

RED STATE BLUES?

A Service by Fritz Hudson
Presented September 5, 2004

Chalice Lighting

*You and I and all of us blew about with the winds of summer,
following the sun in different ways of freedom and play,
finding rest in the cool stillness of shadows,
and moving to the slow heartstruck rhythms which turned the long hours of summer light.*

Now it is time for gathering in.

We come together at this time and this place on the bridge of autumn.

Summer is fading backward into memory. We meet with eagerness and delight.

*Today, we gather in gladness, once more the special community that we call our church,
a community of all ages that sings its songs, tells its thoughts, asks its questions
and searches together with courage and with love.*

Patricia Shuttee. (*Singing the Living Tradition*. Reading #729)

Light Chalice

Good Morning. Welcome to our Church. This is our Founder's Sunday, the 134th anniversary of the day in 1870, when our state was but 3 years old, that 4 women and 3 men met in Mary Monell's living room to create our church, then called the First Universalist Church of Lincoln. This year, as importantly to our world this 134th time as it was to theirs that first time, we gather to form the future of our community. Let us now join in our opening song Number 347 "Gather the Spirit"

Song

*Installation of Children's & Youth Religious Growth & Learning Leaders
Milestones, Millstones, Stepping Stones*

Sermon

"When Pharoah let the people go (out of Egypt)... God led the people ... toward the Red Sea. ... Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night. ... (And) the people of Israel walked on the dry ground through the sea. ... And the people ... believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses." (Ex.13:17,18;14:21,29,31) So it is written in the second Book of the Jewish Torah, the Book of Exodus.

Our children right now are diving into the religious history of the Jewish people, in Exodus and other scriptures. Next week they'll learn tales of this tradition's founders, Moses of course chief among them. We'll be singing them out each week with Shabbat Shalom, but it will take us awhile to catch up with their studies. Three weeks from now I'll speak about "Moses: the Man, the Myth, the Message." Today though I want to speak just a little about "Red Seas" and a whole lot more about

"Red States." More importantly, I want to speak about our feelings finding ourselves in the middle of all this redness. Most specifically, I want to speak about our opportunity to catch onto a strong east wind which just might drive back our Red State Blues, if we feel them. There may even be a modern day Moses in our midst. I may have met him just yesterday. Will we follow his lead?

Our *Lincoln Journal Star* Friday morning cast the connection between our two "Reds". Did you see it? The two headlines above the fold were, on one side "Bush: I will never relent" and on the other "City prepares for sea of red." Were they the same story? An American in any other city who has followed the division of our nation into Bush's Red States and Kerry's Blue States could be forgiven for thinking so. We, of course, know that the "sea of red" refers not to our political loyalties here, but to what we might hold even more dear, our football loyalties. We've been the "sea of red" on fall Saturdays long before we were a Red State on November Tuesdays. But we have been a Republican State for as long as we've existed, a few years longer even than our church has existed. How do we feel about these loyalties bleeding into one another?

Some of us, to be sure, may feel Red State blues because we just don't like football. If that's your problem, I see little hope for a cure here. Some of us, of course, feel Red State blues because we're democrats or greens or libertarians or some kind of independent and we're tired of losing to our republicans, or even we're republicans beginning to tire of the kind of republican that is winning. I do have some hope to offer for a cure to what ails us. But do you feel Red State blues just because of the cocksuredness with which almost every political player or observer beyond our borders views us as a "solidly red state" rather than a "battleground state." Does it rile you how this "solid state" keeps us from even being treated as players in our nation's election? It does me. You might say we should count our blessings. At least our televised football games won't be overrun with the nasty national political ads our neighbors in Iowa are getting. But I think I'd pay even that price to have my voice and my vote contested over, treated as though it matters. And I have felt a strong east wind which could spell our relief.

My thinking and feeling in this malaise got kicked into gear about a month ago. Did you happen to see the *Journal Star* article then headed "Church-state issue hot in Kansas, with pastors' sermons monitored." Datelined Overland Park, it began "A recent Sunday found Tina Kolm changing her morning routine. Instead of attending a Unitarian Universalist service, she was at Lenexa Christian Center paying close attention to a conservative minister's sermon about the importance of amending the U.S. Constitution to ban gay marriage. Kolm is one of about 100 volunteers for the Mainstream Coalition, clergy adhere to federal tax guidelines restricting political activity." Next to this Associated Press article, the *Journal Star* ran a sidebar headed "No evidence of monitoring here." It accurately reported what I had told Values Editor Bob Reeves when he called that week: "The Rev. Fritz Hudson said he is aware of the coalition, ... But he has heard of no such group here." What he didn't report, because I didn't say it to him is what I asked myself when I hung up the phone: Should I start one? Events of the next few days kept that question alive inside me. UU colleagues in the East emailed me word of the organization "Religious Freedom Coalition" which had launched the website "RatOutaChurch.org" to encourage conservative Christians to visit liberal churches to report pastoral violations of I.R.S. rules. The web site specifically names Unitarian Universalist Churches as targets. Then a sometime attender at our church called to express her dismay at a sermon she'd just heard at

