

Winks, Scowls, and Virtue Signaling
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
30 June 2019
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
www.FirstUnitarian.org

INTRODUCTION

We insist here at First Unitarian Society that our congregation be a “safe place to share dangerous ideas.” As with all high-flown aspirations, El Diablo is in the details.

What we must be sure we are doing here is not mere “virtue signaling.” Which is easy: saying one thing and doing something else. Hitting “like” on Facebook or retweeting.

We must be sure we are not merely “signaling” virtue but walking the walk.

I was grappling with this topic because today’s talk was auctioned at our Service Auction. While I was gathering my thoughts, an incident occurred at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly illustrating the issues I was considering—a minister was asked to leave General Assembly after publishing and distributing a book considered hurtful to GLBTQ people and people of color.

That violates the very essence of free speech, doesn’t it?

Or does it?

Rev. Kelli, who was there, will be directly addressing that incident on Sunday, July 21 and perhaps we will hear a bit when Rev. Kelli and Rev. Jim—who was also there—report on GA at noon today.

Another incident underlining this topic occurred the other night at the Democratic debate between Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. When it comes to wrongs in the US, who speaks with authority and who needs to do the listening?

The answers aren’t as easy as they at first appear.

For now, I hope to consider the broader issue of free speech, forbidden speech, and orthodoxy in religiously and politically liberal spaces. Let’s admit it: anyone can spew

hate anytime. We have “freedom of speech.” That’s not the question. The question is responsible speech.

I open this can of worms, aware of my social location—I’m an old white American—cisgender, heterosexual. And an old academic to boot. I have three terminal degrees, and spent nearly forty years in the privileged atmosphere of universities. And I’m a leader in one of the primer Humanist organizations. (I have some privilege.)

This is a difficult topic. A fraught topic. It may even be a topic where angels fear to tread. But . . . I haven’t ever claimed to be an angel, and so I rush in . . .

ONE

I have talked before about the theological foundation of the idea of democracy. (This isn’t as abstract and academic as it at first appears.)

The saying goes “Vox Populi, Vox Dei,” the voice of the people is the voice of God.

Allow me to unpack that a little bit.

As we know, the European monarchies had justified their power by claiming that God—the Christian God—chose them—the monarchs—to rule over the people. One of the outcomes of that was the invasion of Africa and the Western Hemisphere.

In the 1600s, British Puritans disputed that claim and successfully lopped off their king’s head and then proceeded to establish a government of their own.

How to justify power if the people pick and choose their rulers rather than God doing the choosing?

That was a problem. Solution: you make the same claim that the monarchs had used, but in a different way: Vox Populi, Vox Dei,” the voice of the people is the voice of God.

At first blush, this sound nice. But this is not abstract stuff. Some of you heard Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs, a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Nation, give a talk here about this a couple of Sundays ago.

We just took down an art exhibit out in the gallery that included a photo of a sculpture in the Minnesota state capitol building. What it says is, Vox Populorum est Vox Dei. Which is a slightly more pedantic way of saying, Vox Populi, Vox Dei,

In the case of Minnesota, this was a claim that Europeans could justifiably kill natives and steal their land. Look up the mural online. <http://travelphotobase.com/v/USMN/MNPC158.HTM>

Rev. Jim Bear pointed out that the capitol paintings are full of angels—symbols saying that the Christian God “approved this message” and condoned what the Europeans were doing here in Minnesota.

One of the figures in the capitol paintings is a hunched, half-animal figure representing “ignorance.” It’s a racist caricature of a person of color—ignorance personified—being driven out of the state by a blonde white guy.

The Minnesota state capitol building enshrines and perpetrates this genocidal, racist lie and this illegitimate claim to power: “Vox Populi, Vox Dei.”

The invading Euro-Americans were loading the dice, because, if we think about it a bit, lots depends upon which people get a voice and whose god gets to do the talking.

Please hear what I’m getting at—I’m not saying that liberal democracies are a bad idea. What I am saying is that we need to keep in mind who is doing most of the talking and for what motive.

Think about this “voice of the people is the voice of God” thing.

Take the UK Brexit vote for example. Before the vote, polls showed that only 37% of eligible voters supported Brexit, but 57% of the voters who showed up at the polls supported Brexit.

I think it’s fairly clear that behind the claim about democracy being the voice of God is the claim that a majority of the people want something.

Is that what happened in the case of Brexit?

That's one example. Take an example from the United States: how exactly is it that God is speaking through the people when a majority of Americans vote for a particular presidential candidate but the other candidate wins the Electoral College count?

Is it those who show up at the polls or those who vote in the Electoral College that represent the voice of God?

Or is it—as I suspect is the case—that there aren't any gods involved. It's all a human construct. A human construct that very well might not be working as advertised.

Yet, one of the rules of Liberal Club is that we believe in democracy—says so in the Seven Unitarian Universalist Principles.

Not so clear is how said democracy is supposed to be working.

Whose voice?

