

Considering the Democratic Process©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman
March 11, 2018

Many of you have likely noticed that most of the services since October have addressed, to one degree or another, some element of our Seven Principles. Hopefully over the past few months you have taken time to review these Principles which are printed on the back of the Order of Service every week. Our guest speaker last Sunday, Mike Clark, didn't mention it but his talk, like mine today, relates to the later portion of our Fifth Principle, namely the democratic process. Mike shared his reflections on how to preserve a modern democracy. Today I want to follow-up on what he shared. I want us to think more broadly about the issue of democracy. And I would have us consider the democratic process which allows our democracy to function.

The democratic process has a great deal of impact on our lives. Few typical citizens however, have significant knowledge or experience with engaging in or navigating through the process. It is quite likely that many of us feel bewildered, frustrated, powerless or possibly even intimidated when we think about engaging actively and deeply in meetings where the structured democratic process is utilized. I am not talking here about simply going to the poles on election day and selecting the candidates you want to win. I am talking about attending public meetings and making your views known to those who will make the decisions about policies and laws. This is the democratic process that takes courage, that takes knowledge of how the system works, that takes practice and that takes determination over an extended period of time. This is what is meant when the Fifth Principle speaks of the democratic process. It is not a one time, short term event like voting on election day.

How and where might we get the practice we need. How about right here, within our Fellowship. In my time as your minister I have seen the formal democratic process utilized in only a couple of settings—at congregational meetings such as the Annual Meeting and in Board meetings. If we are to become skilled in navigating the democratic process, some of us need more practice than that. We could, if we decided to, provide more opportunities to gain the knowledge and the courage needed to actively and comfortably engage in the democratic process in other public settings.

I want to shift my focus now so we can consider the history behind this Principle and the form of government it espouses. It is not at all surprising to me that one of our Principles identifies a specific type of process related to a system of government. Centuries ago, in the Hebrew Bible, Judaism set forth specific laws people were to follow. Christianity, which Unitarian Universalism emerged from, has continued to lift up a particular set of these laws to this very day. All of us have heard of the Ten Commandments. Typically religious laws of this type are attributed to God. As such, they are considered perfect and inviolable. While I believe there is wisdom contained in these laws, I have difficulty with the process by which they were established. I tend to refer to such a process as top-down decision making. There is something or someone with ultimate or at least immense power dictating how things will be done. For me, this approach can be problematic.

Some of our religious forbears began challenging and even rejecting aspects of this approach before arriving on this continent. One of the reasons they came to this country was to get away from religious and government higher-ups telling them what to worship, how to worship and what laws they needed to follow. After having emigrated here, a group of these forbears gathered in a meetinghouse in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1648. From this meeting emerged a document known as "The Cambridge Platform." This document addressed the issue of polity, or governance, within their churches. What the "Platform" set forth was a significant shift away from the top-down decision making process they left in Europe. The "Platform" was a first step in establishing what I call "bottom-up" decision making. There is a distinct connection between the Cambridge Platform and our Fifth Principle. Of the sixty five surviving congregations that gathered to vote for approval of the platform, 21 are members of the Unitarian Universalist Association today.

Moving forward in time, one hundred twenty eight years later, in 1776, those who signed their names to the Declaration of Independence included members of both branches of our faith tradition, Unitarianism and Universalism. The birth of the United States of America began with what some have called the grand experiment in democracy. The founding of our country and its democratic form of government signified another step toward bottom-up decision making. But bottom-up decision making has its problems, and democracy is far from perfect as a governing system. There are certain situations where democracy may not be the most appropriate decision making process. An example might be a family of two parents and three young teens each having an equal vote on how the family's money will be spent.

John Adams, a Unitarian who would later become the second US President, identified, in 1788, one of the significant potential hazards of democracy. He warned of "the tyranny of the majority." Democracy, as we all know, is based on the concept of one person, one vote. In such a system, however, it is quite possible for the majority to show little or no respect for the wants, needs or even the rights of those in the minority. We have seen this happen throughout the history of our nation. In the nineteenth century our nation was ripped apart and engulfed in war because of just such a situation. And in this last national election, it could be argued that a minority of the voters elected a government that the majority did not want and that many view as tyrannical.

So now I want to move from considering the past to looking at the present. It seems to me that we are witnessing a level of division in our country that may be as high as it has been at any time in my lifetime. I say this even though I lived through much of the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's as well as the Vietnam War era. Today, as Mike Clark indicated last Sunday, our democracy is threatened. It is threatened from without, but more importantly, it is threatened from within. It is threatened from within by the deep divide I just mentioned. I believe the internal divide is the greatest threat we face because it sets family member against family member and neighbor against neighbor.

When emotions become intense regarding an issue, it is very easy for conversations to turn into heated arguments or for communication channels to close down all together. We may see those who have views different than our own as enemies we need to fight and defeat. Parker Palmer speaks to this in another section of

his book. He writes; “Get me going on politicians who distort my faith tradition to win votes or on racial bigots and homophobes who want to translate their personal shadows into public policy, and this nice Quaker boy from the Midwest does a passable imitation of the Incredible Hulk.” Having met Parker Palmer and heard him speak, I find it hard to visualize this transition. He goes on to say; “Still, no matter how jaw dropping or morally offensive I find some people’s convictions, I must learn how to speak up in the civic community without denying my opponents their humanity and further poisoning the political ecosystem on which democracy depends.” His ending comment stands out for me, “I must learn how to speak up in the civic community without denying my opponents their humanity and further poisoning the political ecosystem on which democracy depends.” As Palmer pointed out in the earlier reading, the democratic process, a bottom-up approach, holds continual dynamic tension, tension that can be very difficult to hold. It demands that we find ways not just to engage with those who hold a different perspective than our own, but to engage in a way that embodies our UU Principles and strengthens our civic community. This is one of our great challenges today. And it is required of us if we are going to fully live into what our Fifth Principle asks of us.

As a religious faith community that has set forth its Principles, we have agreed to support and affirm the democratic process and share power and responsibility with those around us. The road is not easy and. At times the process will likely lead to decisions which are not the most equitable or just. Such inequitable or unjust decisions occur in all branches of our government. We see this in executive orders, in congressional actions and in court decisions. When such decisions are made we may find encouragement and even inspiration in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. who, during the height of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960’s said, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Most people aren’t aware of the fact that this memorable quote has its roots in the writings of a firebrand Unitarian minister of the 1800’s, namely Theodore Parker. King had read much of what Parker wrote. Theodore Parker was an abolitionist and minister of the Spring Street Church in West Roxbury, Massachusetts from 1837 through 1846. He preached and wrote passionately against slavery. Here is a small sample of what he was sharing from the pulpit in the mid-1800’s:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.

Like Theodore Parker I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. From my limited knowledge and experience, however, I agree with his assertion that it bends toward justice. I also believe that each one of us can and does make a difference in the curve of that bend.

I hope I have made it clear that our faith tradition has a long history of supporting the democratic process and of challenging systems and laws that are unjust or inequitable. There remains, however, much to be accomplished if we are ever to attain what our Sixth Principle states, “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” It will very likely be a long and arduous journey along the path to that

goal. At those times when the democratic process becomes drudgery or seems to fail, I would encourage us to remember and be inspired by the words of Abraham Lincoln that we heard earlier. "I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have." As we go forth today may we carry our light as a beacon of hope. And may we continue to demand, through our words and our actions, that our democratic process respect and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

May it be so.