

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

1.11.15 Sermon: "Fighting for Lost Causes"

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Although delayed by the death of Mario Cuomo, may he rest in peace, January is the beginning of Albany's legislative season. Our representatives have returned to town ready to do the work of the people ... and maybe collect a little graft too, if they are well connected.

Returning to the 1939 classic movie, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, may remind us of some unfinished business in the area of ethics reform from previous years. With the absence of the Moreland Commission, not much reform work is being done. But that doesn't mean ethics reform is a lost cause.

I hope you have a certain affinity for lost causes that sets up an affection for Jefferson Smith. The naive Boy Rangers' leader, gets appointed to replace one of their senators who has just died. The governor picks him to avoid making the choice between the one his legislators advocate and the one suggested by the political machine leader, Jim Taylor. Taylor's opposition relents when he thinks that Smith's lack of experience will make him easy to manipulate. How wrong he turns out to be.

The conflict of interest around which the movie's plot revolves is the Willett Creek Dam project. Machine leader Jim Taylor has bought up the land, in secret, where the dam will be built, hoping to turn a handsome profit. The dam has been folded into a big appropriations bill that has many other pork barrel projects in it. This bill would have passed without notice until Smith decides to make himself useful and propose a national boys camp in this exact spot. Once Smith finds out about the dam project, the fireworks begin.

Now, in a totalitarian regime, if Smith objected to this kind of graft, he might have been taken out and shot, and that would be the end of it. Thankfully, we have a sophisticated culture of political dissent that serves as a check against corruption and the abuse of power. Edward Kennedy said, Integrity is the lifeblood of any democracy; deceit is a poison in its veins.

And poison there is a plenty. In the movie, it is portrayed by the Taylor machine that gets fully activated when Smith tries to interfere with the passage of the bill. The land Taylor has bought is falsely described as being sold to Smith through a forged deed. Taylor creates a clever trap to get Smith expelled from the Senate for corruption. Smith sees it too and is ready to give up in disgust and go home. It is only his secretary, Saunders, who convinces him to fight back using a filibuster. Even as he appeals to his constituents from the floor of the senate, the Taylor machine once again goes into action to prevent people from knowing what is going on, by manipulating the newspapers and generating public opinion against

him. The Taylor machine is masterful in that process, generating 50,000 telegrams in opposition to Smith's filibuster. The machine actually wins and Smith fails in the arena of politics as usual.

The second lost cause in the story is Senator Joe Paine's integrity. His seat was bought and paid for by the Taylor machine 20 years ago. But before that, Smith's father and Paine were allies working together. Their motto was, "the only causes worth fighting for were the lost causes." Smith's father died for this principle, shot in the back at his desk with his hat on, working to defend an individual miner's claim.

When Smith first finds out about the dam project and the graft, he immediately goes to Paine for an explanation. Paine, up to this moment, has been a hero for him, a model politician. Paine explains that politics is a man's world that requires him to check his ideas at the door the way you do your galoshes. He explains that real world politicians need to compromise to get things done. He has to go along with some things he finds distasteful. He says, "I compromised to serve people in a thousand ways. I had to play ball. This is how states and empires are built since time began." Expediency is the way of the world.

Paine's conscience does bother him though, because he has compassion for his friend's son and doesn't want to see him hurt. What stops him from backing out of Taylor's graft scheme is his own ambition to be President. So he asks Smith to keep silent as the bill comes up for a vote.

Alexander Solzheynitsyn responds, "In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers . . . we are ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."

The foil in the story who throws a monkey wrench into everyone's plans is Saunders, Smith's secretary. Weary of the ways of politics, her heart guarded against idealism and innocence, she despises Smith at first and wants to quit her job. As she puts it, she came to Washington with blue eyes filled with question marks. Now they are green and filled with dollar signs. She cynically sees how the world works, is disgusted by it and doesn't want to babysit this clueless junior senator.

Any others here this morning like her? It is an unpleasant side effect of following politics around here too closely.

Saunders compares Smith to Don Quixote, the mentally unstable character intoxicated with fictional portrayals of chivalry. Smith's wide eyed, uncritical love of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson has the same kind of romantic idealism that drives Quixote.

But like many cynics, Saunders is attracted to the very qualities in Smith that she disdains. Smith's love of nature and his simple virtue speak to her. She swoons, the camera shot soft

and gauzy, when he tells her of his father's advice to "always see life as if you've just come out of a tunnel." This appeals to her heart far more than "going through life all wised up" does.

When Smith stands to oppose the bill, Paine cuts him off at the knees before he has a chance to say anything. Smith is no match for this skillfully crafted and ironic betrayal, accusing him of doing the very thing Taylor was doing. Saunders is the one who stops Smith from leaving town with his tail between his legs.

