

An Election Sunday Sermon

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As you may remember, Massachusetts was founded as a theocracy. This means that in the early years of that colony there was no clear distinction between church and state. Indeed, in many ways, the civil, secular government was understood to be subservient to and the expression of the religious vision. All citizens were expected to belong to a local parish, and church activities and programs were supported out of the public treasury. What you may not remember is that following the American Revolution, and the adoption of the Constitution of the United States, it was held that the constitutional decree of separation between church and state was intended to apply only on the federal level. What various states did about religion was not a federal concern. Consequently, Massachusetts maintained public support of churches well into the 1830's. What you also may not remember is that Massachusetts was the heartland of American Unitarianism, and that Unitarian churches were part of the establishment in Massachusetts--that is, they were supported by taxes into the 1830's.

Because of this historic entanglement between church and state, Unitarians in Massachusetts, and to some degree throughout New England, took a great deal of interest in the political life of the community. One expression of this interest was a tradition called "The Election Sunday Sermon." On the Sunday before election day, the Unitarian clergy would mount their pulpits and deliver themselves of a sermon in which they sought to define the moral, ethical, religious dimensions of the issues to be decided by the electorate. Nor did they pretend to be non-partisan. In the struggle for a moral and just society, the church was called upon to be fiercely partisan, and so our religious forbearers did not hesitate to instruct the faithful concerning how they should cast their ballots.

I am not aware of any studies which suggest how effective this tradition was in shaping electoral outcomes. That tradition, however, left a clear imprint on subsequent Unitarian thought about the relationship between the church and the secular world. Even after the churches were disestablished, and tax money no longer flowed into the coffers of the church, Unitarians retained the tradition of the Election Sunday Sermon, as a symbol of their sense that religion cannot be restricted to the private sphere, but must address public issues. Indeed, over time, Unitarians would come to embrace the position advocated by the Universalists--that separation of Church and State is necessary precisely because it frees the church to be more honest in its critique of the political and public realm, that the duty of religion is to inject moral and ethical issues into the struggle for power.

This morning, the last Sunday before election day, 1992, I would like to revive the tradition of the Election Sunday Sermon. I will not presume to tell you for whom you should vote, but I would like to examine some of the issues which seem to be at stake in

this election, suggest some of the moral imperatives which I find present in the alternatives which confront us, and suggest some of the challenges we face as we seek to be morally and ethically responsible citizens in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Let me begin this morning, by suggesting some of the pseudo-issues, the distractions which have been offered us as a basis for choice during this long, dreary election process. Over the last few weeks, I have heard one of the three major candidates suggest that when you enter the voting booth, you should ask, "Which of these guys would I pick to balance my check book? Which of these guys would I choose to manage my pension fund? Which of these guys--if they were younger--would I want my daughter to marry? And when you have answered these questions," he said, "you'll know who to vote for." Let me suggest to you that whether the candidate was serious, or just joking--and it is not always easy to tell--those are clearly irrelevant criteria by which to choose a President of the United States, or Members of Congress, or people to fill almost any other public office. The fact is that in selecting public officials, were are not often being asked to select an accountant, we are not often being asked to select a stock broker, and we are certainly not being asked to choose a son-in-law. Despite all the jokes this political season about how to spell "potato" and whether our public officials know how to balance a check book or even to add, this has very little to do with the kinds of skills and talents and vision needed by the people we choose to assume public office. I would argue that the candidate who hopes we will choose him because of his accounting ability, or because of his skill with the stock market, or because he would make a good catch for our daughter does not display an understanding of what is at stake in this election. This election is not about being a nice guy, or about being able to spell, or about balancing check books. Something else is at stake here.

