

The Promise of Peace

An Election Sermon

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

The Promise of Peace: Preamble

A month from today, the election will finally be over.

The ominous ads on radio and TV will vanish.
Yard signs will be banished to the recycling bin.
And, hopefully, we will wake knowing
the country has set a clear and confident course for the future.

Now, of course, the wrangling for power in the House of Commons
may go on for weeks or months.

We may face a period of uncertainty should no party win a clear mandate.
We may confront head on the instability of minority government.

And we, or more precisely David Johnston and at least two party leaders,
may come to find the possibility of a governing coalition
far more promising than any of the alternatives.

With the three major parties locked so closely in the polls, at this point,
it feels impossible to know what will happen.

That is why this election—
and the sacred right to vote—is so vitally important.

Polls suggest that a surprising number of the ridings where we,
the members of this congregation, live are still up for grabs.

Which means the ballots cast by those of us able to vote
may make a meaningful difference in a pivotal election

at a profoundly critical moment in the history of this country.

Now, there is in the Unitarian tradition
that traces down through the Puritans of New England,
a history of ministers delivering,
a week or two before a major vote,
a fiery sermon instructing congregants
how to return to God's good graces through the ballot box.

In a two-hour stemwinder of a sermon,
after blaming and shaming their congregants
for God's clear disfavour for the world,
the ministers of the 17th century
essentially told their congregations how to vote.

Of course, I won't be doing that this morning.
I won't be speaking for two long hours,
I won't blame or shame,
and I certainly won't be telling you who to vote for.

I'm gratefully a bit—if just a bit—smarter than that.

And, besides, I have to take care to not violate CRA guidelines
for charitable organizations—something my Puritan predecessors
never had to worry with, back in their day.

I will instead ask you to consider the values
you will take into the voting booth.

I will ask you to give thought to what you consider most sacred—
what you feel must be protected, or strengthened, or saved—
what you see as being so vitally important to the future,
to building up a better world,
to increasing the sum total of love and justice on this planet,
that you will cast your single, precious vote
in the hallowed hope that it will shape the course of things to come.

When I told Richard Kirsh, the founder and our congregation's
most dedicated supporter of the Central America Project,
that I felt I needed to preach an Election Sermon this morning—
and apologized that I likely wouldn't be pointing

to the work of that worthy project in a very direct way—
he simply reminded me of the violent upheaval
and the continuing fragility of democracy in that part of the world,
and suggested we remember what a privilege it is
to participate in the democratic process of this country,
even as it shows signs of neglect and abuse.

So, I ask you to consider what resources you will bring to this sacred task.
What will guide you in deciding how to vote?

My hope is that you will vote your values.
That you'll be led by your hopes and not your fears.
That you'll cast a vote that "serves life"
and upholds the principles we, as Unitarians, profess.

In a moment I'll ask you to join me in reciting those principles.

And after we've brought them to mind once more,
I'll offer you not a hellfire and brimstone election sermon,
but instead the speech I desperately long to hear
delivered by the winner on election night.

A speech grounded in Unitarian principles.
A speech I would be thrilled to hear from any of the party leaders.

For such a speech would, I believe,
signal the start of a very different and deeply needed approach
to ensuring our common well-being on this planet,
not merely for this moment in history, but for generations to come.

So, will you turn with me to the back of your hymnals to #594
and read the words responsively with me?

Responsive Reading #594: "Principles and Purposes for All of Us"

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We believe that each and every person is important.

We affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

We believe that all people should be treated fairly.

We affirm and promote acceptance of one another
and encouragement to spiritual growth.

*We believe that our churches are places where all people are accepted,
and where we keep on learning together.*

We affirm and promote
a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

*We believe that each person must be free
to search for what is true and right in life.*

We affirm and promote the right of conscience
and the use of the democratic process.

*We believe that all people should have a voice and a vote
about the things which concern them.*

We affirm and promote the goal of world community
with peace, liberty and justice for all.

We believe that we should work for a peaceful, fair and free world.

We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of
which we are a part.

We believe that we should care for our planet earth.

“The Promise of Peace: An Election Speech”

My fellow Canadians,

We meet this evening,
at the end of one of the longest
and arguably most bitter elections in our country’s history.

Beyond those of us here in this hall,
there are millions of people tonight,

from coast to coast to coast,
huddled around television or computer screens,
gathered in people's homes or in pubs or hotel ballrooms,
all coming together in the tender hope
that the results of the votes cast across Canada
will open a new and promising chapter
in the story of this country that we love.

As the votes have come in tonight, I have been both elated
and humbled by the support you have shown for our party.

Given the strength of the election results,
I anticipate being asked by the Governor General
to form the new government in the coming days.

As I have indicated repeatedly throughout this campaign,
my party and I are fully prepared to accept this challenge
and this privilege for the coming four years.

With what looks to be some 207 seats in the House of Commons,
you have given us a strong mandate to govern.

