

Trick or Treat?
Rev. Mark Hayes
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I went back and forth in my mind about whether to focus on Halloween or Election Day for today's sermon. I finally concluded that it didn't need to be an either/or choice, as there is, in fact, some overlap between the two topics. And so I decided that the blurb I submitted for the newsletter over six weeks ago, with the title "Trick or Treat?" was generic enough, and provided enough wiggle room to allow me to go ahead and sneak in an election sermon. While the result may not be a great treat, I do hope you won't feel too tricked by it.

The Election Sermon is a noble tradition in American history, going back well into the seventeenth century. That is, even before there was a United States of America. In the course of time, the election sermon has come in a variety of forms. A. W. Plumstead, in a book on religion in American history, tells of an early custom in New England of opening the annual General Court with an election sermon. These sermons were apparently addressed to those already elected, and appealed to the conscience and piety of those officials. Plumstead relates that this type of sermon

was the center of a ritual in which a community gave thanks and took stock. As one contemporary observer put it, it was a time "when the heads of our tribes are met together in a solemn assembly to give thanks to the God of heaven for the many great and distinguished privileges, both civil and religious, which we are favored with; and to ask direction and a blessing from on high, upon all the administrations of government in the land."

The more enduring form of election sermon was that preached in the days leading up to elections. Plumstead points out that one of the most frequent topics of those sermons is reflected in the title of one particular 1694 address: "The Character of a Good Ruler." And the Christian convictions of many of the preachers of these sermons led them to echo the sentiments of Samuel Beicher, who preached in 1707 that it was important to elect only those who "have subjected themselves to the rule of Christ's Kingdom."

The Rev. Forrest Church, of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City describes the typical early election sermon as a two-hour, fire-and-brimstone jeremiad (that is, in the tradition of the great Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah). Church summarizes the typical message as follows:

The world has gone, or is about to go to Hell. The reason is simple. God is punishing you for your sins. Whatever is wrong in this world is wrong because you are wrong-headed, wrong-hearted, inattentive to God's commandments, and God is watching and God is angry, and if you keep on messing up you will burn forever.

The focus of present-day election sermons, and certainly of this one of mine today, is somewhat different. However, there are some qualities - some features - of those early sermons that are worth hanging on to. For instance, the ideas of giving thanks, of taking stock, and of considering the character of a good ruler or leader.

We should indeed pause in gratitude for our many blessings, not least of which is the freedom we have to cast our votes, and to have a voice in the political life of our communities and our nation. When we recognize what a blessing it is to have those freedoms, it is clear that with such freedom comes great responsibility. The recognition of this freedom and this responsibility is enshrined in the stated principles of our liberal religion; namely, the call to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

We don't put too much stock in sacraments. But if we have any sacraments, one of them is surely the act of speaking out on important issues and voting when given the opportunity. And so I think that one essential part of any election sermon is to remind the faithful of the importance of exercising the right, the privilege, the duty, of voting for those who will govern. That is not merely a civic duty, but also a religious duty. So make sure you vote!

Then there is that notion of taking stock of where we are. Asking not only what's going wrong, but what's going right? And what kind of change is called for in order for us to live up to our potential as a people? I'm not going to take any time this morning rehashing the list of what's wrong in our nation and our world right now. Both presidential campaigns have spent great deals of time, energy, and money doing just that for nearly the past two years.

Usually, one party touts how wonderful things are, and the other how horrible things are. It's almost depressing to hear so much doom and gloom from both sides. And while of course it's true that there is much in the current state of our nation with which to find fault, that must not be the whole story. We should reflect also on what is right about our communities, our nation, and the world. Those blessings that we were feeling gratitude for a few moments ago. And then we should consider how our various potential leaders might be able to build on those strengths to take us in more positive directions. To help us live up to our potential, and to be our best selves, as individuals, and as a society.

And, again looking to those election sermons of old, I think it's always appropriate to reflect on those qualities of character that make for good leaders. Qualities like honesty, intelligence, vision, good judgment, the ability to work well with others, a strong moral compass, and good, solid values that are brought to bear in making decisions and leading. Good values – values that you and I might agree on – don't inevitably lead to what you or I might embrace as the right position on every issue. But I'd rather take my chances on someone who displays values similar to mine, rather than someone who displays none, or those contrary to my own convictions.

I'll say a bit more about values before I wrap up, especially about using our own values in making choices about our votes. But before I do that, I'd like to make a couple of other points. The first has to do with the “trick-or-treat” quality of the election campaign process.

The most obvious parallel here has to do with masks. When kids go out trick-or-treating, many of them wear masks, pretending to be someone or something other than

themselves. It's all in the spirit of fun, and I think it's a healthy form of temporary escapism. I get a kick out of opening the door and seeing what kind of creativity and imagination are being expressed by the young neighbor kids. But don't you sometimes find yourself wondering who was that behind that mask?

