

**Sermon: “Three Sermons That Shaped Our Faith: Parker's the Transient and
Permanent in Christianity”**
Rev. Martha Hodges May 24, 2009

Today we remember Theodore Parker, and the contribution he made to our Unitarian faith. It matters that we know our history. In a tradition in which our beliefs are not handed to us, and so are far from uniform, our history, along with our principles, binds us together into a common identity.

Over the past several months, we've spoken in several sermons about how Unitarianism moved away from conventional Christianity and toward an understanding of that faith tradition that more closely resembles our own.

I've talked to you about William Ellery Channing's "Baltimore Sermon", in which he affirmed the use of reason and intellectual freedom as paths to religious insight.¹ Channing presented the Bible as the work of human hands and cited the lack of any scriptural reference to the Holy Trinity. In so doing, he answered the orthodox critics who questioned liberal Christianity, declaring, "Yes, we are something new, something different, something genuine." He stated our dissent from the Calvinist doctrine of Original Sin and eternal damnation, and argued for the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus.

I've talked to you about Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Divinity School Address", in which he rejected the authority of theologians and proclaimed the authority of personal experience of the Divine.² God is described not as Father, but as Divine Law: a reality that can be grasped by the intuition, not by academic study; in nature, not in scripture.

Today, we'll be talking about the third in this set of three sermons that changed the course of Unitarianism.

The year was 1841, twenty-two years after the "Baltimore Sermon" and three years after Emerson's address. One of the listeners present at the "Divinity School Address" was Theodore Parker, a young Unitarian minister who would follow Emerson into the Transcendentalist Movement, but, unlike Emerson, would dedicate his life to the ministry and become the most popular preacher in Boston... This despite the shunning of his Congregationalist colleagues and the efforts of the Boston clergy to make his life miserable. What excited the ire of the ministry was Parker's sermon, preached at the ordination of one Rev. Charles Shackford, entitled "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity."

What raised such a fuss was Parker's distinction between what he called the essence of Christianity, as expressed in the character and words of Jesus, and the fleeting rites and rituals, the theological arguments and doctrines that had grown out of the Christian church and had come to be mistaken for the religion. In other words, Parker preached the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus, as so many UU Christians do today.

Pure religion, Parker said, consists of the timeless truth, the Truth of God, namely, the command to love God “with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” and the love of man, the love of thy neighbor as thyself. The only “form” or ritual demanded by pure Christianity is to live a divine life, that is, a life guided by this law, as revealed not by scripture or theology, but by the voice of God in the heart. A life of humility, reverence, sobriety, gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith, and active love.

This doesn't sound too revolutionary. What got Parker's colleagues so riled up was his insistence that this “pure religion” was not limited to Christianity. While Christianity, and the person of Jesus, were the best examples available to us, this pure religion, the “permanent” in Christianity, existed -- eternal, universal and unchangeable -- independent of the “transient” in Christianity: the doctrines and practices that were debated and fought over, that changed over time, that were the expressions of a particular time and place. This is what he wrote:

There is but one kind of religion, as there is but one kind of love, though the manifestations of this religion, in forms, doctrines, and life, be never so diverse. It is through these, men approximate to the true expression of this religion. Now while this religion is one and always the same thing, there may be numerous systems of theology or philosophies of religion. Their creeds, confessions, and collections of doctrines, deduced by reasoning upon the facts observed, may be baseless and false... Now the solar system as it exists is permanent, though the notions of... Ptolemy... and Copernicus... prove transient, impermanent approximations to the true expression. So the Christianity of Jesus is permanent, though what passes for Christianity with Popes and catechisms, with sects and churches, in the first century or in the nineteenth century, prove transient also.

This true Christianity, said Parker, these great and permanent truths of morality and religion, are “perceived intuitively, and by instinct, as it were, though our theology be imperfect and miserable.” Thus, they are impervious to human error and the changing fashions of church and sect. In his insistence on the primacy of intuition, Parker echoed Emerson and his other fellow-Transcendentalists. Our modern Unitarian Universalism also stresses the authority of conscience and reason in discerning the truth, though we tend to downplay the role of intuition. Like Parker, however, we insist on the personal connection with Mystery or the Divine, unmediated by scholar or priest.

