



UU Congregation of Phoenix

November 2018

Democracy



Harmonies of Democracy
A Reflection
Benjie Messer, Music Director

Democracy, our worship theme for November, is a system of government “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” as the old quote goes. Democratic governments require people to work together. And we have work to do together. Beyond governing ourselves and resolving our disputes, we need to work together to solve the runaway destruction of our environment and our climate. But today is not a good day for democracy. Both in the U.S. and around the world, anti-democratic governments are on the rise, along with political and cultural polarization. Meditating on democracy at a time like this may bring up feelings of hopelessness, anger, or despair.

Our monthly hymn for November is “We Shall Overcome,” and it’s a perfect antidote to those feelings. For two hundred years, it has helped stoke flames of hope, peace and righteousness. It was written by Africans forced to live in slavery in the U.S., who sang “I’ll be all right someday” while working in the fields. In 1900, Rev. Charles Tindley gave the song a home in the black church with religious lyrics: “If in my heart I do not yield, I’ll overcome someday.” Then it found a home on the picket line, with workers singing “We will win our rights someday.” In the 1950’s and ’60’s, it became a key anthem of the U.S. civil rights movement, lending its strength to countless marches, demonstrations, and jail cells.

I was hired to work at UUCP in January of 2013, and the first service I attended after being hired was our annual Martin Luther King Jr. service. After some beautiful songs by an a cappella group and a powerful justice-themed sermon, the service ended with the congregation singing “We Shall Overcome.” As the song began, members of the a cappella group moved spontaneously, one by one, to the front of the sanctuary and took each other’s hands. Then they began motioning to others (including me!) to come forward, and soon half of the congregation was holding hands in a circle around the hall. To my complete surprise, I found myself tearing up, which had never happened to me in a religious service before. The tears had something to do with being welcomed into a place where people were both serious and hopeful about making the world better, and that feeling was cemented into place by “We Shall Overcome.”

When Katie and I chose “We Shall Overcome” as the hymn for November, we were thinking about congregation’s children. We felt that it was a song that children “should know” as part of being Unitarian Universalists, a part of our shared culture that we simply couldn’t ignore. But it may be just as valuable to adults. As we meditate this month on democracy, and as our own government and society grows more and more polarized and corrosive, let’s keep believing, together, deep in our hearts, that someday, we shall overcome.

Quotes and Thoughts for Reflection

Democracy

“Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.” — Martin Luther King Jr.

“A vote is like a rifle: its usefulness depends upon the character of the user.” — Theodore Roosevelt

“Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” — Winston S. Churchill

“We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.” — John F. Kennedy

“Democracy is in the blood of the Muslims, who look upon complete equality of mankind, and believe in fraternity, equality, and liberty.” — Muhammad Ali Jinnah

“Democracy is not freedom. Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what to eat for lunch. Freedom comes from the recognition of certain rights which may not be taken, not even by a 99% vote.” — Marvin Simkin

It is an axiom in my mind, that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that too of the people with a certain degree of instruction. This it is the business of the State to effect, and on a general plan.” — Thomas Jefferson

The ballot is stronger than the bullet.” — Abraham Lincoln

“Every election is determined by the people who show up.” — Larry J. Sabato

“Democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve.” — Bernard Shaw

“It’s not unpatriotic to denounce an injustice committed on our behalf, perhaps it’s the most patriotic thing we can do.” — E.A. Bucchianeri



Democracy and Justice
A Reflection
Rev Margret A. O'Neill, Interim Lead Minister

Our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition is grounded in our shared values and commitments, expressed in the seven principles that were first written over 30 years ago, and have been democratically adopted by the approximately 1,000 member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Each and all seven of the principles are equally important and mutually affirming, and together they form a strong foundation for the leadership of our Unitarian Universalist presence to bring more justice into the world.

The first and second principles call us to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations. The fourth and fifth, equally important, affirm the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, along with the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations. I have been doing a lot of thinking this fall about the meaning of democracy in a UU congregation – and especially about how we use democracy to create and carry out initiatives that are both participatory and justice-centered, reflecting our diverse experiences, understanding, and voices.

In our learning journey, how do we balance the urgency of a justice imperative to care for those among us who are most often disenfranchised or subject to discrimination, with the uncertain promise and open-ended possibilities of a democratic system in which everyone, with every sort of opinion and perspective, has a say? How does a democracy avoid a tyranny of the privileged; how do we balance the benefits of collective decision-making against the risk of domination by those of privilege and power in the system?

Political thinkers have pointed out that a fair and effective democracy can thrive only with a high quality of education among the populace, and I would add that healthy democracy also requires heart-centered listening, open communication, trust and love. This democratic UU Congregation of Phoenix has set for itself the goal of living into a challenging vision to be theologically diverse, radically inclusive and justice centered; achieving this vision will require a continuing balance of learning, participation, understanding, open communication, trust and love.

With our principles in mind, this congregation is engaged in planning and implementing bold initiatives, and educating ourselves about all the elements of the actions we take. You are invited to join the Inclusion Ministry Team, and to make your presence known in this model democratic system for justice. May we live into our promise to be a faith community for our time, as all are welcome share this journey, growing in spirit and advancing justice.

Deepening Connection Small Group
Session Plan
Theme: Democracy
November 2018

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting:

“Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”
— Winston S. Churchill

Brief Check-in

Focus Reading:

“People use democracy as a free-floating abstraction disconnected from reality. Democracy in and of itself is not necessarily good. Democracy must be rooted in a rational philosophy that first and foremost recognizes the right of an individual. A few million Imperial Order ‘[people] screaming for the lives of a much smaller number of people in the New World may win a democratic vote, but it does not give them the right to those lives, or make their calls for such killing right. Democracy is not a synonym for justice or for freedom. Democracy is not a sacred right sanctifying mob rule. Democracy is a principle that is subordinate to the inalienable rights of the individual.” — Terry Goodkind

Focus Questions:

- What do you remember learning about democracy as a child?
- How has your understanding of democracy changed with time and experience?
- What are ways we can balance democratic principles of liberty and choice, with the dangers of a “tyranny of the majority” that threatens minority rights?
- How can a democratic society include safeguards for the most vulnerable among us?
- How does a changing culture influence our understanding of what it means to live in a democratic system?

Checkout/Likes and Wishes

Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice:

The blessing of truth be upon us, the power of love direct us and sustain us, and may the peace of this community preserve our going out and our coming in, from this time forth, until we meet again. - Duke T. Gray