

This morning I am going to focus on our fifth principle "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

With this principle the theology behind the principles moves from the personal or the church community and into the larger world. This principle affirms the democratic process in our congregation and in society at large

When I was a child my mother used to take me with her to the voting booth. I can remember as she stood in line, I was always fascinated. Her voting pol was in the local public school. I went to a small parochial school. I was fascinated to see where "Protestants" went to school - it was huge! They had a gymnasium and that was where my mother voted. She would wait in line and when it was her turn she would walk up to the folding table on which was a book and she would sign in and then she would go to the machine. Many of you may remember these machines. She would go and stand in front of the choices. She would move a large lever that would close a set of curtains behind her. Then there were small levers that she would move to cast her vote. And when she was done she would move the large lever again and that would finalize the vote and open the curtains. I can remember her holding me, and letting me watch and even letting me move the small levers as she directed me. I have to admit that would have been some of the few times I have ever voted Republican.

It did not matter what party you belonged to there was a sense of the sacred about this voting act. I don't know if my mother was intentional about bringing me. I suspect she was. And I suspect that it was easier to bring me than to get a sitter. But she taught me about voting. She taught me that it was an important part of being a citizen; she taught me that although it was my right as an American it was also not something to take for granted.

My parents would spend the evenings running up to an election talking about the candidates and the issues and how they should vote. My father was a little old school about many things and one of them was voting. He believed that my mother and he should vote the same so as to not cancel each other out. I never did get the math about that. I think my mother dealt with this by simply letting us all know that the voting booth was anonymous and she did not need to share who she voted for. Still I am pretty sure that she voted the same most of the time.

I also remember that the voting polls were staffed by volunteers usually veterans. There was usually coffee and pastries for the volunteers.

That is a small detail but many years ago I had the opportunity to go to Russia with my husband and his theater. There were many adventures had on that trip but one in particular sticks in my memory. It was 1995 and we were staying with one of the members of a Russian theater group when an election was to

occur. Now there had only been truly democratic elections since 1991 in Russia and so this was still a very new thing to our host. He was super proud about being able to vote and so he brought Geoff and I to the place where he was to vote. You know what - there was a folding table with volunteers, who were veterans, who helped our host sign in. There was coffee and pastries. And our host went into a curtained booth to cast his vote. I could not see if it was a machine with levers or not. But except for the language difference I felt like I could have been at any polling place in America.

The main difference that I saw or really felt since I really could not have any in depth conversation with anyone because of language barriers, was that for the folks in Russia voting still felt like something special and something that had been hard fought for. I did not sense cynicism or jadedness, as is often the case here in the US.

In our UU culture this voting thing is really important. We have the privilege as a congregation of determining everything that we do. There are no bishops, popes or presbyteries, telling this congregation what to do. As the minister I may be considered the trained religious professional in this community but ultimately my vote has no more weight than any other. And actually I usually have less ability to vote. On any committee that I work with I am a member ex officio because of my office but I have voice and not vote.

We have a congregational structure to our denomination meaning that the congregation is the basic unit of power - not the larger district or region, not the national UUA. The National UUA can make a pronouncement at General Assembly its annual meeting. We here at First UU promise to listen carefully to what is decided at General Assembly but we are not bound by what happens there unless we choose to be. Our congregational structure was established in 1648 with the creation of the Cambridge platform by the then Congregational churches in the New England area. The New England authorities desired a formal statement of structure and governance and a confession of faith because of the ... Presbyterians [were gaining power in] England and they did not want to be Presbyterian.

The Cambridge Platform said:

There is no greater church than a congregation which may ordinarily meet in one place", indicating that the congregation itself is the highest level of church authority. And also that the church body, by vote, has the power to install officers and to depose them. The platform specifies that no higher church authority, nor any civil authority, has the power to choose officers. And the civil magistrate should have no power within the governance of the church itself, nor compel people to attend. The platform is at pains to say that church government and civil government are separate and one does not compel the other.