St. Mary's Catholic Church downtown. The priest there, Father Witt, she said, had likened the Democratic Party to the Nazi Party in its position of abortion. (Source withheld pending permission for publication)

So here's where my thinking and feeling has traveled since then. I've asked myself: Is there something immoral, something religiously wrong, with churches advocating for political causes. Our faith's principles surely argue otherwise. Our roots, like the Roman Catholics', are in the tradition which teaches that "faith apart from works is barren." (James 2:20; *Service of the Living Tradition*. Reading #668) We came of age in the "Social Gospel" movement a century ago to realize the Kingdom of God here on earth. We draw for our inspiration, as our identity statement proclaims, on "words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." We covenant to affirm and promote "a world community with peace and liberty for all." To confront, to promote, those are political acts.

And in fact, a century and more ago, when Unitarian Presidents sought to win and retain that post, political endorsement were expected from American pulpits. In 1908 when William Howard Taft, the Republican and Cincinnati Unitarian, ran against William Jennings Bryan, the Democrat and Lincoln Fundamentalist, a biographer records that "the pastor the Second Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, attended by (Will's brother and wife) Charles and Annie, urged his constituents to vote for Bryan." (Ishbel Ross. *An American Family: The Tafts*. 201). When Will ran for re-election in 1912, the Reverend John Haynes Holmes of the Unitarian Church of the Messiah in New York got a phone call on the Sunday morning before election day from the U.S. Secret Service. President Taft will be attending your worship this morning, it informed him. Rabbi Stephen Wise, Holmes closest colleague, records in his journal that Holmes then called him. He said, "Wise, I just heard that President Taft is coming to church this morning. ... This is going to be difficult. I am preaching this morning on the subject, "Why I Plan to Vote for the Progressive Party." Wise answered: "There's nothing to do but stick to your guns and be as kind as you can be," which Holmes did, deleting only one of his planned paragraphs. (Carl Voss. *Rabbi and Minister: The Friendship of Stephen S. Wise and John Haynes Holmes*. 125-6)

Arthur Weatherly, our minister here for both those elections, and perhaps John Haynes Holmes' closest colleague in Unitarianism, must have made similar pronouncements from this very pulpit, though I have no record of them. Did he preach for Taft or Bryan or Roosevelt, Wilson or Debs. I don't know, but I'd bet the whole pulpit that he preached for somebody.

It was John Adams, the first Unitarian President, who said "It is the duty of the clergy, to accommodate their discourse to the times; ... If the rights and duties of Christian magistrates ... are disputed, should (the clergy) not explain them, show their nature, ends, limitations and restrictions?"

William Howard Taft's response to Holmes' pulpit endorsement of Roosevelt is reported differently in two places. A Unitarian website says that Rabbi Wise, who knew Taft personally, said later that the President "remarked to him angrily, 'The blatherskite! He did everything but take up the offering for Teddy.'" (John Haynes Holmes. *Notable Unitarians*. www.harvardsquarelibrary.org.) An earlier book by a Unitarian scholar reports, rather that "Wise saw Taft in the diner of a train one day and

asked how he had enjoyed Holmes. Taft chuckled and, his massive frame shaking with laughter, said, 'Yes, Rabbi, I went to the Church of Messiah. ... I must say, the only thing he did *not* do for Teddy that morning was to take up a collection for the Bull Moose Party!'" (Carl Voss. p.125-6). I have no way of knowing for sure, but all I know of Taft's character persuades me that the second telling is more true to the man. Its spirit, of seeing things in a larger context, with self-deprecating humor, is more true to his, to our, faith.

The nation's current Internal Revenue Code is not the Torah. It is not a guide to what is immoral and what is immoral, to what is religious and irreligious. It is simply an arbiter of what is taxable and what is not taxable. It allows churches who incorporate under its section 501(c)(3) to pay no taxes themselves and it allows those who donate to such churches to deduct their donations from their taxable income. The price of this privilege is that the church cannot directly endorse or support political candidacies or political parties and it cannot expend a substantial portion of its resources to promote political causes.

