Faith and American Authoritarianism

Let me begin with a story of my own faith. My father was a pastor in the United Church of Christ who taught me the Social Gospel. Faith is not so much a matter of Christian *belief* as it is of *practice*. Faith is a matter of *following* Jesus. For me that has been best expressed in Matthew 25 passage we read earlier which ends:

Jesus said to them, “You are blessed by my Father, for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

And they answered him. “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?  When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

Jesus said to them. “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

And that is perhaps the best description of my faith. The individual’s response to the Gospel is love for my brother or sister. The community’s response to the Gospel is *justice*: the liberation of the poor and oppressed.

Following that faith, I want to talk this morning about the condition of American democracy. It is in bad shape; we are in the midst of the worst constitutional crisis since the Civil War, treacherously close to authoritarianism.

After Marja read a first draft of this teaching, she asked me, “How is democracy part of your Christian faith?”

The answer is that I believe a democracy is the best form of government for protecting the values of my Christian faith. It’s not quite as simple as that, of course. A democracy is any country ruled according to the will of a majority of the people and majorities don’t necessarily protect justice for everyone, for instance, the poor, minorities, or people of color. So, democracy is not good enough for justice. Justice requires, at the very least, what’s called a “*liberal* democracy.” In this case the word “liberal” doesn’t mean progressive or left-leaning. It’s an older meaning: the protection of the minority and of human rights as we find in the Constitution’s Bill of Rights. A liberal democracy is not only majority-ruled, but also committed to justice: free and fair elections; fair legal procedures; freedoms of speech, the press, religion, assembly and so on. It’s why the Bill of Rights had to be added to the Constitution, to keep the majority from trampling on the minority.

Unfortunately, even a liberal democracy doesn’t guarantee justice, but I believe it will, over time, be the form of government most likely to move toward it.

So, my faith requires that I commit myself to a liberal democracy and dedicate myself to upholding it. And whether you are overtly “political” or not, everyone on this screen works for liberal democracy … whether that has meant providing care for young immigrant mothers, building a school to give oppressed people an education, offering therapy to people oppressed by their inner demons, listening to a friend in pain, or so many things you do.

I’m going to talk this morning a lot about the Republican Party. I am very aware that it’s inappropriate to speak about partisan politics in a Christian worship service. So, let me differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate politics within a liberal democracy. Politics is the way we tussle over the best ways to govern our nation, over the best ways to bring about justice; it’s a conversation about what is best for this country. Illegitimate politics is the work against democracy itself.

I’ve struggled against the politics and policies of the authentic Republican Party since forever, but those struggles have always been within the context of legitimate political differences within a democracy … no matter how wrong-headed their ideas seemed to me. Their ideas came from a worldview I didn’t share, but I believed them to be a part of legitimate political dialog: listening to one another, trying to understand one another. Whether it was gun rights, abortion, poverty, climate change, racism, gay rights, even immigration, I could disagree … often vehemently … even condemn beliefs as unchristian, but they were positions that could be argued about, put to a legitimate vote, and accepted if my side lost … which it usually did.

Years ago, Gail Arnall asked me to sit down with her deeply conservative, Republican brother, Bill, to talk about values and policies. We had a good talk; actually, quite invigorating. We probably disagreed about almost every policy position brought up. But we had very similar values; we just disagreed about the best way to get there. We were part of the back-and-forth of democracy.

But Bill’s Republican Party no longer exists. Rather, it is a party, I believe, that is working against democracy and towards authoritarianism.

I find it’s hard to see the United States as an authoritarian country because we usually think of authoritarianism in absolute terms: a sudden coup or military take-over with an absolute autocrat; no meaningful elections; state-controlled media; loss of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and so on.

But there are varieties of authoritarianism, stages. In the modern world, actually, democracies become authoritarian only gradually, often quite legally and constitutionally. The basic institutions of democracy — elections, courts, legislature, press, and so on — continue to exist. But they are gradually subverted:

* Rules governing elections are tilted toward the leader’s party.
* Partisans are appointed to the courts.
* The party becomes subservient to the leader.
* The press is either subtly threatened or continually attacked as “fake news.”.

