

Christine for President 2016

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson and Kelsey Atherton

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You may be surprised to learn that I'm running for president this election, but, I'm quite a regular candidate...I like running for office, even though I have never won one...except this one, of course. In our UU tradition, senior ministers are elected by the congregation rather than assigned by anybody...that's a critical part of the democracy we value and further. But in the larger political realm, this is my third run for president. I also ran for Pope. Running for pope was the most fun, because I had so little to lose, not being a Catholic.

Running for president of my own beloved country is a different matter. I've got a stake in this.

And it's been an election about candidates, their personalities and pasts, about who has earned how much money in what way and how they have spent it and how they have sheltered it from taxes, and very little talk about the issues.

Which is why I've gotten no press. I've got a seriously boring past. Neither wealth nor bankruptcies nor email servers and no clandestine videos. Now, I am a woman. That is obviously very interesting, in a negative way, to lots of people who equate being a woman with being weak, emotional, and prone to hormone driven hissy fits. But...that doesn't describe me, as you who know me best can surely attest.

It is true that I have little foreign policy or military experience but I am wise enough to know when I need help, and I have my campaign advisor to help me learn what I need to know. Thanks, Kelsey!

We have time to cover only three points of my platform this morning, and whatever it is that Kelsey wants to add, and they are:

The economy, policing, and what makes a nation a great nation. They are all about democracy, and democracy, as you may know, the furtherance of the democratic process in our nation as well as in the microcosm of our churches is one of the purposes of these congregations that we cherish. And so, this morning, we are furthering it.

First, An Economy that supports Democracy. Now, on the one hand, here's the truth of the matter. The American Economy is flourishing. Although we had a huge scare 8 years ago, we've had a slow but thorough come back from the brink of disaster. Last year, household income grew by 5.2%, the single largest increase since the 1960's, and for the first time in nearly as long, the gains were shared across the income spectrum. 3.5 million people climbed out of poverty last year. The unemployment rate is about 5%. And our future looks bright. American companies are doing cutting edge work on the next set of innovations that will shape our lives: robots,

drones, driverless cars, artificial intelligence, space, stem cells. We have no need to fear for the basic robustness of our economy. What we do have to worry about is the basic justice of our economy.

If I am elected I will work tirelessly to unravel the basic injustice that has allowed the shocking and dangerous level of wealth inequality which we now have.

In spite of last year's success at sharing the new wealth of the recovery, the fact of the matter is that too much of the wealth of the nation has been sequestered by a very few people at the tippy top of the economic pyramid, many of whom are not as smart or very good job creators as they fancy themselves, but are simply ruthless and unprincipled, and it is also true that they...collectively....have gamed the system so that it is perfectly legal for them to pay no taxes, taking advantage of loopholes not available to the rest of us. The result of this is not just a bunch of playboys and girls with too much money to hoard, the result is a tax deprived government at all levels unable to provide basic services and protections, and a stressed upper middle class, a worried middle class with no savings, a furious working class and a completely disheartened impoverished class. The two later groups taken together constitute 40% of Americans, and if you gave that 40% of Americans the proportion of land on this continent that equates with their portion of wealth, 40% of Americans would own the land equivalent to a very generous definition of Houston, Tx, and it's outskirts. At the same time, just one family, the Walton Family, also has that much wealth. With the rest of the tippy top .1% of the wealthy, they own the wealth equivalent of the NW quarter of the US.

Do you need much more explanation for the fact that the US, like England and lately, Colombia has a very large rebellious voting population who is ready to wreak any kind of havoc on the off chance that something might change?

If I am elected president, my foremost goal will be to preserve the experiment of democracy in this land. And my first objective will be legislation and policies that will, for the good of democracy, begin to reverse this trend of the accumulation of massive wealth. Smart, innovative, hard working people should be well compensated, of course, but we all need to remember, that the more a person owns, the more they owe the government that protects them and their wealth, that provides the infrastructure which has allowed them to make that wealth. They deserve a very good life. But nobody "deserves" to own 40% of the economy. Nobody is that smart, that dedicated, or that hard working. Give me a break! The only way to own 40% of the economy is to strong arm the system into letting you take and take, and take. And now it is clear. The exceedingly wealthy have taken so much that our shared enterprise of democracy is at risk.

