

“What’s At Stake?”

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“What’s At Stake?”

READING 1 Kings 12

The Northern Tribes Secede

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king... and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, “Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you.” He said to them, “Go away for three days, then come again to me.” So the people went away.

Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the older men who had attended his father Solomon while he was still alive, saying, “How do you advise me to answer this people?” They answered him, “If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants for ever.” But he disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him. He said to them, “What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, ‘Lighten the yoke that your father put on us?’ ” The young men who had grown up with him said to him, “Thus you should say to this people who spoke to you, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, but you must lighten it for us’; thus you should say to them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’ ”

...on the third day... The king answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him and spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.”

... When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, the people answered the king, “What share do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, O David.”

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RESPONSIVE READING

One: How lovely to think that no one need wait a moment, we can start now, start slowly changing the world!

All: How lovely that everyone, great and small, can make their contribution toward introducing justice straightaway...

One: And you can always, always give something, even if it is only kindness!

– Anne Frank

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SERMON

Bought a lotto ticket this week. It's not something I do often, but when the odds approach the payout it's worth a buck. The essence of gambling is risking something for something better. For gamblers, those who do it for sport, the danger of losing is part of the thrill of winning. But while most of us are not high-risk gamblers, we do take risks. Running late? You press the speed limit or shave that yellow light. Smoking causes cancer and emphysema, but not in everyone. Is it worth the risk? For some it is. That new house with the hot tub is so wonderful but a little too expensive. Maybe with some creative financing it might work. Unless you lose your job.

We take risks all the time, mostly small ones that we can bear if we lose our stake. I used to play some poker years ago. I always went in with only as much money as I was willing to lose. But now and then we have to play a high stakes game. Jobs are a risk. They may not work out. Buying a home is a serious risk. Marriage. Now that's a high stakes game. Statistically it's an even money bet. And if you lose, it costs you in all sorts of ways. And children. Well, what more high stakes game is there than to create new life you have to protect and nourish?

We take risks because we believe something is worth the risk. That thing we take the risk for is our stake. For the gambler it is riches. For the young adult, it's choosing the right career. For the couple getting married, the hope is happiness. And children? Well, Carl Sandburg said it best. "A baby is God's way of saying life should go on." These are the stakes, the things we take risks for. But there are other risks and other stakes.

Last spring I said this church needs to have a vigorous social ministry, a commitment to serve the community. I said that because I believe a church that does not have an explicit stake in the world has nothing at stake. And like a poker game, only those who ante up get to play. We need to ante up, put a stake in the common pot so others at the table take us seriously. I mentioned four things we have a stake in around town. These things express our values, not in words but in deeds. And as a church that believes in deeds more than creeds, I think we have a positive duty to have a stake in the world around us.

One thing I talked about was human rights, equality under the law and before God and wherever else one measures. There has been a lot of loose talk in churches about the "gay problem," notably the gay marriage problem. I believe we are of one mind about the centrality of human equality as a spiritual value. We have as much right to speak as a body as anyone else. I also said then that when other churches say their faith demands they speak up against gay marriage and we do not, silence is assent. Our youth group showed leadership on this matter and made diversity poles we could personally place in our yards to signify our commitment to equal dignity for all. Here's mine. But we also need one for the church as a whole; something big enough to put in our front yard and tell everyone that this is where we stand.

It was in contemplating this piece of painted wood that I got the idea for this sermon, because the whole idea then was to get people to make their commitment pub-

lic. At the gambling table you have to show your money. What good is a principle if no one knows you have it? I think we should call these diversity stakes not poles. They say, here I stand to everyone.

Let me add that making a commitment to equality emboldened me to become the convenor of the local clergy group in support of gay rights. I preached at Pride Day last June. But equality goes further than gay rights. I offered myself to the Urban League whose board I am joining. I went with Latinos to see our Congressman to pressure him about immigration issues.

But now, what will *we* do, we as a church as well as individuals? I believe we have a duty to be the cathedral church of human dignity, the place that defends the whole rainbow of humanity. And we need to show it and do it.

Another principle I said we need to act on is equity. What good is equality without equity as well, that is, a level playing field? That's like starting a race with some people still in the locker room. Public education is a travesty of inequity in this country, a place where we systematically hobble some to advantage others, and with results that make our community and country not stronger and united, but weaker and divided.

We at FSC believe in equality because we believe everyone has something to give. But without adequate education, most of those gifts are lost. In response to that challenge, we are now in partnership to sponsor a conference of private sector partners of public education this November. There is a tutoring program already in place that would love more support from you. And the mayor asked me if we could not help address the problem of adult illiteracy as well.

The third challenge I issued was to promote sustainable growth in response to the crises of energy costs, economic decline and environmental threats. One way we have done this has been to get a complete energy audit for this building so we can make this a "green" sanctuary. The good news is that we have done better than most already. Further good news is that we have made improvements since then. Most visibly, we now replace as many light bulbs as we can with low energy long-life alternatives. We will resume selling Free Trade coffee starting today, a way to resist the unfair trade practices that have impoverished growers while enriching processors.

