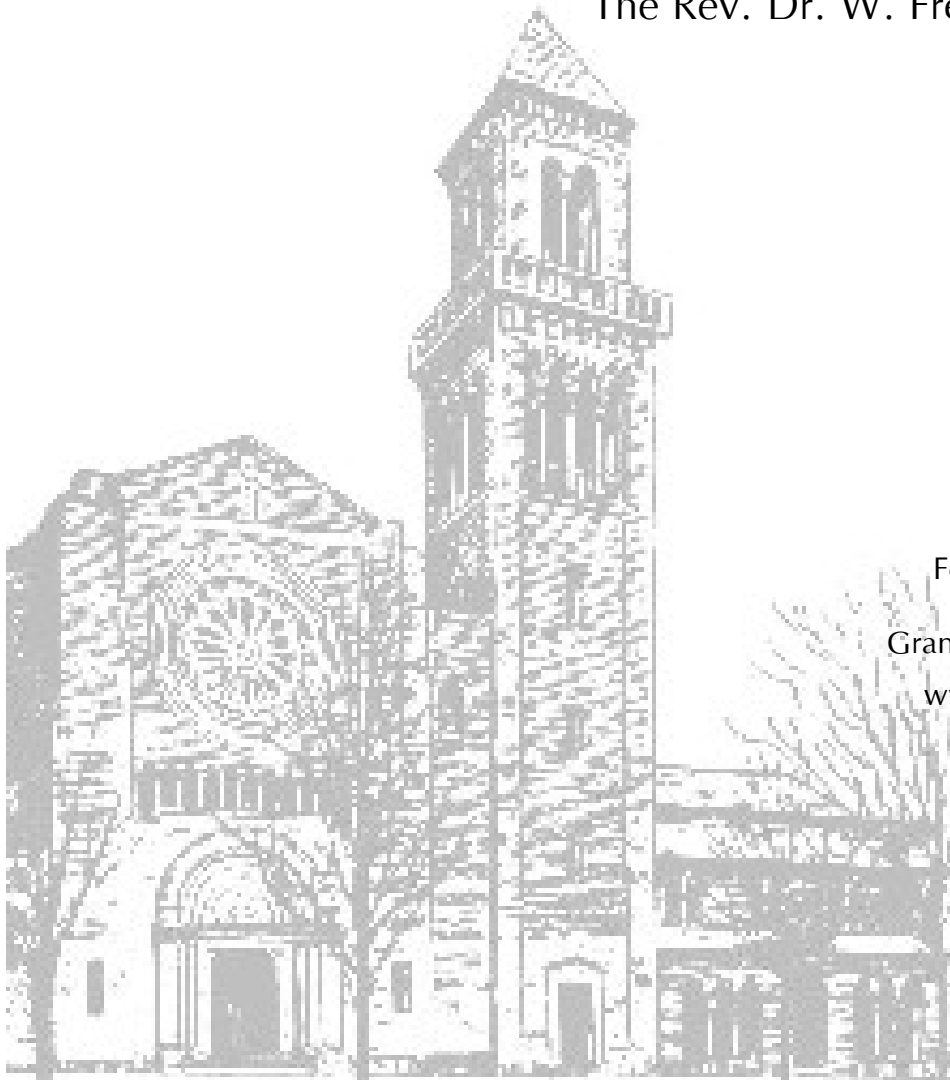


# “E Pluribus Unum ... Or Not ”

Sunday, February 3, 2008

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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.

# “E Pluribus Unum ... Or Not”

## STORY

After five years in Chicago, four spent studying for the ministry and one in the spiritual formation (also called unemployment) I was called to Petersham, Massachusetts, to a church of ninety members in a town of 900 people scattered over 68 square miles, one-third of it underwater. It was as far from big city life as I could imagine. But it turns out that every place has its place, in history if not in the news.

Somewhere between February 2 and February 4, 1787, the remnants of Shays Rebellion were routed in the town, an uprising of farmers in western Massachusetts whose taxes rose to pay the debt of the War of Independence. Lacking cash, they were forced into selling land and, as one had to own property to vote, that meant selling their franchise to pay for the war they fought to secure it.

