"Reasons to (Not) Vote"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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What is your earliest memory about voting?

For me, it was the mysterious arrival of enormous metal boxes in the foyer of my elementary school. One day they would simply be huddled together in a corner. Then, on another day, strangers would enter the school and stand inside these boxes, hidden behind a curtain.

It was spooky. I still hesitate a moment before pulling back the curtain at my polling station.

Perhaps it's the memory of my own apprehension about these voting machines that makes me appreciate a recent comment by a *New York Times* reader describing how her parents always took her to the polls when they voted. They normalized voting for their daughter. Even so, I don't think the creepy curtains are at the top of most people's list for not voting.

So, why *do* people *not* vote?

In a recent opinion piece about voting, feminist author Roxane Gay attempts to tackle the problem of disillusionment in young voters. Gay begins with the story of a young woman in Milwaukee who told Gay, in her words, did not want to vote for "yet another 40,000-year-old white man" who didn't look like her or have familiarity with her experiences."

Gay allows some consideration of this woman's point of view as she acknowledges how it is grounded in the very real experience of a status quo in which white men broadly hold the power. Gay writes,

> "Young people are facing a lot of problems they had no hand in creating. Far too many of them are saddled with incredible amounts of student loan debt, working in a gig economy where little job security is scarce. If they have health insurance, it is likely inadequate. Homeownership can seem out of reach. Black voters are being disenfranchised at alarming rates. Reproductive freedom is precarious. Citizenship is precarious. Climate change threatens our planet on an alarming timeline. Things are grim and politicians of all persuasions are doing very little to assuage or address the very real concerns people have about this country and their place in it."

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So why vote?!?! The politicians don't seem to be doing anything about the problems!?! While Gay may be willing to acknowledge the difficult circumstances potential voters face, ultimately she has no patience with the conclusion that *not* voting is the best response.

The rest of Gay's piece addresses the imperfect system of democracy—where candidates and parties are inevitably flawed. Voters cannot wait for perfection. Rather, Gay suggests, "Voting requires pragmatism and critical thinking and empathy and now, more than ever, intelligent compromise."

Gay's approach resonates with my own posture towards voting and political engagement. And, I want to suggest, it resonates with a Unitarian Universalist approach.

As you may know, as an association of congregations, Unitarian Universalists have voted to promote and affirm seven principles. The first principle is perhaps the most widely known: "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." But, do you know the 5th principle? It calls us to promote and affirm the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

Even if we understand that these principles are intentionally crafted as shared values and not as proscribed religious beliefs, it still may strike you as strange that a particular form of government shows up in the defining statements of a religious tradition.

And yet, the use of democratic processes has everything to do with who we are and what we affirm as Unitarian Universalists. As a tradition, we eschew top-down statements of what we must believe. We do not police the purity of passing down the correct theological statements to the new believer and next generations. Instead, we value the freedom to think for ourselves. In fact, this insistence on individual conscience becomes the grist for many jokes, such as:

> Q: What do you get if you put two Unitarian Universalists together?
> A: Three opinions.

Or

> A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted. After the sermon a UU asked the visitor, "So how did you like it?"
>
> "I can't believe half the things that minister said!" sputtered the visitor in outrage.
>
> "Oh, good -- then you'll fit right in!"

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But, if we are going to be a community and not just a collection of individuals, there must be some way to ascertain where we *do* agree. And this is where the democratic process fits in: we vote to decide. As another UU joke says,

> Q: What are the Unitarian Universalist sacraments?
> A: Doubt, Argument, and Voting.

But there is more at stake here than just being a stereotype of being argumentative over coffee.

In an earlier version of our UU principles from the 1961 merger of the Unitarian and the Universalist denominations, the congregations vote "To affirm, defend, and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships."

In this case, the connection between the worth and dignity of every person and the use of the democratic process are explicitly linked. It is *because* we value what each individual has to contribute that we need a process that gives an equitable voice to persons.

Writing about the 5th principle, Rev. Parisa Parsa explains,

> "In our religious lives, the democratic process requires trust in the development of each individual conscience—a belief that such development is possible for each of us, as well as a commitment to cultivate our own conscience. We could call it a commitment to the value of each person. In the words of Theodore Parker, 'Democracy means not "I am as good as you are," but "You are as good as I am."' My connection with the sacred is only as precious as my willingness to acknowledge the same connection in others."