Secondly, I will preserve democracy by attending to the crisis of policing that we are currently facing.

There are two truths here that seem to me self-evident. First, there is no democracy without policing. When criminals get the upper hand, then it is not a democracy but an oligarchy: The rule of the powerful rather than the rule of the chosen.

AND: There is no democracy without just, temperate, skillful policing. When police are free to kill, take the property of, or rough up anybody they take a dislike to, it is not a democracy but an oligarchy...the rule of the powerful, in this case the police.

We have a problem in this nation with police, backed up by laws, unions, and systems, which allow the police to take property, rough up and kill even people who are doing exactly what they are told to do, or who are reacting in a completely human, if unskilled way, when confronted with police whom they have more and more reason to fear. The cavalier and careless way police and courts across the nation have shrugged off or covered up mistakes, racism, and out and out evil perpetrated against African Americans has given rise to the Black Lives Matter movement for good reason. But all lives and all freedoms are in jeopardy when police are out of control. This is not a new problem, but the technology of cameras, used by both police and civilians, have made it both and newly visible and newly fixable problem.

If I am elected I will step up work on this issue, and not just with police departments which have amassed horror stories but with the whole system of policing. The Federal government can do more than offer old military equipment to police departments. The federal government can develop training for this changed policing environment in which many persons are carrying guns, for instance. They can collect information to help us understand the problem of police brutality so we can better address it, just to name two urgent priorities.

We need to continue the work of the Justice department in ending innumerable practices that put the oversight of police into the hands of other police. The owners of video footage taken from dash and body cameras should be the public, in the form of well trained, well informed civilian police oversight boards. Officer statements about shootings should be taken immediately, like everybody else's statements are. The Criminal Justice system learned long ago that this is the best way to get the evidence which is closest to the truth from human beings with their fallible memories and fanciful self-justifications. A person who has a badge is not immune to their humanity. This is not rocket science. This is common sense.

Here's another bit of common sense. A person who holds the power of instant death over the public should have more training than a person who cuts hair. You think? In order to qualify as a police officer in Albuquerque, you must complete 1040 hours of training...that's a half a year of 40 hours a week. To be a barber you have to have 1600 hours of training...almost 50% more. This is nuts. American police are more poorly trained than most police forces in the wealthy world. Two years of college level work is the general norm. A better educated, better trained police force which is not in the news for killing innocent or non-threatening persons is a police force to which more Americans will want to work for, and the result will be more diversity and a better situation for both police and public.

Of course, financing that would take a taxing plan that would allow cities to do more than bare bones funding, which gets us back to our lopsided tax system which exempts the rich from paying their fair share of the costs of the nation. (By the way: when the rich are paying what they can and should pay, the “tax revolt” will soon be over. When the costs of a decent society are shared fairly, most people will be willing to do their share.

Another policing area which needs to change is that we need to quit relying on our criminal justice system to be our major provider of mental health services in our nation, which it currently is. When people have mental health crisis they and their families should be able to rely on responders from the mental health field, not policemen, and they should have been able to get help before a crisis has spiraled out of control.

Of course, there are many, many good police officers who are doing their level best to police in a controlled, skillful, just and even compassionate manner. But the system needs an overhaul for democracy to function and our nation live up to its ideal of Justice for All.

What makes a nation great? This nation was founded in democracy and in diversity, by seekers of opportunity from many lands, and our greatness is in continuing to be and getting better at being who we most deeply are. The fundamental thing that makes American great, that gives us our unique energy is the fact that we’ve been involved for 250 years now in the project of drawing an every wider circle of who counts as an American, of who gets to help make decisions, who gets to share in the prosperity of our nation, who gets to be, “the real” American. From the days when the only Americans who really counted were land-owning, white men, the circle has gotten ever larger. Now the real Americans who count are rich and poor, women and men, people of every racial and ethnic heritage from every corner of the planet, and also once-despised or invisible; the elderly, sexual minorities, the disabled. It’s been a grand project of expanding justice. It has changed what we look like and It has made us who we are.

It has been a project wrought in pride and in pain. To expand a circle you have to break it and form it again, and while that’s going on, there is anger and chaos and anxiety and acting out and often even violence.

