

**A GOOD FIGHT?**  
A Sermon by Fritz Hudson  
November 2, 2008

**Story:** The Upstairs Cat by Karla Kuskin

**Music:** "Worlds Apart" from *Big River* by Roger Miller

**Sermon:**

"Together, but worlds apart." I suppose that could describe how some here feel among our fellow Nebraskans. On Tuesday, of course, we'll learn again how closely or distantly our political spirit tracks with those who share our space. Past experience and present polls would lead most of us to expect some sense of separation. But how are we equipped to deal with those differences? Are we any smarter than Kathy's upstairs and downstairs cats?

Ginny's and my son, Eric, is now a newly-minted law school graduate, studying for his bar exam in Tennessee. Four years ago, as he was just entering legal studies in Oklahoma, he sent me a story which perhaps illustrates our state's general situation.

*A lawyer, it seems, went duck hunting in rural Nebraska. He shot and dropped a bird, but it fell into a farmer's field on the other side of a fence. As the lawyer climbed over the fence, an elderly farmer drove up on his tractor and asked him what he was doing. (Have you heard this story?)*

*The lawyer responded, "I shot a duck and it fell in this field, and now I'm going to retrieve it."*

*The old farmer replied, "This is my property, and you are not coming over here."*

*The indignant lawyer said, "I'm one of the best trial attorneys in Nebraska and, if you don't let me get that duck, I'll sue you and take everything you own."*

*The old farmer smiled and said, "Apparently, you don't know how we settle disputes in these parts of Nebraska. We settle small disagreements like this with the Husker Three Kick Rule."*

*"Huh. What's that?" the lawyer asked.*

*"Well, because the dispute occurs on my land," the farmer replied, "I go first. I kick you three times. Then you kick me three times. And so it goes back and forth until someone gives up."*

*The attorney quickly thought about the proposed contest. He decided that he could easily take the old codger. He agreed to abide by the local custom.*

*The old farmer slowly climbed down from the tractor and walked up to the attorney.*

*- His first kick brought the toe of his heavy steel-toed work boot right up between the lawyer's legs, dropping him to his knees.*

*- The second kick went straight to the gut, sending the lawyer's last meal gushing from his mouth.*

*- Then, with the barrister on all fours, the farmer placed his third kick squarely on the rear, sending his opponent face-first into a fresh cow pie.*

*The lawyer summoned every bit of his will and managed to get to his feet. Wiping his face with the arm of his jacket, he said, "OK, you old coot. Now it's my turn."*

*The old farmer smiled and said, "Naw, I give up. You can have the duck."*

Now, I'll ask, was that a "good fight?"

In our part of the world, you can't get much religious help for that question. With Jesus as its model, the Christian tradition does not speak easily of any "good" in fighting. Its touchstone for dealing with differences is "Turn the other cheek." Yet somehow it manages to move from there to rally troops singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." Siddhartha's message and model brings little better Buddhist assistance. If suffering's end comes from extinguishing all craving, as Siddhartha preached, then dealing with differences becomes an inner-directed effort to repress passion. That's a hard place from which to build relationships. Among humanity's three ancient culture-crossing prophets, in fact, only Mohammed (in Islam) shows and speaks of fighting, struggling, as a path to salvation. And we in this land have a long way to go before we learn how his "lesser jihad," the struggle against others, fits within what he called the "greater jihad," the struggle within oneself.

In our nation's politics, however, we're very clearly looking to be led by a fighting spirit. Last spring, Senator Clinton's very nearly successful resurgence as a candidate rode the wave of proclaiming herself the fighting champion of working class whites. Following his failure to win his party's nomination in 2000, when he his military identity, Senator McCain has come forward this year, as *The New York Times Magazine* put it last Sunday, brandishing "the mindset of a warrior." His close comrade in arms, Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, was even willing to tell the *Times*: "The man will run across the street to get in a good fight." And the tone Senator Obama set to initiate his campaign – "there is no red-state America or blue-state America, there is only the United States of America" – that tone has dulled now. In the nationally broadcast infomercial this past week, he pointed to "the couple trying to retire," the "family saving for their kid's college education", "the single mom without health insurance," and "the guy whose job has been shipped overseas," and then said "That's who I'm going to be fighting for every single day I'm in the White House."

