

Let My People Vote
Rev. David A. Morris
UU Congregation of the Outer Banks
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“We know we are in a profoundly moral struggle. Extremists have not focused their energies and investments on North Carolina because we are weak. They have thrown all they have at us because we are strong. No, we don’t have money on our side. What we have is truth. We have love and justice and the faith that, if we can hold on for a little while longer, goodness will win out in the end.

“After America’s First Reconstruction was attacked by the lynch mobs of white supremacists in the 1870s, it took nearly 100 years for a Second Reconstruction to emerge in the civil rights movement. Though we ended Jim Crow segregation in the 1960s, structural inequality became more sophisticated in the backlash against the movement’s advances. Nothing less than a Third Reconstruction holds the promise of healing our nation’s wounds and birthing a better future for all. But we’re not just waiting for it. In North Carolina, we’ve seen what it looks like.

--Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II

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Ten years ago, when the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II was elected to lead the North Carolina NAACP, he realized that many people committed to justice were working, in his words, as separate “tribes.” There were people concerned with education, health care, election finance reform, affordable housing, discrimination in hiring and wages, criminal justice reform, environmental justice, immigration reform, and many other causes, each committed to their issue, each able to mobilize large gatherings of people for public events, but all seeing each other almost as competitors. He wondered what would happen if the groups came together. He began making contacts as he toured the state in his first year as NAACP president, and in 2007, on the second Saturday in February, the answer became clear:

When all the many folks concerned with issues of justice, equity, and compassion in public life gathered in one place, the numbers were extraordinary and the potential for coordinated, effective action was enormous. The first Annual Historic Thousands on Jones Street Rally and People’s Assembly unanimously adopted a fourteen-point comprehensive agenda, and gave birth to a grassroots fusion coalition called the Forward Together Moral Movement. In addition to the now-annual February gathering, their most publicly visible activity has been the Moral Monday protests, bringing the People’s Agenda to the state legislature. North Carolina Unitarian Universalists have been part of the coalition from the start, and have been among the more than 1,000 people arrested so far in acts of civil disobedience at the State Legislative Building.

In their first years, the coalition realized that even as they found connections and supported each other in their different concerns, the issue of expanding voting rights needed to be at the heart of their work. In their very first year, they were able to help gain passage of a bill making access to

voting easier—increasing early voting, making same-day registration possible, and allowing people to register and vote anywhere in their District on Election Day, so that working people who could only get a short time off could vote near their workplace instead of having to get to their home precinct and back.

The results were immediate. In the 2008 Presidential election, with at least 185,000 new voters, mostly people of color, all fifteen of North Carolina's Electoral college votes went to Barack Obama. The shift in power was palpable, and for some, it was frightening.

Confronted with the realization that these new voters had clearly spoken for change, the state's traditional political power-brokers and the people who funded and advised them could have considered that they ought to reflect on their policies and agendas, and see what they needed to change in order to address the real needs and challenges of their citizens' lives in some way. Instead, a raw political calculus came into play. If these new voters are going to vote against us, they decided, what we need to do is to stop them from voting.

The backlash was swift, well-financed, and effective. Millions of dollars poured into the state. The legislature changed hands in 2010. Then, in June of 2013, the United States Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that so many people like Joanne Bland in our story had struggled, suffered, and even died for. And that same year in North Carolina, the most stringent voter-suppression law in the nation was passed—not just requiring a photo ID that many citizens, especially poor, rural, and elderly African American and Latino folks do not have and can't easily get, but rolling back nearly all of the gains that had been made toward expanding access to voting. The law is under challenge in the courts—but meanwhile, for this year's election, it is in effect.

In 2014, the Forward Together Moral Movement put out a call across the country for people to join them for that now-annual rally on the second Saturday in February. North Carolina Unitarian Universalist congregations asked the Association to help them make a national invitation for UU's to come. This is our Selma, they said, in recognition of the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Selma march and the Voting Rights Act. I was there that day in 2014, and it was extraordinary—tens of thousands of people of all races, classes, and faiths, including almost a thousand Unitarian Universalists from all over the country.

In addition to the sheer diversity of the people and the broad range of concerns they represented in a single coherent coalition, what struck me most was how clearly this event and this movement was not a political gathering about getting certain candidates elected, but a spiritually grounded, multi-faith movement to call elected leaders of any party to account for the welfare of the people they serve.

