

The People Rule

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

November 5, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Ronnie Mars

"Try That in a Small Town" is a song written by Kelley Lovelace, Neil Thrasher, Tully Kennedy, and Kurt Allison, and recorded by American country music singer Jason Aldean. The song was the subject of widespread controversy and media attention following the release of its music video in July, with accusations that the song was a coded endorsement of racism and lynching, which both Aldean and the video's producers have denied. After the subsequent extensive media coverage, "Try That in a Small Town" had a surge in popularity.

The song contrasts rural and urban lifestyles. It asserts that behavior such as flag burning or protests and attacks toward police officers will face stronger consequences in a rural setting than an urban one, stating, "try that in a small town, see how far ya make it down the road" and "if you're looking for a fight, try that in a small town". In the second verse, Aldean sings about gun rights and not wanting his own to be confiscated.

Oak Grove, Kentucky, a community of, 7700 and adjacent to the Fort Campbell army post, is just that kind of small town. I lived in Clarksville, TN., population 171,000 and neighbor to Fort Campbell, also where I worked. The people in these communities love their God and Country and support our country's military. That suggests I know what's in their hearts. I don't know what's in their minds. People in these small towns in America speak English, but their language is different. That doesn't mean a community loves its country less if they don't wrap themselves in the flag.

Last Saturday I heard crowd noises outside the stage door of the Keller Auditorium in downtown Portland on Clay St. I was not aware of an event taking place. Over 1,000 Palestine supporters filled the streets calling for a cease-fire in Gaza. We secure our stage doors during such events.

We talked about that in my Social Justice in the Media class that previous Thursday about Freedom of Speech and Religion. The United States was founded on the principles of the American Enlightenment; a period of intellectual and philosophical passion in the thirteen American colonies in the 18th to 19th century, which led to the American Revolution and the creation of the United States of America.

I told my students I had a bias with immigrants moving to the United States and voicing their political views about issues back in their native countries. But that is the point. As citizens, they have the right to exercise their free speech and I can defend their speech while also criticizing it.

We also have Freedom of Religion; whose peoples' beliefs are as different as the designs of these houses of Worship. We should be able to agree to disagree on ideas we do not share, while learning to coexist. That democratic aim is a work in progress.

The People Rule© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

It takes a village to raise a child – there is a lot of truth in the saying, even if the origin of the phrase is debated. In 2016, Joel Goldberg did a story on National Public Radio entitled “it takes a village to determine the origins of an African proverb.” The conclusion of that research was that although the origins of the saying is undetermined, it does speak to the culture of some African cultures. In Uganda there is a proverb that translates to ‘a child does not grow up only in a single home.’ In Tanzania, “a child belongs not to one parent or home” and “regardless of a child’s biological parents its upbringing belongs to the community.” And in Swahili, a language spoken primarily in Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique, a similar saying exists.

In our tradition, in Unitarian Universalism, we have a naming ceremony for babies and young children, that reminds parents that the community is there to support the family as they raise their children. I haven’t had the honor of doing one of those here and don’t actually know this particular congregation’s traditions around that practice. But now that I’m talking about it, I’ll do some research. But in the past, I’ve received a call from new parents who want a sort of private baptism for their baby, generally for their extended family for whom baptism is an important Christian rite, but they don’t wish the doctrine that accompanies the ceremony. I have to tell them that I don’t do child dedications outside of a congregational context – because the meaning, for me, is that it takes a congregation to raise a child. Since we don’t generally believe that children are born sinful, the holy water isn’t there to symbolize Christ’s sacrifice and washing away of sin. We generally use water – as it is symbolic of life, peace, and power– as we publicly name the child and dedicate the parents and community to the nurturing of the child’s development.

I wasn’t dedicated in that way until I was 13, so I always thought of my dedication as a sort of bat mitzvah. We were attending the UU Fellowship of Fargo-Moorhead in Fargo, ND that was completely lay-led. Perhaps once a month, or less often, even, a minister would come through town and preach at the fellowship and one of them offered to do a child dedication ceremony and I got included. I don’t really remember it; just the story about it.

