

WINNERS, LOSERS & GRACE

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

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So it's over, finally, right, the election campaign? It was "long" wasn't it? But was it like the ascendance to office of Nebraska's only native born U.S. President, Gerald Ford? Was it a "long national nightmare?" Anyone think so? I don't. Will you raise your hand if you felt yourself emotionally engaged in some aspect of our recent campaigns to election? (100% of us, I'd say) And how about the results, on all the offices and ballot issues contested? On Tuesday night or Wednesday morning, who felt like you'd come out in some way a winner? (70% of us) And who felt in some way like you'd come out a loser? (70% of us)

Elections, voting, does that, we know – makes winners of some of us and losers of others. Our laws prescribe that we vote on many offices and questions all at once, primarily I suppose for efficiency. More election days would be more costly. But for most of us, voting several on several different offices and issues at once brings the benefit of making us both winners and losers at the same time.

As your minister, I'm constrained from sermonizing for candidates before elections. Whether that's a good thing is for another sermon. After the election, however, I'm thinking that this sermon will be more real if I confess my own wins and losses. On Tuesday night, in the choice for President, I felt a winner – big time.

I'd contributed money to the Obama campaign twice.

I'd changed my registration to speak on his behalf at my precinct caucus.

I'd gotten myself elected an alternate delegate to our County Convention to support his candidacy.

At the same time on Tuesday night, however, on the issue of amending our state constitution to prohibit preferences based on race or sex, I felt a loser. I still do. I won't ask who here joins me in this particular win or this particular loss. I know some do. I'm sure some don't. I hope profoundly that some of your feelings are exactly opposed to mine – that you feel a loser in the Presidency and a winner on the constitution. If no one here does have those feelings, then I believe we are the poorer and weaker for it as a faith community. My choice for both positions was clear and heartfelt. But as I thought my way to my feelings I discovered something. I saw in the principles of our faith the basis for reaching the opposite choices was well. Our identity statement says "we're grateful for religious pluralism." That pluralism inspires us "to deepen our understanding and expand our vision," we say. So today I want to explore how my understanding might be deepened and my vision expanded in both my winning and in my losing last Tuesday. As you'll see I think it has something to do with grace.

Let me talk first about my big loss. We Nebraskans now live under a constitution which says that "The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin" in public employment, education, or contracting. The dagger in my heart there is the loss of granting "preferential

treatment." To me losing "affirmative action" now is like losing it's author, President Kennedy, again all too soon. I see blacks, Hispanics, women and trans-gendered people woefully under-represented in the upper echelons of our state's public employment and education. The affirmative action we had taken to increase their presence I think had only barely begun.

I do see the cost of affirmative action.

- I see the beyond-their-control barrier such action might put before individual white or Asian males like me when we compete for top end positions.

- I see the corrosive suspicion such action might arouse about the personal achievements of all members of the groups who benefit.

I just think that the benefit that broadly distributed power would bring to our culture is worth the individual costs. BUT I lost, Tuesday. So now what?

Speed Leas, in his many works promoting constructive conflict, sees two unhelpful tendencies in us when we're losers.

- We tend, first, to deny or distort the reality of losing.

- Second, if we eventually accept our loss, we tend to dissociate ourselves from some of our fellow losers. We "splinter."

Leas also sees two ultimately helpful potentials in losers however. In a loss, once accepted, he says:

- We can find motivation to examine ourselves and our position more closely to better match our values with our identity and our strategy.

- And we can find motivation to work more vigorously, in new ways, to serve our values.

G.K. Chesterton, the British journalist, put his finger on the challenge. He said, "How you think when you lose determines how long it will be until you win." If you joined me in this loss, how are we going to think our way to a new victory. Here's what I'm thinking. I'm thinking what we lost was the window during which race, color, ethnicity or national origin could be used as a conscious marker for those our body politic sees needing help to gain equal opportunity. The success of such individuals of color as Tiger Woods, Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey and now Barack Obama has closed that window. I'm thinking however, that it's not as clear that the window for conscious aid for women (and perhaps transgendered people) has closed. All the public discussion I heard of this amendment in the campaign focused on the first paragraph. There sex is lumped with race, color etc. But have we thought about the amendment's third paragraph. It's now in the constitution too. It reads, "Nothing prohibits bona fide qualifications based on sex that are reasonably necessary to the normal operation" of public employment, education, contracting. I'm thinking it is time to get back to the discussion we never finished 30 years ago when we, or at least I, lost on the equal rights amendment for women. Civil rights for women and the transgendered and civil rights for people of color may very well not be the same. Sex differences are a helpful basis for some differences in public treatment. The amendment itself says so. But which differences? I think we've got work to do here.

And what about the clearly continuing lack of equal opportunity for vast numbers of people of color? Now, forty years after the end to legally-supported discrimination on this basis, what is the real cause for this unequal opportunity? Is it a culture of ethnicity, still? Or is it now a culture of poverty whose roots in ethnicity can be cut free? Can we make new alliances across racial lines in the way our amendment's California champion urges us to do. Can we, as Ward Connerly has long advocated, undertake affirmative action to provide equal opportunity to those born into poverty, whatever their color? Here too, I think, we've got work to do.

