

Betsy DeVos's Yacht

Sermon by Dirk Bender, delivered October 1, 2023 at Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North.

Just the week before last, we heard Reverend Dave speak with us about how we can be better advocates for our LGBTQ+ folks, as Pride approaches. I think there are very few, if any, in this room today who aren't worried about how some of the most vulnerable among us are being targeted by those with an agenda to exploit what they call "Biblical values".

And as Dave quite rightly pointed out, even within the context of adherence to those holy books, these people are—and there's really no other way to put it—just plain lying. And clearly, they don't much care, because they have their eyes on their prize. I probably don't have to quote a whole bunch of stories that you've all likely seen. Most recently, I had this ProPublica headline to process: "This Security Guard Enforced a School District's Mask Mandate. He Ended Up Facing a Criminal Charge." The story had a depressing familiarity to it: the usual gang of ignorant right wing thugs, America's Worst Parents, performing the usual [stuh-KASS-tick] terror tactics. In this case, a security guard wound up somehow facing charges of depriving one of the thug parents' civil rights. He was acquitted, but that the other side is able to leverage the power to cow local school boards into submitting to their book-banning, their targeting of our most vulnerable youth, is pretty alarming. The side of thuggery and violence, as I said, have their eyes on their prize, what they call a "Christian nation". Which, of course, bears little resemblance to the message that their supposed leader preached, but that's been the case for several centuries here in America.

Fortunately, we too have our eyes on the prize. And we happen to have the truth, and human decency, on our side, and I think it's safe to say we know that there's an advantage to being truthful and right. And, frankly, the advantage at the moment of a relatively friendly federal government that at least isn't actively sabotaging our efforts to protect the marginalized folks who need protecting.

So. Why on earth did I choose to focus on Betsy DeVos' yacht? I'll try to explain.

At the time when this act of vandalism occurred, mid-way through Donald Trump's **first**, and one imagines, **only** term? as President? this incident may not have been on everyone's radar. But it certainly was on mine, and on those of politically engaged people I know. Once the details of this incident were known, and it was clear that nobody was hurt, this was, quite frankly, hilarious.

The imagery a lot of us had was of this pretty odious, unlikeable individual who'd marred into a family devoted to parting fools from their money through pyramid schemes, a person who had devoted most of her professional life to attempting to demolish the centuries-old, proudly American tradition, of publicly funded education, seeing this privileged **villain** getting at least a bit of a really unflattering public exposure. A kind of comeuppance, thanks to some righteous rascal.

It was, frankly, to me at least, and to some folks in my circle of friends, a funny visual image. To imagine her 40 million dollar yacht out there drifting somewhere on Lake Erie. Even though, turns out, the yacht never got out of the boat dock area.

Now, the perp who did this was never caught. And honestly we'll never know if this was just a random act of vandalism, or politically targeted against DeVos.

Given that so little actual damage was done—just 5-10 thousand dollars' worth, and given that DeVos' net worth is pegged at over five billion dollars, it's not terribly surprising that the Huron police department, apparently, didn't bother putting a lot of detective resources into solving the case. So the mystery endures.

I used this example as one of scores of rather inconsequential news stories that crossed our paths in the last few years. And let's admit it, it's fun. However you feel about, say, the likes of a Lauren Boubert, it's kind of hard not to get sucked in to what amounted to a rather ridiculous story about appallingly bad behavior, a few weeks ago.

On a somewhat more serious, large scale note, a story such as some may have been following about another—what I'll call—"convenient villain", Elon Musk and his policies regarding access to satellite information? and how such a thing could wind up affecting the balance of power in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine—certainly should draw our attention. But so could, say, any number of memes one might encounter about Musk. Memes that one might choose to share on social media. And spend who-knows-how-much-time yukking it up with one's pals.

Most of the jokes aren't even all that funny. Like...

Elon musk should tweet about my weight. So it would plummet, too.

Ok, maybe you heard:

The good news is Elon Musk is turning X headquarters into a homeless shelter

The bad news is, it can only house 280 characters, or less

I'm not here to shame folks who like to have a good time. Much.

Ok, maybe just a little. But here's the thing. Back to the subject of education. And how the efforts of a DeVos, or any number of prominent "Christian" (and yes, I do unapologetically use bunny-ear quotes) conservatives—people who have followed in Michael Farris' footsteps—who have been advocating for the use of tax dollars toward school vouchers, that could be used for religious schools' programs.

It's kind of important to focus on just what **we** are willing to do, to ensure that our public schools are properly funded, and not see their funds siphoned off by people with an agenda that is, frankly, harmful to society at large.

What are we willing to do? What can we do?

A few years ago, a friend told me of a conversation he'd had with someone who had a very serious problem with his decision to take a perfectly legal property tax exemption. This property tax exemption erases the obligation to pay "school taxes", that he qualified for because he was of an age to do it, he'd turned 65.

Without getting into the weeds of how my friend justified this decision, I'll just say at the outset, the explanation, "I'm doing it because I need the money" seems like a perfectly justifiable reason. No further explanation is really necessary.

But ever since, I've had this ethical question buzzing around a little bit in the back of my noggin. What if—just asking here—what if those who don't necessarily "need the money", however one might define "need" in this case—decided, en masse, NOT to take this exemption, when they turn 65? What kind of financial effect would it even have on, say, the county I live in?

Finding the answer to THAT question turned out to be a little tougher than I thought, but I have got some idea now that I've made some calls and written some emails to my local county tax commissioner.

I live in Gwinnett. Our so called "L5A" exemption, for people 65 and older, and it IS means-tested, meaning that above what I'd say is an upper-middle class annual income is exempted. So those who do qualify, who are permitted to keep the money they'd formerly had to pay for local school taxes, aren't really all that well off to begin with.

