

“And They’re Off!”

Sunday, March 4, 2007

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
24 Fountain St., NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
www.fountainstreet.org

Printed by
THE EXTENSION SERVICE
of
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

Copyright © 2007 by Fountain Street Church

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.

“And They’re Off!”

Looking Out

I was in LA LA land this past week. Yes, Los Angeles California for a conference of clergy. The word California almost literally means fantasyland, dating back to the 16th century in fact, the place of splendor or beauty. Especially west of LA, where I stayed. I can see why the Spanish would apply the name, as it is a feast to the eye everywhere. But today it is also a place founded on illusion.

First, the movie industry with its astonishing powers to make us think movies are important and real. Movies are the epitome of deception but the money we spend on them makes it a very real industry. How weird is that? Then there’s the real estate industry and its preposterous prices that make near hovels worth a half million dollars. And there’s the illusion that one can drive in that town. I have never seen so many freeways, at least some of which are clogged 24 hours of the day. Add the lush flora which, far from being natural, are sustained by draining the faraway Colorado River almost dry. Including the ubiquitous palm trees which it turns out are not indigenous, but introduced by real estate developers less than a century ago to lure people here by making it seem more tropical and less arid.

Illusions are on my mind today – the very potent power of the alluring falsehood to make us do things that common sense would find laughable. Brooks Atkinson said, “People everywhere enjoy believing things they know are not true. It spares them the ordeal of thinking for themselves and taking responsibility for what they know.” This is why there is an old Serbian proverb, “Whoever tells the truth will be chased out of seven villages.” And yet we willingly live with a fascist piece of legislation called the USA Patriot Act and deploy thousands of soldiers in a war of occupation through a Department of Defense.

Harry Truman saw this coming when he said, “a good politician has had to be 75 percent ability and 25 percent actor, but I can well see the day when the reverse could be true.”

The culmination of which is what author Garry Wills observed, “Politics demands a great capacity for self-deception, which rescues the politician from hypocrisy.”

* * *

Looking In

People want worship to be serenity and pause. But that’s wrong. We deserve such, to be sure, but as an end. We come here to pause, that we might consider the

centrifugal forces in our lives, the things that pull us apart and confound our hearts and churn the mind.

Think back, perhaps to a moment even this morning, to a moment of unease. Why did it happen? Now ask why did I allow it to happen? Almost every disturbing thing involves a choice as well as a reaction, and in that choice a moral and spiritual moment of reckoning. Use this pause to look inwardly and take a reckoning of your own soul. Listen not for the still small voice of wisdom but for the wild and woolly voice of irrationality. Hear your own demons. This is where wisdom really begins.

* * *

And They're Off!

Happy birthday USA! You thought it was July 4th, but March 4th is the date in 1789 when the Constitution was put into effect. That's because it was the date for inaugurating presidents, starting with George Washington in New York City, at the junction of Broad and Wall Street. March 4th remained inauguration day all the way up to the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt when it was changed to January 20th.

On this 218th anniversary of the republic I find myself thinking about the 2008 race for the presidency. Two dozen people have publicly declared their candidacy, minus one who has already dropped out, Tom Vilsack. Pundits are already acting like color commentators at the Daytona 500 where all they notice or report are the crashes and calamities - and thank you Joe Biden for giving us an early crack-up.

What is my role, though, besides saying in effect, "a pox on both your houses"? The law is very strict about what preachers can say about politics. Our IRS challenged a Pasadena California church's tax exemption for condemning the war very publicly. As this service is broadcast to the general public, which means they do not even need an illegal wiretap to listen in, I need to be especially careful. Clearly, being a preacher and talking about politics is a dangerous job - unless of course, I were not a preacher.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am here this morning to announce that I, Weldon Frederick Wooden, am a candidate for *Vice President* of the United States. You heard me right - *Vice President*. I'll take the nod from any party.

Why Vice President? Think about it. I am a natural choice. What do vice presidents do? They attend funerals. I do that. They go to rubber chicken dinners and make speeches. I do that. They preside over a body each member of which thinks they are better than he is. I do that. When it comes to skills, experience, temperament and character, I am the perfect Vice President.

