**“A Sermon in Baltimore, Two Hundred Years Ago”**

May 5, 2019

UU Church of Lancaster

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**Reading: excerpt from “Election Day Sermon, 1830,” William Ellery Channing**

I call that mind free, which masters the senses, which protects itself against animal appetites, which condemns pleasure and pain in comparison to its own energy, which penetrates beneath the body and which recognizes its own reality and greatness

I call that mind free, which escapes the bondage of matter, which instead of stopping at the material universe and making it a prison wall, passes beyond it to its author….

I call that mind free, which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith…

I call that mind free with sets no bounds to its love

I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstance… but which bends events to its own improvement and acts from an inward spring, from immutable principles which it has deliberately espoused.

Such is the spiritual freedom which Christ came to give. It insists in moral force, in self-control, in the enlargement of thought and affection, and in the unrestrained action of our best powers…. I know how little this freedom is understood and enjoyed, how enslaved men are to sense and passion and the world, and I know too that through this slavery they are wretched and that while it lasts no social institution can give them happiness.

**Sermon: “A Sermon in Baltimore, Two Hundred Years Ago”**

The theme in the Soul Matters program and in worship for May is “curiosity.” Soul Matters calls us to examine each monthly theme from many views. “Curiosity’s” root meaning of “self-discovery or “inquisitiveness” has many dimensions, and I want to highlight the call from Soul Matters to consider the consequences of curiosity: what are the outcomes of being curious, especially in good liberal mindset. How can each and every one of us, each in our way, expand our understanding and experience with this process we call life. Curiosity keeps life fresh and alive and vital. Living by the Seven Principles of free faith, as printed on the back of the Order of Service, curiosity invites us to both talk about and act on these principles, as self-discovery takes us into new realms of understanding of how to make the world a better place.

Today, on this day when we honor and celebrate the important contributions to this free church from years of dedicated service from office administrator of Emma Bramble, we also celebrate another important contribution to history, an event in religious history which indirectly led to the founding of this congregation in 1902 and directly to the founding of the Unitarian denomination in 1825. Today is the two hundredth anniversary to the day of the delivery of what has come to be known as the “Baltimore Sermon,” preached by the Rev. William Ellery Channing at what was then called the “First Independent Church of Baltimore.” In the early nineteenth century Channing was one of many progressive ministers filled with curiosity for how they might transform religious life in New England away from its grounding in Calvinism, toward a more liberal, life-giving approach to faith. The consequences of his Baltimore Sermon have influenced each and every one of us here in this room this morning. Without Channing’s 1819 sermon, good chance that this congregation would not have been founded when it was, 83 years later, as part of the Unitarian denomination.

Let’s review some of the story of this important Baltimore milestone in Unitarian history and ask how it remains relevant to and clarifying of our understanding of free religion today. The story of the Baltimore Sermon also reminds us of the importance of religious doctrine as an influence on how we live out our beliefs in community with fellow human beings and with Mother Earth. My experience is that many Unitarian Universalists today could be more discerning of theological doctrine, of discerning and following faithfully any of the many theological paths our multicultural mindset embraces. For this hour let us explore the importance of Channing’s interpretations of the doctrines of divinity and scripture.

Facts of the Baltimore Sermon

Channing delivered his sermon, titled “Unitarian Christianity,” on May 5, 1819 for the installation and ordination of the first minister of that congregation, Rev. Jared Sparks. That Channing left the orb of New England, the stronghold of religious liberals, and came to Baltimore for this event was a big deal, and quite intentionally planned.

William Ellery Channing was born in 1780 into a prosperous family from Newport, Rhode Island. Always of frail physical bearing, nevertheless he was well tutored and entered Harvard College at age fifteen. A few years later he served as a tutor in his own right to a family in Virginia, where he experienced the horrors of southern slavery first hand. After more study at Harvard, in 1803 at age 23 he became the minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, a position he held until his death in 1842. In 1814 he married his first cousin, Ruth Gibbs, one of the wealthiest women in the country at the time. After his important sermon in Baltimore in 1819, in 1820 he started a lecture series called the Berry Street Essay, which continues today. The Berry Street Essay is the longest continuously surviving minister-led lecture series, which is delivered General Assembly each June. I recently served for three years on the committee which selected the annual essayist, and for General assembly 2020 in Providence we are planning another 200th anniversary celebration, that of this essay. Channing had other interests beyond ministry. I chose Responsive Reading #652 intentionally to remind us of his commitment to religious education: that reading is taken from a talk he delivered to the Unitarian Sunday School Society in the 1820s. By the 1830s he was also a vocal promoter of antislavery reform, working with some of the earliest Unitarian abolitionists such as Lydia Marie Child. He promoted other social justice issues, such as advocacy for better working conditions for low-income laborers Believing in the capacity for divinity to be present in each human, he also laid the groundwork for the emerging Transcendentalist movement. His Election Day sermon of 1830 which I just read a few lines from inspired the next generation of liberals, including Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller.

As a young minister Channing quickly became recognized as a leader in New England religious life. Since the arrival of Pilgrims and Puritans, church was organized by congregationalism. In the eighteenth century New England Congregationalists were dominated by Calvinist principles: which included a grounding in human depravity; the notion of pre-selection, that some were chosen for heaven and others not; and the doctrine of the Trinity, that God existed in three forms: father, son and holy spirit. Through the eighteenth century there had always been some who countered Calvinist doctrine, and that the more liberal sentiment grew as the new country formed a government and identity based on democratic principles. Liberals countered the Calvinists in many ways, especially by calling for reason in religion, especially in the interpretation of Scripture; by believing in human good, not human depravity; and by promoting a concept of the divine as Unity, with Christ as a human mediator, not a divinity.

