

“The Four Freedoms”

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What is Democracy? Does it mean wearing a campaign button or voting, running for Congress or maybe running against Congress, pledging allegiance or carrying a protest sign? Democracy can mean all those things. But to really understand it, it helps to have a little history.

Back in the day when my mother was young, the President of our country was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And in those days, the world was in big trouble.

Here at home, factories were closing. People had no jobs. Millions had lost their homes. Overseas, the Nazis had invaded Czechoslovakia and overrun France. Japan had troops occupying China. Bullies and dictators with big armies were rattling their bayonets.

And in this climate of chaos and fear, President Roosevelt gave a speech to remind Americans of the bedrock values on which our nation was founded, values that he said would have to become worldwide for the human race to find security and peace.

It became known as the Four Freedoms speech. Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear: these were the doors to a safe and hopeful tomorrow, the president said.

Two years later, an artist named Norman Rockwell put flesh-and-blood on the President’s words, with a series of paintings that showed what democracy meant in the lives of ordinary men and women. If you visit the Norman Rockwell museum, a few miles west of here, you can see the original artworks, which are reproduced on the cover of this morning’s bulletin. The Four Freedoms are big paintings, so large you can almost step inside and feel part of the story.

The first is Freedom of Speech. A man lifts his voice at town meeting. From his complexion and weathered hands, he probably works outdoors for a living. Two men nearby in jackets and ties are sitting down, looking upward toward the speaker whose blue plaid work shirt is open at the collar. The speaker seems sure of himself and sure of his words, obviously respected by his better dressed neighbors, who pay more attention to what the man’s saying than to the cut of his clothes.

The second is Freedom of Worship. The canvass is filled with women's and men's faces, bathed in soft, warm light, hands clutched or gently folded in prayer, one holding the prayer beads of a rosary, people of all races whose eyes seem full of cares and burdens but which are all focused on something invisible that we can't see, out beyond the frame of the picture. Across the top of the painting are the words of James Madison, father of the U.S. Constitution, "according to the dictates of conscience."

Freedom from Fear, the third painting: Two young children are being tucked into bed by their mother, bending down with infinite tenderness, as father stands by her side gazing at the sleeping youngsters, the father weary but proud and protective, holding in his left hand a folded newspaper whose headline is only partially visible, "Bombings kill."

Freedom from Want: the viewer seems to be welcomed into this final picture in the series, to become a guest at a traditional Thanksgiving Dinner with all the trimmings—turkey, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce—sharing the abundance of one family's celebration of this most typical of American holidays.

These Four Freedoms, as enunciated by Roosevelt and depicted by Norman Rockwell, are close to being the touchstones of our own spiritual tradition. After all, the Pilgrims who originated the first Thanksgiving also founded the Plymouth church that's Unitarian today, and the New England town meeting is close cousin to the congregational meetings that are still the hallmark of our faith, where people take direct charge of the decisions that affect their lives, in matters large and small.

Freedom from Fear: saying "no" to violence as the way to resolve our disputes. Freedom from Want: building a world where everyone has a seat at the table. Freedom of worship: where Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Christians can live as friends. Freedom of Speech: where open debate and honest questions will always be welcome. The world has changed dramatically since my mom was young. Yet these Four Freedoms are like a roadmap to keep us on the path.

America has almost forgotten the Great Depression and become the world's richest nation yet remains in danger of moral bankruptcy as the poor are left behind. America is no longer threatened by armies from abroad, having achieved the military might to destroy the earth many times over, yet in the arrogance of power risks creating endless enemies and perpetual war.

The country at times seems to have lost its sense of direction. But for that very reason, I believe that what we do here matters. Congregations matter. People assembled to discuss the issues of the day, to pool their resources for the

common good and vote on how their money gets spent, electing their own town moderators and church boards, exercising the faculty of dissent, learning how to disagree with each other without being disagreeable, practicing tolerance—all of this matters enormously if the Four Freedom are to be kept alive.

Democracy isn't something that happens far away, in Washington D.C. or on the evening news. It starts right here, in this church, in our liberal religious tradition. To borrow a phrase from the Occupy movement, "This is what democracy looks like."

Closing Words

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem.