions—through public social witness and the political process as well as through direct compassionate care to individuals in need.

There are limits to what we can do and to what we should do. By law, we are not to engage in *partisan* political activities. Neither the congregation nor I from the pulpit can endorse or denounce political parties or candidates during an election. Nor do I think we *should* do this—even if it were legal. As a religious organization, we are exploring a much larger and bigger world than that of politics. We are reaching out to understand the expanses of meaning and the contours of moral action. We explore and express this ongoing search in our personal moments of reflection, our weekly gatherings as a community, our interpersonal relationships with family and friends, and in our public actions of community engagement and political action. I would never want who we are and what we do to be reduced to any political party's platform.

And yet, I also do not want us to be curtailed in our relevance because we fear engaging in issues and actions that seem political. I believe that we can act in a public way as a group of congregants or as a whole congregation with a *religious* voice, that we can call any and every political party to uphold certain shared values in their proposals and in their votes. We already are a congregation with multiple party affiliations—we call Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Green Party, and probably more our members and friends. And that's because we come together not as a political organization but as a religious organization that is bigger than political party. We come together with a commitment to valuing every person—even those from a different political party. *And* we come together to live out those values in our actions—some of which may be to engage the political process.

We may not always agree on how to live out our values. It is a bold thing for a congregation as a group to take a public position on an issue—to hang a Black Lives Matter banner, to offer sanctuary for a person facing deportation, to fly a rainbow flag on our steps. But, it is something we <u>can</u> choose to do as a *religious* act. Deciding what we *should* or should *not* do as individuals, as groups, or as a congregation . . . that is a matter of individual conscience and the use of the democratic process.

© Stephanie May 2018

Democracy is essential not because it is the only possible form of government. Democracy is essential because it is shared power that aligns with valuing the right of conscience and the worth and dignity of every person. Democracy is essential because to live out the fullness of who we are as human beings we need to feel like we can meaningfully shape the world we share.

Imagine what kind of world you would like to live in. Imagine believing, really believing that you can be a part of making that world come to be. Imagine democracy is essential.

© Stephanie May 2018