

**THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GOD'S WORD
VERSUS THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
FREE SPEECH, RELIGION, ASSEMBLY, AND THE PRESS**

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Unitarian Universalist Church - St Petersburg, Florida

READINGS (printed after sermon)

Opening	<i>A Unitarian Universalist Invocation (UUA Covenant)</i>
Meditation	<i>Cherish Your Doubts</i>
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SERMON

A month ago the Tampa Bay Times published a letter to the editor claiming that God's word and freedom of (especially Christian) religion were being subverted by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that same-sex couples had the right to legal marriage. That's when I decided to title this morning's sermon "The Spiritual Significance of God's Word versus the Spiritual Significance of Free Speech, Religion, Assembly and the Press."

What was I thinking?! That topic is huge!

Maybe I was wondering whether our basic Constitutional freedoms had spiritual value, as much even as some have attributed to God's Word. I did presume that our U.S. Constitution stood for not permitting any discriminatory treatment of any citizen for any reason except scientifically recognized harmful influence or behavior. The securing and protection of minority rights, though often requiring difficult persistent work, has consistently been upheld and expanded in legislation, judicial rulings, and in American societal practice.

Who would have guessed a month ago that this week the U.S. Department of Justice would target LGBTQ citizens and claim to the U.S. Supreme Court that civil rights law does not apply to homosexuals in the workplace? Who would have guessed that President Trump would claim that transgender persons could not continue to serve in the U.S. military.

I believe these claims are within our concern this morning and we must keep them in our consciousness. We are concerned about the spiritual significance of all freedoms guaranteed as equal rights.

And we should remember that the work of winning freedom of speech is not new. Jewish scripture is full of such stories. And the Gospel verse about parables is such a story.

Jesus was preaching to a great crowd on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He told them many stories full of puzzles and mysteries, like Zen koans. Why parables, ask Jesus' followers. Church doctrine answers that he was explaining how some are chosen for salvation and some are chosen for damnation.

We know two realities for revolutionary teachers: one, they must tell stories that stay in people's minds a long time and be passed around and often lead to epiphanies and empowerment.

And two, these stories often need to be told in a way that conceals a revolutionary message from the ears and eyes of the oppressor - like Jesus' message that God's way is for everyone to have what they need in order to be fulfilled before anyone else gets to have extra - like Emily Dickinson instructed poets with liberating truths too soon to tell, Tell the truth, but tell it slant - like the old African American spiritual "Follow the Drinking Gourd", which directed people escaping slavery to follow the night constellation that took them north.

Sometimes the speech issue is actually one of freedom from religion. Growing up within the Catholic Church in the fifties and sixties, we were subject to several limitations on free speech. There was a list of banned books we could not read and a list of banned movies we could not see (which lists we carefully memorized) and a general ban on attending the worship services or education programs of any non-Catholic denomination or religion.

There were other things condemned and banned, but if you don't count beliefs, then books, movies, and religions were the primary restrictions on our freedom of speech (defined as freedom to express ideas or seek information about ideas).

These days I realize I have a great deal more power and right, and even duty, to choose how I live and learn than I ever imagined back then, including significant free will over my own attitude and state of mind. And one morning last week during meditation the significance of it all came to me: I see this power, and so I have this power - this spiritual power - because of freedom of speech.

That is the spiritual significance of free speech, no matter what someone else's version of God's Word might be. Freedom of soul - the power to nourish the seeds of potential in our core beings - was opened to me by

education and affirmation from many different people, by many different cultures, by countless books, by many teachers of the spiritual disciplines, by the challenges of competing and cooperating hopes and dreams and truths in community, and by the counterbalancing solace and restraint of people with more wisdom than me at whatever time my ignorance was being called to account.

Can this kind of freedom come to humans from any means other than through unfettered communication with the world? It's all part of growing up. But we must consider how many people never do grow up, who never say in fulfillment at the end of their lives, "It is completed."

In this light, God's Word personally defined by an unfamiliar letter writer to the newspaper editor does not seem to me a compelling guide to the spiritual growth and fulfillment of which we dream.

