

## **FOR TIMES SUCH AS THESE**

A sermon by the Rev. John T. Morehouse

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After September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, I remember standing with my Congregation in a circle in our church holding hands and sharing our fear for the future. So much seemed to be wrong at that moment. People in that church had lost loved ones in the attacks - we worried that this might be the beginning of a new world war. Six years later many of us still worry. Sure, gone is the prescient worry that we are going to be destroyed, but the worry is still there nonetheless. We did go to war, two wars as a matter of fact. We have seen the gap between the rich and poor widen, and for most of us liberal spirits, we worry about the disenfranchised in our world now that much of the safety net has fallen away.

There are our own personal worries as we launch into this new year as well: financial concerns (are we headed for a recession?), relationship problems (can I ever overcome my problems?), health concerns (insurance being what it is, how long can I keep going?). I know that these and so much more weighs on us, especially in this post-partum holiday moment. And yet I see ample reasons to take heart. To work for change. To hope and believe that 2008 will be a much better year. I believe that we will become more liberal, and I mean that in the best sense of the word: more giving and creative towards our fellow beings in the new year.

Why? Well for one reason, our personal and collective lives do go on. Someone has died, people came to be married, babies need love and our children grow. What I have discovered from looking too far down the road of the future is

that the immensity of the problems we face are immense precisely because we try to face them all at once. Taken day by day, we manage to not only survive but to grow a bit in the process.

Being human, much more than even a liberal soul, is to keep living in the present. What fear can do to any of us as we survey the year past and the one before is to keep us walled in. But life is not a box, it keeps unfolding and I want to suggest today just how we keep living with that liberal spirit even in the midst of strife.

Last week at our Christmas Eve service and in the sermon the day before, Renée and I shared with you the immortal words of Sophia Lyon Fahs, the founder of what would later be known as the Sunday School movement, not only in our religion but in others as well. She can truly claim the honor of being the founder of modern religious education in America, providing children with the learning and respect in religion that had so been lacking in religious life. Up until this time, kids were expected to come to church and be quiet. Sophia Fahs believed that kids need to question, learn and grow. She believed that they are the most liberal of souls.

She wrote: “That some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into the wider and deeper sympathies” (From It Matters What We Believe)

Perhaps with the fear mongering our culture is so steeped in we are seeing the world as a closed garden; safe in here. If so, we have lost sight of the liberal spirit. For we are the expansive faith, the ones who look for the better in others

sometimes at the cost of common sense. In the post holiday moment, we might wonder why we do all this. The gifts, the celebrations, the all of it. The answer has something to do with being expansive, with seeing the world not as a walled garden but as an open field.

Over Christmas someone asked me to preach on the pervasive competitiveness of our culture. I promised I would, but let me note today, as we stand on the threshold of a new year, that I believe competitiveness is part of seeing the world as a walled garden, especially after 9/11. It's you or me. Us vs. them. Your loss is my gain. This, while not the heart of the conservative spirit, has something to do with it.

With this image of the open field before us – not the walled garden - what then could our liberal spirit say to the year before us?

As liberals we are called to believe deeply and sincerely that the inherent worth of each person is real if not always obvious. Even that so and so who cut you off in holiday traffic has a potential, perhaps not realized. This must be at the top of our liberal agenda if we are to see this New Year as a year of hope and change. Starting with the ones we love. Is this the year to forgive that ancient hurt? Is this the time to talk out the misunderstanding? At the very least, as one friend reminded me, 2008 may be the year to learn all of your neighbor's names. And I envision for this church the same faith in our neighbors. This is the year of building bridges, not liberal vs. the conservatives, but, in the best liberal spirit, understanding the conservatives.

As liberals we must be willing to acknowledge and work against evil in the world. I remember trying to explain to a child right after 9/11 what had happened.

Let me begin by saying that evil is not an act of God. These were human choices and human actions. This is the face of evil. Watching those bodies pulled from the rubble was its aftermath. My heart was heavy with the murder of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan. The answer to “why evil” is deeply imbedded in both history and faith. For people to commit such a horror two conditions have to be present: 1. That they felt they were justified. We, or rather our government is not entirely innocent. We do have to ask ourselves what would create such a sense of desperation? In the midst of all this saber rattling, I pray we will at least examine the motive behind evil acts such as murder.