There is a marker in town, on the main road just north of the common. Most people don't even notice, and even more do not realize that it was this event that prompted George Washington to come out of retirement and attend the yet-to-meet convention in Philadelphia. He was elected president of that body, and subsequently president under the instrument they created, the Constitution.

## SCRIPTURE *Psalm 2:1-3*

“Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us.’ ”

## READING *From Thomas Jefferson, writing in November of 1787:*

“A little rebellion now and then is a good thing. ... God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion. The people cannot be all, and always, well informed. The part which is wrong will be discontented, in proportion to the importance of the facts they misconceive. If they remain quiet under such misconceptions, it is lethargy, the forerunner of death to the public liberty. ... And what country can reserve its liberties, if its rulers are not warned from time to time, that this people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to the facts, pardon and pacify them. What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## SERMON

What a week this is. It is Super Bowl Sunday, which is now forty-two years old. That makes it older than Super Tuesday, the presidential primary day where we hope (and perhaps fear) that the nominees will narrow to the two who will face off next November. Far older than either of these is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the Christian season of penitence in preparation for Holy Week and Easter Sunday. And older yet is Ground Hog Day, which is only a veneer over the older Roman festival of Lupercalia, which included a fertility rite involving a sacrificial goat and whips called "Februa" that gives us the name of the month. And finally there is a yet older custom known in northern Europe as Imbolc, the midpoint between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. It is also the anniversary of Shays Rebellion of 1787.

Two weeks ago I delivered my "inaugural address," the speech I want to hear next January 20th, which was also my vision of the national soul. For me, the essence of the country is contained in the Preamble, which, coincidentally, has just as many clauses as there are Sundays between now and Easter, six. Starting today I will connect an issue we are hearing about with one of those clauses. I believe that when we do this we will find new insight

E Pluribus unum – out of many one. It's on every dollar bill and reflects that first clause in the Preamble, "to form a more perfect union." That issue was what Shays Rebellion brought into high relief. The Articles of Confederation were showing themselves weaker than people thought. Not only was every state printing its own money, raising its own militia, but each paid its own debts and levied its own duties, and favored its own churches. What Benjamin Franklin noted of the men signing the Declaration was becoming true for the states in the new republic. Either they must hang together or they will hang separately. That became evident when Daniel Shays mounted his farmer's rebellion in January of 1787.

Those farmers did not feel united with the country. They saw the government literally forcing them to sell their citizenship to pay for the war they fought to obtain it. While politicians have ever been the bane of ordinary folks, in 1787 cynicism sank to contempt, and their act of rebellion challenged the authority of the commonwealth itself. They had lost their fundamental trust in apparatus of the state. No doubt many of them remember a phrase from 1776, "... to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it." But no one imagined it would happen so soon.

The essential basis of representative democracy is trust between those who elect and those who are elected. The farmers of western Massachusetts did not trust their government. They believed their government was serving the private Boston bankers who loaned the money for the war at the expense of the livelihoods and citizenship of those in the countryside. Today we hear about special interests and PACs and 527s, groups and individuals who give money to campaigns. Ordinary citizens feel dwarfed by their influence. We can sympathize with Shays and friends, but we are not quite

ready to take up arms yet.

But what they and we have in common is that politics looks like a rigged game. And who willingly stays in a rigged game? Underneath the elegant phrase "to form a more perfect union" is the nervous fear that government can be corrupted, especially one that depends on public trust. Undermine that trust that the people's government is really theirs and democracy falls. No less true today than back in 1787. None of the other questions facing us today can be addressed if we do not believe government is working for the people. That's why this issue must be addressed first.

That said, Americans have been a trusting people because, after Washington, every presidential election has been tested by innuendo and outright manipulation. James Monroe claimed that he lost an early election because he refused to buy votes by giving away whiskey. Thanks to Andrew Jackson, father of the modern Democratic party, a half century of federal elections were essentially funded by federal employees who gave kickbacks from their paychecks. As outsiders, the rising Republicans finally banned federal employee politicking but instead went to corporations and demanded essentially protection money, threatening harmful legislation if they did not give. Later, after the first successful efforts to put a wall between business interests and government interests, they simply asked owners and investors to give privately.