When I was serving as a minister in the Lansing, Michigan congregation, they hadn’t had a child dedication ceremony for several years, so I did one early on in my ministry that included something like 10 children, ranging from babies to teenagers. Maybe we can offer something like that here, if parents are interested. By the end of my ministry there, we generally offered a dedication once or twice a year when a new baby arrived or a new family requested one.

I think we need reminders in this culture that families do not exist in isolation; just as we need reminders that individuals are connected by community. The extreme individualism that has plagued our American society harms us because it robs us of our true identity –as it says in one of our readings in our hymnal – that “we are connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.” “We are not isolated beings,” but interdependent.

Our theme this month is democracy – which means rule by the people, that the people are in charge. It’s a system of governance in which power is entrusted to the people or the general population of a state or organization. Democracy, according to the United Nations, “provides an environment that

respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in which the freely expressed will of people is exercised."

Our churches are democratic institutions – Unitarian Universalist churches are. We have congregational polity, which means that the congregation is in charge. Not only do you elect your representative leaders – members from among you to the Board of Trustees – actually to two Boards – including the Board of the endowment committee, and to your leadership discovery and development team that help you find those volunteers who agree to be elected to serve – you elect all those volunteers, but you also elect your minister. I was elected in 2017 and have served you for 6 years.

The fifth principle – in Article II of the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association – states that we congregations covenant *to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process*. This language was adopted by democratic vote in the 1984 and 1985 General Assemblies – where delegates from UU congregations gather to make decisions about the larger association of which we are a part. Currently this language is under consideration for revision, and some complain that the new language doesn't include the word *democracy*. The new language includes those values that I preached about last week, that Penny Slingerland wrote about this week in the bulletin – the list of values that has love at the center, but includes *pluralism, equity, and justice* – which are the values that we hold that lead us to use a democratic process. It's not democracy in all its various forms – representative democracy, parliamentary democracy, democratic socialism, etc. – but the values we are able to uphold using some form of governance that allows the people to be in charge of their own destinies.

Sometimes the majority of people won't vote to protect the minority of people – leading us to Jason Aldean's recording of "Try that in a small town" – with its implicit endorsement of violence, and no recognition of the value of pluralism. But in a congregational setting, where we ground ourselves in the values of pluralism, interdependence, equity, justice and the like, we can find ways to use a democratic process to safeguard different voices, different opinions while learning to be together and co-exist.

But the church is not that different from other institutions in which democracy depends upon the participation of the people. 'Good communities don't make themselves,' said Kimmerer's father, recently retired as town supervisor, 'We've got a lot to be grateful for, and we all have to do our part to keep it going.'

My ballot for Tuesday's general and special election, I'll admit, was languishing on the kitchen counter until I thought about my having to preach this sermon. So, I picked it up, did my research, and voted. Democracy takes some work. I couldn't in good conscience just pick a name on the ballot without knowing a bit about the values of the person for whom I voted. 'We've got a lot to be grateful for, and we all have to do our part to keep it going.'

I love Kimmerer's discussion of the maples in that reading. "the maples have been giving all year long," she writes. "Their contribution of limb wood kept my old neighbor Mr. Keller's house warm all winter when we couldn't pay the oil bill."

"Our congregations are voluntary associations and depend on donations—not just of our financial resources but of our time and talents as well," writes Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom in *Serving with Grace: Lay Leadership as a Spiritual Practice*. "In fact," he goes on to say, "even if our members pledge sufficient

support that every single task could be farmed out to paid employees, the church would still need volunteers because that's the nature of a volunteer association.

"As Rev. Gary Kowalski put it in a sermon,

'People who come to Unitarian Universalism seeking spiritual goods are likely to be disappointed as long as they have the outlook of consumers in search of material goods. If their connection to our liberal faith is to grow into something more rewarding, they have to give up the consumer mindset and begin to think of themselves instead as shareholders, investors, co-owners in what happens in the church.'" End quote.

Kimmerer's use of the maples to explore civic involvement and stewardship reminds me that this is the natural way of things, not something humans invented apart from the natural world. We are interdependent, and we should value that interdependence.