Other counties in GA have their own regulations, some don't have **any** income limits, and some are much more restrictive. I'm just speaking for Gwinnett. And by the way, I did just turn 65, the exemption is something we could likely receive ourselves, were we to apply for it next year, so this is not all purely academic for us.

Now, for some funding information. I realized this is where people's eyes might glaze over so I'll try to be brief, but in Gwinnett, a total of 6.8 billion dollars of assessed value is exempted from paying school taxes. This is from a total of a little over 43 thousand households taking the exemption. And doing the math, that comes to a pretty modest assessed value of 158 thousand dollars per house.

That is less than half the median home value in Gwinnett county, which is about 400 grand. And yes, assessed versus actual resale value are two different things, but, you get the idea. These folks taking the deduction, certainly appear to be the sort who **can** say, without feeling too guilty, I don't think, "hey, we need the money."

So given the modest means of the people involved, and the overall 3 billion dollar annual school budget not being affected all that much by the shortfall? Yeah. Not the best application of my time and trouble trying to convince these folks to refuse to take an exemption that the county actually encourages one to take.

But here's something that this exercise DID teach me, and it's something I'll hope to leave you all with as well. As far as I've been able to ascertain, with the research I've done, America is the only representative democracy, of the sort that we tend to call an "industrialized nation," that funds its public schools the way that we do, with such a large share coming from very local property taxes.

Whether we're talking about the EU, or Japan or Korea, it is MUCH more of a top-down or, at best, provincial-down, funding taking place, in those nations. One has to look to a much less well-off nation, the Philippines, to see similar burdens placed at the individual, local level, by the way; I learned that fully half of the Philippines' funding comes from individuals rather than the government in that nation.

But back to how it's done in these wealthier nations who enjoy the kind of standard of living that we do, if not better. Again, the funding is coming from shared resources, from what one might think of as the "top" although it may be at what we'd call, sometimes, the state or provincial level.

Not the sort of thing we have in the USA, where the lion's share of funding is from local property taxes. Nationwide, the figure is a staggering 81%.

Interestingly, in Georgia, it's not quite that massive a percentage, it's actually a little less than half. But, that's still a lot, and it still, likely, plays a huge role in the sort of inequities we see between the haves and have-nots, in the schools in the cities around us.

And as far as I can tell, the inequities that result from individual cities being starved for property tax funding? Resulting in schools that are genuinely hurting for needed maintenance, salaries for qualified staff and so forth? I take no pleasure in saying this, but folks, those inequities, they're not a bug. They're a feature.

They're a feature.

They enable the folks who move to the “best” communities and send their kids to the “best” schools, to wall off their communities - ok, OUR communities - enabling us to peek out from time to time for a look at those poor inner city school kids and say “oh dear, what a shame.”

And... they enable those folks...us folks... to not really do jack to change the status quo.

Well. We CAN change it. People HAVE the power. We can, at minimum, make our elected officials know that we are not ok with this system. Just because it seems it's always been that way doesn't mean it's got to stay that way.

A friend who was born and grew up in Sweden, who once worked at a Saab factory, but came here, moved to South Florida and then settled in GA after graduating from GA Tech, weighed in when I recently asked him to put, in writing, how he saw our educational inequity. Versus what he sees in his old homeland, which he still visits every year. And I quote—but I've cleaned it up a bit:

I just flew back from Sweden on Monday from a 6 week stay over there, so allow me to illustrate it with this quote that I read in one of the papers when I was over there:

“She’s a school teacher, so she makes good money”.

I could possibly rest my case right there.

I think America’s a mess in comparison. In fact, I could almost write a book about how screwed up I find it to be.

To your question about funding schools through property taxes. I find that absolutely asinine, and I got my schooling on that in South Florida. With a 30 minute drive, you could go from a gleaming state-of-the-art facility to an absolute [crap] hole where half the windows were boarded up, probably from some hurricane passing through some years prior. IN. THE. SAME. [Flipping]. COUNTY. And politicians have the nerve to claim that kids attending those two schools are afforded the same, equal opportunities in life? Go [flip] yourself.

You really don’t see that in Sweden. Don’t get me wrong – discrepancies do exist. I’m sure you could find some crappy schools without looking too hard, but that’s more of a reflection on the high-crime neighborhoods they serve; not funding levels. And there IS a problem with crime (gang related, mostly) which is a whole ‘nother story.

End quote.

Anyone think that's an exaggeration? About the inequities here in the richest, most powerful nation ever on earth? Granted, I am focusing, somewhat myopically, on our funding of education. And by doing so I guess I'm falling into the trap of imagining that our schools should shoulder the burdens imposed by a cruel economic system. That

schools should exist to prop up kids and keep them healthy enough to serve as obedient laborers for the machine. I guess that's another sermon topic for another day.

Still, this is an enormously important funding component, and it's critical that we address what I feel is absolutely a flawed funding mechanism.

I do not imagine that I have all the answers, nor do I think that this funding mechanism is the key that unlocks all the doors to happiness and provides prancing unicorns for everyone, ok? But it certainly seems to be a root cause that needs attention. Attention brought to our elected officials, to people who hold the purse strings. And focusing our attention on this, rather than shiny objects? It's a start, it's something we can and should focus on.

Rather than being led astray. Set adrift. Adrift...like a yacht in lake Erie.

And about that. Circling back to that shiniest of shiny objects? Betsy DeVos' yacht?

And about what it means, what I think about this incident, worth sharing with our beloved community? With regard to the yacht being set adrift, I'll just leave you all, with these **four** words.

I. Didn't. Do. It.