

Democracy in America

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

What a week in America! The nation has been inspired by the story of an amazing man. From humble beginnings, one might even say poverty; he struggles to make something of himself. He moves away from the place of his birth and into a new life. He has overcome tremendous odds, personal tragedy, and finally rises to become a United States Senator. He is a superstar of an elected official. Soon his name is known by everyone in the country. From that seat in the Senate he aspires to the highest office in the land. And this past week he made history with his successful election to office. I am speaking of course of Joe Biden; the next Vice-President of the United States!

Who did you think I was talking about? Joe Biden had his humble beginnings in Scranton Pennsylvania. Most everyone in the country has known who he is for a long time. He made history by attaining the highest elected office of anyone from the state of Delaware. And as for achieving the highest office in the land, well I had been under the impression these past eight years that the Vice President was the highest

office in the land! I hear the guy who got elected with him is pretty good too.

It's just a little joke for my Republican brothers and sisters out there, and I know you are out there. This is a Sunday in which people come to church looking for very different things. There are some of you, I am sure, I know this, who are disappointed with the recent election. You may not have been surprised, but you are hurting a little bit. It is no fun when your guy or gal doesn't win an election. When that happens these days can be filled with anxiety; wondering where the country is going under its new leadership. If your guy did win last Tuesday, then the days that followed felt like Christmas, New Years, and winning the lottery all rolled into one. Hope, anticipation, and celebration feel like the order of the day. Surly this is understandable. But no matter which candidate you rooted for, I urge you to take a few moments and remember what it was like four years ago when everything was reversed. No one likes a sore winner or a sore loser.

My goal this morning is to navigate somewhere down the middle of these waters if possible. It probably isn't. Ministers like all human beings have their biases and these will no doubt become evident. One of my biases is to look at issues in the political arena first and foremost, and to the candidate who represents those issues secondarily. Politicians of all parties come and go, but the issues like the economy, healthy care, equality for all people in our country; these remain. Certainly some

elected officials care more about them than others do; I won't go so far as to say that it doesn't matter who you vote for. Surely it does. But voting is the bare minimum participation in our democracy. You only get to do it every couple of years. To really make progress on the issues that you or I care about, we need to be active in the political process 365 days a year.

Take for example what is happening out in California right now. Despite the overwhelming election of Barack Obama in that state, they passed a ban on same sex marriage. Now sadly this is not unusual these days. A similar measure passed in Florida and a few years ago in Nebraska when I was there. But in California things are different. They actually had the experience of legalized same sex marriages for a few months. This isn't an abstract idea of what we might be preventing in the future by passing this law. No. They took away rights of citizens through the democratic process. No wonder there are so many protests going on in California; a state that is so rich in history for our Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgendered brothers and sisters.

This is the great irony of American democracy. The framework of our government is based upon the noble values of the Enlightenment: equality under the law, one person one vote, checks and balances to prevent the over-centralization of power, the separation of church and state, to name only a few. Yet this framework can be utilized in amoral ways; meaning morally neutral ways. Ours is a government that has

passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which was legislation in the nineteenth century that defined some human beings as the private property of other human beings and should be returned to them. Many a Unitarian clergy flouted this law. In Boston, Theodore Parker tried to break out of jail a slave by the name of Anthony Burns who was being returned to the South. Ours is also a government that over a hundred years later passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in the 1960s that at least from a legal stand point stripped away the last vestiges of discrimination. Proving that as Martin Luther King said, the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

In our reading today, Alexis de Tocqueville bemoans the lack of civic engagement in American life. He sees too much individualism, too many people thinking only of their private lives and their immediate circumstances. This is in the 1840s mind you! Surely voting is a big part of that participation in public life, but there is so much more to do. Being informed, joining voluntary associations like churches and other civic organizations, having a little courage to stand up and speak out on that issue that touches your heart and engages your passion; regardless of your political party—that is what it means to be active in public life. Around here we call it social justice. While that is great, and I highly recommend it, even just being well informed and open to other opinions is an easy way to begin that public engagement that de Tocqueville urges us to consider. I feel for the people in California right now.

Surely there are busy people there as well as here. But I just wonder how many of them are thinking, “If only I had given up one night a week of staying home to watch television, and had gone out to knock on doors or make phone calls to defeat this horrible ban!” Even one person can make a small difference or sometimes even a large difference to prevent their rights from evaporating. Electing the right politicians can help, but it isn’t everything. Remember, California voted for the more liberal of the two candidates.

I encourage working on issues first and candidates second. The issue is the one that speaks to you, that you find you have a connection to. It doesn’t have to be the one that is politically correct or that you feel like you should care about, but don’t. And it applies to both ends of the political spectrum. That is the great beauty of our democracy; it makes room for competing opinions and philosophies while at the same time creating a place where we can come together. If you are sad and depressed by this last election, let that motivate you. If you are elated at this last election, carry that energy into these next years. In 2000 there was this great candidate that sounded much like de Tocqueville. He said that all Americans should devote themselves to a cause greater than their own self-interest. We cannot just be content with our own comfort, but be willing to sacrifice for the greater good when history calls us to do so. He was of course John McCain. He, like all of the veterans that we will honor this Tuesday, gave himself, his name, his comfort, and even his

body for his country. Regardless of what one might think of his policies, he like all veterans are worthy of respect and honor for that.

