

LESSONS FROM THREE HUNDRED YEARS

A Tercentennial Sermon
Delivered at First Parish in Needham,
Unitarian Universalist
Heritage Sunday, November 13, 2011
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Readings

The readings are taken, first, from the Biblical text chosen by the Rev. Stephen Palmer, when he preached his “Century Sermon” in 1811, on Sunday, November 16.

In a more modern translation Deuteronomy 32:7 reads, “Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your parents, and they will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you.”

Second, from a paragraph late in that same sermon:

“What commotions and changes may take place in our own Country , it is impossible for us to predict. Our present form of government; our modes of living; our national habits; and the state of many things, which is now seen, may undergo innovation and change, and in a measure, be seen no more. One hundred years from this day, perhaps the future inhabitants of this town, in imitation of our example, will meet together; and look back upon the various transactions of the century, yet to come, but which will then be gone, as we now look back upon the events and changes of the one, already passed away.”

And finally, from the late M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Travelled*.

“Life is difficult. . . . Life is complex. Each of us must make his own path through life. . . . The right road for one is the wrong road for another. [The great danger for] the person with a secular mentality [is to feel] himself to be the center of the universe, [but] meaningless among . . . billion[s] of others – all feeling themselves to the center of things . . . The person with a sacred mentality, on the other hand, does not feel herself to be the center of the universe. She considers the center to be elsewhere and other. Yet she is unlikely to feel lost or insignificant because she draws her significance and meaning from her relationship, her connection, with that center, that Other.”

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A conventional sermon on today's theme would begin in 1711 and tell the history of the parish. But that has been done before, both in print and otherwise. Instead, let me start from the present, providing lesser known glimpses into the heritage of this congregation and lessons for the future. Beginning with this framed inscription, to be hung during Social Hour:

“This Parish Hall is dedicated in honor of Elizabeth Bartlett Storer (1916-2004), a direct descendent of Gov. William Bradford of Plymouth Colony, elected in 1620, and of Elizabeth Dexter May, born May 1, 1915, a direct descendent of Timothy Kingsbury, first Deacon of this Parish, elected in 1720. Born and raised within First Parish in Needham, as young women they were among the founders of its Choir in 1938, in which they faithfully sang for many years, along with Gordon Kingsbury May. True daughters of New England, they cared for their parents and families and heritage, and made generous gifts without which the renovation and expansion of this hall in 2008 would not have been possible.”

Friends, I ask you to rise and thank Betty May, a living link to the very founding of this church, who has proven her devotion to its Fourth Century, which still lies before us. May others emulate her thoughtfulness and generosity!

From the third century of our congregational history, let me now lift up a time Betty will recall. During World War II, Mort Gesner was the minister here. Our archives still contain the extensive correspondence he maintained with the young men and women from this Parish who were in military service overseas. Gesner was a religious humanist, with a real faith in human creativity. His son, Clark Gesner, later became a songwriter, musician, actor and composer, best known for the Broadway musical, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, based on the *Peanuts* cartoon strips.

But services here at First Parish, down to 1944, still included the Lord's Prayer every Sunday, with periodic communion, administered by the deacons of the church, including Betty's father. The Parish bylaws made it clear membership was open to people of all beliefs, but the Church had a covenant saying "in the freedom of the truth, and in the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of Man." When Gesner left and was succeeded by Fred Cairns, a Canadian Unitarian of more adamantly humanist convictions, the old church-parish distinction was abolished, with the Church being merged into the Parish. The office of deacon disappeared, and so did any covenant at all, however inclusively worded. And that has made all the difference: although congregations like this one, from their founding, had been gathered around a covenant, but not a creed. So now do you understand why our Covenant Task Force is working on new, inclusive wording we can all embrace, expressing to newcomers and to coming generations the spiritual hopes and purposes of our time? But now to another dimension: not time, but space.

Many people who enter this Meetinghouse for the first time think that its present interior must be pretty similar to the way it was originally built, so very long ago. But in fact that's not the case. The pulpit at which I stand, the pews in which you sit were built only in the 1920s, during the ministry of the Reverend Benjamin Franklin Allen. The simple pine table in our chancel may go back to the First Meetinghouse, in the 1700s, but the even older Bible Box below it, though it dates back to the 1600s, was given to the Parish in Allen's time.

The plaques listing the ministers were put up in 1911, at the time of the bicentennial. But back then, and during the latter part of the 19th century, the interior of this Meetinghouse had dark mahogany, red velvet hangings, curved pews, and a very Victorian feel. The exterior wasn't colonial white, but rather Victorian brown – since brownstone buildings were more the fashion than white clapboard. So please remember that when you discuss historic restoration or any accessibility alterations to this chancel. It's not original, although the window behind me is – carpenter Gothic. Originally the façade had two front doors, not one. Our hope, in our Fourth Century, is make that front door accessible again, to replace vinyl siding put on 40 years ago, and single-pane windows – making this space as "green" as the rest of our award-winning building.