Any church can, if it chooses, forego this privilege. We could re-incorporate under section 501(c)(4). That would allow us to engage in unlimited promotion of political causes, and secondarily, to endorse political candidates or parties. We would still not pay any taxes as a church under this section, but the price of our political freedom would be that your donations to us could not be deducted from your taxable income. Do I advocate that? I don't know yet. I'm thinking and feeling about it. It's clearly not a decision I am authorized to make. We're a democracy. Only a majority of your votes, as church members, at a congregational meeting called specifically for that purpose, could make that decision.

I won't advocate that today. In part, I won't advocate that because I think we as a church can do many good things with your tax-deductible contributions, things at least as important as what the government could do if you paid them as higher taxes. Even more, I won't advocate it because I'm not sure that supporting and endorsing political candidacies and parties is the best way to practice our religious principles.

Am I a member and supporter of one political party. You bet. Do I have a preferred candidate for many of the offices to be filled this fall. You "double bamm det". Do I think and feel those choices are informed by my Unitarian Universalist principles. Absolutely. You could say I pray about the choices, if by pray you mean that I deeply and privately try to bring our principles and the votes I cast into harmony. When I pray about those choices though, I realize that no candidate and no party ever fully and reliably reflects those principles. I realize anew how much I need the support of a strong church to help me keep those higher ideals alive in my prayers and my choices.

Our principles call us to affirm and promote "equity, compassion, justice, liberty, peace." The fundamental political requirement for this calling, I believe is that all persons have equal power to influence our government, and that the weak not be taken advantage by the strong. This is the core I believe of our covenant to affirm and promote "the rights of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

My ultimate faith is not in any candidate or in any party. My ultimate faith is in all humanity. Acting freely and with all the wisdom we can muster, I believe, only all of us acting together can do what's best for each and all of us. My particular calling, as minister of the church whose first covenant is to affirm and promote "the worth and dignity of every person," I believe, is to do my best to see that those judged least worthy, those given the least dignity in our society, be empowered to raise an equal voice in choosing our government with those with the greatest pretensions to worth and dignity.

Even though my thinking and feeling has not led me to adopt our Kansas siblings' tactics, I have come to feel a stronger connection with their plight. I'm about half way through now reading Thomas Franks book, out last spring, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. His answer, in a nutshell, is that in places like Kansas (and I'll say Nebraska), liberals have allowed conservatives to woo working class Americans away from voting to serve their economic interests by disingenuously promising to address their cultural dissatisfactions. I'll explore what this calls us to do when I address how we might help educate new voters in sermons I plan for early October.

For today, let me simply say that I trust economically disadvantaged people themselves to decide whether to believe that President Bush will deliver on the aid he promised last week for housing and jobs and community development or whether a President Kerry would do it better. I trust them to decide whether Jeff Fortenberry or Matt Conneally or Steve Larrick would better promote their interests in Congress. And I think we can practice our principles within the limits which maintain the tax deductibility of your donations to us by working to insure that the citizens who go to the polls this fall represent as many of the weak, the oppressed, as possible. As your minister, that is how I propose to invest the time your donations give me to help create our image of a world community.

Will Taft may be the best known Unitarian to be raised in the First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati, Ohio, so far. Our current Unitarian Universalist Association President, however, another William, Bill Sinkford, make yet overtake him. Bill Sinkford's mother, an African American single parent in the 1950s, found the welcoming spirit still burning bright in that church 100 years after Will Taft's father help put it there in the days of abolitionism. A year ago this month, Bill Sinkford wrote a Pastoral Letter to our churches entitled "The Soul of Our Democracy."

The beginning of the church year, he said, is a time to reflect on the year just ended and to set priorities for the year ahead. As this church year begins, I find myself thinking most about the role our faith can play in civil society. Unitarian Universalism has always had a spiritual center and a civic circumference. How are we called to live out our commitment to American democracy? I believe this year is a time to take action.

Unitarian Universalists, without a doubt, register and vote in far greater numbers than do most Americans. And many of us have worked in voter registration drives and contributed financially to efforts to get out the vote. But we have not, as a movement, committed ourselves to increase either voter registration or voter turn out. It is time we did ... I believe that the greatest service our faith community can perform right now is to help Americans reclaim our democracy. We should never

again have a president or a legislature elected by only half of the eligible voters ...

There is work to be done. I'm not talking about simply affirming the importance of voting, nor simply promising to vote ourselves. I'm talking about mobilizing to get out there and work ...

I want to urge all of our congregations to take on voter registration and get out the vote campaigns as part your work this year. I'm imagining thousands of volunteers making phone calls, handing out voter registration forms in supermarkets, offering car pools to the polls. I'm imagining election-week work camps for our young adults, and even youth. I'm imagining systematic poll-watching.

