

E Pluribus Unum

A sermon delivered by Shawna Foster

July 4, 2010

First I'd like to address the presence we have today of so many American flags. The first reason is practicality. It's the 4th of July and the theme of today's service is "Fire in the Sky" so I wanted something that looked like fireworks for everyone to have in their hands to wave. It turns out that the plastic metallic sparklers are \$1.39 a piece. While the American flags are a dozen for a dollar. So, freedom is a bit cheaper than fireworks.

But the second reason has more to do with who we are as a church and country. Working with the youth this year and the invention of their holidays based on each of our seven principles, made me think that if there was one holiday we should celebrate as Unitarian Universalists religiously, it's the 4th of July. The pluralistic values of our society, that is, we are one great nation made by many diverse peoples, mirrors the pluralism of our tradition—we are one great religious movement made by many diverse faiths and philosophies. The religious convictions our forbearers celebrated religious difference and even protects atheists from coercion by believers. In the same tune, our church glorifies religious diversity. We are a community that lives out our country's democratic principles religiously, right down to how we are organized and democratically elect our denomination's leaders. But what about separation of Church and State? As anyone who has looked at the issue knows, it doesn't mean that the church can't get involved in the affairs of the state. Indeed, our brothers and sisters on the right know this all too well.

As Forrest Church once said: "Don't give the Bible, flag, and family to the religious right," he says. "We have to retrieve them and plant them on their original high ground."

Do you hear what he's saying? We have some pretty awesome family values right here that should be uplifted politically as having values. Our campaign, Standing on the Side of Love protects GLBT families and families of color. We value families that look different, families where the woman wears the pants in the household, and we don't have to tear down any other kind of families to do it. Truly, these are family values. And we should proudly proclaim that we inherited the vision of our forbearers of a pluralistic society, and the people who say that there should be one state religion under god, or that gays can't be families, or that immigrants don't deserve the right to keep their family intact, or that women should be subservient to men, did not.

Now to get involved in supporting the nation we have to separate these ideas of nationalism and patriotism. If you are feeling a bit queasy about having so many flags and talking so passionately about your nation, I am right there with you. Because nationalism is dangerous. But what I'm talking about isn't nationalism. It's patriotism. There is a difference. The difference I draw between the two is that nationalism wants to preserve the nation as it is, and patriotism wants to lift the nation to where it should be. A great example is from the Olympia Brown story. Specifically, our documents say all MEN are created equal—nothing about women. But she knew that even though the

document did not specifically reference her, she knew she was an equal. She was a patriot to help convince Kansans that women ought to vote. If you've ever been called un-American for trying to do something inherently democratic and good for our nation, the friction between being a patriot vs. being a nationalist is what you're feeling. However, our forbearers do not want us to preserve the nation as it is. We are passionately directed to abolish tyrannical government and put up a better one to serve the people in the Declaration of Independence. That is our right granted to us: to change our government to suit everyone for the better. We should also draw this distinction in our church. We do not wish to preserve this church as it is forever at any cost. We want to make it as it should be, as our vision inspires us to be.

Another value that we in a pluralistic faith love is freedom. The Declaration of Independence also promises us this.

Forrest Church, in his book The American Creed, explains this. He says: The American creed has two themes. "One is the divine nature of our rights, as elaborated in the Preamble, the idea that they derive from natural law or from a higher authority. This is the Unum principle." The other, liberty and justice for all, "is the pluribus principle," he said. "These ideals go together [in "E pluribus Unum"] but have been in tension since the nation's founding days." Now, as I read Abraham Lincoln's comments in the opening words*, we have brought this E Pluribus Unum to all peoples of the globe. This is the idea that everyone has divine rights inherent within them.

Here are some examples of the tension in E Pluribus Unum: this morning, I had to get clothes on my son, and convince him that church time is not naked time. We limited his personal freedom a bit to come to church. So there is friction there at the smallest level and it goes up to the global level. We are free, for example, to fill up the gas tanks of Hummers and to make such obnoxious cars. At what cost? Whose freedom are we limiting to take this liberty? It's not just the freedom to have pristine waters in the Gulf Coast. There have been other tragic oil disasters all over the world that dwarf the Gulf Coast disaster. But they didn't happen in our waters or on our land, so you may not have heard of pipelines bursting in the Gulf for 10 months at a time in near Mexican shores, or the oil spills in Africa. Their freedoms to have unpolluted land clashes with our freedom to use energy. At the same time that energy development brings wealth to their country.

These are complicated issues. How do we know what to do with these freedoms? That is the where the Unum principle comes in. The liberty and justice for all. The "for all" is the common good. We need to rate our freedoms and see how it can benefit the common good. Sometimes the freedom of speech for one person to show the way benefits the common good. Other times it is limiting that freedom of speech so that we can get out of church on time and enjoy the rest of our Sunday that is better for the common good. This is how our forebears envisioned we figure out these clashing freedoms.

We put the value of the common good to work even as we worship. Let me tell you a story. I went to a conference where I visited with a black Unitarian Universalist minister. And I told her that I was uncomfortable signing a song in our hymnal. Go to hymn

number 154. Someone tell me what the title is. Go on, look at it. "Ain't Up On The Auction Block No More". Can you see why I'd be uncomfortable singing this? Looking at my skin and referencing my history, I don't think any of my ancestors experienced slavery. Why should I sing a song about redemption from something I'm pretty sure my family didn't suffer? She turned to me and said, "You know, it isn't always about you." That's true. When I worship in a community with you all, it isn't always about me. It's about the common good. When I pick up a hymnal from now on, I solemnly vow to stop reading ahead to check to see if I really believe with all my heart and soul the next verse and if I should sing that or not. Because it may not be about me. It may be about the next person, who comes to this community to have support in his or her spiritual journey. For people who aren't here anymore. It may be about them. And they need to hear me sing the song for them.

There are other elements of worship too that you enjoy that others don't. However, as a community, they will still worship with you, and that is what makes our community great—having these differences, noticing them, and celebrating them. This is also what we do as a nation.

To close, I want to thank you all for being here today, and for perhaps feeling a little uncomfortable. To look at the flag may not be to your comfort; to have children around, or for kids to listen to adults for an entire service may not be to your comfort; to talk about how our church could be different may not be to your comfort, but in that uncomfortable place, truly we grow. And this is a safe place for us to be uncomfortable in community. Please take these flags home with you, and remember your inheritance from our forbearers of a pluralistic society and religious tradition. There are many ways in which we can act out our Unitarian Universalist values, and what better day to do so, than on the 4th of July.

Make it so.

*Opening Words:

"I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of separation of the colonies from the motherland, but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world, for all future time."

- Abraham Lincoln, 1861