

“YES WE CAN, AND WE MUST”

Sermon by Thad Box
Cache Valley Unitarian Universalists Church
Logan, Utah
January 18, 2009

When Jay Black asked me to talk this morning, I told him I was not comfortable speaking in church. He persisted and I confessed that the last time I preached it split the Church and that church no longer exists!

I was a ruling elder in a proper Presbyterian Church in an upscale neighborhood in Lubbock, Texas. We had an active ministry to migrant workers, mostly farm workers living in labor camps and women working in dry cleaning establishments.

Our minister went on vacation. The Session asked that I fill the pulpit and preach on our ministry to migrants. I used the text that says “as you do it to the least of these, you do it to me.” I suggested that our church's role in migrant ministry should be redirected to those who owned the dry cleaners, farms, and labor camps—many of whom were our members.

We should start by calling any church member who employed migrants before the Session and question them about their treatment of workers. This type of action was authorized and spelled out in the Book of Church Order. When our minister returned, he agreed with me. My comments were summarized in an article in *Presbyterian Survey*, the Southern Presbyterian magazine in an essay, “A Type With a Purpose.”

That was the first time I left the Church. I tell this story because when we say, YES WE CAN, our first goal is to evaluate who we are and what our role is in any situation.

I come from a long line of Methodist preachers who were inspired and controlled by comments from the “Amen corner.” I don't expect Unitarians to prod me with amens, but I think, “Yes we can” would be an appropriate comment when I say something you think is a good idea.

This morning I will briefly describe the condition of the country as I see it and talk about the election, Obama and his potential. I will outline my own priorities for rebuilding America, suggest who I think we are and give my thoughts on what we can do. I'll do that in 20 minutes or less and then let you have your say.

My thesis is that Obama, as good as he is, cannot build a more perfect union. That it the people's responsibility. That is up to us. When we say “Yes we Can,” the job becomes ours.

Our country is in a big mess. We are embroiled in two wars. Israel and Palestine are pulling us into another war. India and Pakistan are on the brink of armed conflict. Russia has cut off gas to Europe. Iran wants attention. North Korea threatens South Korea.

The world is a very unsafe place. Because of our actions the last eight years, we are seen as part of the problem. We have lost our moral authority to broker peace

Our economy is in free fall; attempts to restore liquidity in our banks have not worked; a major depression is probable unless we can turn our economy around.

Our economy has suffered from an ideology that the market can solve all our problems. Policies of the last few years concentrate wealth in the top 1% of the population. There has been a lack of oversight and regulation. Our national deficit is at an all time high and getting bigger. We have been told by economists, media, government and our peers that spending and consumption are good. We can spend ourselves into prosperity. Our savings are among the lowest in the industrial world. "A penny saved is a penny earned" is a quaint saying from the distant past.

Our environment is changing for the worse. We are fouling our nest through the burning of fossil fuels. Global warming and climate change are facts. Productive land is lost to houses and roads. The oceans are our septic tanks and cesspools.

Our human resources are undeveloped physically, mentally, morally. We have an obesity epidemic while much of the world starves. Our schools do not turn out graduates who can compete in the modern world. We, the richest country in the world, have millions without health care. We celebrate ignorance in entertainers and politicians. Peer acceptance trumps excellence.

We were once a culture of courage and compassion. We have become a culture of fear and greed.

But in the last election the people spoke. We said we have had enough. We are not satisfied with what we have become. We can change for the better. We will be better. Yes we can. And we must do it now.

This change in attitude coincided with the rise of Obama the Unlikely. The most unlikely candidate imaginable---a skinny black kid with a funny name-- caught the attention of America. He preached hope, not fear. He appealed to the good in us, not what is wrong with us.

He ran a near perfect campaign, the best in my lifetime. We elected him our president. His transition activities have been promising. He shows leadership we have not seen in years. His greatest strength may be in his ability to inspire us to make the changes necessary. But Obama cannot change America for the better. We the people must make the United States of America a better place. Yes we can change America if we use sound principles and set reasonable priorities.

We must first change ourselves before we can change the world. We must replace fear with courage, greed with compassion, demands with negotiation, arrogance with humility, mediocrity with quality, lethargy with action. Yes we can.

We must show we understand and desire peace by ending war, torture and preemptive dominance of others. We must admit our mistakes and regain respect. Until we can retake the moral high ground we cannot forge peace or be an honest broker.

Toward that goal, we must get out of Iraq, close Guantanamo, end torture, reestablish constitutional law, rebuild Afghanistan, rein in Israel and negotiate with enemies as well as friends. This will mean sending aid, not armies, to the trouble spots of the world. Yes we can.

We must invest to improve the human condition to save the economy and the environment. Unregulated greed caused the market to fail. Monetary policy failed. Bailouts have failed to date and history shows they will probably not help much in the future. Stimulus packages have failed and probably will help only temporarily and minimally. The most important tool we have is investment in the human potential. Investment to improve people can give us a new world based on quality not quantity. Investment in the human condition can lead to a change toward sustainability not growth

I would like to share with you an example I lived through. I was born into a subsistence agricultural economy not unlike much of Africa and the third world today. We had no money. We grew our food using our own labor. We carried water from a creek. We used an outhouse. There was no electricity. We heated the house with wood we cut.

One of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Great Depression make-work projects, the Lower Colorado River Authority, built several dams and hydroelectric generators in my area. Jobs building the dams put money into the hands of workers. The added income changed the economy and raised the standard of living. After the dams were completed, rural electrification brought tools and innovation into homes of the workers. Families read at night. Schools improved. Ambition viewed new horizons. The area today is one of the prime research areas in America.

My point is that public money did not just build a dam, it changed a people. This was not just a "make work" project, or an infrastructure project. It was an investment in the human potential.

There are a number of investments that I think stand a chance of working in our current economic situation. Some of these we could call infrastructure. We need a new electricity grid that will allow new energy technologies to replace fossil fuel. But this grid needs to be managed by federal policies that allow people with solar panels on their roofs, with hydroelectric generators in their irrigation ditches or windmills in their back yard to sell surplus energy. Being energy independent becomes profitable for families.

We need to rebuild our railroads to include high speed rail that will move goods and people quickly, with lower fossil fuel requirements than airplanes or trucks. We need universal broadband that will bring information into homes in the poorest ghetto and to the most remote ranch.

We need to improve treatment of veterans who have been damaged in our wars. We should build public hospitals in every town over 50,000. These could not only function as veteran hospitals, but would serve as regional imaging centers for body scans, MRIs, and other expensive tests. They could house the computer networks that will allow all medical records to be electronically available to every doctor or druggist.

But infrastructure projects alone will not help unless we have people who can use them. This means direct investment in people through education. We must improve our public schools, build more community colleges, and subsidize education to turn out needed professions. The equivalent of “shovel ready” infrastructure projects are investments in scholarships and research.

Locally, Utah State University has announced it may have to lay off 600 employees. The state legislature talks about budget reductions approaching \$30 million. USU and other research universities should be able to tap human investment funds to get immediate research grants with stipends for students in each grant.

Unemployment benefits should be increased for people who will go to school. We should immediately make needed funds available to anyone who enrolls for a college degree. If the person graduates and goes into public service, the debt is forgiven. If the person fails or drops out the grant becomes a loan to be repaid. This would put money into the economy and prepare for long term quality growth.

The development of universal health care should be viewed as an investment, not an expense. Universal health care will not only reduce expenses for indigent care, but it will allow small businesses to compete. Grants to train more primary care physicians, physician's assistants, nurse practitioners and registered nurses could improve illness prevention thus lowering most medical care. We need investment in health care, not health insurance.

Investment in transportation should include the development of non-fossil fuel powered individual transport vehicles. Here innovation and new thinking are needed. It makes no sense to push tons of metal around to get one person from one place to another. Public transportation systems can, and should, carry people on direct, routine, recurring trips like from home to work. But new ideas are needed for individual transport and walking neighborhoods.

The collapse of the housing industry was one of the major causes of our financial situation. Urban homesteading of foreclosed houses could turn a housing problem into an opportunity.

These are just some of the ideas that might work. Suggest your own, but each suggestion should be an investment that will help build a sustainable human community, not an expense. Whatever that investment is, it should improve the human condition and reduce environmental degradation. It should be a step toward sustainability.

We must determine who we are and what we can do. I think we are upper middle class people living in one of the most conservative states in America. We are the elite, educated, with jobs. We are the minority. To be effective we must work with the majority while retaining our values. We can't change the world by working only with our liberal selves. We must join our Mormon neighbors in mutual goals. We can succeed only by coming together. Compromise must rule our thinking; it cannot be an ugly word. We can organize and act as a group; we can act as individuals; we can work within our group or we can help others.

Tomorrow Obama has called for a National Day of Service---Yes we can. What will you do? I don't know what I will do. Probably write an essay, maybe clear snow from blocked sidewalks in my part of town. But tomorrow, let us each help one person---preferably a young person—to go into some form of public service. Talk about building community, not obtaining more wealth.

One of your members, Erin Brewer, has organized a computer food drive. Sign up. Take a basket of food to the Cache Food Pantry. Ask others to do the same. Think of ways to get this whole congregation involved in providing food on a regular basis.

And in all our actions, let us remember these words from Aldo Leopold: “The mechanism of operation is the same for any ethic: social approbation for right actions; social disapproval for wrong actions.”

What I have tried to do today is to say YES WE CAN----AND WE MUST. We can save America if we change ourselves, if we work together, if we invest in people to stimulate society, if we respect one another as good neighbors.

Obama did not say “Here's what I can do for you” He said “We can form a more perfect union together.”

Fifty one years ago my Methodist preacher brother-in-law asked me to speak to a group of farmers and ranchers who were organizing a conservation district. We met in a little church in Star, Texas. A saying in the back of the church impressed me so much I wrote it down. I typed it on a 3 by 5 card. It has been on the wall of every office I have occupied for over half a century.

I don't know its source. It is similar to one attributed to Edward Everett Hale in your hymnal. My Texas version is not as subtle as the Unitarian one. It lays responsibility right on us. It says:

I AM NOT EVERYONE

BUT I AM SOMEONE
I CANNOT DO EVERYTHING
BUT I CAN DO SOMETHING
AND WHAT I CAN DO
I OUGHT TO DO

Thank you for tolerating me. Yes we can. Si se puede.

(Dr. Thad Box, retired Dean of the College of Natural Resources at Utah State University, writes a weekly column for the Logan, Utah, *Herald-Journal*.)