The story of how this Meetinghouse was put on log-rollers and moved here in 1879 from its original site, a mile and a half away, above the Burying Ground along Nehoiden Street, is too familiar to repeat again today. But let me mention a few related facts I didn't realize until lately. The minister then was the Rev. Solon Bush, who served here 18 years. He was described by his successor as an "old fashioned pastor who loved his people . . . was interested in the children and tried to keep track of them after they grew up."¹ I've tried to emulate that. Moving the meetinghouse saved this old parish from death or irrelevance. The mission and heritage of First Parish was to be "A Religious Center with a Civic Circumference," as we now phrase it.² Separation of church and state has never meant that an open, liberal church like this one does not have a ministry that stretches beyond its own membership. Indeed, it had such a ministry from the start, when it was constituted to tend the moral and spiritual needs of the whole town as its parish.

Recognizing that, Bush and his wife, who must have been comfortably well-off, seem to have made the anonymous gift that made possible the Parish Hall built in 1888, just before he retired. The whole Town then still had only about 3000 people. Betty May remembers going to Sunday School classes when they were held in the four corners of that one room. There was no useable space underneath this room until the 1920s, the population had more than doubled, and Miss Adah Fuller made possible the creation of a lower Parish Hall, then used for suppers and plays, later as a pre-school serving the community, as well as RE, and now turned into real classrooms.

Bush had been editor of the most important Unitarian journal of his day, *The Christian Register*. Before he settled here, the parish went through a long period with no long-term resident minister. Pay was inadequate. The parish evidently had stopped providing adequate ministerial housing. There's a lesson there, too! Even my immediate predecessor was unable to afford to live in town. Three of the short-term ministers before and during the Civil War were Universalists – all of whom earned part of their living writing and editing.

¹ From a biographical sketch by Albert Vorse, in *Heralds of a Liberal Faith, Vol. III, The Preachers*, ed. Samuel A. Eliot [American Unitarian Association, 1910], pp. 55-56.

² The phrase is not from Solon Bush, nor from Buehrens, but can be traced to the humanist ministry of the Rev. E. Burdette Backus at All Souls Unitarian Church in Indianapolis, IN (1938-53)– if not to an older source.

When the Meetinghouse was moved, however, the Parish lost extensive acreage that today would be worth tens of millions. It all went to the Town, in return for the expenses of moving a building still used for Town meeting. But perhaps that's alright. Until recently I didn't realize the Town also contributed to building this structure, back in 1836. The Commonwealth had disestablished the Congregational Churches of the Standing Order, Unitarian and Trinitarian, two years before. They also paid for the Paul Revere Bell, back in 1811; but possession is nine points of the law, I'm told! When the leaky bell tower required that the whole Meetinghouse be rebuilt, the Town planned to give the Parish its share of a windfall. Believe it or not, in the 1830s the federal government was running a surplus, not a deficit. They decided to send that surplus back to the states; and Massachusetts planned to pass it on to the towns. The plan was to make this Third Meetinghouse larger than the Second. Instead, when the Town got far less money than expected, they made it smaller – cutting down and reusing the sturdy old timbers from 1774 that held everything together when the building was moved. To me they're a symbol of the strong old heritage of covenant, not creed. But, oh, don't I wish that this sanctuary were just a bit larger! Eventually, as I have said here before, if you continue to fulfill your mission as a congregation, you and my successor will have to consider holding two Sunday services, not just one.

I also discovered that the clock that hangs at the back of this room was a gift to First Parish at the time the Meetinghouse was dedicated, in 1837. It came from the family of one Ebenezer Fisher – a prominent family in all of what was once Dedham. Ebenezer Fisher, Jr., went on to become a leading Universalist minister, dean of their theological school at St. Lawrence, in Canton, NY. I'd love to know more about that connection. But I've left a paper in our archives about what I have been able to learn.

Time doesn't permit tracing our history all the way back through to its earliest years, when one of the deacons was authorized by the church to “tune the psalm,” starting the strong music tradition of this parish. Or how the small choir once sat up here on this chancel, with the organ housed in what is now the minister's study. Suffice it to say that the music program here has never more diverse, or stronger, than it is today.

Here, week after week, year after year, generation following generation, men and women, children and elders, have gathered here to affirm in varied word and varied song the timeless truth that, as Scott Peck once said, “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived,” and “Genuine love is volitional rather than emotional. The person who truly loves does so because of a decision to love. . . Love is the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.”

We learn from the wisdom and experience of the past, near and far. We grow. And we pray together, each in our own way, that when our time is over, “love will be our legacy.” So let us pray together now:

Spirit of Life and Love, God of many names, mystery and center beyond all our naming, we give thanks for this beloved community of memory and hope, for its heritage of praise, for the faithful, creative lives nurtured here through three centuries past. As now we begin its fourth century, bless and guide us as we plan and work to keep its doors wide enough to welcome all who need its human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride or strife – even our own. These things we pray in the names of all those, known and unknown, present and absent, remembered and forgotten, who have tried to be true servants of abundant life and love. Amen.

(The Paul Revere Bell is rung to welcome the Fourth Century in the history of First Parish.)

*Hymn 290

Bring, O Past, Your Honor

Lyttle/Dykes

We now extinguish the flame within our chalice, symbol of communion and equality, of heretics and mystics, reformers and seekers, artists and activists; but not the blessing of a great heritage -- the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry from here deep within our hearts, until we are together once again. Go in peace. Amen.

