



Reading

Our reading this morning comes from William Ellery Channing, one of the founders of American Unitarianism which emerged in the early 1800s in resistance to Calvinism, the predominant theology of the day. Calvinism emphasized the sinfulness of humanity, God as merciless judge, and the doctrine of predestination, which taught that the human race had already been divided into the few who got to heaven, and the many who did not. Even as a young boy, Channing knew something was wrong with this kind of religion. It was too hopeless and too harsh. As a young student, he found himself drawn to reformist theologians and teachers who looked for other ways of understanding Christianity. At first they hoped to create a place for liberal religion in their churches, but the conservatives were in no mood for reform. The liberals ended creating a new denomination, Unitarianism. Channing became its pre-eminent leader. The following excerpts are taken from his 1820 article, "The Moral Arguments Against Calvinism" which became his theological masterpiece. The religious language may sound old fashioned, given what Unitarian Universalism has become, and yet it cannot be overestimated how radical these ideas were for his time. If you listen carefully, you will find the seeds of our foundational theology resting in this passage, even though Unitarianism and now Unitarian Universalism have changed a great deal in two hundred years.

"THE general spirit of Christianity teaches no doctrines [of human depravity, eternal punishment and predestination]. [This] we have opposed. The Christian spirit is love, charity, benevolence. Christianity is designed to manifest God as perfect benevolence, and to bring men to love and to imitate him. [Calvinism] gives views of the Supreme Being, from which our moral convictions and benevolent sentiments shrink from horror, and which, if made our pattern, would make us into monsters! It is plain, that, were a human parent to form himself on the universal Father, as described by Calvinism, that is, were he to bring his children into life totally depraved, and then to pursue them with endless punishment, we should charge him with a cruelty not surpassed in the annals of the world; or, were a sovereign to incapacitate his subjects in any way whatever for obeying his laws, and then to torture them in dungeons of perpetual woe, we should say, that history records no darker crime.

"[On the other hand] is it probable, that [in] a religion, which aims to attract and assimilate us to God, considered as love, we may confidently expect to find ... the brightest views of the divine nature [and the greatest possibilities of human nature].

"We are presumptuous, we are told by [the Calvinists], in judging ... our Creator. But he himself has made this our duty, in giving us a moral faculty [of conscience]; and to decline it, is to violate the primary law of our nature. Conscience, the sense of right, the power of perceiving moral distinctions, the power of discerning between justice and injustice, is the highest faculty given us by God, the whole foundation of our responsibility, and our sole capacity for religion. God, in giving us conscience, has implanted a principle within us, which forbids us to prostrate ourselves before mere power, or to offer praise when we do not discover worth. [Thus, should we not] abhor a severe and unjust [Creator]? Our Creator ... discovers himself to us in ... benevolence, equity, and righteousness. He rests his authority ... with the great and fundamental principles of morality written on our souls."



Sermon

Sometimes I try to imagine what life must have been like in America in the first decades following the Revolution, the decades in which William Ellery Channing grew up. A new country was being created: new forms of government, new leaders, new ways of managing the economy, a new sense of identity and purpose. I imagine it to be an exciting restless time, with so much promise and possibility, and opportunities to make good things happen. And yet we also know, that in times of incredible change, there is also a lot of fear and uncertainty. The newness can feel dangerous, precarious, unreliable.

Human beings do not change easily. We do not leave behind our old patterns, just like that. They usually follow us and we will adjust to large and small changes in ways that drag those patterns with us. This happens in our individual lives, it happens in the family, in society, in government, and in religion.

In the first decades of this country's history, a democracy unlike anything else was being created. Suddenly all men were born equal (and of course it was just white men – that pattern did not die). But even this level of equality was an incredibly new thing. And there was a lot of fear of what that would be like. If everyone was equal, could you keep order? Would people get out of control? They had known a society defined by class, where your family of birth defined who you were and what your potential was. Strong social classes were considered necessary to keep order, for it was assumed the upper classes were morally superior and needed to keep the less-educated, more impulsive lower classes under control. I know that goes contrary to the story Americans tell themselves, that this is a classless country, but it was not true and it's not true today. However it is the ideal and one of the things that came to define what it meant to be American. So you had this new democracy based on the ideal of equality trying to emerge in a society based on class division and cultures of hierarchy, one being an untested way of living with other human beings, the other a familiar old pattern. We can only imagine the tension resting below the surface.

