

Election Sermon 2004

Jamaica Plain, October 31, 2004, Rev. Terry Burke

Tonight the streets of Boston will be filled with witches, vampires, princesses, wizards, zombie cheerleaders, and Martha Stewarts for Halloween. We heard today in our second reading from Pushkin's Eugene Onegin about Tatyana's nightmare, in which she dreams of odd monsters: a combination cat and crane, a goose with a skull's head, a crayfish on a spider, and a dancing windmill. Finally she dreams of what she fears most, the man she loves, Eugene Onegin. Likewise, some of the most popular Halloween costumes this year are human forms some people fear, George Bush and John Kerry, our presidential candidates.

Today we face another Halloween election nightmare: frightful visitors from the Religious Right. The Christian Right has an organized campaign, called "Rat Out the Churches" to spy on Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, United Church of Christ, and other liberal churches. The scary visitors are hoping to get liberal churches in trouble if they publicly endorse political candidates. They do this in revenge - the conservative Rev. Jerry Falwell got into trouble with the IRS for endorsing President Bush.

The Internal Revenue Service has ruled that clergy or their congregations can't publicly endorse political candidates and keep their congregational tax exempt status. I can give you information on how you can help UUs get out the vote in New Hampshire and I also have copies of the National Council of Churches liberal Christian guidelines on the election. I can also tell you in a private conversation who I'm voting for, and put a bumper sticker on my car. Some liberal groups point out that the courts have never ruled on this gagging of clergy free speech. Personally, I don't have the time and energy to challenge these IRS rulings. Concerning our visitors who hope to 'rat us out,' the UUA headquarters had a very irenic, peaceful response: 'perhaps the visitors from the Religious Right will hear a very different message of divine love and justice and toleration.'

Inspired by our hypothetical visitor, I decided to follow an old Puritan and Unitarian tradition and preach an "election sermon." Today I brought into the sanctuary a portrait of Channing. William Ellery Channing, one of the great founders of American Unitarianism, was for many years the minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, now the Arlington Street Church. Channing, a strong abolitionist, advocated a free, non-creedal, liberal Unitarian Christianity. Our responsive reading today on "the Free Mind" came from an election sermon Channing preached in 1830 entitled "Spiritual Freedom."

What was happening in 1830? Andrew Jackson was our president. Railroads and industrialization were beginning in America with the rise of modern capitalism. The word "socialism" was first used in a modern context concerning the Saint Simonists in France. Opposition to slavery was beginning to get organized. There was massive immigration to the US from Great Britain, Germany, and Ireland. Revolutionary upheavals took place in France, Poland, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Greece. The camera was being developed, and Hector Berlioz helped create modern music with his "Symphony Fantastique" in 1830 (that piece would make good Halloween background music).

In this time of change and turmoil, Channing did not endorse particular candidates, but spoke on general spiritual principles. In his famous description of the "free mind," Channing urges his listeners not to be slaves to the past, but to listen for new and higher truth from God. We are to recognize the image of God and the rights of God's children in all people. The "free mind," and the willingness to serve and sacrifice for others, at all cost, are based for Channing upon the promise of immortality by Jesus.

Just as Channing was inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus, our anonymous stranger of the Religious Right would presumably be motivated by the question "WWJD," "What Would Jesus Do" concerning the election. Drawing upon the Biblical narratives, Jesus was concerned for the poor, and often critical of the rich: in his story of the rich man and Lazarus, the uncaring wealthy man goes to Hell, and the destitute Lazarus goes to heaven. Jesus also said that it is as hard for a rich person to get into heaven as for 'a camel

to go through the eye of a needle.' People play with that verse in various ways, but in the teachings of Jesus, to be rich is usually to be spiritually poor.

Jesus got extremely angry at the money changers in the Jerusalem Temple; he disliked those who made money while mouthing false piety. Jesus treated the women of his time with dignity and respect, insisting that there be no double standard in divorce. In the Gospel stories, Jesus healed people, and he clearly wanted people to be whole physically, mentally, and spiritually; it's hard to imagine that he would close detoxes and treatment centers. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus blessed the peacemakers, and later wept over the death of a friend.

Jesus tried to reconcile opposing groups; within his disciples he had Simon the Zealot, a revolutionary against the Roman order, and Matthew the tax collector, a collaborator with the political rulers. Jesus defined the neighbor that one is to love to include everyone, and gives as an example of a "good" neighbor an enemy of the culture, a Samaritan. Jesus also embraced the lepers and outcasts of his society. I once heard a former head of the Southern Baptist Convention, who had lost several family members to AIDS, say that "the first person in history to willingly embrace a leper didn't die of leprosy. He died at the hands of political leaders who wouldn't have touched a leper with a ten foot pole." Jesus would probably embrace those who are outcasts and reviled in our society.

Jesus preached about what he called the "Kingdom of God," the breaking into this world of God's reign of love and justice and forgiveness. In our first reading today, Jesus blesses children and says one should be like a child to be part of the Kingdom of God. I assume Jesus would be concerned about the millions of children in our country who are hungry, homeless, and need health care. Twelve million children live in poverty in this country. IN AMERICA! WWJD - "What Would Jesus Do concerning the election?" I don't know. I have an idea based on the Biblical material that I've just discussed, but I can't say for sure. Be very wary of political types who tell you they know what Jesus, religious figures, God think.

In the current UU World magazine, Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church quotes the philosopher Nietzsche, " When fighting monsters, we must avoid becoming a monster." That Religious Right man or woman potentially sitting in our pew is not a monster or an enemy, but a stranger. In many traditions, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, the stranger is regarded as holy, teaching us something about God or ourselves. Certainly the stranger is someone to welcome and provide hospitality to. Opposed as I am to the actions of the Religious Right, we should not demonize their individual adherents. The radical Civil Rights leader Will Campbell used to shake up rallies by beginning his speeches, "I want you to know first off that I'm pro-Klansman." After a pause he'd add, "I completely oppose the Klan, but I'm pro-Klansman because I'm pro-human being." As with Tatyana's nightmare in Eugene Onegin, the monsters ultimately have a human face. We can oppose the Christian Right without denying dignity and respect to its individual members, even if that dignity and respect is not reciprocated.

I can't tell you definitely "What Would Jesus Do" concerning the election, but I think it's a good guideline to vote for those who are pro- human being. Echoing William Ellery Channing, may we use our free minds, and set no bounds to love, recognizing in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children.