But we can do more of course. We could serve free trade coffee after church. It costs more, so we would have to pay more. We could arrange for car pools to reduce automobile use. We could cook our meals with local produce and products. It too costs more, but as a cursory look at the food industry will reveal, it is rife with waste of energy and other resources. Even a small investment, \$10 a week, would help.

Finally, I said we need to be part of creating a responsible religious presence in public affairs. The forum of ideas has been overwhelmed by well-supported voices from one side of the religious community. We need to be there not to shout as loud but to set an example with others of honest democracy, of genuine discourse and respectful disagreement. I took the initiative to invite our gubernatorial candidates to speak here on the place of religion in society. Sadly, neither agreed. But I truly believe we could be the place where candidates come and really express their ideas about religion in society and the separation of church and state. I imagine someday presidential candidates coming here to deliver the Wishart or Randall lecture on the

role of religion in America. We need to have a stake *as* a community *in* the community, just as we have a personal stake in our world.

Let's go back to that first idea, of having a personal stake in things. We have mortgages and jobs and families and so care very much about the society around us because our lives are affected by society. But sadly, this stakeholding is getting smaller every day. As reported in the news recently, the median income in our town has fallen. I am not here to analyze why, but incomes have fallen all over the country, in 46 of 50 states. But we hear that wealth has risen, and it has. I pondered this and wrote about it on a blog I maintain. Rising wealth and lower incomes mean the work of the many is enriching the few. We are becoming the world of our grandparents, 1900, when men and women and children worked 6 and 7 days a week and for very meager wages. Productivity went up then too, and so did poverty as it has here. I'll let the historians and pundits explain it. My time is growing short. What I want to say is that those with little have little stake. If I cannot make the rent, why tell me about mortgage rates? Food is cheaper in the suburbs, but I don't have money for gas, or maybe even a car. More and more people have less and less reason to believe society or government can mean anything to them. They have no stake in it. Likewise, ironically, the very rich, because their circumstances are so abundant they can weather any vagary. One has nothing to gain, the other has nothing to lose. A democracy utterly depends on its citizens to survive. They must feel their stake in society, and society's stake in them, are real. As I wrote in my blog, there can be no commonwealth where there is no common wealth.

We heard an old version of this story in the passage from 1 Kings, chapter 12. When the common people heard that their putative king would continue to oppress them, they abandoned him and left the country. And the eventual outcome was civil war and the collapse of Israel as a political reality. In other words we are on all too familiar ground. This is as real and as dangerous as climate control or the threat of terrorism, but we have nothing to say or do.

That's because the problem is also a spiritual problem. Tomorrow is the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. As some of you may know, I wrote about it in the current issue of UU World, the magazine of my original community of faith, the Unitarian Universalists. The editor asked me to consider the spiritual ramifications of September 11 for liberal religion, and one of the conclusions I reached was that the attacks reminded us of something most Americans, and especially the fortunate class of educated and employed Americans, can readily forget – nothing is ultimately secure. Katrina came along last year and showed us that not only terrorists but nature can sweep away all our security with no effort whatsoever. As safe as we are in some ways, we are always at risk.

This is where religion begins. From ancient days down to today, the precariousness of life, and our way of life, is what makes us stop and ask, "What really matters?" If random zealots, freak storms, and ultimately our own bodies, can wipe us out, what does it matter if we live or die? We need a faith that addresses this question, the one

that haunts poor people, the forgotten, the sick, those whose stake is so small it amounts to none at all.

Liberal religion, as it is ordinarily practiced, does not do this. Let's face it, for most of us here and those like us in other places know that if the church did not exist we would not only survive but continue pretty much as we are right now. Liberal religion is an enrichment, something we like and enjoy but do not actually need. There is no risk to losing it, no real risk that if it were not here we would lose something vital to our life or way of life.

But that does not mean liberal religion in its several forms *cannot* deal with the question of what life means. I would argue that it can, and must, if it is to justify its existence. After all, a religion that cannot stake a claim to the meaning of life cannot inspire you to stake a claim in it or life.

This year I am going to define liberal religion, stake a claim to its legitimacy among other religions, and tell you what that means for this church. In so doing I put both it and myself at risk. I could fail. That is what risk means. But I am also convinced that failing to take this risk now is even more dangerous in the long run. Unless liberal religion is willing to stake a claim about what it thinks is ultimately right and good and true, it has nothing to say. And unless this church stakes its claim to advance that vision with singleness and passion, it has nothing to do.

Here's how it's going to go. I'll lay out my sense of our future as a church this fall. That's also when we ask for your annual pledge of financial support, and I believe people want to see their money make a difference in the future, so that's a good time to tell you where I want us to go. During the winter I'll describe the basis of liberal theology, the worldview that underlies our convictions and actions. Then in the spring I will describe what the liberal religious life is; that is, how to live faithful lives. Any religion that does not form and inform choices as people really isn't much of a religion.

As I said earlier, I could fail in this. There is genuine risk. People want religion to be a place of harmony and comfort, a place of safety and welcome. We will all have to ask ourselves if we are up to the job, or even want it. But as I look out upon the world, and the awesome impact of religion on all that is taking place, not to act would be a greater failure. It's like the lottery ticket I buy now and then. I will probably lose anyway, but it's better to lose while trying than by not trying at all.