

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula**  
**Sunday October 14th 2018**

**Sermon:** “Patriotic Correctness”

Now, where shall I begin? There are just so many options. Columbus Day? Confederate memorials? Taking a knee during the national anthem? The Pentagon paying millions of dollars to sports teams to honor the military? A US President who believes that public protests should be illegal? Freedom fries? Maybe I’ll start with a couple of personal experiences.

A few years ago, when I lived about a mile from here on the other side of Warwick Boulevard, there was one night when there was a lot of helicopter activity. It started in the middle of the evening, and it continued into the early hours of the morning. In some neighborhoods, it was loud enough, apparently, to set off car alarms. People were posting about it on Facebook, some of them wondering what was going, others complaining about the disturbance. Some other people then responded, and responded to the complaints in particular, by saying that the helicopter activity was part of the military preparedness that protects our freedom. Given that, they went on to say, nobody had the right to complain about it.

I’m going to leave that there for now — and yes, I’ll come back to the shameful irony of it later on.

Going back over twenty-five years, now, my first lesson in American culture, given to me by an American shortly after I had arrived in America, was as follows. I don’t remember what we’d been talking about, but a graduate student, a couple of years ahead of me in the physics program, warned me that there was this thing called “political correctness” that was ruining careers. And in support of this warning, he told me that there had been a professor who, during a job interview, had asked the candidate for the job if he, the candidate, was gay. For this, the other student explained to me, the professor was summarily fired.

Today, about the only time you’ll hear the words “political correctness”, or their abbreviation as “PC”, is when someone is complaining about not being able to say or do something that they used to be able to say or do. I don’t know if the story about the

professor is true, which is to say, I don't know if such a question about an interviewee's sexual orientation caused the interviewer to be fired. I can quite imagine, on the other hand, that there have been plenty of interviews where the answer given by the interviewee to such a question resulted in the interviewee being turned down for the job, for reasons that had nothing to do with the ability of the interviewee to do the job and everything to do with the biases of the interviewer.

After all, unless it really bears on the specific responsibilities of the job, it's not fair to ask about someone's sexual orientation or their marital status or their religion. A Catholic hospital decides it wants all its ambulance drivers to be able to administer last rites? Okay, then it's fair enough that one of the interview questions is "Are you a Catholic priest?" Otherwise, no.

There was an episode of the animated sit-com "King of the Hill" where the main character, Hank, is responsible for hiring a new employee at the propane store, and he decides that he wants this new employee to be a good Christian. Only Hank's wife, Peggy, explains to him that he's not allowed to ask the job candidates about their religion, since it has nothing to do with being able to sell propane. So, thinking he can get around simply asking outright, Hank comes up with interview questions like "If you could have lunch with one of Jesus, Moses or Mohammed, who would you choose?" and "Do you put mustard on your ham sandwiches?"

So, setting aside the way the term has been bastardized, "political correctness" refers to the avoidance of language or behavior that might exclude, marginalize or insult people already placed at a disadvantage by society. This isn't about restricting what someone can say just for the sake of limiting their freedom. Rather, it's about fairness and respect. It's not fair to ask about someone's sexual orientation in a job interview, and it's not respectful to tell jokes about all women being bad drivers or all Muslims being terrorists.

I've noticed that when someone complains about the "PC police" preventing them from saying certain things, it's almost always a white man complaining that he really wants to say inappropriate things about people on the basis of gender or sexuality or race or religion but he knows it's no longer acceptable for him to do so. And particularly in the run-up to the 2016 election, political correctness became the scape-goat for many of society's troubles. You know, those big problems like civility and common decency.

Now there is a “PC” threat to American society, but it’s not political correctness. Rather, “PC” in this case stands for “patriotic correctness”.

Let me go back to that night with a lot of noisy helicopter activity. Remember that, in response to complaints about the noise, some people said that the helicopter activity was part of the military preparedness that protects our freedom, and so nobody had the right to complain about it. *Because we’re free, I guess?*

The irony is that the freedom that such military preparations are intended to protect necessarily includes the freedom to complain about the activity, and for that matter also includes the freedom to criticize those who complain. Freedom, in the sense of lack of external constraint, must include the freedom to say things with which others might disagree, or it’s not really freedom.

By analogy with political correctness, then, we might define patriotic correctness as the avoidance of language or behavior that might insult American pride. Increasingly, that has come to mean anything that appears to be even slightly critical of the military.

Remember that in the weeks and months following 9/11, any questioning of the invasion of Iraq, let alone any actual criticism, was instantly met with accusations of failing to support the troops, accusations of undermining our military while encouraging the terrorists. Not only were we asking why the 9/11 hijackers hated America, now we were asking why our fellow Americans hate America, should they dare to voice the least concern over the US military response.

Now patriotic displays at public events became more common during that time, which is quite understandable for a nation that felt under attack. Military personnel were frequently honored, which is an appropriate way to recognize people who were risking life and limb, even if the reasons politicians offered for why our troops were being put at risk were questionable.

