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Our Founding Values, the Body Politic, the Common Good, and Personal Politics
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When I was first asked to talk with you, I was honored and flattered and I also misunderstood the length of my time allotment. I had hoped to initiate a dialogue and discussion which is my usual mode of operation. I believe through dialogue we achieve a fuller and finer truth. So, I must admit I'm a bit daunted by delivering a one-way address, so please bear with me, and thank you for inviting me.

This present election cycle certainly raises questions:

Has the campaign become more important than the presidency, just as personality has apparently become more important than the issues? Have we entered an era of reality TV politics where truth no longer matters, only image and sound bites?

We have, and will, talk more than enough about the personalities in the coming weeks, so this morning, I would like to shift our focus more to "Who are we, the American voters?" This is a perspective I often take with my classes: "Who are we as Americans? How do we define ourselves and how do we act?" In this case, how do we choose or decide? Obviously, there are many possible aspects to explore to try to answer these questions. It is a kaleidoscopic combination of social, economic, ethnic, spiritual, philosophical, political, and emotional factors that shift and rearrange to form our ephemeral conception of ourselves and our voting.

Whether we agree with him or not, Donald Trump and his message have made this a most significant election. My thoughts today do not address the momentous importance of our first major party nominating a woman for president, that is a long over due topic for another day.

Mr. Trump received approximately 1 and 1/2 million more votes than any other Republican primary candidate. Yes, it must be noted that each election there are (hopefully) more voters, but there are certainly forces at work to countermand that as well. But, Mr. Trump did run in a field of as many as seventeen candidates and amass these totals. This was a noteworthy achievement. On August 12, when Mr. Trump was at a low ebb, voting projections for the general election forecast him receiving approximately 44% of the vote, 56 million votes. So who are these voters: our friends, our neighbors, our family? ourselves?

This campaign has offered enough derogatory language that it is evident that there are appeals to people's biases and these are powerful forces: Sexism, racism, scapegoating and even the labeling of deplorables. In addition, fear and anger drive many voters. Fears of change, fears of economic insecurity: lost jobs and lost upward mobility, fears for the future of our children, fears of environmental and climatic change, fear of government over-reach, fears of new, unknown disease, fears of the effects of

the disparity of wealth, and certainly fears of terrorism and people different from us. There is a growing national fear of “there goes my everything”; perhaps it is now even a malaise. In addition, Americans have been historically anti-intellectual in our national ethos, and we couple that with an undue respect for the intelligence of those who have, or claim to have, great wealth. Our history and mythology extol the self made man from Benjamin Franklin on through Carnegie, Henry Ford and the fiction of Horatio Alger. Today even millionaire candidates tell us how they survived on “tuna casserole eaten on an ironing board” or started with nothing, but a million dollar, interest free loan.

Also, we, as is always true in a democracy, are prey to demagoguery whether it’s Huey Long or Joseph McCarthy.

At this point, I imagine you are wondering what all this has to do with today’s announced topic. So, here we go.

To my understanding, our great nation was founded on two notions, which may sometimes be in conflict: individual freedom and the general welfare. The Mayflower Compact forms the body politic to provide just and equal laws for the general good of the colony. The Declaration of Independence, for the first time in history, has the people forming a government to ensure the rights, freedoms, and equality of all men. Our Constitution created a more perfect union to promote the general welfare.

So this is my fear. I fear that we have lost our commitment to the general welfare and to the whole community and our common good. I believe this is evident in the ineffectual gridlock of our government and the growing lack of civility and respect, which no longer allows the compromise, which is virtually a prerequisite to our form of government. This focus on ourselves or our group is not new. We are well aware of self-indulgence and have all of the “ME” generation, self actualization, and the repeated litany that youth only thinks of itself.

In our history, we have had periods of greater general awareness as well. During the Great Depression, we acknowledged “the Forgotten Man” and John Kenneth Galbreath, over 60 years, ago worried about our over commitment to personal affluence and the apparent lack of concern for the general good. In fact he warned of “private affluence and public squalor”. I believe that today, we are there. The condition of our infrastructure: roads, bridges, railways schools and education in general, underscore his concerns.

With respect to our voting and our political life, I wonder if we are not experiencing the some unintended collateral damage of the tactics and success of the civil rights and women’s movement. Certainly this heightened sense of identity and focused effort were and are wholly justified in challenging injustice. However, we appear to have morphed to a society where all groups are oppressed, from middle-class white men and their tax burdens to the enmity felt by the persecuted one per cent. This group attitude has permeated politics and voting to the point where personal politics rule. I vote or support

only those who will do for me and my group. All others be damned and my anger is focused on some of these “others”. I believe this attitude could be our destruction. We have lost our sense of balance. Advocacy has devolved to enmity. To an alarming degree, personal concerns and the surety of our own correctness currently appear to hold sway.

As an historian, I can see the cyclical nature of trends but things do not change without effort. I truly believe in the power of the Golden Rule and its appearance, in some form, in virtually all religions. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

To this I would add an excerpt from Philippians Chapter 2: Verses 3-16
“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but, in humility, count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but the interests of others.”

Perhaps following these precepts we can restore the U. S. to being US.

Thank you for listening.