Speaking of the military, I had a very interesting election week this past week. I spent last Saturday through Tuesday attending a UUA conference for ministers of large churches held in Concord Massachusetts. The fall in New England has nothing on Delaware. It was beautiful. I walked around the shops downtown. I went with some fellow UU ministers to find the graves of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. We walked down to the bridge over the Concord River where the first battle of the Revolutionary War was fought. This was just last Monday, the day before the election. The bridge is still there. It connects a forest to a field of rolling hills where the actual battle took place. And battle is perhaps a glorified term for it. This was a bunch of local farmers with muskets going up against the British infantry. The Americans crossed the bridge and then turned around and fired on the Brits who were chasing them. That was the well known “Shot heard round the world.” Of course there is a beautiful monument and statue of a soldier with a plow and musket facing the bridge where the British came over.

The best part of it for me, though, was another monument. On the opposite side of the bridge there is a marker commemorating the British soldiers who died. It notes that they traveled thousands of miles only to die in a strange land so far from home. It was a very moving thing to

see. It actually made me proud to see that in America we erect monuments commemorating even the honor and bravery of the opposition in our war for independence. Instead of de-humanizing them as the enemy, we are a country that can see in them an admirable quality and give it our respect. Granted it probably took a while to be able to put that up. But the moral arc of the universe is long and it bends toward justice.

Opposing forces coming together. That is what last week was for me. Farmers with muskets and British soldiers both honored at the birthplace of our country. Democrats and Republicans coming together in our civil process for the peaceful transfer of power. White and African American citizens coming together and overcoming one of the biggest barriers any of us could imagine. I hope that even those of you who did not vote for Barack Obama can hear in his words this morning a transcendent vision for America. The promise of America is hope. Hope even in facing a difficult future that can be scary and uncertain. But that future is even scarier and more uncertain when we are divided as a nation. When we are alone, then fear is always more powerful. As Americans we face this future together, regardless of party. This is a truth that has been lost for the past few years and even decades in American political life.

Well I voted for Barack Obama this year. I tried to tease the staff last week that I was in the tank for Bob Barr, but I don't think they

believed me. I voted for Obama because he fit the best with the issues that I care about. That is first and foremost, and I knew that going into the voting booth. What I found when I got in there and was about to finish up my ballot, that I had a kind of reverse Bradley effect. I stopped for a moment and thought, “I just voted for potentially the first Black man to become President of the United States of America. I get to tell my grandchildren that.” Like those farmers who took on the British troops in Concord Massachusetts, we Americans love to make history. This week, instead of the shot heard round the world, it was the election heard round the world. While it may be premature to declare an end to racism in America, to see an African American man elected President so decisively by people of all races is a huge milestone. To see the world react the next day was so gratifying. It was so touching that a small act that you and I did as individuals last Tuesday was received so warmly by the rest of the world. That alone gives us hope that we are in this together.

Election day contained so many powerful images. The civil rights leaders and other participants weeping with an overflow of emotion when the decisive votes came in. I later saw that some people had some very somber worship services in their churches grieving for their friends and family who were no longer alive to see this day happen. To hear John McCain’s gracious and eloquent concession speech. It was a speech that echoed Obama’s call for unity in this morning’s reading. To

see the world celebrate with us. Kenya declaring a national holiday. Our allies around the world thirsty to rejoin us in solidarity and celebration.

Perhaps the most moving moment for me came right after Obama's victory speech in Grant Park. You see my favorite part of a football game is the end, when its over and these big tough burly guys hug their friends on the other team, smile and joke with each other, sometimes pray together; all after three hours of beating the heck out of each other with strength and speed unknown to most of us. So of course my favorite part was when Barack Obama's family and Joe Biden's family came out on the stage following the speech. Obviously one family was black and the other was white, but they had both won. They were both celebrating this great victory. And you saw people of different races share in this celebration, hugging each other, kissing in each other talking and chatting as if it were an extended family reunion. I thought, "That is exactly the symbol of what our country did today." At least for one day, perhaps only for a single hour, it appeared that Dr. King's dream had come true.

America is an amazing place. Maybe some of those old divisions have come down. At least it looks like the American people want to see them come down. I know I do. We want to be united as a people, the stakes are too high not to be. America is an amazing place. We put up markers to honor the people we fought against in a war that literally

defined our nation. We have through the painstakingly long perspective of time, come to see and eventually correct the immoral acts of our democracy such as slavery and Jim Crow. Barack Obama's election to become the forty fourth President of the United States demonstrates that a corner has been turned. There was no forced bussing or state troopers enforcing a law; the American people voted of their own free will and choice to have an African American man lead them.

But let us not be complacent. There is still too much to be done, so long as there are things like Proposition 8 in California and elsewhere. Find the issue that touches your heart, as that one touches mine, and work like the dickens for it. Let us follow the advice of de Tocqueville, and the example of veterans like John McCain, by giving ourselves to a cause greater than our own self interest. Let us live the American promise that our new President-Elect spoke of, and seek ways to heal old divisions just as we have in the past. And may democracy in America be strengthened as a result. Amen Blessed Be.