

**To What End?**  
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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

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To What End?

Our neighbors at the Iowa Lakes Unitarian Universalist Fellowship invited me to preach back in July, issuing their invitation thusly:

*...we would appreciate hearing your thoughts regarding our first UU principle and how today's POTUS has created and encouraged division and has supported hate groups in our country. Your hopeful and optimistic ideas for our county's future would be greatly appreciated*

While I accepted their invitation, I didn't exactly grant their request. Instead I told them:

When you invited me to preach you couldn't know that I would respond by sending back an in-your-face sermon title—*What's Our Excuse?* You couldn't know that I'm ornery that way—but not just for the sake of orneriness. Rather because I believe preachers, even occasional guest preachers, are called to hold up before congregations the nuances, complexities and even paradoxes of life. And because I believe that we come to church for what we can't get from other places.

There is no shortage of places we can get disgust, anger, despair, hand-wringing, righteous indignation, and agreement from wise and compassionate folks just like ourselves that what's happening in this country now wouldn't be happening if the 2016 election had gone our way. Or if the nominating process in the Democratic Party prior to the 2016 election had gone our way. Or if President Obama had been allowed a Senate approval hearing on Merrick Garland. Or if... We can and do get all that on MSNBC and Facebook and over coffee or drinks with friends. We even get the most subtle form of all that every time a major news source prints something like, "President Trump continues to state, erroneously, XYZ." "Or President Trump today repeated his false claim that, ABC." We come to church, to religious gatherings, for something different than all that—or why come here at all?

Which is not to say I don't do plenty of those, every day—angry name calling, hand-wringing, snorts of disgust, sighs of despair, righteous indignation in casual supermarket conversations. But I come to church for something different, too. When I'm sitting in the congregation and when I'm standing in the pulpit.

You don't need me, I told that congregation in Iowa, you don't need me to tell you that it seems to me that freedom of speech can't mean a baker in Colorado doesn't have to bake a cake for a gay couple if it doesn't also mean a restaurant in Virginia can refuse service to Sarah Huckabee Sanders. You don't need me to tell you that Justice Kennedy's retirement seems certain to threaten Roe v. Wade and is already striking fear in the hearts of GLBTQ families. You don't need me to tell you that the administration's "easily won" trade war is going to hurt the farmers in my neighborhood and in your neighborhood. You know these things and you know people more learned in the areas of constitutional law, and family law, and health care, and agribusiness to speak to you about these things. And you really don't need me to tell you that the tenor of much of our President's rhetoric is not only offensive to our specific (but not exclusively) Unitarian Universalist affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but also at odds with the basic manners and goodwill we teach our children to display on playgrounds and in classrooms. So, that's one of the reasons, I told them, I wouldn't really address the topic they asked me to address—because they didn't need that from me.

But, I continued, there is also this: when I point a finger at President Trump I find three fingers pointing back at me. Blech. It's a scolding, moralistic object lesson I resist but find useful nevertheless. I may not have voted for the man. And you may not have voted for the man. And he may not have won the popular vote. But enough people voted for him that according to the rules by which we elect our leaders, he won. And that means someone or more than one person I know and know well voted for him. And someone or more than one person you know and know well voted for him. And we have probably over the years known that we disagree with these people on things that matter—access to reproductive health care, access to adequate and affordable health care of all kinds, education funding, 2nd amendment rights, gender equality, climate change and all the rest. And we have probably, at least I have, 'agreed to disagree' or 'gone along to get along' or stayed silent 'for the sake of family unity'. And so I ask, what's our excuse for the election of a president, and senators and congresspersons, whose values are so antithetical to our own and whose actions so demonstrate a greater loyalty to self-preservation than to the commonweal or upholding the constitution?

I also ask the question, what's our excuse, out of my understanding that there is nothing at all we can do change our President's (or anyone's) behavior or language, and very little we can do to immediately influence Congress, either. The behavior and language we **can** change, the civility we can increase, the level and scope of compassion we can deepen and broaden are our own. So if hate groups are increasing in number and if public discourse is devolving into battling screeds, what's our excuse?

If, in the first instance, we must ask what's our excuse for not having the difficult conversations, for not being courageous enough to offer our tender life stories as the

reasons for the candidates we endorse, the votes we cast, the causes we support with our money, in the second instance we must ask what's our excuse for refusing to hear, with open hearts, the tender life stories others offer as the reasons for the candidates they endorse, the votes they cast, the causes they support with their money. If, in the first instance, we must accept responsibility for our complacent belief that all-would-be-well-of-course-it-would, because our vision of how it should all turn out was so clearly the right vision it was almost impossible for us to imagine that a near majority of our fellow citizens could have a different vision, then in the second instance we must accept responsibility for all the ways and all the instances we haven't gone high when they've gone low. What's our excuse on the one hand, for posting another Facebook meme instead of knocking on another door or calling another congressional office? And what's our excuse, on the other hand, for questioning, aloud and often publicly, the inherent worth and dignity of those whose votes and actions and language we abhor?

Whenever there is another election on the horizon (and there always is), we who claim to affirm the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large must always study the successes and the failures of the election just past. Not as an exercise in either finger pointing or debilitating shame, but as the best means of identifying and setting out to achieve the goals we have for the next election. Name-calling and anger and keeping a running tally of all the wrongs is satisfying—and can fuel the actions we prayerfully undertake toward the justice we seek—but we cannot allow them to become our ends.

