

COMMITMENT

At the congregational meeting following the service today, we will be practicing democracy as only Unitarian Universalists do it! We will undoubtedly listen attentively to some ideas and proposals which will be completely ignored when we get around to voting. We will likely give more time to minority positions than to the quiet majority position that will win the day, possibly in unanimity! And we may well leave frustrated because it takes so long to ratify what is often a foregone conclusion. Yes, it is messy. Yes it takes more time than it seems it should, and yet it is a truer democracy than is generally practiced elsewhere in this democratic nation! Is our practice perfect? By no means! At the UUA General Assembly, democracy in Business Sessions has been limited for many years to those actions previously presented in separate mini-sessions of those particularly committed to an issue or position. I kind of miss the intellectual free-for-alls that used to happen—probably some of my own quietly anarchistic tendencies or my history of playing some of those games when I was in High School attending events of the Illinois Association of Student Councils! In any case, it takes commitment to be a Unitarian Universalist, often more so than those looking in from the outside might realize. Part of the commitment we make as members of a UU congregation is to engage in the messy democracy, to support our congregation financially and by our participation, even in some of the stuff that isn't as much fun for everyone. Today, we shall ease any possible pain, by breaking bread or at least eating soup as we work!

Now I want to share some history of three of the men who gave their lives in commitment to this movement. And yes, this is the bulk of the great unfinished sermon carried over from the last 2 weeks!

UU Saints (continued!)

19TH Century Unitarian Ministers **William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker** all considered themselves to be Christians, as had the Unitarians and Deists who shaped the founding documents of our nation. These are the theological roots from whence we came. To this day, Unitarian Universalist ministers are trained in Christian Biblical and theological studies, as well as in other aspects of ministry and in other acknowledged sources of our Living Tradition.

In his most famous sermon, “Unitarian Christianity,” delivered at the ordination of Jared Sparks May 5, 1819, **William Ellery Channing** set the stage for the split between liberal and conservative Christians in Boston. The fundamentalists of their day had been jabbing at the liberals, and Channing took up the gauntlet. In his sermon, he said that:

Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books... (Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism by Conrad Wright, p. 49)

Channing went on to explain that: *We believe in the doctrine of God’s UNITY, or that there is one God, and one only... We understand by it, that there is one being, one mind, one person, one intelligent agent, and one only, to whom underived and infinite perfection and dominion belong... We object to the doctrine of the Trinity, that, whilst acknowledging in words, it subverts in effect, the unity of God. (Three Prophets p. 57)*

Channing also addressed the question of the humanity and divinity of Christ, declaring that: *We believe in the unity of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus is one mind, one soul, one being, as truly one as we are, and equally distinct from the one God. We complain of the doctrine of the Trinity, that, not satisfied with making God three beings, it makes Jesus Christ two beings, and thus introduces infinite confusion into our conceptions of his character. (Three Prophets p. 62f)*

Channing established the theological center of American Unitarianism with this and other sermons, shaping a rational religious movement that was aware of German higher criticism of the Bible and quite willing to see the Bible and religion as objects of discussion, discovery, and exploration, with revelation continuing.

Two decades later, **Ralph Waldo Emerson** stirred up significant controversy when he preached to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School. His Transcendentalist views, and those of Theodore Parker would later take cold rational Unitarianism to a new heartfelt experience of religious truth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born May 25, 1803. Emerson's father, William, was minister of Boston's First Church when he came into the world, the church where John Quincy Adams was a member and where John Adams often worshipped when he was in from Quincy.

In 1832, when Waldo Emerson resigned from the pastorate of 2nd Church, the proximate cause was his refusal to offer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but his beliefs about the nature of Jesus were beginning to differ significantly from even the Unitarians of that day. As David Robinson comments in *Apostle of Culture*,

“What was the place of Christ in a philosophy of self-culture? In their preaching Channing and Ware had made Christ a central emblem of perfected, and therefore perfectible, humanity. But as Emerson confronted the same issues, the crucial role of Jesus began to give way to what we might call a stance of prospective humanism, which placed an image of perfected humanity in the future rather than in the history of Christianity.” In 1836 (Emerson) noted, *“The Revival that comes next must be preached to man's moral nature, & from a height of principle that subordinates all persons. It must forget historical Christianity and preach God who is, not God who was.”* (Robinson, *Apostle of Culture*, p. 55-56)

Emerson may have quickly left the pulpit behind as he helped to create the Lyceum lecture circuit, but throughout his career he addressed the moral and ethical questions of the time. In the Lyceum he was constrained from addressing some of the most critical issues such as slavery and the role of women, yet he addressed such issues often enough in other lectures and from pulpits as a visiting minister.