One of the things I believe is that the tensions in any society are mirrored in the religions of that society. What we're struggling with will be reflected in the ways we understand God or the divine and how we practice our faith. Our deep concerns will determine the questions we ask of our beliefs and the answers they give us. And that's because religion is about making sense of life. All the gods and goddesses we create, the understandings we have of an afterlife and so on, are all reflections of how we're experiencing and understanding life on this earth. And in the early years of this country, we see the tension between old hierarchy and new equality in the theological battles that erupted about who God was, and how human beings were supposed to relate to God.

So for example, after the American Revolution, Calvinist Protestantism was the dominant religion of the day. Calvinism proclaimed a fire and brimstone message about a fearsome God who was pre-eminently a merciless judge. Humans were sick sinful creatures dependent entirely on the mercy of this powerful God for salvation. How many of you have been exposed in some way to this kind of theology? You have been exposed to an old pattern that has refused to die. There was no equality before this God, just the need for unthinking obedience. Kind of like that old hierarchical society that America was supposed to be leaving behind, where those above have authority and those below do not and you do not question it. This kind of God is not a God that fits with democracy.

Calvinist Doctrine also promoted Predestination. This doctrine said that God had already decided who went to heaven and who went to hell. So the only thing you could do was try and determine whether you were one of the elect. Were you wealthy? Did you do a lot of good in the world? Did you respond to the altar call at a revival? Life became a test, and you looked for signs of whether you were saved or not everywhere. But ultimately, none of these signs were guarantees, and there was absolutely nothing you could do to change what God had decided.



When I look at this doctrine in a big picture way, like a student trying to understand why things are the way they are, I can see how predestination might make sense in that time, because many people experienced their lives as being at the mercy of arbitrary forces. There were no social security nets, no unemployment benefits, no job security, no health care insurance, you were always vulnerable to forces beyond your control, and sometimes you couldn't make sense of why some got lucky and some didn't. Predestination was a religious way of making sense of the routine unfairness of life.

There's all kinds of ways people make sense of the things they can't control. Each of us compensates in some ways for the places in our lives that don't feel safe. I think, for instance, that there is a direct connection between the fact that the United States has the weakest social safety net and the most fundamentalist churches of any industrialized nation. You have to find safety somewhere, and if your society isn't creating that safety, you're going to make up for it in other ways. So, we have an avalanche of churches that offer all the answers.

But again, this predeterminist kind of thinking doesn't make sense in a democracy, if by democracy we mean that each individual has a say in their lives. In a democracy it is not acceptable that we should simply be at the mercy of forces out of our control. Why are so many still up in arms about Hurricane Katrina. Because who suffered and how much they suffered was unfair and we railed against that unfairness. Unfairness is considered a moral problem in a democracy, not something to just accept as divinely ordained or simply normal. So here, again, you have a theology that doesn't make sense in the nation that was being created. It is the echo of an old old pattern.

William Ellery Channing grew up in this disconnection. He grew up in a church that preached the doctrine of human depravity and predestination. He was exposed to a God that was hard and merciless. One day his father took him to see a famous minister, and he heard that we were lost souls in a dark universe in desperate need of sovereign grace. (David Robinson, 6). As the minister thundered on, Channing felt terror, and a desperate hope that it wasn't true. Life suddenly seemed so hopeless. How could you ever let down your guard and experience joy? He was overcome with a sense of foreboding and dread. Life couldn't be about this!

When I think about the young Channing going home with this fear in his heart, I think about the many people I've met who've had the same experience. You may have been exposed as children or as adults, maybe it was reinforced by your parents or your community, but there's this look in people's eyes when they've had that kind of fear and hopelessness, that crushing feeling, that life is indeed a dangerous thing and God is a source of foreboding and dread. And yet somehow you're supposed to love that God with your heart, body, and soul? It doesn't make sense. Children and adults need safety and security to become well-rounded people capable of making their own decisions. Many of us know how this teaching has damaged our souls. I know that some of you have worked for years to undo it so that you can be free and able to enjoy life and true love.