Our response has been anything but innocent. So as part of my liberal agenda – one I will invite you to be a part of – I want to undo our complicity in evil by seeing the closing of the Guantanamo Bay prison. As the Rev. Justin Osterman writes:

“Over the past five years our nation has retreated from every one of these basic American values. We have embarrassed ourselves as a society by allowing systematic abuses to take place in our names; we have driven from our side all but our most tenacious allies in the world; we have squandered all the sympathy and moral credibility the world conferred on us after September 11, 2001; we have antagonized neutral populations and created enemies where none previously existed; and we have violated the simple standards of decency for which our great nations stands. It is a travesty bordering on criminal behavior which has gone unchecked and unchallenged. ...

“Guantanamo Bay, Cuba is our prison and it is my prison. All that has been done in that prison has been done in our names. And I, for one, cannot accept this any longer. Not in my name.

“We face a moral turning point in our nation’s history; we will either excise the disease that is spreading from Guantanamo and threatening our American way of life, or we will succumb as a society to the its ravages and the American way of life as we know it will die. As patriotic citizens and people of faith, we must demand the immediate closure of the Guantanamo prison and insist that the sterilizing light of open and public examination be brought to bear not just on the prison itself, but on the policies and the persons that have allowed this facility to exist.” (From “A Cancer on Our Democracy” printed in the Meadville/Lombard Reader Vol. II, 2007)

It is part of my agenda, my resolution for this coming year, to see the prison closed before the year is over. I will keep you posted.

We need to remember that evil is often born in the complicated arena of politics and religion, by self-serving politically motivated men. While the religion is part of the equation it is not the reason. It is only the excuse.

As liberals we must balance out individualism, that supreme enlightenment value, with the needs of a community. One of the reasons we have a behavioral covenant as a church is to remind ourselves that individual opinions do not reign supreme. The community we are a part of has rights as well. Think about that this next year each time you complain about something here or in another community you are a part of. Remember that in the liberal spirit we should assume the best of our leaders until they prove otherwise. And then to ask ourselves, as liberals, what am I going to do to make it better?

Owen Flannigan, in his book The Problem of the Soul, notes that individualism is built on the assumption that we are masters of our will and fate.

But, he notes, our will and fate is not necessarily the will of the majority, and this is when we must bend to allow others into our wide open field of life. This coming year let us move beyond the negative form of the golden rule and move to its original positive meaning.

As liberals we must employ empathy first. “Seek first to understand then be understood,” in the words of Stephen Covey. Try being in some else’s shoes. As liberals we believe in a freedom to believe – a wide open field – but that doesn’t mean we can hurt others with that belief. That would be the same kind of exclusiveness that Fahs warned us of.

Finally, as liberals we must approach this year as faithful people. Because our theology is a process rather than a dogma, we are required to be open to others. We will defend diversity because like a good pasture, many are better than one. As Bill Sinkford reminds us “We are so much better together than we can ever be alone”. As liberals we are not required to nail down God. The spirit we live by must be open to change. This does not mean we have no values; we do and the principles we live by help ground those values. But if we are to make 2008 a years of hope and build bridges to the future, then we need to be open to other ideas, seriously open. In trying times such as these this is the only way we will survive. I invite you to be part of a new class starting next Monday evening in which we will explore the meaning of the seven principles and what they might teach us as we live and grow in times such as these.

I would like to close with this quote from a man who, when his life ended like many of the prophets before him, many thought our world had come to the end. The world didn’t end, and with our help it will heal from this and every

other horror in the generations to come. These are the words of Robert Kennedy on the night Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed:

“My favorite poet was Aeschylus (who wrote) ‘in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.’ What we need in these United States is not division; what we need in these United States is not hatred; what we need in these United States is not violence; but love and wisdom and compassion towards one another...We can do well in this country. We will have difficult time; we’ve had difficult times in the past, we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence, it is not the end of lawlessness, it is not the end of disorder. But the vast majority of people in this country want to live together, want to improve their lives, and want justice for all human beings...Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago ‘to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world’. Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our people.” That, my friends, is the essence of the liberal spirit, a spirit very much in need in times such as these.

Happy New Year!