Over the course of the past few weeks, I have heard another candidate ask, over and over again, "Who do you trust to run the government? Who do you trust in a crisis? Who do you trust to take care of your family?" Again, this is a wrong formulation of the issue. In a democratic society we may give much to politicians and elected officials--we may give them our money, we may give them our affection, we may give them our votes. The one thing we dare not give them is our trust. No elected official is ever to be trusted. And I say this not because I believe that politicians are, by nature immoral or unethical. Quite the contrary. I believe that the vast majority of the men and women who offer themselves for public office are people who care profoundly about the nation, who want to solve its problems, who dream great dreams for the people.

It is precisely this quality which allows them to be seduced by their very success. Once entered upon the political process, objectivity disappears, harsh alternatives replace soft shadings, and it becomes almost impossible to resist identifying personal success and the public welfare as one and the same thing. Our history is filled with the stories of good people, elected to office determined to serve high, moral purposes, who became convinced that the welfare of the people was bound up in their remaining in office, and as a consequence, were prepared to regard virtually any compromise as acceptable. Because they care so much, elected officials are always tempted to believe that they are so much better for the people than the opponents that a little lie, a small betrayal, a modest

accommodation is not too high a price to pay to keep the scoundrels out. It is this identification of personal and party good with the public good which infects the political system and it is for this reason that we dare not trust any politician. Politicians are to be watched, not trusted.

Of course, I am not the first to come to this conclusion. The men who framed the Constitution of the United States understood very well the seductiveness of power, and the tendency to identify personal success with the public good. That is why they devised a system of checks and balances--making certain that there would always be someone watching. "A system of checks and balances" is another way of saying do not trust elected leaders; watch them. And that is the reason that an appeal to trust as the basis for choosing a candidate in this year's election fails to move me.

The third candidate has been asking us to choose on the basis of the programs he has offered. "I have outlined what I want to do for the country. You've heard what the other guys propose to do. Choose between these programs." Now I have to admit that there is some part of me which wants to say, "Yes, this is the right way to make a rational political choice." Except-- except I have been around long enough to know that there is many a slip between campaign promises and the power to implement those promises. I also know that the world doesn't stand still. By the time January arrives, the challenges which loom so large in our sight now may be overwhelmed by developments we cannot not foresee--developments which will render the promises of November irrelevant or impossible or both. And more than this, I have to be honest and say that while I have vague, general ideas of what the candidates are promising, I have not mastered the details of their proposals, nor have I had the time or the opportunity to subject them to a careful and detailed analysis. At some level, the programs are little more than slogans--not that there is no substance to them, but in terms of public understanding, public insight, public judgment, they function as a standard around which to rally. I find, after years of watching what happens to campaign promises and candidates' programs when the election is over, that the suggestion that I choose on the basis of "the issues" is less than satisfying.

How, then, are we to decide when we stand in the voting booth on Tuesday, the curtain drawn behind us and the need to choose confronting us? I believe that the choice we will make is important to the future of this country. While few election results are irrevocable, there are times when patterns are set, patterns which determine the content of political discourse for a long time to come, and my sense is that this may be one of those elections. In my mind, what is at stake is a decision about the kind of society we shall be as we move into the twenty-first century. It will come as no surprise to you that I am not happy with the state of the nation and the way it has tended over the past decade and a half. I have watched as we have carefully redefined what freedom means. In his book *THE ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY*, Charles Taylor suggests that increasingly we have defined freedom not as the right and the responsibility to engage in the governing process, but rather as the right to accumulate and to consume. This redefinition inevitably leads us to embrace "limited government," meaning by that a government which will not interfere with us, which will let us alone, in our private little worlds, to enjoy our loot. He

says,

A society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are 'enclosed in their own hearts' is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government. They will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely.

This opens the danger of a new, specifically modern form of despotism... 'soft' despotism....not a tyranny of terror and oppression as in the old days. The government will be mild and paternalistic. It may even keep democratic forms, with periodic elections. But in fact everything will be run by an 'immense tutelary power,' over which people will have little control.