And, yet, I stand here tonight to say
that I have also heard your call to do more than simply govern.
I have heard a deeper call to lead.

This election has come at a critical time in the life of this country
and, I believe, in the history of the world.

The choices we make in the next few years
will affect the long-term course of life on this planet—
leading us either down a path of continued self-destruction,
or toward an enduring commitment to respect and protect
the fragile balance of conditions that sustains all of life on this planet.

The choices we make in the coming years will speak clearly
of our commitment to live into the promise that is Canada—
of whether we can and will summon the resolve
to strive toward our highest aspirations,
of whether we will undertake the often difficult work
to make this country the best it can possibly be.

The challenges before us are enormous.

Yet so are the opportunities—
if we will commit to making the very most of them.

The honour of leading this great country
comes with tremendous responsibilities.

Chief among them is a commitment to tell you the truth—
day in and day out—about the affairs of your government.

But the leadership you are asking of us
also requires an unflinching honesty
about the true state of things in our country and our world.

The game of politics so often pressures people of good will,
the public servants you elect,
to gloss over the harder realities of our situation.

We have a collective aversion to hearing bad news,
and we too often punish politicians who dare to pass such news along.

I vow tonight that I will consistently take that risk,
trusting that Canadians can handle hearing the truth,
even when it is hard.

For we live in a serious time that demands serious conversations.

The truth, unvarnished and in full,
must be brought to bear if these all-important conversations
are to strengthen our democracy and secure our future.

I can predict, then, that I am almost certain, in the years ahead,
to tell you things you do not wish to hear.

And, yet, my hope is that we can achieve a deeper maturity
that empowers us to contend with what is hard
and make the difficult decisions that will allow us to find our way
forward.

This is to say that the road ahead will not be easy.

A more secure future is asking us to change course
from the path we have been on.

Without a doubt, there will be costs to cover and sacrifices to be made.

Not unlike living through times of war,
we are being called to bring our best selves
to the challenges that we face.

Here is what I believe is possible.
Here is what I believe we can achieve.
Here is what I believe should be done, and must be done.

We must learn and we must act to live in
right relationship with this planet we call home.
We must come to understand our role
as stewards of the earth's finite resources.

Caught up in the great web of life,
not only in the here and now, but with all of life yet to come,
we mustn't carelessly sell off or squander the bounty of the earth.

We are long overdue for a radical reorientation
in our use and exploitation of the resources we find,
from the energy we consume, to the water we drink, to the air we
breathe.

To secure the future of life on this planet, we must strive,
with all deliberate speed, to achieve a largely carbon-free economy.

To do so, we will have to transition to a different economic system,
and, frankly, a different way of being.

This transition won't be easy. Far from it.
It will require the full influence of government to overhaul
the structures that cannot serve us sustainably
into a more precarious future.

And it will take the full force of our collective will
to journey through this transition together.

It will be sorely tempting,
when we are called to sacrifice and change,
to abandon our efforts,
to revert to the elusive security of the way things have been.

But to do so would be to invest ourselves in a false and dangerous hope.

To keep faith with generations still to come will demand
we commit ourselves to this difficult work over and over again.

Yet it is the sacred bargain we are bound to keep with life itself—
a force that has brought each of us into being
against the most incredible of odds.

In balance to our deepening regard for life's interconnected web,
we must cultivate an ever-growing commitment
to affirm the worth and dignity of each and every person.

This work must begin with an unwavering resolve to reach
genuine and lasting reconciliation with the First Peoples of this land.

Our efforts will build upon our very Canadian capacity
to celebrate the diversity that so clearly strengthens our common life.

As our country grows ever more diverse,
we must increase our capability to recognise that all people bring gifts,
and unique identities to be honoured, respected, and employed
in the service of building up a better world
within and beyond the borders of Canada.

To strive toward the full promise of this nation,
we must ensure the well-being of all who live in this land –
and do what we can to support those in need around the world.

We must ensure that justice and mercy
are extended to those who have the least in our society.

We must ensure that every person be granted the basic necessities of life,
from food and healthy water,
to education and the all-important gift of hope,

which beckons one's life toward the possible.

As we give thought to the Canada we seek to build,
we would do well to consider the Canada that has already been.

The proudest moments from our history
can point us to the promise that is ours
to uncover in this age to which we belong.

On this momentous night, as we turn with hope toward the future,
may we rise “to the better angels of our nature.”

May we embrace the real responsibilities of citizenship,
understanding ourselves as so much more than mere taxpayers—
seeing ourselves, instead,
as co-authors in the unfolding story of Canada,
as co-creators of a just and peaceful land,
and as co-conspirators of the transforming power of love,
who serve life and help heal our world.

And, with that, at the end of a long election night,
the crowd—comprised largely of Unitarians—goes wild,
for they are grateful for the votes they cast that day...!