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Religion column: Bring love with you into the voting booth

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Remember, remember the fifth of November:

Gunpowder, treason and plot!

— British nursery rhyme

One autumn night in 1605, agents of King James I searched the cellars underneath Parliament and discovered three dozen barrels of gunpowder guarded by a man armed with a slow-burning fuse.

A few days earlier, Lord Monteagle had been warned of a plot to blow up the House of Lords at the opening of Parliament, thereby killing the Protestant king so that he could be replaced by a Catholic monarch. The plot was the work of a group of English Catholics whose faith was repressed by the king's policies, and the man with the fuse had been recruited after spending years abroad fighting with the Spaniards against the Dutch.

Under interrogation, he admitted that his assignment had been to blow up the House of Lords, and under torture, he revealed the names of his fellow plotters, as well as his own: Guy Fawkes. Found guilty of high treason and condemned to be hanged, drawn and quartered, Fawkes jumped from the gallows in order to break his own neck and avoid the excruciation of evisceration and dismemberment while still alive.

Guy Fawkes Night is observed in today's Britain as a largely family-oriented occasion featuring bonfires, food and fireworks displays. Originating as a mandated celebration that the king survived an attempted assassination, it has thankfully grown beyond its former anti-Catholic sentiment and represents a uniquely British holiday on a par with the American Halloween.

I remember when I was growing up in England that, in the weeks before bonfire night, children would make figures out of newspapers and old clothes and ask people for "a penny for the Guy" to pay for firewood. Supposedly, the idea was that such figures would be burnt on November 5th in memory of Fawkes' fate.

As we approach Election Day this week, we can be thankful that civic life in the United

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States proceeds considerably more peaceably than it did in 17th century Great Britain. Living in a constitutional federal republic with democratically elected leaders, governance is ultimately the responsibility of the people themselves rather than a monarch or a class of oligarchs claiming a special mandate, divine or otherwise.

Moreover, and essential to the functioning of democracy, the people are constitutionally guaranteed the rights of freedom of religion, of speech, of the press and of assembly, all of which are clearly alive and well given the popular movements that are challenging today's political and financial orthodoxy.

It's interesting to compare Congregationalism (as a form of church governance) and Federalism (as a form of national governance) since, in the United States at least, they evolved in parallel. Unitarian Universalist congregations, for example, elect their own leaders (including ministers), given their covenant to affirm and promote "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large".

As such, we enjoy many and varied discussions about how individuals and groups of individuals can balance freedom and responsibility, how we might seek peace and do justice, and how we are called to use our blessings in service to the greater good. Disagreements are, of course, inevitable, but we try to remember one ingredient that unfortunately seems all too often missing from society's political discourse: love. For, in the words of the legendary Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou: "If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good."

Love was certainly missing in the lives (and death) of Guy Fawkes and the Court of King James, but it need not be missing in our public lives, too. As you go to the polls this week, and as you prepare to vote in next year's elections, will you do so with love? Casting aside fear, forsaking anger and rejecting cynicism, will you enjoy the privileges of citizenship with love for those with whom you disagree?

Avoiding self-serving pity, will you choose compassion, literally "suffering with" the poor, the hungry and the dispossessed? When you vote, will you do so as if "the least of these" were right there in the voting booth with you?

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