

"Politically Conservative, Religiously Liberal"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, October 17, 2010

Am I the only one who has trouble having political discussion these days? It seems like our entire country has lost the ability to engage in good old fashioned political discourse, without it descending into arguments that often become heated and personal. Today I have some basic skills to share about how to have a discussion with people with whom you disagree. [Am I the only one who needs some help with this?] Thanks to Mike Wessinger, who purchased this sermon topic in our church auction, I also plan to clarify a fundamental relationship between religious liberalism and political conservatism. If you're a boss, I want you to listen today for how you can be a boss that people look up to, not just kiss up to. If you're a son or daughter, or mother or uncle, who has political or religious differences in your family, listen for how those relationships can grow and deepen, rather than growing farther apart and widening the divide between you. If you're a coach, or teacher, or Boy Scout leader, consider how these skills can help you be a better role model. And if you host your family's holiday meal, see how this can improve your hospitality. Or if you're single and dating, try to imagine how this could impact your life, or if you happen to be in public service, as a number of you are. In this church we have a mayor, two judges, a member of the school board, an insurance commissioner, and people on a number of city commissions as well as folks running for state and county offices in the coming weeks. If you are one of them, listen for how you can be a better public servant and more effective politician.

But first, let me clarify some things about liberalism and conservatism. I'm going to do about five minutes of teaching this morning. Many people were surprised last month when I explained that the original name of this church in 1921 was *All Souls Liberal Church*. The founders thought that the word *Unitarian* in our name would be too controversial for Oklahoma in the 1920's, but apparently *Liberal* was not. The reason is that, at that time, Liberalism had a different meaning in America, and was a prized American value. You see, it really wasn't until the Great Depression in the 1930s, that American political liberalism was born. It was a response to the depression, and spawned the New Deal, and other liberal political currents in American politics.

So, prior to the 1930s in America, liberalism referred back to the intellectual tradition of Liberalism born in the seventeenth century through thinkers like John Locke. And this form of Liberalism was the intellectual engine behind the Enlightenment, which was the father of both

religious liberalism and American democracy. Liberalism, in this sense, undermined the notion of the divine right of kings. Our country was founded on liberalism which conceived concepts like: the rule of law rather than the authority of rulers; the idea that authority comes through the consent of the governed rather than the heredity of the monarchy or by divine dictate. The entire notion of fundamental individual rights to life, liberty, and property, are ideas born out of seventeenth century liberalism. The Latin root of the word liberal is *free*. Liberal arts education has been considered the backbone of a thriving democracy. Among other things, it connotes freedom of inquiry and academic freedom. In the same way, liberal religion is free religion. It is religion that allows people the freedom to inquire about matters of faith.

Both religious liberalism and American democracy are products of the Enlightenment. So, in 1921 in Tulsa, and across America, liberalism was a well-regarded concept. It signified freedom, reason, and tolerance. And it questioned the old traditions of authority in government, religion, education, and society. Conservatism, by definition, seeks to maintain tradition and traditional institutions. Conservatism comes from the Latin *conservo*, “to preserve.” If there must be change, conservatism prefers it be minimal and gradual. And here’s why this is so confusing today – the political roots of conservatism only go back to the early 19th century after the French Revolution. That was a time when liberalism was at its peak, and heads were literally rolling in the streets in France. Political conservatism was born, in that context, as a force of moderation to check the extremes of liberalism and maintain the health of a free society. That is a key point: political conservatism was developed out of freedom to preserve freedom.

So while religious conservatism is trying to preserve ancient structures of authority, American political conservatism is not trying to preserve old feudal forms of governmental authority; it is trying to serve democracy. In other words, American political conservatism and American political liberalism are *both* products of the Enlightenment, and the tradition of freedom, reason, and tolerance. *Both* are attempts to strengthen freedom. *Both* are attempts to facilitate the maintenance of liberal democracy, and so there is no contradiction between religious liberalism and political conservatism. Both liberalism and conservatism play an essential function in the development of a healthy democracy. And that is how someone can be religiously liberal, supporting freedom in religion, while also being politically conservative.

There is no philosophical incongruence between being religiously liberal and politically conservative in America today. In fact, to do so, is to uphold two different but equally important aspects of American freedom. The only reason this has become confusing in our times is because the American conservative party, the Republican Party, has, in the past few decades, yoked itself to the religious right on certain social and moral issues. Without a doubt, this

marriage of politics and religion has posed challenges for American religious liberals who are politically conservative. But, while the religious right would like their moral positions to be the central issues in conservatism, American political conservatism is about much more than these narrow concerns.

Okay, I'm done teaching, and I'm ready to start preaching. So, how do we have productive conversations with people who think and believe differently from us? There are four ideas I have to share and you can remember them by the word *PREP*: P-R-E-P, as in *prepare*. We prep before we take a test. We prep before we do an interview. We prep before we cook or paint. P-R-E-P: Persuade, Respect, Entertain, Pause.

The first P is *persuade*. When you're abrasive, you're not persuasive! Rule number one is to be persuasive, not abrasive. There's no benefit to becoming hot-headed and angry, especially in a conversation about religion or politics. All that does is make your position seem weak and make you seem unreasonable. Angry, weak, and unreasonable is not attractive or persuasive. And the conversation quickly descends into a fight. Rule number one: commit to being persuasive rather than abrasive and you will keep more friends and possibly convince more people to consider your positions.