We cannot claim to be a democratic nation if our leaders derive authority from elections in which too few vote ... low voter turnout is precisely what gives the government the mandate to act as if no one cares and no one is looking. (uua.org)

Over this past year Bill has led our Association into a partnership known as "Faithful Democracy." Our partners in Faithful Democracy include the Church of the Brethren, the Episcopal Church of America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the General Conference of Friends (the Quakers), the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the Union of Reform Judaism, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. When I asked our Church President, Linda Hellerich, what most touched her as our delegate to the UU General Assembly in Long Beach California last June, she immediately said, "Bill Sinkford's speech on voter registration, his marriage of spirituality and social action, action based not on anger but on hope."

By now over 200 of our Association's 1000+ congregations have joined into this work. For our church's part, your Social Action committee and I have begun by arranging to empower us first to register new and underrepresented citizens to vote this fall. On this coming Tuesday evening, September 7, Maura Kelly Tolzin, of the Lancaster County Election Commissioners Office, will be here at 7:00pm to train as many of us as will come to become certified voter registrars. We have also made initial contact with the Hispanic Center, the Asian Center, the Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest, and the Lincoln Action Program and learned that they are very interested in working with us to identify ways to increase registration and voting among recent immigrant citizens and economically disadvantaged citizens. You may have noticed in the Journal Star that our Election Commissioners' Office is making a large effort to provide voter registration opportunities all over our community. Planned sites I see that may increase registration among new Americans and poor Americans are the Naturalization Ceremony at the Federal Building on September 15, the Always Low Prices Store at 27th and Y on September 25, the O Asian Garden grocery store at 2535 O Street on September 28, the Super Saver grocery store at 48th and O Street on October 4. Ms. Tolzin will help us find ways to make their efforts more effective. We are also discussing doing door-to-door canvassing for registration in selected neighborhoods on weekends. We've got until October 22 to registrar as many of these citizens as possible.

Ms. Tolzin has also agreed to train registrars a week from Thursday, on September 16, if we have enough people who want it then. My hope is to find one or more partner congregations from among our Faithful Democracy partners to join us that night, perhaps on their site. If you cannot attend this

Tuesday, but would like to receive the training on September 16, please tell me so after the service today or email or call me at the church office during the week. I will announce whether and where that training will be held at next Sunday's service and I will email those who tell me of their interest as well.

On upcoming Sundays we'll talk about how we can turn newly registered voters into people who actually vote on Election Day. We will also talk about how we can help them find how their personal, our communal, and our global well-being might be best served by who they vote for. We will talk about how to insure that every vote counts and every vote is counted. Remember, in Nebraska, in each congressional district we have total control over our one Electoral College vote. Our particular calling is to make sure that one vote counts and is counted.

Bill Sinkford has been our leader in this work, but he has yet to become our Moses. I wonder now though whether I may have met Moses right here in Lincoln just yesterday. 10 days ago, as I said in our Milestones, Millstones and Stepping Stones, Bill was arrested protesting the Sudanese government's oppression of its citizens in Darfur. Yesterday I once again helped provide legal assistance to immigrants here in Lincoln at the United Methodist Ministries monthly clinic "Equity in Nebraska." One of my clients was Sudanese, a refugee in his seventies. He was asking for assistance to bring his children, still in camps in Egypt, here to the United States.

He told me of his own experience in those camps - how the Egyptians tried to keep the Sudanese there so they could be employed at slave wages, rather than facilitating their acceptance as refugees in our country. He suggested to me the American economic interests in the Arab world were keeping us from challenging the Egyptian government to let people like his children become refugees here. I don't know if that's true. I do know that he knows a good more about it than I do. 'As a Christian,' he said to me, 'I come to you like God came to Moses. Go Down Moses, way down in Egypt land. Tell them, tell them, let me people go.' All of a sudden, I realized, he sees me, us, as his people's Moses.

Is that possible? Could we raise our hand here and part this Sea of Red all around us, to walk to the promised land on dry ground. I don't know. I do know that there's a strong east wind blowing our way. And I know the only way we'll ever see the promised land is if we make common cause with the least worthy, the least dignified of God's children, if we them raise their voice to join ours and make each one of our votes count.

Mary Monnel's work as our founder, as most of you know, is memorialized in the window hung on the south side of our Fireplace Room. It is inscribed, "She rests from her labors and her works do follow her." Look at it again, or for the first time, before you leave today. Unlike Mary, you and I have not earned our rest yet. We still have her work to do, now.

You will find our closing song as #305 in our songbook, *De Colores*.
Song.

Chalice Extinguishing

This flame for us is
the light of truth,
the warmth of community,
the fire of commitment.
Let us carry it in our hearts into our world.

Extinguish Chalice