At some point, though, such displays at sporting events ceased to be entirely honest. An extensive Senate report revealed in 2015 that the Department of Defense had paid dozens of professional and collegiate sports teams, to the tune of almost seven million dollars over a four year period, so that those teams would put on military

tributes at their games. Is patriotism real when someone had to pay for it? As the report released by Arizona Senators John McCain and Jeff Flake noted, “Americans deserve the ability to assume that tributes for our men and women in military uniform are genuine displays of national pride, which many are, rather than taxpayer-funded DOD marketing gimmicks.”

Of course, the people attending sporting events in person or watching them on television can't tell the difference between an authentic display of patriotism and something that required money to happen. All the fans know is that there was the national anthem, and the flag, and a color guard, and someone in military uniform throwing the first pitch, and that's a heady mix of symbols. And now comes someone who, instead of standing with his hand over his heart, takes a knee during the anthem.

Colin Kaepernick began his protest by sitting during the playing of “The Star-Spangled Banner”, explaining that he could not “stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me,” Kaepernick said, “this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.” Soon, though, he began to kneel during the anthem, following a conversation with former NFL player and US military veteran Nate Boyer about how to show more respect to former and current military personnel while still protesting.

None of that mattered to the patriotic correctness police, of course. For them, the fact that kneeling before the flag was a long-standing sign of respect was irrelevant. Rather, failing to correctly respond to the anthem in their narrowly prescribed fashion was nothing but disrespect for the troops, and that was the worst way to be unpatriotic.

Of course, nuance and reason and a coherent argument rarely make an appearance when it comes to patriotic correctness. More than once, now, the President has said that he thinks protesting should be illegal. Okay, so we know he has a fragile ego and that he is jealous of dictators such as Kim Jong Un given that the North Koreans have no choice but to do what Kim tells them to do, but let me say that again: The US President thinks that public protests should be illegal.

I mean, I've only been a citizen for ten years, but apparently I understand the Bill of Rights a whole lot better than the President does, not that that's a high bar.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” It’s right there in the First Amendment.

Of course, we’ve already perverted the meaning of freedom of religion to mean freedom of a majority religion to victimize women and LGBTQ people and members of minority religions, and the free press is being systematically delegitimized as “fake news”, so it’s not surprising that freedom of assembly is under attack, too. But if the First Amendment is being dismantled, at least the Second Amendment is standing strong, right?

We need to reclaim patriotism. If it is to mean love of country, including a willingness to sacrifice for it, because that’s what you do for something you truly love, then it needs to be understood that patriotism is going to be quite different from what makes us feel good, different from serving a particular political agenda, and definitely different from failing to strive toward a more perfect union of which every American can be proud. Rather, patriotism needs to mean doing the right thing even when it costs us something. As one person put it in describing a picture of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee, “A woman is trying to protect us from putting an attempted rapist on the Supreme Court, and she’s going to be destroyed for it, and she knows it, and she’s doing it anyway. That’s patriotism.”

Patriotism includes a willingness to criticize our country when we know it can be better than it currently is, and patriotism requires us to listen to those whose ideas about how it can be better may be different from our ideas. However, patriotism does not expect us to agree with someone else just because they say we should. It does require us to send running anyone who claims that patriotism is about them personally rather than the good of the country as a whole. And patriotism demands that we strive toward a more perfect union of which every citizen can be proud, not just those privileged few for whom the current system is working well.

During my time in seminary, I became aware of efforts to end Columbus Day as a federal and state holiday. It doesn’t take much time learning about the real Columbus to understand why we shouldn’t be honoring him in the same way we honor Abraham Lincoln and Dr. King. Columbus subjugated the Lucayan people for their gold,

murdered those who wouldn't comply, enslaved the rest, and forced girls as young as nine or ten into sexual slavery. Millions of Taíno died following the Columbian invasion. Moreover, the gold that was sent back to Europe destabilized the economy of Africa's gold coast, leading directly to African slavery, making Columbus the father of the transatlantic slave trade. As one person has put it, Columbus discovered the New World like that meteorite discovered the dinosaurs.

Why would we want to celebrate Columbus, other than a false sense of patriotism? So there have been efforts to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day, something that's catching on in many cities and even a few states. Inevitably, there have been cries of political correctness run amok, that such an American tradition should be tossed aside. Actually Columbus Day began in the 1930s when President Roosevelt made it a federal holiday under pressure from the Knights of Columbus, the same male-only Catholic group responsible for getting "under God" added to the pledge of allegiance in the 1950s.

However, true patriotism, namely genuine love of country that gives heed to the higher ideals for which it stands, does not shy away from the bloody origins of this nation and the legacy of colonialism that still remains today. True patriotism says that we can do better, that we must do better, when it comes to the romanticized history that is taught to our children. We can learn, we can admit our imperfections, and we can make this a country for all children, not just those who have benefited from colonialism. And rather than only putting ourselves first, we can do it better by recognizing that all countries have these same needs.

Given the choice between political correctness and patriotic correctness, I'm sure it's clear which I choose. On one hand, try to be considerate of other people. Be sensitive of differences; appreciate diversity; respect individuality. In short, apply the Golden Rule. On the other hand, demand a proscribed set of behaviors, using Orwellian doublespeak to explain this reduction in freedom as being for the sake of freedom. Condemn anyone who questions or criticizes; delegitimize or even criminalize dissent; demand uniformity. In short, practice authoritarianism.

As far as I'm concerned, it's not much of a choice.

Let us pray that our nation makes a good choice.

May it be so.