The R is for *respect* and what I mean here is respect for the relationship. If you care more about your relationship than convincing someone of your opinion, it completely changes the tone of the conversation. People too often sacrifice their relationships in order to express their politics. In the end, if we keep in mind: this is my friend, or my co-worker, or my relative, or someone I'm just getting to know – whatever the relationship – remember to care more about the person than the politics. When we do this it creates respect, and a person is much more likely to consider your opinion if they feel you respect them and care about them. There's way too much disrespect and name-calling in political discussions today: people comparing the President to Hitler (we saw this with Bush and now Obama), and people calling each other unpatriotic, or racist or baby killers, or talking of death panels. We cannot have a valuable dialogue if there's no respect.

The E is for *entertain*. Entertain that the other is not insane. (I know it can be hard!) Try to find the pearl of wisdom in the other person's position. There's nothing more disarming in a political argument than having the other person cede some ground. See if there is anything at all in the other person's position that you can agree with, or at least understand. If you really are considering what the other person is saying, they will feel that. They will usually appreciate it and, in turn, are much more likely to consider your case. I have found over the years, that if I pay attention to even the crankiest person who disagrees with me about politics, or just about anything, that I can find a pearl in that slimy oyster somewhere. It's usually something I need to

pay attention to. When people in this church come to me with a complaint or concern, even if I totally disagree, or if they are being abrasive, I always try to discover what is the little piece of information that I need to hear. I don't just say to myself, "Oh, that cranky curmudgeon can kiss my glass!" Well, sometimes I say that first, to myself. But then I excavate that pile of dung they dropped, looking for a diamond, and I almost always can find one. So, entertain that they are not completely insane about their political positions or even their religious positions.

And the last and often most difficult P is *pause* – before you pounce. Let it lie before you reply. Retract before you react. Hesitate before you denigrate. Stop before you chop. Wait before you berate. Rest before you protest. Let it dwell before you yell. However you can remember it, remember to pause. Because what makes us abrasive is not what the other person is suggesting, it is how we react to it.

Other people don't make us angry; we become angry. And the reason we get angry is that we tell ourselves a story about what the person has said. I can remember a time a few years ago when I came home after a long day and I was sprawled out on the couch reading the newspaper. I had some dishes I needed to clean up on the counter, and I was planning to get to them shortly, but I needed a break. Well, my wife Anitra walked into the room and I saw her look over at me on the couch. I didn't really see her look; I just felt the laser beams from her eyes burning a hole in my neck. Then, I heard her start loading the dishwasher. I was fuming; *how dare she judge me for not doing the dishes! I've worked a long day and I'm just relaxing a bit. This is my house, too; can't a guy have a break?* Later, after I gained the composure to confront her about it, she explained that she looked over at me reading the paper and thought to herself, "He's really had a long day; I'm going to take care of these dishes so that he can relax!" So, here she was, trying to be kind to me, and I spent an hour and a half feeling upset because I had told myself a story.

It's the same in political discussions; the person doesn't make us angry, we make ourselves angry by telling ourselves a story like, "It's people like him that are destroying this country" Or, "He only cares about himself and doesn't care if the poor die of hunger." Or, "He's a racist if he wants strong immigration laws." If we can learn to pause long enough so that we can check the story we are telling ourselves – long enough to entertain that the other person is not insane, inane, or just being a pain – and pause long enough to remember to respect the relationship first, and long enough to remind ourselves to be gracious – because abrasive is never persuasive.

Having bad conversations gets us nowhere, and having *no* conversations by saying, "We just don't talk about politics" also gets us nowhere. But having skillful conversations helps bring

out the best *in* us, to bring out what is best *for* us. By working together we can bring out what's best *in* America, *for* America.

I suggest you try PREP-ing for one week. Just try it for a week. If it doesn't work, you can always go back to being abrasive. Take a week to try it and consider it boot camp for the holidays – there's about a month before Thanksgiving – when many of us are going to be around relatives or friends with different political and religious views. So try PREP-ing for a week and see how it works.

Persuasive, not abrasive
Respect the relationship
Entertain they're not insane
Pause before you pounce

Imagine if everyone went to work tomorrow and put their relationship before their politics. Imagine what Thanksgiving would be like, and Christmas, or Hanukah, or whatever your family celebrates. Imagine your next hunting trip, or girls' night out, or time with your brother, or mother, or son. Imagine what America could do and be, if we really worked together rather than trying to one-up each other. Imagine what the world would be like if everyone could honestly share their religious views and politics without getting jumped on, and harassed; if people really listened and learned from each other.

You can become a model to others, at home and at work and in your neighborhood. You can be that boss who the employees look up to, not just kiss up to. You can be the public servant that is respected on both sides of the aisle, or the church member who helps make sure everyone feels welcome at All Souls. Because this church is not aligned with any political party –and reasonable people will always disagree sometimes on how best to preserve and maintain and expand our freedom. And at its best, this church should be a laboratory where we practice and feel safe to try to be the person we hope to become. But it takes PREP. Remember what PREP stands for?

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Let us bring up the level of dialogue in this country. It can begin right here in our church.
Amen.