The Cambridge Platform established the Free Church - free to govern itself and not to be governed by a larger church organization, also free from governance by the civil authorities. The Cambridge platform helped to establish the democratic process as core to our identity as UUs and core to how we get things done. We laugh at ourselves at how much we talk about things. A minister colleague of mine was for a time on staff at a very large church, which discussed for two years the idea of establishing composting at their church. It never did get started. We can laugh at that sort of inaction and we should. But those conversations are also part of the process we have for educating ourselves, and educating ourselves is part of the process of making decisions in our congregation. We know in a lived way, in a culture handed down generation to generation that democracy is more than the casting of a ballot, there is the educational process involved in understanding the issue at hand, and most importantly the process of getting ones voice heard. Conversations, letter writing, reading, attending lectures, and now things like tweets, you tube, ted talks, reddit, online petitions, and let us not forget public demonstrations are all essential parts of a healthy democratic process

Perhaps that is why 50 years ago UU ministers and laity alike responded. when after what became know as bloody Sunday Dr. Martin Luther King began a campaign of telegrams and public statements, "calling on religious leaders from all over the nation to join him and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in a peaceful, nonviolent march for freedom" That march was in support of voting rights for all Americans no matter what their color.

The Board of Trustees of the Uua as they were meeting in Boston received a telegram from Dr. King asking that they join him. In a historic move they suspended their meeting, traveled to Selma and reconvened. I still find that little detail amazing. Think about any of the committees that you have been involved in. Think about how decisions are talked about and made or many, many times deferred. Boards of Trustees are not generally speaking made up of revolutionaries. They are made up of folks who believe in whatever institution they are working for. Boards of Trustees are charged with fiduciary responsibilities. They are supposed to look after the ongoing financial health of their organization. Boards of Trustees do not often make radical decisions. They might go so far as to affirm a radical social movement. But to actually stop their meeting and go to a demonstration. My experience is that it is really really hard for Boards to do that. And yet the UUA Board did that. They had to know the risks they were taking, not only risking their own lives but risking greater controversy within the UUA. And yet they felt the cause of civil rights was greater than the need of the UUA to maintain the status quo

Even though our UU principles as we know them were not yet in existence in 1965 our religious tradition was founded on the free use of the democratic process that Cambridge platform. That Board of Trustees knew that not only is

the democratic process what we do in the voting booth. It is also the act of making our voices heard.

50 years later we look back at the civil rights movement and think of course. But at the time I don't know that it was clear for everyone. There were folks who were vocally in favor of passing the voting rights act. There were people who were vocally opposed. There were a lot of people who were silent in their opinions. People who were unclear about what the right thing to do was. People who honestly could not see what the voting rights act would mean for this country. What would life look like in 2015? We can see it now but they could not see it then. Take a moment and think about that. What do you think life will be like in 2065? Will immigration rights still be an issue? Will we have figured out how to change the course of global warming? Will gender equality be such a given that it's a non-issue? Will all bathrooms simply be equal access? Will our grandchildren look back shake their heads and gently laugh at our antiquated public restrooms policies? Will we have finally truly achieved a society where all cultures, all races, all religions are truly accepted?

The march on Selma was a nodal event. Pressure had been building. There had been sit-ins; there were the freedom riders. The children's crusade had happened in 1963. President Johnson signed the Civil rights act of 1964. There were murders and violence along the way. It was a scary time. But when on March 7 the country was able on their televisions in their living rooms to watch protesters being bludgeoned. Something shifted. Martin Luther King was moved to send out telegrams and make phone calls pleading with religious leaders to come down and they did.

We talk about our involvement in the civil rights movement and we remember it with pride. We UU's like to look back and pat ourselves on our collective backs. And in a lot of ways we should. James Reeb a UU minister, and Viola Liuzzo a UU layperson both lost their lives because they participated in the Selma March. There were a lot of folk who went down and risked their lives for justice. I honor them in their courage. But I also know there were others. I have a friend whose father was a UU minister at the time of the march on Selma. He considered going down. My friend has distinct memories as a child hearing her mother say oh no you won't. You have a wife and children that you are responsible to.

And that is OK. Not all of us are the demonstrators, not all of us are cut out to walk the picket line, to march, to cross that bridge in Selma. We may hold up Rev. Reeb and Ms. Liuzzo as saints of our movement. But you know that minister who had a wife and children he is one of our saints too. He struggled with what to do; he did not simply turn a blind eye. He preached on civil rights, he wrote letters, he had conversations, he risked relationships, and the security of his job to lift up justice. He used the democratic process. And you can too.

So what is it that you are passionate about climate change? Gender equality? Immigration rights? Education? If you can march then march, if you can sign petitions and bring petitions then do that, if you can write letter then write, if you can pray then pray. All of it, all of it is part of the use of our democratic process making this place and this world more just.

In a world without end may this be so.