I would propose to you that there are two mutually supportive American Dreams regarding spiritual growth and fulfillment – and that both require the freedoms of expression we know as freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and the press or media. The first American Dream is the dream of fulfillment of the soul, the coming to fruition in the course of a lifetime of all the potentials one has for thriving as a human being – our potentials for safety, belonging, productivity, generativity, esteem, love, creativity, and even transcendence.

The second American Dream is the dream of building a democratic society in which each person has a fair and equal opportunity, without externally imposed fear, to speak their mind and to influence how all can thrive in the community.

The first dream, of individual fulfillment, I would say is innate in Earthkind. It is the second dream, of societal fulfillment in relation to freely governing individuals, that was new to the world with the United States. Abraham Lincoln said it in immortal words in *The Gettysburg Address*: This nation is "dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal" as participants in a "government by the people, of the people, for the people."

Here's the rub. Both types of the American Dream are experiments. They are experiments that are still in development and in progress – and we have some obstacles still to the fulfillment of the free soul and free society.

We read this morning an excerpt from a memorandum by Lewis J. Powell, Jr, to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, written in July 1971. Powell was then sitting on the boards of directors of eleven major corporations. You may have noticed that his memo laid out a strategy for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce - a plan for using the wealth of American corporations and

individual wealth holders to take control of information coming out of America's institutional systems of education, news, entertainment, public policy and politics, and, subtly referenced, religious institutions – all to promote the corporate and wealth-holding stratum's vision of free enterprise and its rewards.

Here I raise the flag to the question as to whether that memo began the coordinated ending of free speech in America, never mind the freedoms we still need to institutionalize for a basic standard of living necessary to actually have the life and liberty to pursue happiness.

Two months after Lewis Powell delivered his requested memorandum to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, he was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court by President Richard Nixon where he served from 1971 to 1987 and authored the rulings in four cases that established corporations as having the Constitutional status of human persons with full right to pour unlimited amounts of funding into influencing America's political campaigns and public policy.

Great amounts of money from corporations and wealthy people have been poured into the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations to carry out that agenda. So far, it has worked for them. But the middle class has been shrinking ever since.

This is a serious problem, as legal scholar Ganesh Sitaraman of Vanderbilt University Law School has written in an important new book, The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution. Sitaraman makes the case that the American founders and authors of the Constitution correctly believed that a democracy requires a very large middle class and no vast differences between the wealthy and poor.

The reasoning is that 1) power follows wealth; and 2) that minimizing inequality instills a shared sense of purpose and shared sense of fate, without which a country falls apart in chaotic oppression and a government falls into tyranny. I would add, also, that then the souls of the people are grievously wounded and the spirit of the country begins to die.

Indeed, we do have obstacles to fair speech and equality of opportunity. In general today, basic freedoms are threatened for Muslims, women, people of color and diverse sexual orientation, immigrants and refugees, workers, and across all categories, the poor. All the freedoms undergirding life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are at risk for them, which means us.

But we still have some tools of the spirit in the freedom of speech, media, assembly and religion tool box. We have:

- 1) the courts, at least in part and the rule of law in the Constitution as a whole;
- 2) the voting booth in part;
- 3) existing public policy in part;
- 4) mutual education and care in community from cradle to grave in full (if we so act), not least of which education is remembrance of what we are and what is right;
- 5) communal wisdom on how to deal creatively and compassionately with our challenges;
- 6) the ability to appreciate the weaknesses in the arguments we hold and the strengths in the arguments others hold, bringing us all closer to truth;
- 7) awareness that we can comprehend each side's goals, differences, and criteria for fairness, and use them to cooperate and compromise;
- 8) practices of non-violent resistance;
- 9) stories of power, purpose, persistence, and patience.

I saw a good movie the other day - "All Eyez on Me" about another messiah, the renowned hip-hop and rap artist Tupac Shakur, who was assassinated at perhaps the peak of his fame at age 25, maybe by a gang, maybe by the police. In the middle of the movie is a scene where vice president Dan Quayle is shown on TV in 1991 denouncing Tupac's music, especially a song called, "Soulja's Song", which Quayle and the White House claimed Warner Brothers Records should take off the market because it inspired the murder of police officers.