What I want to emphasize this morning is the danger to the democracy. Originally, this, I began to list the many different individual threats, perhaps twenty or thirty of them. But it began to seem like a rather boring political science lecture. So, instead, let me describe only three — Trump’s insistence that he won the election, the January 6 insurrection, and the Republican statehouses’ attack on the electoral process — and then spend a few minutes looking at each one in some detail.

Stop the Steal

The first is President Trump’s “Stop the Steal” campaign. After multiple recounts and more than sixty unsuccessful lawsuits, there is no evidence of fraud. But, in the days after the election, Trump called election officials in many states trying to get them to overturn their results. We learned this week that days before the Jan 6 insurrection Trump was dissuaded from appointing an acting Attorney General at the last moment who would have used the Justice Department to defend Trump’s claim.

Relatively few Republican leaders still cling to Trump’s belief that he actually won and that the election was stolen from him. But one-third of all American voters still believe that President Biden won only through fraud. The experts have repeatedly said that this was the most secure election in our history, but still less than 20% of Republican voters believe that Joe Biden won the presidency “[fair and square](https://news.yahoo.com/poll-two-thirds-of-republicans-still-think-the-2020-election-was-rigged-165934695.html).”

This is the first time in our history that the fairness of the nation’s elections has been so widely and deeply challenged. Democracy depends on free and fair elections; it depends perhaps even more on the *perception* of free and fair elections. But large swaths of American voters now believe there is widespread fraud in our elections. That does not bode well for our country

Senate Failure to Remove from Office

The second danger from the Republican Party can be seen in their failures to remove President Trump from office after the House impeached him. After the January 6 insurrection, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said that the president was “practically and morally responsible” for the attack on the Capitol on January 6.  He [continued](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mitch-mcconnell-trump-impeachment-vote-senate-speech/),

This was an intensifying crescendo of conspiracy theories orchestrated by an outgoing president who seemed determined to either overturn the voters' decision or else torch our institutions on the way out," McConnell said.

McConnell gave that speech immediately after voting *not* to find Trump guilty.

Since then, the party has lined up more and more deeply behind Trump. One of those who didn’t, Representative Anthony Gonzalez, actually resigned last month because of threats to his family over his vote to impeach Trump.

I suspect I don’t need to convince anyone here of the danger Donald Trump poses to our democracy, but it’s important to recognize that the Republican party is fully committed to him. Barring health problems, he will be the 2024 Republican candidate for president.

Republican Statehouses attack on the electoral process

And the third threat to our democracy is happening in Republican statehouses across the country as they limit voting rights among the poor, people of color, and minorities. 2020 had record turn-outs in large part because the pandemic forced states to change laws to encourage voting, things like early voting and mail-in ballots. In the first six months of this year, using the false excuse of voting “irregularities,” 18 Republican-controlled statehouses had [had passed](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2021-07-02/17-states-have-passed-restrictive-voting-laws-this-year-report-says) more than 30 laws making it harder for people to vote, things like

* doing away with same-day registration,
* limiting early voting and mail-in ballots,
* fewer numbers of mail-ballot drop in boxes
* imposing strict standards of voter ID.
* removing voting centers from area
* making purges of voting rolls easier

The rationale for these changes is to prevent fraud in elections. But there has been no fraud in elections and no legitimate reason to protect against it. One of the more important ways to secure our democracy is to encourage everyone to vote in elections. The pandemic pushed states to broaden their rules and allow more ways of voting, which helped to turn out more votes than ever before. With no legitimate reason, states are limiting those ways to suppress voter turn-out.

Another thing is happening in these Republican controlled statehouses. It turns out that election officials have significant power in deciding important details in an election (such deciding if ballots are completed clearly enough to count or deciding where ballot boxes go. Ordinarily these decisions are made by local, non-partisan officials. This year in many Republican statehouses, however, the legislature is transferring many of those functions to partisan state officials. These officials will have a great deal of power in deciding how votes are decided.

There is no question that these changes are intended to limit voting among groups who are more likely to vote Democratic.

