The Woman Suffrage Centennial

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Sunday, August 16, 2020
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: "There's a River Flowin' in My Soul"; "We Are a Gentle, Angry People." Video: "One Voice," by Ruth Moody, sung by Myriad, a young women's ensemble from Canada.

Piano music, chosen by Irina, all composed by African American women: "A Summer Day," by Lina J. McLin; "Troubled Water," by Margaret Bond (1913-72), "Homage," by Zenobia Powell Perry (1908-2004).

Introduction

Today's service is rooted in the Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The Fifth Principle says that our UU congregations affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. The democratic process depends on the choice, and the ability, to participate in the process—to vote on the issues that matter to you, elect the people who represent you, and put yourself forward to serve in elected office. This week the nation is marking 100 years since the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. It says that citizens cannot be denied the right to vote on the basis of sex by the federal, state or local governments. So this week we celebrate the messy history and the faithful persistence of all those who won the right to vote for women.

Homily

From the first Women's Rights Convention in 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York, till the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified and adopted in 1920, it took 72 years for women to get voting rights, or suffrage. I wonder: Did three generations of women spend those years waiting patiently until men chose to share their power? Was there a gradual process, a dawning awareness that women's voices, perspectives, and presence were needed for the wellbeing of the country as well as for women's own freedom? Did it take 72 years of reasonable dialogue? No, it was a messy, painful, tragic, divisive, confused, and confusing journey.

The journey was filled with setbacks, mistakes, and heartbreak, as well as courage, devotion, friendship, victories and celebration.

Perhaps the most troubling source of crisis along this journey had to do with racism in American society. The famous early leaders of suffrage were educated white women. Many early suffragists were abolitionists, too, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1840 she and other women went to London for a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society, but they found women were not allowed to be seated there as voting delegates. Eight years later in Seneca Falls, Stanton co-authored resolutions listing 11 categories of rights needed by women—one of which was the vote.

Black abolitionists like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth also worked for suffrage. Frederick Douglass was a Black man who lectured, wrote, and organized across the northern states for abolition after he had gained his freedom from slavery. He also was an eloquent ally for woman suffrage. However, sometimes white women leaders would ask him to stay away from certain suffrage rallies. They didn't want to alienate some of the white women they wanted to introduce to the movement.

After the Civil War, the U.S. adopted the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, granting African American men the right to vote. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony opposed that amendment. They had assumed women would enter the land of suffrage and full citizenship side by side with Black men. But they were told, "The country can't handle that much change at once." Frederick Douglass himself said it was the Black man's time first, and women would come later.

Anthony and Stanton expressed their outrage at the 15th Amendment in racist and condescending terms. From the early days of the women's movement, there were several active suffrage organizations led by and for Black women, especially in places where laws, or white women, or both, kept them out.

Another dynamic of those early decades was that leaders of the major woman suffrage organizations were split about a strategy for victory. One group wanted to nail down the right to vote in every state, one state at a time. Another pursued a national strategy toward a federal amendment.

In the 1890s, the first state to achieve suffrage was Wyoming—followed by Colorado, Idaho, and Utah. As newly admitted states in the nation, these western states would gain more money and influence in the country if they could count women as voting citizens. The next big steps took place in 1910, when the voters in three other states—the men, that is—considered referenda, or ballot initiatives, for woman suffrage—and voted them down. However, one referendum did pass—in Washington State, by a 2 to 1 margin. In 1911, California became the sixth *free state*, as leaders called a state with the right to vote. This brought new momentum and organizing energy to the East Coast and Midwest.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter became one of the suffrage leaders in the early 1900s—Harriot Stanton Blatch. One of her supporters described her strategy of relentless public awareness: parades, protests, lectures, and civil disobedience. She said: "You must keep suffrage every minute before the public so they're used to the idea and talk about it, whether they agree or disagree."