But when you actually read the words, you find the song is of a youth telling his story for his young brother – a story of a black youth caught in a hellish violent home, community, and world, telling his younger brother and himself, with his words dying at age 17 in a hail of bullets, "All ya ever wanted to be – a soulja, a soulja, like me.... The fast lane ain't anything they told ya – never get much olda, following the tracks of a soulja." Not a song urging the killing of police, but urging a little brother to not get killed.

And as story-tellers do, this one had a signalling coded twist. It was the word "soulja," combining the English word "soul" and Hebrew word "ja" meaning God or "Divine Being." All you ever wanted to be was a "soul ja".... The free speech that the White House condemned was an oppressed child's warning cry as well as a cry for help.

Stories in parable and song are the tenth tool in the tool box of spiritual freedom and spiritual fulfillment. They open minds and gradually change hearts. People grow from those messages long after the messengers are dead. That speech, at least, is freed. I think there's a spiritual fulfillment in that, too.

READINGS

Opening

A Unitarian Universalist Invocation (UUA Covenant)

In our morning together, and in our lives,
may we grow to feel more deeply
the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
love of justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
acceptance of one another & encouragement to spiritual growth in all;
joy in free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
the rights of conscience and democratic process in all decisions;
commitment to a world community of peace, liberty, & justice for all;
and respect for the interdependence of all existence.
May it be so.

Meditation

Cherish Your Doubts UUA Hymnal, #650

Reading#1 from *The Parable of the Sower*, Mark 4

Again Jesus began to teach beside the Sea of Galilee. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the water and sat there, while the whole crowd was on the shore. He began to teach them many things in parables.... And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Later, when the crowds were gone, those who were around him along with the twelve apostles asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables, in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand.'"

Reading #2 *Confidential Memo*, from Lewis Powell, Jr, to US Chamber of Commerce

August 23, 1971

TO: Education Committee, U.S. Chamber of Commerce

FROM: Lewis F. Powell, Jr.

This memorandum is submitted at your request as a basis for the discussion on August 24 with (the) executive vice president and others at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

(T)he American economic system is under broad attack.... (T)he most disquieting voices ... come from perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media,

the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians... the most articulate, the most vocal, the most prolific in their writing and speaking.

The Chamber should consider establishing a staff of highly qualified scholars in the social sciences who do believe in the system... The staff of scholars (or preferably a panel of independent scholars) should evaluate social science textbooks, especially in economics, political science and sociology. This should be a continuing program The Chamber should insist upon equal time on the college speaking circuit. ...

Perhaps the most fundamental problem is the imbalance of many faculties. Correcting this ... would mean the urging of the need for faculty balance upon university administrators and boards of trustees... by writing and speaking, and by appeals to alumni associations and groups. The national television networks should be monitored in the same way that textbooks should be kept under constant surveillance. ... Complaints — to the media and to the Federal Communications Commission — should be made promptly and strongly when programs are unfair or inaccurate.

Current examples of the impotency of business, and of the near-contempt with which businessmen's views are held, are the stampedes by politicians to support almost any legislation related to "consumerism" or to the "environment." ... This is the lesson that political power is necessary (and) must be used aggressively and with determination.... ... (T)he Chamber would need a highly competent staff of lawyers ... to appear as counsel amicus in the Supreme Court, lawyers of national standing and reputation. (And) is it not feasible ... to establish a national organization of American stockholders and give it enough muscle to be influential?

(This) type of program ... would require far more generous financial support from American corporations than the Chamber has ever received in the past. The threat to the enterprise system is not merely a matter of economics. It also is a threat to individual freedom. ... (T)he contraction and denial of economic freedom is followed inevitably by governmental restrictions on other cherished rights. It is this message, above all others, that must be carried home to the American people.

Closing *A Unitarian Universalist Blessing, from the UUA Covenant*

What awaits you now as you go out into the world?

Light, sound, movement, bliss, choice.

May you experience transcendence from it all.

May you hear the prophets' call and rise with power.

May reason and science guide you beyond idolatry.

May you feel the spirit flow in you and may you care for friend and foe.

May you appreciate each phase of life and feel rapture in all their rhythms.

May you live in joy and peace.