She finds him at the Lincoln Memorial, feeling sorry for himself, bags packed, ready to go home. She challenges him not to quit in a rousing speech, reminding him he came to town with a faith bigger than the machines, bigger than Paine or any other living man. She points out he brought what they don't have, "plain, decent, everyday common rightness."

Antisthenes, primary disciple of Socrates, and grandfather of the cynics, would recognize Smith. He would say that virtue was an affair of deeds and *does not* need a store of words or learning. The wise one will be guided in public acts not by the established laws but by the law of virtue.

It is during his filibuster on the floor he is finally able to demonstrate his virtuous character and influence the other senators. Even when confronted with overwhelming opposition trumped up by the Taylor machine, he can still face Paine and say:

I guess this is just another lost cause, Mr. Paine. All you people don't know about lost causes. Mr. Paine does. He said once they were the only causes worth fighting for. And he fought for them once, for the only reason any man ever fights for them. Because of just one plain, simple rule: "Love thy neighbor."

And in this world today full of hatred, a man who knows that one rule has a great trust. You know that rule, Mr. Paine. And I loved you for it -- just as my father did. And you know that you fight for the lost causes harder than for any others. Yes, you even die for them -- like a man we both knew, Mr. Paine.

This is the speech that finally causes Paine to have a change of heart and confess his evil deeds.

So how are we doing today fighting for lost causes?

There sure are a lot of them. We Unitarian Universalists are pretty good at finding them and lining up our support behind them. Which can be a little discouraging sometimes while we advocate for the protection of Transgender folks, for fair redistricting, ethics reform, better health and human services, better wages and employment practices, and other social issues that match up with our values.

Looking outside Albany to the world stage, there are many, many lost causes that call out for our attention. In the area of armaments, for example, which is worse: drones, robotic killing machines, cluster bombs, landmines, depleted uranium weapons, or weapons of mass

destruction? They are all present and future problems that will kill and maim thousands in the future. And few if any governments that have them want to give them up.

We don't live anymore in the world of machine politics that dominated a lot of the twentieth century. We do continue to live in a world where the news media can be easily manipulated to serve powerful interests. With many of us cloistered in Internet echo chambers talking only to people who agree with us, it is getting harder and harder to hear the other side of an argument. How many of us tune into FOX news, CNN or MSNBC regularly to listen to the other side's talking points? And when we do talk with those outside our inner circles, do we talk about gun control, abortion, charter schools, tax policy and personal vs. social responsibility? And if we are unlikely to talk about these issues, lost causes probably will not come up either.

Still, sometimes a lost cause does get attention and carry the day. Twenty years ago, I would never have believed we'd see as many states with marriage equality as we do now. Medical marijuana? Not during the war on drugs era started by Nixon in 1971. I still am amazed Cuomo didn't cave to the oil and gas companies. Could still happen ...

So what lessons might we take away from Jefferson Smith? How about these three:

1. Corruption is a fact of human existence – Antisthenes believed that virtue could be taught. I'd argue you need a willing student to learn the lesson. The power of self-interest over public good corrupts politicians regularly. It is hard to live in the candy factory and not want to take home a little of those sweet rewards. Yes, power corrupts, always has and always will. That force, when organized in a group like a political machine can be almost unstoppable. But not completely, especially when it makes mistakes. And thankfully, humans are very error prone!
2. Personal relationships can facilitate a change of heart – Smith gets appointed in the first place because of his influence on the governor's children. Saunders faith in Smith inspires him to filibuster and fight rather than run home to his mother. Paine finally breaks down influenced by Smith's appeal to his relationship with his father who fought for lost causes. Changing hearts and minds happens best person to person, friend to friend, ally to ally *and* with our enemies – who may be our friends tomorrow, if we treat them with respect.
3. Finally, the appeal to moral values and principle does work. The public good, once clearly defined and broadly embraced, will trump private interest at odds with that good. The public wants virtuous leaders of character to sit in their seats of power. They will throw the bums out, given the chance, if they don't have integrity. Integrity isn't a left or a right or a red or a blue issue – it is one of the middle of the road, purple issues we don't need to argue about.

Organizations in our society charged with the responsibility to appeal to moral principle are

religious organizations like our own. Sometimes we are uniquely positioned to bring a liberal religious voice to bear on social and political issues. This congregation does that work with other liberally religious groups united under the banner of Interfaith Impact. Nationally, we do it as part of the Standing on the Side of Love campaigns. We do it internationally as part of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. And, as Bill Schulz, director of UUSC, former President of the UUA and past director of Amnesty International will tell you, our voices matter and can save lives. Our individual voices matter, but our collective voice matters even more.

So as we begin another legislative season, I encourage you to be aware of the opportunities that come up to join with our allies to advocate for our lost causes.

This year, maybe one or two of them will be found.

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