Now, then, let me talk about my big win. Whether "President Obama" was your fondest dream or your fearful nightmare, I wonder: Are you like me still working to take in that full reality? John McCain was my senator for seven years in Arizona. "God bless him" and "God damn him," I've been moved to say several times. But John found God's right side Tuesday night at the Biltmore I think when he, a new loser, could so quickly say: "I wish Godspeed to the man who was my former opponent and will be my president." Barack's familiar fluid speech in Grant Park didn't quite make him my President. In fact it was only in watching his first halting first "presidential press conference," on Friday - without teleprompters or stage craft – that I began to feel the reality of his learning curve, his struggle as a winner. I felt invited to come along on his journey.

Speed Leas, the conflict theorist, also sees helpful and unhelpful tendencies in us when we're winners. Helpfully, he says,

- We tend to grow in cohesion with those who share in our win.
- And we tend to relax and grow more expansive in our affections.

But, unhelpfully,

- We tend to feel that winning confirms our positive stereotype of ourselves as a group and to confirm our negative stereotype of those who lost to us. We find little motivation to examine and correct either of those stereotypes.
- More unhelpfully, we tend in spite of whatever fighting spirit made us winners, to become complacent, to lose our drive to accomplish what we claimed to have sought in the fight.

Last Sunday, I left in your ears what I found the most effective line in the final campaign rallies. It didn't say so then, but the words were Barack Obama's. They followed a long litany of "as your President, I will do this's and I will do that's." But they ended by saying that "We", not "I", that "We've got work to do." What did we winners win on Tuesday? We won 53% of the nation's votes. The losers won 47%. We won 28 of our states. The losers won 21, perhaps 22, including our own. And we won not just the opportunity but the responsibility for leading our nation out of profoundly threatening habits of self-destruction, of global-community destruction, of planetary destruction. And to do so as quickly as possible. This is not work that any one man, that any 53% of the people, that any 58% of the states, can accomplish. And it is not work that self-satisfied espousing or even practicing such liberal values as equity, compassion, and peace can achieve. To my mind Barack Obama's most important words in Grant Park on Tuesday night were these: "Let us remember that it was a man from this state who first carried the banner of the Republican Party to the White House – a party founded on the values of self-

reliance, individual liberty, and national unity. . . . Those are values we all share. . . . To those Americans whose support I have yet to earn -- I may not have won your vote, but I hear your voices. I need your help. And I will be your President too."

I think Barak Obama really became "my President" just yesterday, in fact. It was when I learned that he had finally won our state's second congressional district electoral college vote. I knew that our church member, our state senator Diana Schimek, had worked long and hard, years ago, to make winning part of our state's vote possible. Thank you Diana!!! Winning that vote, I somehow felt, put me right here on the front lines of our nation's real fight. It makes me feel, right here, like a private on the front lines of President Obama's army.

We are now exactly where the divide between red states and blue states has finally been broken. We are here now where the recreation of the United States may have finally begun. We are now here where the values of the democratic party and the values of the republican party can be examined together, can be fought over constructively, if we will but see and seize our place.

John McCain said Tuesday night that he deeply admired, "(Senator Obama's) success in inspiring millions of Americans who had once wrongly believed that they had little at stake or little influence in our election." Our Americans, here in Nebraska, too many of them – too many of our young people, too many of our black people, too many of our Hispanic people, too many of our poor people of all colors - still wrongly believe they have little stake or little influence in our elections, in our economic system, in our culture. We who are both winners and losers here now have work to do to bring them into our struggle.

I was very grateful this week to read the words of a heretofore unheard voice in our Lincoln Journal Star: columnist Courtland Milloy of the Washington Post. Mr. Milloy brought us the voice of Henry Saunders, a black federal contractor in D.C., who said: "As an African American, even though Obama has no special agenda for black people, as he goes up in stature, so do the rest of us. We are now more inclined to challenge ourselves, to try to improve and empower ourselves because he has raised our expectations." To me the most important thinking we need to do in this state, in this nation, is the thinking that will convince us that never again will there ever be in our community any permanent winners and any permanent losers. We are all, and we all will ever be, sometimes winners and sometimes losers. And if we seize what's helpful in each position, we will grow, together, from both.

Yesterday 70 Nebraska Unitarian Universalists gathered in this room – half from Lincoln, half from Omaha – to work together toward making our conflicts more constructive. I will say that we didn't work quite as much as I would have liked, but we made a start. And we were given tools, whose practiced use, if we got good at it, would both "deepen our understanding and expand our vision" of the power in real religious pluralism." Today many of those who attended here have joined me in wearing a "day-glow orange" dot on their name tags so that all can know who we are. If you weren't able to join us yesterday I'd ask you today in the Fireplace Room to find someone wearing a dot, and ask them what they learned, how they think they, that we,

might use it to make all our fights here "good" fights – community-constructing, not community-destroying fights. And then I'll ask you all to think and work with me on how we might take these tools into the world beyond these walls – onto the front line between reds and blues, between whites and those of color, between those comfortable and those impoverished, between women and men - to win what I believe is President Obama's real fight.

Grace – God's grace, human grace – is the marvelous, mysterious visitation, into the realm of human effort, human choice, of the beautiful, creative power of Life itself. Grace, in the arena of human conflict, is the revelatory arrival of a solution to our problems which no contestant, no prior winner and no prior loser, could before embracing the conflict had even known existed.

Johann von Goethe, the German poet, knew how to invoke grace. He wrote:

The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.

All sorts of things occur to help

- A whole stream of events that issue from the decision rising in one's favor

- all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and assistance.

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it.

Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

Let's get to work.