We’re in such a time now, and this election season has been disappointing in that it has revealed that lots of people are not really with that program and would prefer retreat to a smaller circle in which they feel safer and more central. Even the ones who are not angry or ugly about it have shown that they wouldn’t mind if it happened. This has made me sad, but it has shown me the truth, and I truly believe that it is the truth which sets us free.

Now we know where we stand. We know what work we need to do. I will do this work no matter who is elected president. I know that you, in your own way, will do so as well.

We’ve had these issues before and solved them. We’ve been through change and the pain of change before. We’ve been through slavery and the massive cost of ending slavery, we’ve been through the Gilded Age, we’ve seen resistance to immigration and resistance to fair

treatment of working people and we've seen populist movements and repression and police brutality and we've come to this point in our history and we will continue. We will be reminded by new Americans of the value of freedom. We will bring along the reluctant and we will share the pain of change and we will remember that everybody has worth and dignity no matter what they feel or think, even if they have to be stopped from doing what they are doing.

We will do this because it needs to be done and because we've got some massive issues facing us. Terrorism is terrifying even if it is not actually very dangerous. Gun violence is tragic even if there is a lot less of it than the car accidents we take for granted. Both international events, especially in the middle east, and Global warming will present our whole world with a crisis that will take well-functioning governments and well-funded international agencies to solve. And just as the costs of change and disruption must be shared within a nation, so they must be shared in an ever-smaller world.

And now, my campaign manager, Kelsey Atherton, has something he wants to add. Kelsey, what did you have in mind?

KELSEY ATHERTON:

Christine, I know you spoke stewardship last month, about what it meant to specifically take up the task of caring for the faith community that nurtured you growing up. I am here to speak to another task of stewardship, the kind presidents, specifically, have to do.

And, as fair warning, I come to this from my day job, where I work as journalist writing about military technology.

The president, it turns out, is a steward of a great many terrible things. We live now, as we have lived since August, 1945, with nuclear weapons, and the knowledge that at our nation's disposal is a singular kind of tool that can bring great harm to a great many people, all at once. There are 1,000 or more of these weapons stored at Kirtland, just on the southern edge of town, and almost 6,000 other warheads elsewhere in this county.

Since 1949, Americans have not been the only people with access to that sort of horrific power, but Americans were the first, and Americans are the only ones who get a say over who gets to control our nuclear arsenal.

This is not, I should clarify, a stewardship we chose. No one wants to enter the world with the burden of a nuclear arsenal weighing on their shoulders. And yet, this is a stewardship we have, and only by taking that responsibility seriously can we hope to manage it responsibly.

Part of that responsibility, in my view, is greatly reducing the size of active nuclear arsenals through diplomacy. The United States and Russia both signed the New START treaty in 2010, which called for a reduction of between one-half and two-thirds of deployed nuclear weapons, depending on the type of weapon. Work like this is vital yet insufficient for the stewardship task

of preventing an apocalypse. Other movements, like the Global Zero campaign, work towards a world without any nuclear weapons for anyone at all.

The presidency cannot, as much as I may wish it were so, control the actions of other nuclear nations. For people who grew up in the Cold War, this may be a grim truth you remember. For people like myself, who grew up after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this is a grim reality we are learning for the first time. We can guess at how Russia will act, but we don't know for sure, and that's even more true for North Korea, whose young dictator excitedly shows off new weapons every few months.

Christine, I think that this should be an explicit part of your campaign: That voters are entrusting the next president with a terrible power. They must know what you think about these issues. They must come to trust you as a responsible steward of America's power.

CHRISTINE

Thank you Kelsey. I will take that very seriously.

So...the game is up! It's been fun, but Christine isn't running for president any more, because Christine believes...as do most UU's, that working for democracy and furthering the democratic process is one of our sacred obligations. So...we don't fool around with elections. We don't play with our vote. Don't throw your vote away, and don't neglect to vote just because I have left the arena and you are not excited about the other candidates. Vote for the person who is most likely to carry more of your values into government than their opponents. Vote.

It's the only way to move forward. And that's our only option.

To keep on moving forward:

Sing: "We're gonna keep on moving forward."