Channing found himself in this place. Somehow, he knew there was something wrong. And that wrongness dawned on him as they drove home from the service. His father started to whistle as if he didn't have a care in the world! And when they got home, he had a lovely evening reading the paper, and Channing wondered how he could possibly do these things if it was actually true that we were lost souls in desperate need of grace? Channing had identified the gap, that tension – between what was said, and what was actually being lived. He came to the conclusion that his father couldn't believe in what he said he believed. For if he did, how could he have a pleasant evening? And he saw his neighbors doing the same thing. Going to church and getting bullied and condemned from the pulpit, and then going home for a lovely Sunday dinner! How did that work?

Maybe you've had a similar experience. Some of my extended family are Southern Baptist. Conservative, hard theology, very black and white, very homophobic. And yet at family gatherings, my partner and I are lovingly embraced, welcomed, and we enjoy each other's company, a lot! I can't understand how they can sit in their churches listening to what is said, and then sit with me and be these loving, kind, gentle people. How does that



work? How do people commit to churches, promising to live out their values, but then sit with those who have been condemned by their ministers?

Channing had a vision of a theology that allowed for harmony and connectedness. What you believed should be consistent with how you actually lived your life. It became his mission to resolve the tension. He was called to promote an understanding of God and humanity that would allow people to live undivided lives. Many were already living as if God loved them no matter what. So why not simply call it like it was. Call a spade a spade rather than dressing a spade up as a wolf and then living like it was a lamb.

And so we have the strong words of our reading this morning. We have been given glorious minds by God, with moral faculties for kindness, generosity, hope, love, affection, selflessness, and an understanding of right and wrong. We don't need to have right and wrong pounded into us. God already put that understanding in us. Channing took to heart when it said in the Bible that we were created in the image of God. For that reason, he had a deep trust in the potential of humanity. We didn't have to be made afraid to do the right thing. The desire to do right was given to us and when given a fair chance, we were likely to choose well.

When I look at it from a big picture sense, I see in Channing's work a theology that matched the democracy that was emerging, for democracy is based on the trust that people have a conscience and will choose what is most right. In Channing's theology all humans are equal before God and God's supreme desire was not to separate the saved from the unsaved, but to reconcile everyone to him. And, you don't have to wait to die to do that. That reconciliation can happen here and now, when you are in touch with the godliness of your own nature. For Channing, the true Christian way was not to divide, but to bring together so that all aspects of our lives form a seamless whole. Channing looked for the promised land in each human heart. He looked for revelation in each human life. He looked for salvation in the choices each human made.

That is the theological foundation of Unitarianism. We are made in the image of God and we serve God by being the best human beings we can be and by serving others so they too can find salvation in their own godliness. Even though Unitarian Universalism has become so diverse, with many different understandings of God for some, or no God at all for others, this foundational principle, that we are created in tremendous beauty, and given the gift of conscience – remains the core of who we are and what we proclaim from our pulpits. This is the foundation of Unitarian Universalist theology.

This message still matters. As we see every day, the old patterns are alive and well. Fear is still a powerful motivating force for the decisions we make as individuals, as a society, as a nation. True democracy still remains to be seen. There are far too many divisions between us. And true to form, the tensions between the old and the new are still mirrored in theologies that compete for the hearts of this nation. We know the God of judgment is still alive and well in the hearts of many and that many more are being damaged by this teaching. Channing's old battleground still exists and now, we are the players on it. And I ask myself all the time, what is our next move on this battleground? What are we called to do? Well, I guess you'll have to come back next week for the answer to that question.

But know this and hear this. You are blessed. You are anchored in the heart of the spirit of life. You are loved beyond measure, which means that none of us is ever alone, abandoned through judgment or any other mean spirited thing. We are called to hope and joy, for the revelation of our hearts tells us this, if we are but ready to listen. Amen and blessed be.