What's more, I want the job. Compare the two jobs and clearly Veep is better.

- Yeah the White House is cool, but there's the intense security that comes with it. Bill Clinton called the White House, the 'crown jewel of the federal prison system.' The VP lives in a smaller house on the grounds of the old Naval Observatory, but it's a real house and no one visits and most people cannot even find it.

- The president has to carry the weight of the world, but the VP has only to stay alive.

- You're powerful and famous, but with that goes all the reporters, ready to pounce on any mistake. The VP still has a cool title, his own seal, motorcycle escorts, a private plane, all the perks of fame with only a fraction of the burden, and when you're done you get a bust in the Capitol.

Sounds pretty good for a job that isn't worth what Roosevelt's VP John Nance Garner called "a bucket of warm spit." For a fellow like me, though, who has no interest in running the world, what could be better?

There is the succession thing I admit. And that's serious stuff. More VP's have succeeded by death than by being elected, six of the former and two of the latter. That's right, only twice in our history has a sitting VP been elected president – George Bush the first, "41" one as the family calls him, back in 1988; and Martin Van Buren in 1837. Since security is so good now, and health so closely monitored, the chance of a VP having to succeed is far lower than ever before. It is mostly our version of the British "an heir and a spare," necessary but very unlikely.

It's no wonder that no real politician wants the job. Politicians are in it for the power. The VP is all but powerless with one exception, one that could be a very potent source of power, but it is generally ignored. The VP is the president of the Senate. Most of the time, VPs have allowed the president pro tem, a senator from the majority party, to do the work, showing up only when their vote could make a difference. But I believe this is a role worth cultivating.

The Senate is the ultimate old boys club in this country, one hundred folks each of whom, it is said, looks in the mirror each morning and sees a better president. They call themselves the greatest deliberative body in the world but they are in fact our House of Lords, dedicated to preserving various status quos by hemming and hawing and fulminating and filibustering and otherwise pontificating while actually prostituting. The only person who could possibly reign in these pious blowhards and keep them in their place, literally and figuratively, would be someone who does not aspire to higher office.

As an independent candidate, not an agent of a party or sect, my platform is one sentence, the Preamble of the Constitution. My only program is liberty and justice for

all. But as VP without the power to make laws or enforce them or adjudicate them, my only means are moral. I shall be the one who actually lives my values, walking the walk as others compromise and dilute their high minded words into the necessary precipitates of reality. Imagine the Vice President as the Tribune of the nation, whose task is to remind everyone of the real meaning and mission of the United States by living it publicly and calling those around him to account thereby.

This is beginning to sound pretty good, isn't it? You thought I was just playing Pat Paulsen, the 1960's comedian whose mock campaigns satirized our political follies for several campaigns. And I am, but not just that. Our political system has become little more than a business, in which even issues are means to manipulating voters/customers so that parties win market share not just elections. We have let the commonwealth of democracy degenerate into a marketplace of competing ideas, where victory is proof of one's worth and the right to do as one wishes with the power such victory brings.

We have no desire for a national conscience such as my vice president might be. Despite all the rhetoric and pomposity we hear about morality and sanctity in America, we really do not respect it when it shows up. If we did, Barbara Jordan would have been president. But have we ever needed one more? For that to happen, the vice presidency would have to be a permanent office, one elected the way parliamentary nations elect presidents – to serve national symbols not political leaders. These people are like constitutional monarchs, with little formal power but immense gravitas. But we are allergic to anything that smacks of monarchy, so I am proposing that we make the second string office serve that end. Make it politically safe and morally sacred, which would have the added benefit of removing the aura of national pastor that enfolds the person of the president.

No, we are not ready for a national conscience. But if we ever are I am ready to serve. And as a candidate for that office, I am now free to make political statements and take sides, although as an independent I am by definition non-partisan. And you will hear me, in my role as candidate, take on questions like God, guns and gays - any number of wars - economics - the environment - civil rights - the judiciary - federalism - foreign policy - and the fate of official Thanksgiving turkeys or the righteousness of government Christmas trees. There's plenty to talk about, now that I am a candidate. I can hardly wait!