You are as good as I am. You deserve a vote, a voice, a place in the process of shaping our shared world.

Why then might someone *not* vote?

Perhaps, like the disillusioned young woman, they do not believe there *is* a place for them. They do not believe their voice will be heard by the status quo elites that show no interest in them and their concerns.

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Or, perhaps, someone has told them directly that they do not deserve a vote. For example, in 35 states, incarcerated persons cannot vote. Even upon release, in more than 21 states, convicted felons cannot ever vote or face an onerous (and unlikely) process to restore their vote.[i] For some, it is not the conviction that creates the barrier, but the requirement to pay off large legal fines, including fees related to their own incarceration or probation, that prevent a person from voting.

Additionally, there are those who cannot vote if they do not have a street address—a ruling in North Dakota that disproportionately impacted Native Americans living on reservations where mail is received at a PO box and houses are known by the people in them or nearby landmarks.[ii]

There are also those who cannot vote because their names were purged from voting rolls[iii] or because they do not have a picture ID.[iv] While some system of accurately identifying voters is an appropriate function of government, the particular usage of such regulations and laws can leave one wondering about their *actual* intention. Because we remember how historically some people did not vote because of laws requiring you to be a man or to be white; or laws requiring levels of literacy, poll taxes, or an ancestral link to a previous voter. In the name of 'legitimate elections,' all manner of persons have been unable to vote.

One of the most bittersweet voting stories I read this week came from Frederick Clay, a Massachusetts man who was exonerated in 2017 after 38 years in prison. Incarcerated at the age of 16, Clay will be voting for the first time in his life on Tuesday. In an interview with the Innocence Project, Clay said:

> I was deprived of the right to vote for most of my life. It's strange to finally be able to vote. Now that I have the opportunity to vote, I feel like I'm doing my part in society. I guess you could say I feel special; a lot of black people fought and gave up their lives for the right to vote. In that sense, I feel special because maybe I'm voting for them.

Considering Clay's story, I try to remember how many times I did *not* vote. I cannot be certain of the number or the reasons, but, if I'm being honest, I have not voted in every midterm, every primary, every local election, every congregational Annual Meeting. This is not meant as a defense of not voting. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that there have been times when I too ran the calculations of my time, energy, and responsibilities against the perceived impact of my vote. I suspect many of you have done the same.

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While such calculations are often rooted in practical considerations, Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg reminds us that voting also has a spiritual dimension. Embracing the Buddha's teaching of the innate worth of all, Salzberg writes,

> People are easily beset by ignorance of course, or persuaded to distorted views ... But nothing actually destroys that capacity within to grow, to love, to develop wisdom. To call someone indelibly unworthy of having a voice, or to discount them from having a sense of empowerment in how their lives are governed, seems to me to reflect one of the biggest distorted views of all.

As Election Day approaches, the tension and the fear are palpable. There are multitude distortions of facts, of candidate's characters, of the intentions behind policies and positions. Democracy is messy. There are no perfect candidates, parties, or policies. But don't be disillusioned—whatever the outcome may be. Because what remains after all the votes are (or are *not*) tallied is the innate worth of all, the inherent dignity of every person. What remains is the work of conscience to stay engaged in working with others to have a voice in how we are governed. What remains is the spiritual work of being neighbors to one another—even to those whose yard signs conflicted with your own.

Seeking to be neighbors to those with whom we disagree does not mean we abandon our convictions or ignore our conscience. While we must be anchored in our values, we must also not forget we move within an ocean of shared humanity. All political action is ultimately in service of persons not principles. Even when we fight for democracy and the strength of democratic institutions, may we be clear in our own minds that we are fighting for faith in the human capacity to grow, to love, to develop wisdom. We are fighting for the belief that we are not just individuals expressing our own consciences, but people living in community trying to find the best ways to govern our shared world. We are fighting to remember: You are as good as I am. You deserve a voice and a vote.

So may it be. Amen.

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[i] http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx and https://www.npr.org/2018/07/05/625671186/felons-in-florida-want-their-voting-rights-back-without-a-hassle

[ii] https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/11/01/north-dakotas-voter-id-law-aimed-silence-native-american-voters-instead-it-rallied-my-tribe/?utm_term=.e4838bcce8e4

[iii] https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/voter-roll-purges-surged-after-changes-voting-rights-act-new-n893056

[iv] http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx

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