Scripture, Parker preached, was a mere collection of stories, some beautiful and inspirational, some not so much. Scripture was poetry, he said, not history. The modern biblical criticism that was developing at this time, the analysis and comparison of differing accounts in the Bible in light of the history and culture of its times, reinforced Parker's conviction that the Bible was the work of men.

“On the authority of the written word,” he wrote, “man was taught to believe impossible legends, conflicting assertions; to take fiction for fact; a dream for a miraculous revelation from God; an oriental poem for a grave history of

miraculous events... They have been taught to accept a picture... never intended to be taken for reality... All the books, which caprice or accident had brought together between the lids of the Bible, were declared to be the infallible word of God; the only certain rule of religious faith and practice. Thus the Bible was made not a single channel, but the only certain rule of religious faith and practice.”³

Further evidence of the transitory nature of Christian doctrine, he said, was to be found in the ever-changing teachings about the nature and authority of Jesus. On the authority of Jesus, Parker made this observation that resonates with us today:

Almost every sect, that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, and not the immutable truth of the doctrines themselves, or the authority of God, who sent him into the world. Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason, why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly. It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.

As to the nature of Jesus, Parker says that he was the “organ” through which God chose to speak. He was “god-like,” not God. He was “our brother”, the “son of man,” and the Son of God, “like ourselves.” His excellence, wisdom, love and piety, were human, and therefore, qualities to which we should aspire.

But if, as some early Christians began to do, you take the heathen view, and call him a God, the Son of God in a peculiar and exclusive sense – much of the significance of his character is gone. His virtue has no merit; his love no feeling; his cross no burden; his agony no pain. His death is an illusion; his resurrection but a show. For if he were not a man, but a god, what are all these things; what his words, his life, his excellence of achievement? It is all nothing, weighed against the illimitable greatness of Him who created the worlds and fills up all time and space! Then his resignation is no lesson; his life no model; his death no triumph to you or me, -- who are not gods, but mortal men....

Finally, Parker tells us that pure Christianity has as its aim “to make all men one with God as Christ was one with Him; to bring them to such a state of obedience and goodness, that we shall think divine thoughts and feel divine sentiments, and so keep the law of God by living a life of truth and love.... It allows perfect freedom. It does not demand all men to think alike, but to think uprightly, and get as near as possible at truth; not all men to live alike, but to live holy, and get as near as possible to a life perfectly divine.”

How familiar this sounds to us! We no longer call it “true religion” or “pure Christianity,” but so much of Parker’s message has found its modern counterpart in present-day Unitarian Universalism.

Our understanding of the Divine is something to be grasped intuitively and individually, a matter of conscience and unmediated experience.

The forms, the rituals, scripture and doctrines of religion are man-made and therefore transient and less important than the search for Truth, which is eternal.

The value of religion lies in its ability to lead us to lives of purpose and love.

The value of Jesus to us lies in his teachings and example, not in his divinity.

The words and works of a human being endow that person with authority; not vice versa. It is not the status or authority of the individual that give value to the words.

Through these three sermons, we see Unitarianism approaching more closely to what we today understand it to be: a religion that understands Jesus to have been fully human; a religion that does not rely on the evidence of miracles and supernatural events for its truth; a religion that is immediate, personal and experiential; a religion that depends not on doctrine, but on the individual’s inner sense of the sacred and the disciplined search for truth.

And we see in these three sermons the pattern that has distinguished our faith throughout history: the continuing tension between comfortable ideas and received authority on the one hand, and new voices, radical ideas, and the call to change, on the other.

These courageous and free-thinking Unitarians, Channing, Emerson and Parker, set the bar high for us. What are the issues, social and theological, that will call us to take a stand against orthodoxy, against the comfortable, the exclusive and doctrinaire? How will we choose to continue in this tradition? What will we leave to the world to make it freer, more authentic and more meaningful? It is a challenge, a call, that is difficult and exhilarating, honorable and necessary. May we be equal to the task set before us by these, our religious forefathers.

¹ Sermon of Oct.26, 2008

² Sermon of Jan. 4, 2009

³ All quotations are from Theodore Parker’s “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity”, reprinted in *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, Conrad Wright, ed., Boston: UUA, 1961