But whom do we want to be led to fight? And how do we want to fight them? I'm asking: what will make this a "good fight" – good in the heat of battle and good in the long-term result?

One of the traditions of our faith, from its roots in colonial New England, is the Election Day sermon. On the Sunday prior to Presidential Elections throughout my career - seven times, including twice here - I have examined the national political stage and its play for our faith. My focus next week may well be on that scale. But for what I have to say today, I'm going to leave

any application to national politics largely to your own thoughts. The work of a church, I think, is ultimately always more local than national. And it is surely always more personal than political. Indeed we fail in our real mission here if we entertain ourselves with work in Washington - which we can affect only a little - while we ignore work right here at home, which is ours alone to do.

So I'll remind you (if you were here) or tell you (if you weren't), that this first Sunday of November, exactly a year ago, we church members met, after our service, to do our own voting. We voted on the future of our ministry, specifically on a motion to terminate my tenure as our parish minister. We were called to that vote by 33 of our active members, 10% of our membership, as our by-laws provide. We engaged in lengthy sessions following two Sundays' services to hear arguments for and against their motion. We then took a secret ballot. And the tally reported was 39 in favor of termination and 153 opposed.

So here I'll ask one more time, was this a good fight? More importantly, I'll ask are we fighting still, for the future of our ministry. Most importantly, are we fighting well?

Our faith, as you know, grew out of the Christian tradition. Our openness to the Buddha's inspiration, Mohammed's inspiration and all the inspiration found in all our world's faiths is an acquired taste for us and still an evolving discipline. Our growth beyond our roots, in fact, was closely bound to our growing discomfort with the Christian approach to conflict. Christian teaching long tried to repress conflict. Our faith was born aspiring to embrace conflict. The embrace is intrinsic to the principles of our covenant: to affirm and promote the "rights of conscience" is necessarily to invite and protect a wide range of personal perspectives and paths to truth and meaning. At the same time, to affirm and promote "the use of the democratic process" is to say that on matters which define or affect our entire community, we will make decisions as a body. But we mean a great deal more by democracy than simply making decisions by a majority vote of our members. Indeed democracy - rule by the people" – far more effectively moves a body forward if it is achieved by an in-depth interchange which transforms all the body's members, rather than severing us into parts - into winners and losers. And when we employ voting as a tool to gauge the spirit of the body, it requires even more in-depth interchange following the vote to keep the body moving, growing together. For us, learning and practicing these disciplines of in-depth interchange is what makes the difference between a "good" fight and a "bad" fight.

Three and half centuries ago, when our spirit was sprouting within Christianity, the poet John Milton spoke to the people in England in defense of the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing. He said: *Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, . . . many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. . . . What some lament of, we rather should rejoice at, should rather praise this pious forwardness among men, to re-assume the . . . care of their religion into their own hands. again. (Areopagitica 1644)*

Two centuries later, as our spirit was taking form in a distinct faith all our own, the black

American abolitionist Frederick Douglass famously taught us that:

*Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. . . . If there is no struggle, there is no progress. (An address on West India Emancipation August 4, 1857)*

I'm pleased and proud that when our conflict became open last year, our Trustees followed our vote by engaging our association's resources to help deepen our practice of democracy. Our embrace of last year's conflict was a bit less crude than the Husker Three Kick Rule. Still, let's be honest, how did it leave us feeling, both those who "won" and who "lost" in our vote?

- Hurting in private places?
- Emptied in our stomach?
- Spitting nasty residue from our mouths or even wiping it from our faces?
- Wondering whether our prize was either a dead duck or a determined distance?

We've begun holding periodic "hot potato discussions" to seek deeper interchange on matters of divided feeling. This next Saturday, however, a far greater opportunity awaits to grow in our faith.

