



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Getting Past Election Politics”

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A sermon delivered on November 13, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Behold, how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.* Psalm 133:1

*I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, [or] in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend.* Thomas Jefferson

*This church does not demand all people to think alike, but to think uprightly, and get as near as possible to truth; it does not ask all people to live alike but to live holy, and get as near as possible to a life perfectly divine.* Theodore Parker, 1841 (adapted)

*Diversity may be the hardest thing for a society to live with, and perhaps the most dangerous thing for a society to be without.* William Sloane Coffin

### Sermon

Like many of you, but not all, this has been a difficult week. Like many of you, but not all, I am trying to make sense of the election results and what it may mean. Like many of you, but not all, I am disheartened, anxious, and confused. And, like many of you, but not all, I'm in need of comfort and assurance that all will be well.

I recognize that it is too easy for me to increase the polarization by asking, “How could anyone vote for a man who has denigrated Hispanics, Muslims, African-Americans, women, and others? How could anyone vote for someone who seems to care only about himself and being a winner? Or who has done nothing to serve our country in the past?”

But if I ask those questions, and let raw emotions get the better of me, I divide us into two camps: *my people* and *those people*. And that doesn't serve us well. So my head is warring with my heart. And even within my heart are two warring sides. One side urges me to be compassionate and optimistic, the other side feeds my anger and grief.

I share this with you because I'm sure my reactions are not much different from many of yours, though again, not all. I keep saying ‘not all’ to remind us that we are not uniform in our beliefs or voting patterns here. Just as the nation is ‘out of many, one’, so are we Unitarian Universalists. We easily acknowledge our theological differences, though sometimes we act as if everyone believes however you or I believe. And we easily forget that we have political

differences, though many times we act as if we're all of one party. When we act this way, we push people away who disagree with us.

This, of course, makes it challenging for me to speak to you as one body. I can't assume you feel alike. So just like I have to speak to all our theological differences, I have to speak and pastor to all our political differences. I do not wish to be a minister to just those who think, vote, and believe like I do.

Granted, that would be much easier, but it would go against how I understand my UU values and principles. It is to these values I want us to reflect on this morning. I believe the values we hold and bring to our living will help us get past this troubling moment in our history.

When I give my 30-second elevator speech about Unitarian Universalism, I say, "Ours is a covenantal religion comprised of people who share common values and embrace differing beliefs." These common values for the most part are expressed in our Seven Principles. If you're not familiar with them they are written on the back of most every Sunday order of service.

The first principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person (or being). That requires me to respect others no matter who they are or what their identity. The seventh principle affirms we are part of an interdependent web of existence. That requires me to acknowledge we are one—and that means I cannot separate myself from those who vote differently from me.

I participated in a UU minister's cluster meeting this week where we did an exercise I want you to try. It's a little out of our normal practice, so I hope you're willing.

I would like you to take a moment to identify a value you hold that determines the way you act or perceive the world. What value is written on your heart that you bring to any endeavor? What value helps you choose how you conduct yourself?

For example, I value honesty. I believe it is important to be truthful and authentic. I try not to lie or pretend I'm something I'm not. That means when I'm in deep conversation with someone, I try to express my feelings and I share when I'm unsure about something. And, I try to listen to what you have to say. I value your wisdom.

So I'm going to be quiet for a moment and let you identify a value you carry with you at all times, or try to at least. (*pause a minute*)

Now I want you to turn to a neighbor, introduce yourself, and share that value. As you share, please listen deeply to what the other person shares with you. Take a minute for each person, no need for life stories. I'll ring the bell to bring us back together (*pause*).

Now I'd like you to share how it felt to listen deeply to someone sharing their value. You don't need to tell us what the value is, just share how it felt to deeply listen to the other person. Is there anyone who would be willing to share the experience of listening? We'll just hear from a few of you. Michelle/Julie will bring the microphone to you.

(*sharing*)

Thank you for sharing and for participating. I believe when we discuss what we value, and truly listen to each other, we can reach across what divides us because we move beyond beliefs and politics to connect with someone on a deeper level. And, we may find we share many of the same values.

One concern I've heard expressed regarding the elections is how isolating we tend to be. We hang out with people who are like us, who affirm our beliefs. We read books and watch the news that reinforces what we may already think. The way Fox News and MSNBC report national events, for example, greatly varies. Each network puts its own spin on what it sees. During the elections, one network championed Clinton, the other Trump. I think you know which was which.

This is but one example of our bubbles. Blacks live in a bubble whites rarely enter. Undocumented immigrants live in a bubble and Muslims in yet another. Rural Americans live isolated from urban Americans. Polling confirmed that each party appealed to its own bubble and rarely listened to the other side. Both parties deluded themselves if they believe they spoke to everyone.

Moving beyond this moment will require us to listen to those outside our own bubbles. Sharing values will help us discover we're not so different and may offer common ground to work together on. But first, we must listen.

When President Obama and President-elect Trump met this week at the White House, these two men who had been at odds for years, seemed to prioritize the value that the U.S. is more important than what either thinks of the other. Despite all the vitriolic slings and arrows, the cameras showed them sitting next to each other, agreeing to work together. Obama told Trump, "We now are going to want to do everything we can to help you succeed because if you succeed, then the country succeeds."

That moment reminds us that we can prioritize our values, too. When my values are in conflict, as they have been this week, I need to remember that expressing my honest disgust and fears are less important than my desire to be respectful of all people, my desire for the polarization to end, and my desire for our country to be one again, not two. If I truly listen to what is important to someone else, then I think we can move forward together.

But first, my, and perhaps your, grief must pass. Like the death of a loved one, the stages of grief cannot be hurried. So let us hold each other gently, and then, let us get to the work of reconciliation that must be done. Let's do that together.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Share your feelings or reactions to the election results and its impact on you for the near future.
2. Identify the values that guided your vote and how might they guide you moving forward.
3. When two or more values come into conflict what helps you prioritize them? What holds ultimate value for you?