This gives me an important perspective on protest movements today. Persistent visibility is necessary to keep us from easing back into complacency. For example, it's been 30 years since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. That legislation was the result of decades of constituent organizing, education of the public, government lobbying, and loud, attention-grabbing mass protests. Activists in wheelchairs would block building entrances and exits to demonstrate for the need for equal access for all people. Another example: in the 1980s and 90s, ACT-UP, or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, demonstrated by blocking traffic to draw attention to government inaction on the AIDS crisis. Protestors with ACT-UP would shout its memorable slogan, Silence=Death. Recently, as part of the Movement for Black Lives, nonviolent protests have kept the national attention on systemic racial injustice, including health disparities, mass incarceration, and police brutality.

Three years ago, the Women's March on Washington took place on the day after Donald Trump's inauguration as president. Marchers there and in cities across the nation were showing up to oppose his policies and violent rhetoric. That march was the largest single-day protest in the nation's history . Nearly a century before, another history-making protest was also organized and led by women.

On a Monday in March of 1913, the Woman Suffrage March brought 5,000 women from all over the country, coming by trains and trollies loaded with marchers and by a pilgrimage on foot from New York City. Groups of highly organized women brought their sign, banners, flags, and parade floats to Washington. In the afternoon sun, delegations marched from every state, as did contingents of librarians, teachers, nurses, and women from other professions. This march took place on the day *before* Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated for his first term as president. When his train arrived in Washington that Monday afternoon, he found no greeting party for him. The train station was empty— because everyone was out watching the march.

When the influenza pandemic struck the United States in 1918 and 1919, it threatened to

set back the momentum for suffrage. Some movement leaders came down with the flu, or their family members got sick, or died. Many women shifted their volunteer efforts from activism to caring for sick people. Yet having recently achieved wins in several more states, the women's political connections and organizing base remained strong. By distributing pamphlets, publishing newspaper inserts and conducting numerous one-on-one conversations, they kept the momentum going.

In the midterm elections of 1918, their activism ensured that both the House and Senate would be now controlled by the Republican Party, which supported a Constitutional amendment. President Wilson was a Southern Democrat. His white-supremacy commitments led him to argue for "state's rights." Hence, Wilson had been opposed to a federal amendment. At first he didn't offer any support for voting rights, even at the state levels. Yet suffragists were turning public opinion in their favor. And they persistently pestered, challenged, and shamed the President into finally supporting the amendment.

Voting is a tool. It's a source of power and leverage to make change. It works only when enough people use it, *and* when we are able to use it. Seven years ago, a Supreme Court ruling undercut voter protections which date back to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In several states, voters have been kicked off the rolls without cause. In some states, laws restrict former prisoners from voting even after they have served out their sentence. States have closed polling places or moved them farther from communities of color or neighborhoods of poor people. Now the Covid-19 pandemic has raised risks and fears for every voter showing up to vote at a place that will be more crowded as well as farther from home. The current U.S. president has made clear his efforts to keep Americans from casting their votes by mail. He's trying to undermine confidence in the coming election for his own benefit.

You know, if the right to vote weren't so crucial, then powerful people wouldn't have gone to such lengths to deny the use of that right, over and over, in history and right now.

Fortunately, countless people are not giving up without a fight. This includes many Unitarian Universalists. We are doing what we can to affirm and promote the right to vote. Some of you have been writing letters to people who have been kicked off the voting rolls and urging them to register again, and telling them how they can do that. Through various organizations, many of you have been mailing post cards out of state, to encourage people to vote in their upcoming elections. This year, our denomination, the UUA, has launched a non-partisan campaign called UU the Vote. Using the internet and the telephone, the volunteers and staff with UU the Vote are working to reverse voter suppression, get folks registered, and mobilize the voters. UU the Vote provides monetary grants to community organizers and local nonpartisan groups to get out the vote, especially in communities of color in battleground states. There are some easy ways to volunteer some of your time for this important work, ways to choose your own level of engagement. If you'd like to discuss how you can plug into UU the Vote or into another organization please talk to Rev. Lucy or to me. You are also welcome to join me in supporting UU the Vote with a financial donation.

It could be so easy to look back 100 years and imagine that the achievement of voting rights was an inevitable victory. But it wasn't. Social progress is never guaranteed, clear, pain-free or final. It is not without conflict, setbacks, and mistakes—trivial mistakes and tragic ones.

A free society, a better world, a flourishing human family—none of these visions will just happen. It calls for faith and for work. And it calls for working in faith, together. So may it be.