Emerson's address to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1838 illustrated well the break he was making with the formalism of churches, including Unitarian ones of his day. In that address, Emerson said:

The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus; in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed, is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. (Emerson in, *Three Prophets...*, by Conrad Wright p. 92)

Emerson excoriated the ministers of his day, including the Unitarians, for their failure to nurture the souls of their parishioners. A lifelong Unitarian and often Unitarianism's greatest critic, Emerson continued to share his moral philosophy from the lectern until his death in 1882.

Theodore Parker, born August 24, 1810, eventually worked himself to death, not caring enough for his own health. His controversial transcendentalist views led to criticism from other Unitarians as well as from the orthodox, yet a group of men organized the 28th Congregational Society, calling Parker to be its minister in 1845. In his day Parker may have been the best known preacher in the United States, regularly filling the great hall of the Melodeon in Boston with thousands, counting up to 7000 congregants on the parish register. His message inspired congregants and helped to shape the social consciousness of his age. He is known for helping slaves travel the underground railroad, sometimes preparing his sermons with a pistol on his desk in case trouble might arise. Parker may not have been one of the best known of those fighting for the freedom for the slaves, but his support of their cause is part of the great legacy he left. Parker died of consumption in Florence, Italy, in 1860, on a trip intended to help him recuperate. Parker has been called the universal reformer for his efforts to better society in a great number of areas. In his classic sermon, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, at the Ordination of Charles C. Shackford in South Boston in May 1841, Parker laid out his views.

Christianity is a simple thing; very simple. It is absolute, pure Morality; absolute, pure, Religion; the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance. The only creed it lays down is the great truth which springs up spontaneous in the holy heart—there is a God. Its watchword is, be perfect as your Father in Heaven. The only form it demands is a divine life; doing the best thing, in the best way, from the highest motives; perfect obedience to the great law of God.

Try it by Reason, Conscience, and Faith—things highest in man’s nature—we see no redundance, we feel no deficiency. Examine the particular duties it enjoins; humility, reverence, sobriety, gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith, and active love; try the whole extent of Christianity so well summed up in the command, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;” and is there anything therein that can perish? No, the very opponents of Christianity have rarely found fault with the teachings of Jesus. (Three Prophets...p. 140)

Parker deeply valued the friendship, collegiality and inspiration of Channing and he was an active participant in the Transcendental Club and a friend of Emerson. He came to maturity on social issues once he had come to Boston, then “threw himself into the various reform movements of the day with characteristic energy.” He addressed slavery and economic injustice. “He served on committees, circulated petitions, organized charitable and social welfare societies, he lectured, he wrote, he preached. He sought to make his home in Exeter Place a clearinghouse for the reform work of the day.” (Henry Steel Commager, *Theodore Parker, Yankee Crusader*, p. 168-9)

If the 21st Century world is small and interdependent because of technological advances, global satellite communications, and world trade, the world of the 19th Century was small because all the big names in education, literature, politics, religion, and science knew each other. When I studied history in high school and college, I did not realize that so many of the figures I studied were interacting with each other on a regular basis, nor that so many were Unitarians. It was only in reading biographies of Emerson and Parker that I realized how many connections there were between important leaders in the 1800s. Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Emerson, Parker and many other prominent people were in regular contact with each other, sharing ideas, dreams, and hopes for the nation.

We stand on the shoulders of great women and men who have built this movement. Now it is our turn to stand up and make a difference in the world, to love and accept, to challenge injustice, to create opportunities for hope to triumph even in this troubled time. It is our turn to seek the best, the highest, the most true expressions of religion in this instant and in the future.

In our congregations, our district gatherings, and in our General Assembly, we have the opportunity to continue shaping a religion which will aid the building of a better and more just world. From our roots in primitive Christianity and the religious dialogues of Boston, we stand uniquely poised to call for justice and compassion in the continuing journey toward religious truth. May our individual journeys and our shared community be a light to the world which is never hidden but always available to inspire a brighter future!

So May it Be. Amen!