At that point, back in July, I concluded the *preachers... are called to hold up before congregations the nuances, complexities and even paradoxes of life* portion of the sermon and moved on the *we come to church for what we can't get from other places* part, combined with the *hope for our country's future* part. It was an okay sermon, as far as it went, and my basic stance on the matter hasn't changed in the few weeks that have passed. But that sermon, as far as it went, left a pretty big question unexamined.

If name-calling and anger and keeping a running tally of all the wrong is satisfying—and can fuel the action we prayerfully undertake toward the justice we seek—but we cannot allow them to become our ends, then to what end do we make our political opinions or theological beliefs known?

The easy, almost automatic, no-brainer answer is, “we make our political opinions and theological beliefs known in order to sway the opinions and challenge the beliefs of others. To win over converts for our side. To change the tide of history with our facts and our words, repeated often enough and emphatically enough and righteously enough that the people to whom we direct them can't help but fall into line, repent of their misguided ways, and vote our way just as soon as the next election rolls around.

But if the end we seek, when we we make our political opinions or theological beliefs known, is to change minds and votes, then we will almost always be disappointed. Studies have shown, after all, that facts don't change people's minds. And each of us has probably had more than a few arguments that have convinced us that arguing seldom wins us over or wins our opponent over to the our side.

Retired Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Schade recently wrote:

*How people change their minds.*

*Many Trump supporters will support him against all evidence until the day they don't. And some will never stop supporting him.*

*They will not change their minds as an individual, but as a group, all at once. Trump's support will not dwindle as much as collapse. Many will say they never really supported him. (These may need to hate Hillary even more to cover their past Trumplove.)*

*They will not change their minds in public. They will not be convinced in an argument, or discussion. They will change their minds in private.*

*They will not be persuaded by facts, arguments, statistics, or clever witticism to stop supporting him. At some point, something he does will embarrass them. Or at some point, they will get tired of defending his latest lunacy.*

*When they are done with him, they will be well and truly done with him. How fast did W go from hero to pariah?*

Tom's remarks generated a lot of discussion. Is he right about how people change or don't change their minds? Did he mean to suggest that we shouldn't speak our minds or post links to articles supporting our viewpoint? Don't we have a moral obligation to speak up? What about the famous lines from Martin Niemöller:

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

I did not wade in to the Facebook furor about Tom Schade's post. A little part of me wonders if he isn't too optimistic that support for our current President (and those who refuse, out of political expediency, to confront him) will one day collapse wholesale. But

mostly I agree with his larger point that fact checking, statistic spouting, our individual debates and clever witticisms will not change minds.

But neither do I believe that silence is options. So, that said, here is my answer to the question, to what end do we make our political opinions or theological beliefs known?

We make our political opinions and theological beliefs known so that we can be found by partners for the real work, the on-the-ground work of disrupting business as usual, of electing the right people at all levels of government, of hosting candidate forums so those who want information, facts, figures and a sense of the real person before casting their ballots have access to those things, of leveraging resources and influence to fund schools and playgrounds and affordable housing, of bring food to food deserts and arts to those who can least afford them and most need them. Some of you may have seen the Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network meme celebrating Leonard Bernstein's 100th birthday:

*"The point is, art never stopped a war and never got anybody a job. That was never its function. Art cannot change events. But it can change people. It can affect people so that they are changed... because people are changed by art – enriched, ennobled, encouraged – they then act in a way that may affect the course of events... by the way they vote, they behave, the way they think."*

We make our political and theological beliefs known so that we can be found by partners and get about the business of creating the world our current elected officials have no room for in their hearts and their vision.

And more importantly than that, we make our political opinions or theological beliefs known to the end that those who most need to hear them—those living on the edges, those who lives and realities are at best ignored and at worse denied—hear them and know that they are not invisible.

My colleague Molly Housh Gordon recently saw a picture of church sign that proclaimed: *Heaven Has Strict Immigration Policies; Hell Has Open Borders*. She posted her own, universalist version: *Heaven = No bans, no walls, no borders, extravagant and transforming love. Hell = Exclusionary theology and its products*

*Exclusionary theology and its products* might not be the most accessible phrase for lay folks (or even some preachers), but Molly's definition of Heaven rings out clear and loud as the bell of freedom in the old song. And if she one days puts those words on a sign outside the church she serves in Columbia, Missouri, someone will drive by—someone undocumented, someone gender non-conforming, someone living with AIDS or HIV, someone living in a bi-racial, GLBTQI or otherwise non-traditional family—someone will drive by and know that that church believes they belong in heaven. And that someone

may walk through the doors of that church that very day or they may never walk through the doors of the church—and that is very much beside the point. I don't know Molly very well, but I know this: if she were to put her definition of Heaven on a sign outside the church she serves it would NOT be to attract new members and grow the church. It would be for one reason and one reason alone: so that someone who needs to know they belong in heaven might be blessed by knowing that others, strangers to them, believe that, of course, heaven is exactly where they belong.

That's the end to which we share our political opinions and our theological beliefs. Because someone somewhere needs our blessing. The blessing of being seen, of being heard. The blessing of having their existence acknowledged and their reality recognized—despite the incompleteness and inadequacy of our vision and our recognition.

And—this is important—we give that blessing as a gift with full knowledge of its imperfection. We offer up our opinions and beliefs with both humility and conviction, and we expect nothing in return. Not thanks. Not a new friend. Not an increase of visitors to our church. Certainly not the right to expect someone living on the edges who might have felt blessed by our words to now become our go-to question answerer in all things racial. We share our political opinions and our theological beliefs to the end that they might be a blessing. And if they are, if they are some day, a blessing in ways we never know, then we, without ever realizing it, will be blessing in return.

Amen.