

**“A MODEST PROPOSAL”**

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A dozen years ago as the winds of war blew toward Afghanistan and Iraq, I recall a dinner discussion in Chatham on Cape Cod. Wine had loosened our dialogue. Our remarks grew less guarded. The host observed even if those Middle Eastern lands weren't a threat, a mission there to build democracy was surely worthwhile.

Alarm bells went off clanging in my head. He saw the Sunni and Shiites sliding flowers into the barrels of our arriving troops and blanketing them with kisses like young maids of Normandy as Allies liberated their villages. Somehow I didn't see it trending that way. But what shocked me most was the idea of democracy, despite its benefits, as something we could export at the end of a gun. And what about the self-centered bias that the entire world should see democracy as an absolute, unquestioned and universal good? It's a really big world out there. Why not instead spread our ways by becoming that shining Pilgrim "city set on a hill"? Then they'd invite us over, clamor after our wisdom, and emulate our citizenship.

So I calculatedly asked, why not invade and convert them to our Christian faith? In response, I got lots of harrumphing, 'are you crazy? Who wants the Crusades again?' I expected. Then I asked: is democracy more universally sacred or compelling than faith? That caused a buzz with no clear answer. But they did say that all should be free to exercise their own religion, a key tenet of democracy. Then I asked them, shouldn't peoples also be free to exercise how we self-govern? Isn't our impulse for self-determination even more primal than democracy?

As for me, I *don't* prefer monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, and tribalism. But what about those who do? Who said the advance of democracy is inevitable and must become inexorable? More restrictive theocratic rule of tribes, clans and sects now gain traction from Asia to Africa and the Middle East, not democracy. Billions will not live in democracies in our lifetime or the lifetimes of our children. Should we dismiss them all out of hand? Or understand them on their own terms? Can we learn to say as Americans what we have learned to say, in matters of faith? Judge not, that ye shall not be judged. Pride drags us down; humility lifts us up.

As a Christian minister, I don't want to run our government or any government. For that will only coopt the church's life to make it less sacred and more profane. That is precisely what happened to us when Constantine made us the official religion of what was left of the Roman Empire. Twenty years before that 313 AD Edict of Milan, we were the most persecuted sect in the Roman Empire. Suddenly, we were blessing the attacks of expeditionary forces at the emperor's whim. Our prophetic voice to resist and speak truth to power was drained away from us.

Instead of suffering and dying for what we believed in, following in the footsteps of Jesus, we were now killing for what we believed in, something he would never

countenance. That's why Jesus used images like yeast and salt to describe us. We exist to lend flavor or purity to humankind not to dominate or control society.

Of course, Islam's mood today greatly differs from these sensibilities. Neither you nor I will change Muslim minds on wanting to govern their homelands. So what if we were to help them develop a model of constitutional theocracy that would give Muslim countries a coherent way of recognizing while also limiting the authority of religious law, and also making it compatible with good governance? No one is asking about that. But the person who achieves it will win a Nobel Peace Prize.

Our nation was formed 240 years ago to overturn the notion of "the divine right of kings." Would it cause a revolution today for me to argue against "the divine right of democracy?" That is a modest proposal I would like to put forth in a time when we have proven able to justify preemptive wars and supported actions to depose tyrants in Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, only to find worse tyrants take their place.

It would be hard to find a more staunch defender and advocate of democracy than Winston Churchill. But we all have heard the language he used to describe democracy, hardly that of sacralizing it: "the worst form of government, except for all of the rest." We recognize better the limits of our faith than the very real limits of the American covenant we share together. That arrogance hurts us as a nation. We miss Reinhold Niebuhr, the greatest American theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a pastor from our UCC tradition. He wrote at length about the limits to power.

Did you ever notice how in heady times of triumph we learn absolutely nothing about ourselves but in moments of failure we get life's deepest lessons? Bringing down the Iron Curtain in 1989 and defeating communism, I believe, is where our hubris grew. Since then all we see is the superiority of our ways. We evaluate every other regime on a scale ranging from serfdom to democracy. We consider democracy a universal birthright and aspiration, not the rare form of government it is, for centuries dismissed as unstable and potentially tyrannical. It was only after WWII that democracy was crowned as the best possible government always.

But let's notice that democracy also has characteristic flaws. Katherine Lee Bates evoked this with her lyric, "God mend thine every flaw." Democracy creates an individualism that is often destructively isolating. Mother Theresa once declared, "Loneliness is the leprosy of the West." Democracy often mocks respect for revered tradition as archaic superstition. Democracy has clearly not made us more respectful toward our elders, to family heritage, or to the virtues of revealed faith.

Instead of judging nations for not being not US-style democracies, and assuming they secretly in their heart of hearts want us to take over and remake them in our image, may I suggest an alternative? Jesus taught, you shall know a tree by its fruits. A noxious tree cannot produce healthy fruit nor a healthy tree poison fruit. In Revelation 13, we hear the church describe the empire of Domitian as a garish beast with ten horns and seven heads, wreaking havoc on the face of the earth.

“In amazement the whole earth followed the beast,” John the Evangelist reports. Pretty clear what they thought of that government, isn’t it? Yet in Romans 13, in another era, we hear Paul the Apostle, a citizen of the Roman Empire, differently describe the same government under a different administration. Paul wrote in good conscience, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.” Pretty clear what Paul thought of the worthiness of those Roman rulers in that moment.

Instead of seeing other nation-states on a sliding scale from selfdom to democracy, why not judge them by fruits of honesty, justice, and serving common good? Maybe the more encompassing sliding scale is from Romans 13 to Revelation 13.

My sermon today meant to address a vital issue of our time in the context of July 4<sup>th</sup>. I know already that I will get messages saying stop meddling in politics. The church is supposed to avoid that. My answer is in two words: Moses Mather. Our first pastor even took sides among deeply divided Tories and Patriots. I didn’t. At least I hope you didn’t hear me playing the left side of this off the right side of that.

Democracy is valued and even precious to us as a way of life. But it is not sacred and cannot be construed as universal by any stretch of our faithful life together. Democracy is a means to an end more than sacred end in itself. Someone said, treating the means as ends, and the ends as mere means, the Evil One rejoices.

What is sacred? This and other churches; this book; the emblems on that table. Amen.