One thing that I should emphasize: Aside from what happened at the Insurrection, none of what I’ve mentioned here is illegal or unconstitutional. But what is necessary to a well-functioning is a series of norms, unwritten guidelines as to what is acceptable. In most of the countries that have gone from being democracies toward becoming autocracies, most of the changes were not illegal, just changes in norms. It is not illegal for a state government to doing away with same-day registration or limit early voting. No law constitutional or other wise has been broken. But the democratic norm is that we make it as easy as possible to vote.

The clearest example, I think, is Republican Senator Mitch McConnell’s decision in 2016 not to bring Barack Obama’s nominee for the Supreme Court Merrick Garland to a Senate vote. McConnell was the Senate Majority Leader and he had sole control of the Senate calendar. He had every legal and constitutional right to hold off the vote until after the 2016 election. But it was an unprecedented breaking of Senate norms that eventually stole one Democrat-appointed Supreme Court seat and gave it to the Republicans.

At this point in our history, the greatest danger to the democracy will be around norms not laws.

Why do I believe it’s important to bring this up here as part of our worship service?

# First of all, this is not just a political crisis but the next few years will be a turning point in our history. The United States has been in a state of political and democratic decline for several decades. During the Trump presidency and especially after the 2020 election there has been a movement toward authoritarianism, but it has come much more quickly than I could have imagined. But here we are, and struggle for democracy should be visible to most of us.

# After the Biden election and Democratic control of Congress, I thought we could relax a bit. But Trump did not go away and took even greater control of the Republican Party.

# Because of what is happening in most of the statehouses that Republicans control, there is considerable urgency to stopping the anti-democratic slide before the 2022 congressional elections. If those states succeed in their radical gerrymandering, voter suppression, and partisan control of the voting process, it is likely that the 2022 congressional elections will give the Republicans control of the House and perhaps the Senate, too.

# We have the choice now between authoritarianism and a new democratic structure only vaguely visible. But we will need to be part of building it. The struggles against climate change, racism, inequality, minority rights are all part of this. We need to see and be part of the larger struggle.

# This struggle will require at least temporary coalitions with people with whom we have traditionally strongly disagreed. Specifically, we will need to find compromises with traditional Republicans so that we can come together in order to isolate the anti-democratic wing of that party. In Europe during the 1920s and 30s, many countries — Italy and Germany especially — were under attack by far-right authoritarian parties. These parties were originally small and fringe but quickly gathered strength under the aegis of populism and nationalism. In Germany regular the regular conservatives parties accommodated Hitler in large part because the conservatives opposed the socialists more than they opposed the Nazis, who, after all, shared many of their basic prejudices. This was happening in Marja’s home country of Finland, too. The far-right Lapua Movement there threatened the country’s 10-year-old fragile democracy.  In Finland as in Germany, the more moderate conservatives at first tolerated Lapua because its anti-communism was useful to their own agendas.  As Lapua became more radical and violent, however, Finland’s traditional conservative parties saw the threat to their democracy. Unlike in Germany where the Nazis were able to pick off the divided opposition one-by-one, the Finnish politicians early-on formed a coalition from across the ideological spectrum to isolate Lapua. This required painful compromise from the left, moderate, and true conservative parties. But they joined together to vote out Lapua, which quickly fell apart.

I don’t know whether the temporary compromises necessary here in our future will be around climate change, abortion, gay rights, racism, or any of the other crucial issues of our time. But the current turn toward authoritarian populism threatens each of them, and we will need to find compromises across ideologies to isolate the radical right and dismantle it. Then we can get back to the partisan political struggles so important to us.

# I think this struggle will require some theological work. Am I correct that this position against the Republican Party really the only position faithful to the Gospel? Are there kinds of compromises that are not abdications of our Christian responsibility? How do we approach churches that have found themselves on the other side?

# This struggle will require that many more people understand the depth and danger of what is happening. Education in churches and other religious organizations, schools, popular organizations like the Festival Center, the Democratic party, and so on will be necessary so that we all have some idea of the threat and be willing to join in a coordinated resistance. Groups that struggle against climate change, racism, inequality and so on will need to recognize the need for compromises to fight what threatens us all.

What will be faithful responses? How will all of this happen? I don’t know. But we must be awake to the stirrings of such resistance and willing to bring the resources of Eighth Day to the struggle.

Republicans have two sides.