

One Nation, Indivisible?©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on July 7, 2019

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Those of you who are slightly older than me likely know this sentence by heart. It is the beginning of the Pledge of Allegiance which was formally adopted by Congress in 1942. I didn't learn this particular version of the pledge because the words "under God" were added to it when I was two. Ever since those two words were added there has been disagreement in this country about whether or not a person should be required or even expected to recite the pledge. The disagreement the added words instigated is one small indication that while we belong to one nation, division exists in our country.

Today our nation is divided in multiple ways. Some people assert that the country is more divided today than it has been in many decades, possibly going as far back as the Civil War. The people of this nation are divided on a wide range of issues and topics. Issues such as affordable medical insurance, climate change, marriage equality and gun rights and gun restrictions to name just a few. There are also significant divisions related to groups of people. Even though there are Federal, State and local laws that prohibit discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin, rampant discrimination persists. Discrimination persists against people of color, against people of various religious faith traditions, against women, and against many immigrants to this country. Far too often members of these groups which are supposedly protected by law are targets of prejudice, hate and violence. And people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender are not specifically included in the Federal anti-discrimination laws. The discrimination, the prejudice, the hatred and the violence against the groups of people I have just named are all indications of the significant divisions in our nation.

The divisions I have just mentioned are definitely significant and should be troubling to all of us. If we look back in history, however, we find that division has been prevalent since before the founding of this nation. The divisions have been based on such things as class, national origin, gender, race, religious affiliation as well as other issues. Here are just a few examples. The early colonists were distinctly divided regarding the matter of religious beliefs and affiliations. They were also divided regarding whether to seek independence from England. After the Declaration of Independence was signed, divisions arose among representatives who were tasked with writing the Constitution. In his book *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, Parker Palmer writes; "Of the fifty-eight delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, only thirty-nine signed the final document. The remaining 30 percent disagreed so deeply with one part or another of the Constitution that they took a pass on posterity." Thirty percent of the delegates refused to sign. In the earliest days of our country only property owning, adult, white males had the right to vote, women had few rights and many of those who were black had no rights at all since they were slaves and considered to be property. The native people who were here prior to the arrival of

European settlers were summarily dispossessed of their lands and/or killed both because of their race and their religious beliefs. Most people in this country are unaware that even though the First Amendment of the Constitution specifically protects religious freedom, from the late 1800's until the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, native people of this land could be put in prison for participating in their religious practices.

I mention these historical divisions for two reasons. First, they give us perspective on what is happening today. Our current situation is not unique or even all that unusual. This is not the first time our nation has been divided, it is not the worst time our nation has been divided, and it will not be the last time our nation will be divided. Second, I would propose that a significant reason for the current level of division we are experiencing is because those who have been oppressed and marginalized in the past are now making their voices heard at ever increasing levels. It is well past time that we hear them and that they be given the respect and the rights they deserve.

Clearly the division within our nation is important socially, culturally and politically. But it would be reasonable that some of you might wonder how the division in our nation is a religious issue. That wondering can be addressed on two levels, one very large in scale and the other more particular to our religious faith tradition. On the grand scale, I offer this quote from Karen Armstrong who has been studying and writing about world religions for decades. In her book *The Case for God*, Armstrong writes; "All the world faiths insist that true spirituality must be expressed consistently in practical compassion, the ability to *feel with* the other." Feeling with the other is a nearly universal spiritual value and precept. Yet in spite of this, there are significant numbers of people who resist or deny the call to "*feel with* the other." Many such people don't even want to hear from or consider the other in any significant way.

More particularly, in our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, we have a set of Seven Principles that offer us guidance in our daily lives. These Seven Principles include the values that we hold and seek to live by. I would invite you to take a few minutes now to turn to the back of your Order of Service where these Principles are printed and read them. (pause)

In our Principles you will notice there are words and concepts that are also in the founding documents of our nation. Words such as justice and liberty. And concepts such as equality and peace for all. These values are essential if we are ever, as the authors of the Constitution wrote, "to form a more perfect Union." Forming a more perfect union is a laudable goal, one that I believe many of us share. Today however, the goal of a more perfect union is in danger. It is in danger from those who feel threatened by the idea that all of "We the People" are entitled to a voice in decision making. The people I am referring to don't believe that all of "We the People" are, as it is written in the Constitution, "created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

My guess is that so far I have been "speaking to the choir" as the old saying goes. So now I want to challenge us a bit. The challenge comes when we try to imagine how to respond to the people I have just been referring to, those who feel threatened by

the concept that “We the People” means each and everyone of us. I am sure at some point we have all had encounters and experiences with someone who has expressed the opinion that the rights of someone they perceive as “other” should be denied. How are we called to relate to such people? Here I would refer us to our Second Principle which states, “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” Compassion, as Karen Armstrong points out, is a shared value of all the world’s faith traditions. When relating to those who express views which are counter to our religious and humanitarian values, we are called to respond with compassion. I don’t know about you, but there are times when I find it very difficult to feel, let alone respond with, compassion. Yet each time I have such an encounter, I recognize it as the opportunity it is. It is an opportunity for me to develop and deepen both my values and my faith.

If responding to the person with compassion isn’t challenge enough, there is more that is needed and called for in such encounters. We must, whenever possible, find ways to express our values openly in an effort to counter prejudice and discrimination. So while we are called to relate to people with compassion, we are also called to work diligently to dismantle oppression, hatred and injustice. This is a tremendously difficult task folks. One that few if any of us are able to accomplish in every situation. It is a task that in our country today we must set ourselves to.

I would say that this is one of the greatest tasks before us today. The task isn’t to make America great again. America is as great as it has ever been. The task is to make America beautiful. By beautiful, I don’t mean physically beautiful. All you have to do is step outside and look around and you will see the physical beauty. What I am suggesting is that we need to make American feel beautiful for all those who call this nation home. This country will feel beautiful when we actualize the values that are so clearly stated in the preamble of the Constitution, in the Declaration of Independence and in our Seven Principles.

As I consider the size of this task I seek exemplars to learn from. I think of great leaders and teachers who have come before, leaders and teachers who have risen to and lived into such a task. I think of people such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela in other countries, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks here in the U.S and Jeannette Rankin from right here in Montana. Each of these people were willing to take on systems of power that were unjust, while at the same time demonstrating compassion for the people who sustained such systems.

In the days ahead I am absolutely certain that all of us will have a multitude of opportunities to practice showing compassion for individuals, while also expressing and demonstrating our values. And I am just as certain that most, if not all of us, will sometimes fail to both show compassion and express our values in the best and most beneficial way. In those situations, we get to practice having compassion for ourselves. None of us is going to get it right every time. We all have a great deal to learn.

As I indicated earlier, the task that lies ahead of us is immense. If we are going to see the task through we will need courage, strength, wisdom, encouragement, and support. We will need the members and friends of this Fellowship along the way. We will need to reach out to others who share our values to remind us that we are not the few, but instead we are the many. I would suggest that we also look to movements that

have come before, such as the Civil Rights movement in this country, to teach us how to accomplish our task. And today, just like during the Civil Rights movement, I believe we will need to have songs that will remind us of what our task is and what we are striving for. We have such a song in our grey hymnal. A song written by Holly Near. I can't imagine any better way to end this sermon than to invite you to sing this hymn with me now. So please rise in body or in voice and join me in singing hymn #170, "We Are a Gentle, Angry People." And let's not be tentative when we sing it. Let's belt it out so the neighbors can hear. Erin will play an introduction to get us ready to sing out loud and clear.