

“Democracy on the Threshold of ...”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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The emergence and spread of COVID-19 poses a threat not just to the health and wellbeing of all of us, the virus also poses a threat to our democratic form of government. In the past couple of months, numerous Presidential primaries have been disrupted in one way or another. Wisconsin’s Presidential primary experienced several problems including a significant reduction in polling locations and long lines of people standing close together for hours. Here in Montana the Presidential primary will be conducted using mail-in ballots exclusively. Many states have postponed their primaries. And just this past week New York canceled its Democratic Presidential primary altogether, drawing threats of lawsuits.

While COVID-19 has been getting a great deal of attention lately, this virus isn’t the only threat to our democratic system of government. Other threats include interference by foreign governments, limits to who is able to vote, gerrymandering, and the infusion of ever increasing amounts of money, especially what is referred to as “dark money.” These are just a few of the multitude of threats to the democratic system in our country today.

But it isn’t just in this country that the democratic process is having difficulties. In the past few years democracies around the world have been experiencing significant challenges. Corruption and voting irregularities have led to disputes regarding who won elections in a number of countries. Some nations have been forced to hold multiple elections in order to determine the political leadership of the country. And once in office, some democratically elected leaders seek to change the rules so they can stay in power for as long as possible, even if that isn’t the will of the people.

If you spend much time thinking about the issues that are currently posing challenges to the democratic system in this country alone, it would be easy to become cynical about the future of democracy itself. Significant numbers of people have lost hope in the democratic process. They don’t believe they have the power or the ability to make a difference. From this place of hopelessness and powerlessness, they take a pass on the opportunity to vote. Such disengagement is yet another threat to the democratic process.

The challenges I have mentioned so far, along with many others, have led some to the conclusion that democracy may be on the threshold of collapse. Last year, at the annual meeting of the International Society of Political Scientists, Shawn Rosenberg, a Professor of Political Science and Psychological Science at UC Irvine, presented a paper titled “Democracy Devouring Itself: The Rise of the Incompetent Citizen and the Appeal of Right Wing Populism.” In that paper he made the following assertion. “In well established democracies like the United States, democratic governance will continue its inexorable decline and will eventually fail.” Rosenberg bases his prediction on research, both his own and that of others in the fields of social and political science. The research indicates that democratic forms of government have been experiencing an ominous trend over that past ten years or more—a trend that has seen the election of national leaders who espouse ideologies and act in ways that are in direct opposition to what is stated in documents such as our Constitution—documents that are the foundation of democracy in this and other countries around the world.

Both the democratic process and the results of science are something we Unitarian Universalists hold in high regard. Each is mentioned very early in the Bylaws and Rules of the Unitarian Universalist Association. In Article II of the Bylaws, which is titled “Principles and Purposes,” we find the following two statements.

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

And a few sentences later we find; “The living tradition we share draws from many sources.” This sentence is followed by six sources. The Fifth Source states; “humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

So what are we to do? There is clear evidence that democracy is struggling, not only in our country but in a significant number of other countries as well. And there are some in the scientific community who are telling us that democracy is going to fail. Do we simply throw up our hands and say “I surrender to the inevitable?” Do we rail against all that we recognize is wrong or broken in our political system? Do we simply go about our daily business and pretend that the challenges democracy is experiencing really don’t matter all that much to our lives? Or do we find a way to face the issues that I have mentioned and seek to find ways to actively and responsibly contribute what we can to keep democracy alive and functioning as well as is humanly possible? There are other options, I am sure. The question is, what will each of us do.

It is very evident that democracy has its problems today. But truth be told, democracy has had problems for a very long time. If you delve into the history of the U.S. Constitution, you will find that only thirty-nine of the fifty-five delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 signed the final document. The remaining thirty percent of the delegates had such strong misgivings with one portion or another of the document that they refused to add their signature to it. The Constitution wasn’t and isn’t perfect just as democracy hasn’t been and never will be perfect. Over the past 200+ years of this country’s history, democracy has gone through periods of significant struggle, not just once or twice but many times. While the Civil War was the most pronounced and well known of those struggles, it certainly wasn’t the only one this country has weathered.

I began by stating that COVID-19 poses a threat to our democratic form of government. I want to add now that COVID-19 might also be creating a situation that could reinvigorate and possibly even strengthen our democracy. That may seem counter-intuitive because what I am stating here clearly sets out a contradiction—namely that something which is a threat may also be a benefit. I will offer an example here that may provide some clarity regarding what I am suggesting.

As COVID-19 began to spread, public health experts and many political leaders told us that it was essential for people to restrict their movement and contact with others. In many states across the country, including here in Montana, Governors and local elected officials issued orders to stay at home or shelter in place. Such orders are in stark contrast to what most of us have viewed as our right to freedom. Yet in spite of that fact, most people, regardless of political party, have been in support of such measures. COVID-19 then has brought people together in action. Action that has not only offered protection for us as individuals, families, and communities, but for all of us. Over the past few years there has been a growing sentiment

toward viewing certain groups of people as “the other.” COVID-19 has challenged the “us versus them” narrative which has been touted by some elected officials in our country. If recent polls are accurate, the threat of the virus has brought increasing numbers of people together in regards to their perceptions and perspectives as more and more people realize that we are all in this together. The reality is that if we are unable or unwilling to find a way to work together, all of us, irrespective of our differences, will be the worse for it. From the recent legislative actions taken by elected officials in Washington, D.C.—elected officials, I would note, of every stripe, plaid and polka dot possible—it would seem that this reality may be gaining traction. I say this because just a few months ago members from the the two major political parties in both branches of congress seemed to have differences that were irreconcilable. Differences that made it incredibly difficult to get legislation passed. Yet in the last few weeks these same legislators have come together in ways that no one could have predicted before COVID-19 arrived. These legislators have found a way to work together for the benefit of the country and its people. These legislators have done this so quickly and so decisively that I am going to say there may yet be hope for our democracy.

So now I want to return to our reading. The reading begins by stating “The future is dark.” Over the course of the last three-plus years I have heard from many of you that you viewed the future of this country as dark. And in the past few months, with the arrival of COVID-19, that sense of darkness has intensified for many people I have spoken with. The number of people who have died as a result of COVID-19 could make any of us feel that we are in, or may soon be in, a tomb. But, as Valarie Kaur asks, what if the darkness we find ourselves in is actually the darkness of the womb. “What if,” as she goes on to ask, “our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born. What if the story of America is one long labor?” I believe the answer to this second question is that the story of America, and more specifically, the story of American democracy, is and has always been a long labor—a labor of birthing the dream that is asserted in the Preamble to the Constitution. If we view this darkness as the preparation for a birth, might we find it within ourselves to bear the pain and the struggle that lies ahead? And as we bear the pain and engage in the struggle, will we listen to the wisdom of those who have come before us? Will we breath into that pain and that struggle? And when the time is right, will we push, with all of our might, to give birth to the democracy that we, and those who have come before us, have dreamt of? Each of us must answer these questions for ourselves.

It is my hope that in the months ahead each of us will find the answers to these questions, the answers that are in our hearts. And when we find the answers, may we strive with all of our ability and our might to live out the values our democracy was and is built upon. And in doing so, may we, as the Preamble of the Constitution states, secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.

So may it be.