

“To Make The Broken Whole”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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This is a sermon on democracy.

This is a sermon on whose voices get heard.

And, this is a sermon about religious values and identity politics.

Are you ready?

Let's start with democracy and the voting system.

In March 1901, academic and future politician Woodrow Wilson, penned an article in *The Atlantic*, entitled, “Democracy and Efficiency.” Wilson begins by expressing concern about the unmistakable “reaction against democracy” in a world still unconvinced of the “benefits of democracy.” While acknowledging that democracy in the U.S. needs work—more “efficiency”—he defends the principle of democracy, writing:

“We keep heart the while because still sure of our principles and of our ideals: the common weal, a common and cordial understanding in matters of government, secure private rights and yet concerted public action, a strong government and yet liberty also. ... Democracy is a principle with us, not a mere form of government. What we have blundered at is its new applications and details, its successful combination with efficiency and purity in governmental action.”

In other words, what is at stake in defending democracy is not merely governmental administration, but principles of the common good, as well as rights and freedoms.

And yet, for all of Wilson's full-throated defense of democracy, he makes no mention that in 1901 women could not vote, nor that the vote of many black men was suppressed. Democracy was in even more trouble than Wilson wanted to admit.

Indeed, democracy does not always work well. This is the also the point of Stacey Abrams 2020 book, *Our Time is Now*. At stake for Abrams is not simply “the vote”, but also all that the voting system enables to happen economically, socially, and educationally in people's lives. To engage in the voting system is to have a voice in what happens. And yet, the system is fallible, and it is broken. Abrams writes,

When a structure is broken, we are fools if we simply ignore the effect in favor of pretending that our democracy isn't cracking at the seams. Our obligation is to understand where the problem is, find a solution, and make the broken whole again.
(22)

What *is* the problem? And is there really a solution to make the broken whole again?

It's so easy to say no. To say the system has always been broken. To say the fix is too complicated. To quietly think, "it works for me."

Plus, aren't there already a lot of other issues out there to be concerned about? Racial and economic injustice. A broken immigration system. Climate change. Why add the voting system to the list? Why move it *up* the list?!?

Our theme this month is relationship. The word "relationship" may first lead you to think of interpersonal relationships such as family, friends, or spouses. And yet, we also have many more relationships that structure our lives—including political relationships with our towns, states, and nation.

We can think of the voting system as a tool of conversation among those who are politically related. We vote to form the laws of our shared life—or to elect the people who will represent us in forming the laws on our behalf.

So, here's a key question: *who* is part of the political conversation? Whose voices are being heard in this process? Who is able to speak through the language of the voting system?

As a principle, democracy is "government of the people, by the people, for the people." We all know the quote from Lincoln, right? And yet, just who counts as part of "the people" that has a voice in government? The exclusion of people from the political conversation erodes the foundation of a form of government that promises self-government. If a person cannot vote and be part of the conversation, are they really part of the project of self-government?

Abrams has many stories of voter exclusion in her book. Here is one:

On November 6, 2018, a 92-year old woman, Ms. Christine Jordan arrived at her Georgia polling station to vote only to be told she was not listed as a registered voter. A cousin of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jordan had an active voting record stretching back five decades. And yet, she had been "purged" from the voting rolls through what Abrams describes as an "emboldened and incompetent process" led by the state.

Too many stories of voter disenfranchisement have been in the news in recent years. Strict voter ID laws that can be costly and difficult to obtain. Exclusions of felons, even long after their sentence has been served. Closures of polling stations creating unsurmountable distances and/or long lines at the remaining stations. Requirements for exact match spelling, signatures, and/or addresses. In the name of “efficiency” and fears of “vote fraud”, the strategies keep piling up. In effect, many thousands are excluded from our democracy—*now*, not in some Jim Crow past.