Our congregations are voluntary associations and depend on donations—of money and of time. There are several volunteers right now who are gearing up to help us with our Annual Pledge Campaign which doesn't start until spring, but is pretty critical this year, as last year we had to cut the budget quite a bit. One of the goals we've been proposing and discussing isn't financial at all, but rather one of commitment. What would it be like if everyone responded to the ask? What if everyone we ask to pledge, would tell us if they could or couldn't. For planning purposes, it's helpful to know especially when the answer is that they can't give. Perhaps every time someone told us they couldn't pledge, a pledger with means might raise their pledge to help. Like the contribution of limb wood given by the maples when Mr. Keller couldn't pay the oil bill. The simple act of responding would be an acknowledgement that we are interdependent, that we rely on one another, and that we care for the institution and the volunteers who ask. Pretty bold goal, I'd say. But it makes me hopeful.

In a recent membership class, the question was asked by someone deciding whether or not to join the church, why become a member? What's the difference between a member and someone who attends church? I didn't have that language from Gary Kowalski at the ready about thinking of themselves as shareholders, investors, co-owners in what happens in the church. But I did remember that discussion Robin Wall Kimmerer has in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, in that chapter about strawberries, concerning the "bundle of rights" vs. "bundle of responsibilities." The consumer mindset keeps us focused on our bundle of rights – What do I get with my money? What can I say with my free speech?

But given that "we are not isolated beings, but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other" we have a responsibility to one another, a bundle of responsibilities. Instead, we could be asking, how can my money best serve my values in the world? And how can I responsibly use my free speech to advance those values?

But the church is not that different from other institutions in which democracy depends upon the participation of the people. I think about how long I postponed voting in this election – that it just seemed like too much work. And then I think about the decline of democracy in the world, and wonder if any part of it has to do with how much work it is?

And how traumatized we are, how unable so many of us are to do that hard work. This war in Gaza, the war in Ukraine, the House leadership, impending government shut-down, global climate change, deaths still from covid, etc., etc.

If democracy means rule by the people, then it begins by learning to govern ourselves. It begins by learning to regulate our bodies, learning to regulate our autonomic and emotional states. And because we're interdependent, we need the help of others in order to do it. Just as a parent helps a child to calm down, which leads to the regulation of their heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and other functions. All these automatic systems get upset when we're hungry, angry, hurting, or scared. We need the help of others – of community, of beloved community – to calm our anxiety and regulate our systems. Repeated distressing and disturbing events leave their mark on our bodies and, overloaded, we are unable to function or function at our best. It just feels to me like so many of us are overloaded and not functioning at our best- I'm thinking of everyone from elected officials and supreme court justices to many of us in this room.

What's counter-intuitive, perhaps, or not obvious, is what Gary Kowalski says about investing ourselves in something larger as a path toward healing and greater meaning. If our connection to our liberal faith is to grow into something more rewarding, then we have to give up that consumer mindset and begin to think of ourselves as shareholders, investors, co-owners in what happens at church. Or if our connection to this country – this democracy – is to grow into something more rewarding, then we have to begin to think of ourselves as shareholders, investors, co-owners in what happens in this country.

Like Ben Kessler and Alyssa Brin have done recently, making sure we have coffee for our social time each week, and all of you who have volunteered to help them. And starting up this "mid-adult friendship and social group" for those in that 20-40 year old age range that, until recently, has numbered few. They, and so many others, are investing their time in this congregation as co-owners in what happens here. As do those we give thanks for each morning as we begin worship together.

We just need to imitate the trees who contribute to the monthly pancake breakfasts run by the volunteer fire department and ambulance squad. "When it comes to civic beautification, they alone create the crimson fall with little recognition."

The bright and varied multicolored leaves are now falling and this season of change, between summer and winter, claims us completely.

"I can hear change humming in its loudest, proudest song," writes the poet.

"I don't fear change coming and so I sing along.

Change sings where? There! Inside me. Because I am the change I want to see.

As I grow, it grows like seeds. I am just what the world needs.

We're what the world is becoming, and we know it won't be long.

We all hear change strumming. Won't you sing along?" asks Amanda Gorman.

Won't you sing along?

"We face a challenge to democracy: a challenge that calls us to hope in moments of despair, a challenge that asks us to persist in the faith that we can and must make a difference."

Won't you sing along?