In other words, our current corporate and special interest dominated political funding system is just the latest chapter of a sordid long story. Laws have come and gone, but the golden rule is still in effect, to wit – whoever has the gold makes the rules. We decry the decline of civility and statesmanship but it never existed in the first place. It is as delusional as the fabled "good old days."

But I am not here either to praise or bury American government. My interest is in asking how we can have such lofty ideals and accept such base realities. We bemoan the length and cost of campaigns which are the reason politicians need so much money in the first place, and yet praise the electoral process as essential to democracy. We decry manipulative political ads and the failure of the media to scrutinize honestly, but at the end of the day barely half the citizens vote and then turn a blind eye to what those elected do with the power we hand them.

And what can I do - someone who has no expertise in politics or history? Preachers look for the foundations, the basis on which one lives. When someone says one thing and does another it means there is some confusion about that basis. Either the person does not really believe what they say - is hypocritical - or does not really know what they believe - is ignorant. As a man of faith, I begin with the hope that people are ignorant.

Freedom is what we say the nation is about. (It is also what lies at the heart of liberal religion, so we have a self-interest in this matter. This is not just an abstract exercise.) But freedom has many meanings. This plays out most notably in the conflation of freedom as a political word and freedom as an economic word.

Political freedom means every citizen is equal to every other, because this is what keeps us free from tyranny. "One man one vote," was the phrase fifty years ago, referring to the subjugation of African-Americans by laws that gave whites more power. Whenever one group has more power by law, those with less will be oppressed. Politi-

cal freedom resides in the joint and equal ownership and stewardship of the state by its citizens.

Economic freedom depends on inequality. We call it competition or free enterprise, but the essence is every person is independent of every other, free to take risks and enjoy the success or failure therefrom. Necessarily this means some will be richer and some will be poorer, some will have more and some will have less.

Two different systems, each called freedom. And herein lies the problem, because they are different and even antagonistic. The freedom of one is a threat to the freedom of the other. Political freedom needs equality to survive, while economic freedom dies if everyone is forced to be equal. Political freedom perishes if those with more money have more power.

This is most intensely visible during campaigns when the need to win votes requires acquiring vast sums of money, the source of which is wealthy people. In order to gain popular power a candidate must be in debt to economic power.

We confuse the forum with the market. For the last generation neo-conservatism has said that there is no difference between the political forum and the economic market. The rules of the latter are those of the former. To limit campaign finance stifles the freedom of those who wish to advance their ideas, and to require equal time for dissenting views inhibits market forces.

I disagree. I believe we have two sorts of freedom, and like our bicameral government, they need to exist side by side to check the excesses of the other. Right now, free market thinking is so strong that it amounts to a sort of theology, meaning to disagree is to be heretical not dissenting. So what we need is more equality, more transparency, more accountability, which are the means by which we find common cause and mutual trust.

For example, we need to reform our electoral process with regional and rotating primaries, proportional winnings not winner take all, and limited and egalitarian media access. Democracy depends on every one having a turn to speak. To favor some over others because they are earlier, bigger, or richer, makes some more equal than others.

I'll reiterate what I said my first year here: all office holders should have their income tax returns open to public scrutiny. The people need to believe with sincerity that their officials work for them alone. List major donors on ads, so that we know who is buying and what they are selling. Shows have sponsors, why not candidates? If it is inevitable that strings be pulled, at least show me the strings.

"To form a more perfect union," first meant a union of the several states. Today, it means a more perfect union of people with government and government with its constitutional purposes. The gravity that holds them both is trust. The people must trust that their government is really of them, by them and for them. And government must trust that the purpose it serves is more important than the power and privilege it enjoys in serving.

It is about integrity, which is what unity means. Look for this in the candidates you see. Look for it also in the vote you cast. In the end, they truly do reflect the trust we have in ourselves and in the principles that make us a nation.