The same thing was apparent this year, when I returned last week for the 10th Annual March and People's Assembly. The Forward Together Moral Movement is firmly grounded in the call of the world's great religions to heal the sick, to welcome the stranger, to aid the poor and the afflicted, to protect the helpless, to give comfort to the imprisoned. It's not about Republicans and Democrats, and in this Presidential election year the organizers on site were emphatic about asking people to set aside their buttons and signs for one candidate or another.

Rev. Barber especially called us to focus on the issues: seeking economic justice, upholding environmental protections, supporting accessible health care for all, restoring funds for public education, treating immigrants with compassion. But above all, in Rev. Barber's and every other speaker's remarks, the primary issue was protecting voting rights. Every person at the rally was asked to fill out and turn in a pledge to do voter registration, drive people to the polls, or volunteer as an observer protecting voters' rights at the polls this year.

There are clearly practical reasons why voting rights are at the top of the agenda. The power of the vote is the foundation for coalition-building and making real change; without it, challenging the political powers-that-be is impossible.

But aside from practical considerations, beyond the logic of creating political fusion coalitions, the movement for protecting and restoring voting rights needs to be spiritually grounded. The resistance is immense, powerful, and persistent. We need spiritual grounding to sustain us through this time of backlash and deconstruction. Truth, love, and justice may be on our side, as Rev. Barber says, but success is not inevitable. Nothing purely logical says that if we hold on just a little while longer, as a great song of the justice movement says, everything is going to be all right, or that goodness will win out in the end. And yet. . . Something calls us to hold on.

Somehow we know that it is worthwhile to hold on, even if we don't know the outcome. More than that: Somehow we know that we *must* hold on.

Somehow, we know that we have to take what the Black Liberation theologian James Cone calls "the risk of faith": The conscious decision to act to bring a world of justice, equity, and compassion into being—whether logic tells us it is possible or not. The risk of faith is the choice to commit ourselves to act, sustained by our assurance that through our commitment, through our action, through our creative and wholehearted engagement with the world as it is now, a way to the new world will be found.

What's that spiritual grounding for us? Why should we take that risk of faith?

We work for the right of all people to have a voice and a vote, first, because it is our principled conviction. The fifth principle of our Unitarian Universalist Association covenant, which binds our congregations together, declares that we affirm and promote the democratic process in our congregations and in society as a whole. Our first principle proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the right to have a fully enfranchised voice in the public discourse that affects our lives is fundamental to human dignity.

We work for the right of all people to have a voice and a vote because it is our history. We follow in the footsteps of Unitarian and Universalist forbears of the nineteenth century like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Olympia Brown, Lucy Stone, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who worked tirelessly for women's right to vote, certain, as Anthony said before her death, that "failure is impossible." They worked though none of them knew they would see their work rewarded in their lifetime, and few of them lived to cast the votes they secured—they worked because they knew they must.

We follow in the footsteps of Unitarian Universalist heroes like the Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, who took their place alongside Jimmie Lee Jackson, alongside Medgar Evers, alongside Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and so many others, including four little girls in a Birmingham church as martyrs for the cause of Voting Rights for Black Americans. They worked though they knew their lives were in danger—because they knew they must.

This congregation has a historic commitment of our own to the vital importance of voting: some of our founding and longtime leading members like Diane Henderson, Jean Joseph, and Peggy Birkemeier helped to found the League of Women Voters here in Dare County. Three former presidents of the League are active members of our congregation: Laura Gilson, Mary Ellen Hawthorne, and Joan Liston. In their work to encourage and support informed voting, our local league has become the second largest in North Carolina, and over 5 local League members have served on the State Board. The North Carolina League of Women Voters is in partnership with the North Carolina NAACP and the U.S. Justice Department in seeking to overturn that Voter ID law because of its intentionally disproportionate impact on African American and Latino voters. Clearly, the importance of peoples' right to vote is and long has been a high value among us, both in our wider movement and right here at home.

Above all, if we fully claim our identity as Unitarian Universalists, we work for the right of all people to have a voice and a vote because it is our hope; it is the vision of our faith. For almost three hundred years the religious tradition of which we are a part has taught that the goal of a life of faith is not a heavenly reward after death, but the creation of a better world for all of humankind in this one precious life.

The vision of an earth made fair, with all her people one, is at the heart of our living tradition. We know the power that calls and guides us toward that vision by many names; we each understand its ultimate nature in our own way. But the vision itself, the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, this we share. And to reach that vision, to build that world, all must have a voice; all must have a vote; all must have a place at the table.

Let my people go, the old Spiritual says. Today, we say: Let my people vote.