As Wilson noted more than 100 years ago, what is at stake *is* about more than a form of government. What is at stake is a moral principle of valuing the voices, rights, and dignity of all people as people. If democracy is about a political relationship, then bringing more people into that conversation strengthens democracy. Excluding people only weakens the very nature of the system.

In November 2018, Stacey Abrams emphasized this critical importance of voter engagement during her non-concession speech in Georgia’s race for Governor. While her opponent Brian Kemp would go on to become Governor, Abrams declared a win—not by becoming Governor, but by expanding the number of people engaged in the voting system.

So where do identity politics fit in? And what links identity politics to religious values?

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm seven principles, beginning with the first principle to affirm “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” and the second principle “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” When you combine commitments to the value of each person with the goal of justice and equity in human relations, there is a clear step to the manifestation of these values in the fifth principle “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

Because we value both equity as well as the voice and value of each person, we seek to engage the voices of all in our shared life.

And, when we’re really listening to the voices of each person, something quickly becomes clear: we are not alike.

In the reading we heard earlier, Abrams underscores how important differences are in our political relationships. She writes,

Difference is real, and to acknowledge such does no harm to the American identity as a whole. The vibrance of our identity politics reaffirms the complexity of our nation and the underpinning of our founding. People fleeing religious persecution

did so because they required a safe space where difference would be tolerated.
(160)

Difference *is* the story of our nation. And, as a congregation begun by Puritans fleeing religious persecution, it is also the story of *our* founding.

Last week I had a rich experience of difference as I participated in a women's leadership program at the Omega Institute. The cohort of 36 students was half women of color and half white women like me. We spanned ages from our 20's to our 70's, arrived from multiple states and from overseas. Professionally, we were nonprofit leaders and business owners as well as educators, holistic healers, and, well, me—clergy. We listened to the five faculty, which also included two women of color, wrote in our workbooks, and, most importantly, listened to one another. There was conflict and compassion, vulnerability and celebration. On the final day, we each had 3 minutes to present. Each woman expressed herself distinctly, differently. Witnessing how a diverse group of women committed to supporting one another's voices empowered us all was a powerful gift.

I imagine this experience is a glimpse of the wholeness Stacey Abrams envisions for our democracy. What if our voting system actively engaged diverse voices? What if our political representation more accurately reflected the gender, ethnic, and other differences in our nation? What if the democratic system reflected *the people*?

Identity politics, argues Abrams, is nothing new. Rather, identity politics is a long-used tool to help ensure particular voices are represented by someone who can reflect their story, their needs, and their hopes. Or, to put it in UU religious terms, identity politics is a way to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of persons by ensuring their particular voices are heard. And, by listening to more voices, we might just have a better chance at building a more just and equitable society for all the people.

This is not a theoretical sermon intended to be merely “interesting.”

This is a sermon that seeks to inspire you to get more involved in the fight for democracy. Educate yourself on the issue of voter suppression—read *Our Time is Now* or go to FairFight.com or CenterforCommonGround.org to learn more or to get involved. Call your local, [state, and federal representatives](#) and ask them to support fair voting systems—paying attention to the news this week as the Senate may try again to pass a bill to restore protections of the Voting Rights Act. And stay tuned for more opportunities through First Parish to send postcards and otherwise encourage and support more voices to engage in the voting system.

There is so much more to say. I did not even talk about the fear or disillusion too many feel in the face of voter suppression techniques. Nor, did I have enough time to play a fabulous [video by rapper YellowPain](#) whose explanation of the voting system rivals (surpasses!?!?) the classic videos of [Schoolhouse Rock](#). But I will say one more thing.

We face a lot of big issues that will not be solved by individuals or even interpersonal relationships. To make structural changes to address climate change, education systems, healthcare, economic inequality, racial injustice and so much more, we will need to work together. A strong democracy is a critical tool to help us justly address all of these issues. Imagine if the voices in government reflected the diversity and complexity of our nation. Just imagine what might be if we made the broken system whole.

May it be so.