This insight suggests to me why we have watched largely in silence, as the rich have grown richer and the poor have grown poorer. This insight explains to me why we have remained largely silent as our great cities have decayed, as our infrastructure has crumbled, as more and more of our children have been plunged into poverty, finding themselves hungry and homeless and without medical care. This insight explains to me why we have remained so passive as the nation has plunged into debt in order to provide guns for the military and butter for the very rich. And this explains why we have tolerated an election campaign in which these issues have been lost in the noise. We who have the power to make self-government a reality, have made a Faustian bargain. So long as the government provides us with the means for a satisfactory private life, we will not exert ourselves in behalf of the public realm. We will enjoy our safe little enclaves, and we will not challenge the looting of the public treasury by the very rich, and we will blame the victims for whatever public ills force themselves upon our attention.

You see, I believe in an activist government. I believe that the role of government is not just to provide those of us who are fortunate a license to accumulate as much wealth and power and privilege as our native intellect and the exigencies of the situation will permit. That kind of society, whether we admit it or not, is devoid of ethics and functions according to the maxims that "might makes right," and "that winning is everything" and "history is written by the winners." I believe that government exists among us so that together we may create a society in which we understand ourselves as responsible for and answerable to each other, a society which embraces the conviction that every human being is of worth and no one is expendable, a society which functions as a shield for the poor and the weak and the helpless, a society that understands that the resources of the nation belong to the people, exist to serve the people and must be redistributed, so that the "mute inglorious Miltons," born into poverty and want, be not neglected in order that the sons and daughters of the rich and powerful may fill their lives with more and more things.

The truth is, of course, there isn't a candidate I can vote for who voices my dream for the nation, for that dream is an unlikely platform on which to stand for office in these days. And so, when I enter the voting booth on Tuesday, I shall make my choice on the basis of

a handful of very subjective judgments. Having listened to all the arguments, having suffered through all the debates, having weighed the pros and cons of promises and proposals, it will all come down to how I feel about the candidates. I will be asking myself these kinds of questions: Which candidate do I believe will be most likely to hear the silent cry of the dispossessed? Which candidate is most likely to believe that government has a responsibility to those who have neither power nor wealth nor position? Which candidate is most likely to feel compassion for those who have been casualties of the brutal social and economic warfare of the past decade and a half? Which candidate is most likely to see the government as an instrument to be used in the effort to build a just society rather than as an impediment hindering the elite? Which candidate is most likely to embrace a moral vision of a society in which justice and equity is the point of government? And having answered those questions, I will cast my vote.

The real meaning of this election, of course, will be decided by what we do on November 4, and on all the days following. The challenge we confront is to rebuild the social compact upon which the theory of democracy rests. That, in turn, is the result of a religious vision, a vision which holds the public realm to a moral standard, which insists that nothing is ultimately good for me which is not good for all and which refuses to sell our birthright for a meaningless handful of things. Fundamental to our health as a society is a recognition that we are responsible for and answerable to each other. No government, no matter how it is chosen, can be legitimate which tolerates grinding poverty in the midst of vast wealth; no government can be legitimate which permits the commonwealth to be plundered by an oligarchy of wealth and power; no government can be legitimate which shrugs its shoulders at homelessness, which clucks its tongue over a failed medical system, which prefers to pay for prisons rather than schools.

By the same token, no citizen is meeting her obligations or acquitting his responsibilities who remains silent in the face of injustice, who defines the political equation in terms of "what is in it for me," who does not recognize that elections are empty forms unless we, who have the power to influence government between elections, refuse to retreat into our private worlds and abandon the public realm to politicians and elected officials. The meaning of this elections will not be decided by how we vote on Tuesday. The meaning of this election will be decided by how many of us come out of the booth determined to be active citizens on Wednesday, and Thursday, and a week from Saturday and on and on, determined that this nation shall live up to its great dream of a land in which freedom means more than accumulation, in which freedom means more than lack of interference, in which freedom means the right of men and women to work together to create a commonwealth of justice and hope for all our children.