In the case of trick-or-treating children, that question is not a life-or-death matter. But what about campaigning politicians? Don't you sometimes find yourself wondering about them – who is that, really, behind that mask? Their masks are, of course, figurative, but they often obscure the true nature of the person behind them as much as if they were made of the most opaque of materials.

One of the saddest features of our political system, in my eyes, is that the skill set, the personal qualities, and the behaviors necessary to run a winning campaign are very different from those necessary to be a great, or even a successful leader. The most obvious example of this is the fact that, generally speaking, the first victim of a political campaign is full honesty and truthfulness.

I came across a cartoon this week that captured this paradox beautifully. A guy approaches a fork in the road, and there is a sign post pointing along each branch. In one direction, the sign reads "Truth." In the other direction: "Victory."

Sadly, but realistically, that is the choice most politicians face. It's not the politicians' fault. In evolutionary terms, it's the natural selection of strategies that work. In psychological terms, it's simple operant conditioning. Behaviors that are rewarded tend to be repeated. So where does the fault lie? With us, the voters. People complain about negative campaigning, but then reward the negative campaigners with their votes. We complain about politicians who break their campaign promises, but we demand unrealistic promises before we'll vote for them. In looking at the prophetic tradition, we've seen that truth-tellers are often not embraced. They are not all that popular, especially when they tell the hard truths.

What is a politician to do? What are we, the voters, to do? There will always be candidates who stretch, if not abandon, the truth. Who wear the masks that they think we want to see. Who play dirty tricks on opponents and voters. But it is up to us to figure out how to see beyond the masks, and to demand and reward honesty. How refreshing it would be to hear a candidate lay out a positive vision and programs to achieve it, acknowledging the costs and sacrifices required to succeed. And how much more refreshing it would be to see such leaders actually elected and supported in their efforts. As a letter to the editor of Time magazine put it this week, "We need not only great leaders, but also a public great enough to accept their leadership."

Lest I be accused of spouting only doom and gloom this morning, let me express one glimmer of hope. By all reports, the turnout for this year's election is going to be, relatively speaking, humongous. The trend in recent decades has been for ever-declining turnouts, with only about half of eligible voters actually voting. This year, some predict the highest turnout in a century. I think that's great. It's at least a first step in taking the political process seriously, and I see it as a good sign.

BUT – let me point out that elections are not the end of the political process. They are but the beginning. Once our leaders are elected, then they are faced with the prospect of governing. And if we are to be full participants in the political process, we must not leave them to go about their work with no further words of guidance from us. Whoever we elect, whoever our leaders are, we must stay engaged with them and with

the process. We must continue to offer a prophetic voice, speaking the hard truths that can move us beyond denial and wishful thinking to real solutions to the challenges we face. And we must continually demand the same of our elected officials.

But it is not only politicians and elected officials who determine the state of our communities and our nation. Forrest Church points out the obvious when he states that “neither John McCain nor Barack Obama is going to save us. . . The votes we cast for president are much less important than the votes we cast with and in our lives.” Church goes on to say:

On this historic election eve, the choice we must make, not just with our vote, but with our lives, is a choice between hope and fear. Hate is not love’s opposite, fear is. When we are frightened – by others, by life itself – we cannot love. We can hide. We can fight. But we cannot love. Conversely, love casts out fear.

I join Forrest Church in calling each of us to commit ourselves to choose, both with our votes and with our lives, to bless the world, and to keep hope alive always. If you have already decided how you will cast your votes on Tuesday, I hope you have made your choices in light of those values and convictions that you hold most dear. And if you have not yet made your final decision, I hold up that same hope.

I hope you will consider all of the candidates in light of the values and principles that we, as religious liberals, embrace together. The worth and dignity of every person. Peace. Liberty. Justice for all. Compassion. Acceptance. Respect for the inter-dependent web of all existence. And then go and cast a vote that you can be proud of.

The sermon from which I’ve been quoting the Rev. Forrest Church was originally his election sermon of 1992, but updated for this year. It’s one of the best I’ve seen, and so I’d like to close by sharing the conclusion of that fine sermon. Church says

The United States of America is the most daring experiment in democratic governance that has ever been fashioned. Our responsibilities are equal to its promise. I have great faith in our system of government. I love this country and its people. I hope that our future will fulfill the founders’ dreams.

Yes, I have my doubts. And I have my fears. All of us do. Yet my faith and hope are strong. We who already have so much will somehow muster the capacity to rise to historic occasions such as this one. If we and our leaders can somehow rise beyond politics as usual to meet this momentous challenge, November fourth will mark not the end of this election. It will mark its beginning. And the world will change.

So may it be.