We will host our regional association's conflict engagement team's workshop. Led by our minister in Ames, Brian Eslinger, and church leader and mediation attorney Harvey Harrison from Des Moines, it has already drawn 45 UUs to travel from Omaha and beyond to join us. 17 of us here have already enrolled. But I'm hoping to double that enrollment today. 35 of us a year ago called 200 of us to invest 5 hours deliberating before we voted whether a change in minister would bring a growth in ministry. I'm hoping, now, that at least 35 of us here can invest 5 hours (and \$40) next Saturday grow the personal skills and group culture of deep interchange that will allow us to change and grow without premature division – and will insure that all who engage in our interchange will feel embraced regardless of where they stand in our votes.

This experience is well-named: A Constructive Conflict Workshop. All of us who participate will work. We won't just talk, as I am doing now, or listen, as you are doing now. I can only begin to tell you what that work will entail.

- We will work through what it takes to create a safe place within which to fight.
- We will work to feel the full range of our natural responses when we experience discomfort with another – all the way from avoidance to confrontation. Then we will work on extending our natural range of personal responses to make whichever response in the possible range is most helpful in each of our fights. Yes, in good fight, there are good times to duck down, good times to stand up, and good times to run like hell.
- Then we will work to strengthen our personal openness - in two directions.

\* First, we will work to be more open to ourselves. We'll practice continuously examining our own needs and desires in our discomforts, realizing the complexity and mixed nature of our own motivations.

We'll learn how to ask

- Is my perspective clouded?
  - Am I lacking flexibility?
  - What are the weakness of my own position as well as the strengths of my opponent's?
- Since in matters of importance, no position holds 100% of what is right, we'll learn to ask how those who disagree with me hold a part of my own feelings, a part of my own full humanity?
- \* Second, we will work to be more open to each other – to keep our channels of communication clear. We'll practice listening to another's viewpoint from within his or her own frame of reference – with my inner ear, my whole being. We'll practice being a "good enemy" not a bad one. A good enemy provides "loving combat" to help both of us in the conflict to test and refine our values. A good enemy fights for impact, not injury. (Tom Owen-Towle. "Saints and Burly Sinners." *Kairos* Spring 1977)

Most importantly we will work to feel our faith. We'll work to feel conflict constructively embraced - not conflict avoided, conflict repressed, or conflict unperceived or unacknowledged. We'll work to feel that "good fighting" is the hallmark of a real "caring community uniting reason with spiritual exploration." We'll work to feel our membership in the body of Unitarian Universalism, fully engaged in a "good fight." We'll work to feel that to hold ourselves neutral or removed from our fights is to disengage from our covenant - to withdraw from "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

As I said, the workshop will take \$40 of your money and 5 hours of your time (9:00am to 2:00pm) next Saturday. Lunch is included. Partially subsidized childcare is provided. Our Administrative Director Jean Helms will be glad to help you register in her office down the hall from our main entrance. See her today or call her tomorrow.

For now, finally let's review our three fights and ask my question one more time: "Is it good?"

First, how about the Nebraska farmer and the lawyer? Was that a good fight. Well I suspect the lawyer learned something from it, which is a good thing. But did the farmer? He already knew how dumb lawyers were, so I don't think so. A good fight always brings lessons to all contestants.

How about our national Presidential contest? Has that been a good fight? You're strongly inclined to say, "That will depend on who wins," aren't you? But I don't think that's the whole story. What will make this fight good is if its victor can transform it into an effective call to us all – those who gravitating to him with hope and those cringing away from him in fear – a call to bind us across those lines to meet together the challenges now facing our nation and our world. A good fight always builds the relationship between the contestants – forming a larger body stronger at its lines of prior division. I'll have more to say about that next week.

And how about our own fight – our struggle to shape the face and future of our ministry?. Is it a good fight. Ultimately, we'll find the answer to that question in its affect on each of our spirits, individually. Does it lead us to the love, the acceptance, which emboldens our personal spirit to

grow? Just as all our political candidates claim that our country needs change, I believe that our ministry also needs change. All we decided a year ago, was that, for the time being, that change will not best come in changing ministers. The choice of how the change we need will come is still very much before us, within us.

Have you watched the Presidential candidates in their rallies this week? Have you wondered who is making the most effective appeal to lead our nation's good fight? I'll tell you the call that has reached me most deeply. At those rallies, after all the "I will do this's and I will do that's, I feel called most by the closing words, We - not I - "We've got work to do."