For decades conservatives and liberal Congregationalists co-existed relatively peacefully. Still today there is evidence of the distinction in New England towns, with a UU church on one corner of the town common and a UCC church on the opposite corner. However, by the early nineteenth century tensions between the two philosophies led to what is known as the “Unitarian Controversy” which lasted a good thirty years. Two incidents in particular widen the wedge between them: in those days pulpit exchanges among ministers were common, but the conservatives increasingly denied invitations to ministers who would preach liberal theology --- the supreme example was ignoring the radical minister Theodore Parker. Then in 1805 a liberal named Henry Ware was elected as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, shifting the focus of divinity education toward the liberals, which Harvard remains today. By the way, the annual Ware lecture at General Assembly is named after Henry Ware. Martin Luther King and Mary Oliver have been among prominent Ware lecturers.

Liberal attitudes toward religion were moving out from “the neighborhood of Boston.” A group of liberals began meeting in Baltimore in the 1810s and by 1819 were ready to settle their first minister. They called a man named Jared Sparks, nine years Channing’s junior. Sparks came from a poor family in Connecticut who worked his way out of poverty to a degree from Harvard in 1818. Sparks also enjoyed mentoring from Channing and became a religious leader in his own right. After serving the Baltimore Church for four years, he became chaplain to the US House of Representatives, a scholar of the life of George Washington, the first lecturer in American history at Harvard, and President of the College in the 1850s. The May 5 ceremony in Baltimore for Sparks was both an ordination to ministry and an installation as minister of the congregation. These are important events in the life of both ministers and congregations, as I trust this congregation will experience within the next two years as you install a new settled minister and perhaps also ordain that person if a first-time minister.

With the selection of Sparks by the Baltimore church, the liberals seized the moment. The service in Baltimore was highly orchestrated. Tensions with conservatives continued to grow, they realized the imperative of making a statement for the liberal way, and to do so outside of New England emphasized the geographic growth of liberal faith. Channing was a logical choice to deliver this sermon --- by 1819 he was regarded somewhat as the dean of the liberal way. Seven other liberal ministers from New England also attended in Baltimore. News of the radical nature of his sermon was leaked ahead of time, and a few days later the sermon was published and re-published: the Baltimore Sermon became one of the most widely read theological documents of the nineteenth century, known nu many, not only religious liberals. By the way, the sermon latest ninety minutes and today is widely available in print and online.

Contents of Baltimore Sermon

My goal ths morning is not detailed theological exergesis of the sermon. Instead let us review it broadly, to underline the important of how we define theological doctrine. Until 1819 proponents of liberal religion had resisted the term “Unitarian,” in part because of associations with the English version of liberal faith brought to America by Joseph Priestly which completely denied Jesus’ divine nature. After the Baltimore Sermon, even the Channing-ites acceptes the term “Unitarian.” More important, his sermon was the catalyst for the founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. By creating an institution: the liberal approach to American religion was codified and legitimized.

The Baltimore Sermon outlined the central tenets of Unitarianism, in two sections. In the first, Channing explained liberal understanding of the Bible as a document written by humans, not a divine work. Thus it must be read and interpreted with reason, just like any other human-written document. The Bible does contain the revelation of divinity, but interpreted through human reason. In the second part of the sermon Channing explained what liberals have uncovered in Biblical texts. Most important about interpreting the Bible, the doctrine of the Trinity is not Biblical: thus, he promoted a united God, not God in three persons. He also promoted a God who is infinitely just and compassionate, not harsh; and Jesus as human mediator, who helped other humans move more deeply toward the divinity within each person, thus also to enhance the moral nature of humanity. Channing’s big picture message was to correct some of the harm which Orthodox Christianity could generate. He encouraged people to be curious, to explore new interpretations of scripture and more hopeful ways to be religious.

Consequences and Implications for Liberal Religion Today

Why does it matter, that we know about and celebrate the Baltimore Sermon? How did it influence religious liberals today, this lengthy, erudite discourse on theological doctrine delivered two hundred years ago? For one, the event modeled for us the importance of defining and publicly articulating new interpretations of theological doctrine: that is, the importance of advancing what we believe as followers of liberal faith. That Channing’s ideas and beliefs about Unitarianism were voiced very publically, especially promoted by the printing of the sermon, likewise illustrates the importance of not just thinking about our beliefs but putting them into action: the action of defining a ministry, the action of disseminating his idea in print. Channing’s sermon spawned a new religious identity which helped define a new religious denomination in 1825. That institutional presence in American religious life was confirmed all the more fully with the creation of the National Unitarian Conference led by Henry Whitney Bellows in 1865.

Channing’s sermon marked the beginning of a church and ministry which is still alive today at the First UU Church of Baltimore. I attended celebrations last evening and this afternoon a group of ten of you plan to travel to Baltimore to attend a worship service honoring this monumental moment in Unitarian history.

Anniversaries of pivotal historical moments are important markers for us modern. The Baltimore church is commemorating an important ordination and installation. What important anniversaries lie in the future of this congregation: perhaps notice of 120 years of existence in 2022? Perhaps the installation of your next settled minister --- and possible ordination if that person is new the ministry --- may go down in UU history. Imagine that two hundred years from now Unitarian Universalists could be celebrating the “Lancaster Sermon.” …. Imagine, just imagine.

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