As I've mentioned before, Benjamin Franklin himself described democracy as "two foxes and a chicken" voting on what's for supper.

Franklin's answer was to build a republic so that the chicken—the minority opinion—had a chance.

But isn't the fact that here in the US men (mostly white men) vote on what women can do with their bodies . . . isn't that the same in principal as Franklin's two foxes and a chicken voting on what's for supper?

Is this working as advertised?

TWO

You can see, I hope, why Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs is skeptical of the claim that the voice of the people is the voice of God. His people and his God didn't get to speak.

Here's the truth: It wasn't about "god." It was about naked, brutal power.

And you see, I hope, why people of color often have some trouble accepting the contention that the majority here in the US is the voice of God.

And you can see why marginalized groups are skeptical about putting their rights and futures in the hands of such governments. Governments claiming to speak with the voice of God, upon—let's admit it—flimsy evidence.

Let's take another given. Another sacred cow: that debate is the way to get to democratic answers.

Free speech as a concept is all about what we call the "marketplace of ideas." The claim is that when all ideas get shared and aired publicly, the good ones sell and the bad ones get cancelled. (Sort of like network TV shows.)

But how often are the purveyors of ideas honest brokers? And how often is debate actually debate rather than mere loud proclaiming by the loudest people in the room?

Is debate the way to get at truth?

The English word debate comes to us from the Old French *debatre* "to fight, contend, to beat down"). Yes, the word debate literally contains "batter," to beat down.

Is that what we need to be doing in a democracy?

How about conversation rather than debate?

Because here's the thing: When we aren't in conversation, we forget the humanity of "the other." We go off battering.

The term "conversation" is based on the Latin word *verto*, "to turn," and *con*, "with." To turn with.

You can't converse to someone—you can only converse with someone. The turning is a turning with—going in the same direction.

Here's something I think is true: It's harder to marginalize, hate, and kill people you have conversed with. People you have "turned with."

As I've said many times, Humanism needs to work at reversing many of the bad habits Western thinking has got us into.

One bad idea is that some god or other wants things as they are.

And another is our "failure to communicate." To converse.

Look around. What we see is what a whole lot of man-splaining, white splaining, and hetero-splaining will do.

The evidence says that our society is not about turning with; it's about battering down. It's about "othering" rather than "us-ing."

Our summer intern Jé Hooper has some thoughts about this Jé . . .

CONCLUSION

In your order of service this morning is a quote from literary critic Terry Eagleton: "The din of conversation is as much meaning as we shall ever have."

I like that.

At first glance, it appears to be bleak—human conversation is all the meaning there is?

But you see, con-verse-ation—"turning with" other people—leads to another way of seeing reality.

Our theme for this summer is "Justice Embodied."

Justice embodied implies two things:

One, getting out of your head and into your body; and

Two, getting out of your comfort zone and into the hubbub of con-verse-ation.

My hope for today has been to trace how the very concept of free speech is soaked in Euro-White, patriarchal assumption.

I'm not saying that free speech isn't a great thing. I'm saying that the concept—when it isn't examined closely—can be rife with White Supremacy and misogyny. "Splaining."

Yes, even the sacred cattle called reason, logic, and science can fall prey to those obfuscating evils.

I'll leave you with an anecdote:

I've long been fascinated by an incident that appears to have actually happened.

In 1930 at the Second Conference on the Epistemology of the Exact Sciences—a conference predicated on the objectivity of human knowledge and the truth of science, a twenty-five year old named Kurt Gödel, who had just completed his doctoral studies, got up and shared his "incompleteness theorems."

Those theorems—"pure mathematics"—undermined the entire project of the conference, the Epistemology of the Exact Sciences.

Young Herr Gödel demonstrated that math has a big hole in its central claims.

Apparently, many of the great assembled mathematicians immediately saw that Kurt Gödel was correct and that they had been wrong for years. And right there and then they admitted the truth of Gödel's math.

That is how human thought should work.

Unfortunately, anecdotes of that sort are rare.

The physicist Max Planck stated the more usual mode of scientists when he said,

A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.

That saying is usually trimmed down to the phrase: "science advances one funeral at a time."

So much for debate.

Democracy. Debate. Reason. Logic. Science. These are not as solid as cornerstones and foundations as often we would like to think they are.

Let's resist making it true that "democracy advances one funeral at a time."

When White supremacy and patriarchy and motivated reasoning (and on and on) are running as background programs, the output is not as pure and sound as many of us would like to think.

But that's a hopeful, not a frightening prospect. We are not called to be not God's Pontificators but a people of nuance.

And the way to get there is not debate but conversation.

SOURCES

Delores S. Williams

Sisters in the Wilderness: the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk.

<https://www.orbisbooks.com/sisters-in-the-wilderness.html>

Dr. George Yancy on embodiment: https://youtu.be/_6f_oqu8_Mw

Podcasts, PDFs, and videos of FUS Assemblies and presentations are available here:

<https://firstunitarian.org/category/podcasts/>