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Sunday service at UU Metro Atlanta North, Roswell, GA
June 30, 2024

Call to Worship

The topic of my sermon today is tolerance, but we will open and close with two excerpts from William Ellery Channing's discourse on "Spiritual Freedom."

Writes Channing: "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, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, whilst consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself, and uses instructions from abroad not to supersede but to quicken and exalt its own energies."

End quote.

Here we begin.

Sermon: A Mild, Candid and Charitable Temper

One of the fun things to trace through American history is the name of different Protestant groups. Where did they come from? Many of them were named for practices. Methodists were thought to work methodically toward their own salvation. Baptists were fussy about who they baptized. Quakers warned secular authorities to quake before God. Seventh-day Adventists celebrate the sabbath on the seventh day, while Pentecostals emulate a number of practices found in the biblical account of the Pentecost.

Others were named for the way they organize their churches. Episcopalians have episcopates, Presbyterians have presbyteries, Congregationalists congregate. A couple were

named for theologians, either famous (hello, Lutherans) or obscure (hello, Swedenborgians). But groups named for actual theological beliefs are rare. The Holiness churches come close; they believe in entire sanctification as a definite, second work of grace... but that's a mouthful, so they just go by the nickname "Holiness." Really, the only two American Protestant groups named for specific Christian theological positions were the Unitarians and the Universalists, and if you have a nose for irony you'll see where I'm going with this. The only two groups named for Christian theology simply aren't Christian anymore, at least not collectively. So what gives? What's in a name?

Let's start on the Universalist side. The name "Universalist" was a perfect fit for the Universalists, since universal salvation, the idea that all human souls are bound for heaven eventually, was pretty much their whole thing. And luckily for them, the name aged well. They were much slower than the Unitarians to embrace their post-Christian status, but once they did, many of them gravitated to the kind of "universalized Universalism" represented by the Charles Street Universalist Meeting House in Boston, which, when it opened in 1947, was decorated with no fewer than 65 symbols from the world's religions, a kind of "Coexist" bumper sticker of epic proportions. *Universalist*, indeed.

The name Unitarian, however, was, I think, an awkward fit for the New England Unitarians from the start. It presents a distorted picture of what they were all about. The goal of my sermon this morning is not only to correct this picture, but to explain why this fussy bit of historical arcana is worth thinking about today. We'll see how it goes.

So, what does "Unitarian" mean? In Christian terms, a Unitarian theological position is one that argues that God is not a *trinity*—which is to say, composed of a trio of distinct persons,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but, instead, is unitary and undivided. This idea pops up repeatedly through Christian history, often in places like Eastern Europe and Spain where Christians rubbed elbows with Muslims and Jews, and it has occasionally produced groups of believers who embrace the name, most notably in Transylvania in the 16th century, England in the 18th century, and America in the very early 19th century. In America, the name “Unitarian” was *eventually* embraced, under duress, by the more liberal churches of Puritan New England, many of which traced their roots all the way back to the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1600s, and many of which remain Unitarian Universalist to this day. (The fact that liberal religion in this country originally took root in harsh, unyielding, Calvinist soil is fascinating, and I have lots of ideas as to why, but that’s a topic for another time.)

I say they embraced the name Unitarian “under duress,” because when the Unitarian controversy began the job of cleaving New England’s congregational churches into liberal and orthodox wings, it was the *orthodox* who first accused the liberals of being “Unitarians.” The accusation was not meant kindly. Unlike the Universalists, who chose a name that suited them, the New England Unitarians had their name thrust upon them. It took fifteen years, from 1805, when the controversy broke out, until 1819, when William Ellery Channing championed the name in his famous Baltimore sermon, for the liberals to throw up their hands, roll their eyes, and say, “Fine. If you want to call us something, call us Unitarians. Whatever.”

In other words, unlike the Universalists, whose name contained the whole of their message, the Unitarians were not particularly focused on the question of whether God is one or three-in-one. This is because the New England Unitarians were not systematic theologians. They were moralists. They weren’t Unitarians because they prioritized getting the theology right.

They were Unitarians because they thought so-called “metaphysical” arguments over the nature of God were a distraction from the true aim of religion, which was to help people live more upstanding lives. The Unitarian position on the Trinity was not, “We must banish this irrational doctrine!” The Unitarian position on the Trinity was, “Why are we arguing about this?” The aim of their preaching was to model and inspire good behavior, and preaching about the Trinity didn’t help with that. Unlike the Universalists, who set their sights directly on the idea of eternal damnation and preached against it with all their might, the liberals didn’t go after the Trinity in their preaching... or, at least, not at first. They just, kinda, stopped preaching it.

Now, it is easy, with two centuries of hindsight, to see that these Unitarians were setting themselves on a path that would lead them beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy and, eventually, beyond the bounds of Christianity itself. The past two hundred years have, indeed, been a grand adventure. But it is a mistake to assume that the New England Unitarians *intended* to strike out on a heroic quest for unknown pastures of freedom, reason and tolerance. From their perspective, they were the same Christians they’d always been, just with a more modern attitude on certain minor points. It was the orthodox reaction to this attitude that ultimately pushed them out of the nest. Because the orthodox New England clergy reacted to the emergence of this liberal attitude among some of their colleagues by exercising the nuclear option: they withdrew the hand of fellowship from the liberals, and they encouraged their congregants to do the same.

I already mentioned William Ellery Channing and his Baltimore sermon. Channing was the most prominent of the first generation of New England Unitarian ministers, and the Baltimore sermon, which was printed as a pamphlet until the title “Unitarian Christianity” and

went on to become one of the most widely-read and influential sermons in Antebellum America, is his most famous work. If you know our history you'll have heard of it, since it ranks up there with Emerson's divinity school address and Theodore Parker's discourse on the transient and permanent in Christianity as a foundational text. But this morning I want to discuss another piece of Channing's writing. It's where the quote I used to title this sermon—"a mild, candid, and charitable temper"—comes from, and it itself has a title which, although candid, is not particularly mild: "The System of Exclusion and Denunciation in Religion Considered." It dates from 1815, when tensions were high, and opens with a terse description of the situation.

"Nothing is plainer," writes Channing, "than that the leaders of the party called 'Orthodox,' have adopted and mean to enforce a system of exclusion, in regard to Liberal Christians. They spare no pains to infect the minds of their too easy followers with the persuasion, that they ought to refuse communion with their Unitarian brethren, and to deny them the name, character, and privileges of Christians." End quote. The system of exclusion he's talking about began with orthodox ministers who decided that, to defend the gospel, they would no longer allow liberal ministers to drop by occasionally and preach from their pulpits, thus violating a friendly custom of "pulpit exchanges" that had been the norm for over a century. This was shocking enough, but by 1815 the rift had spread to the laity, as you can hear from Channing's words. Suddenly members of the liberal camp found themselves denounced and excluded from Christian fellowship by friends and neighbors they'd known their whole lives. It can't have been much fun for them.

And I suppose it's not much fun for us to revisit the memory, either, because we rarely dwell on the fact that the Unitarian branch of our heritage was born from a painful schism. At least, I was never taught much about it when I was growing up in our church. I always assumed that our emphasis on tolerance just sort of naturally followed from our emphasis on reason: we know that reasonable people can differ about things, so it's reasonable to tolerate the differences. And what I just said is, actually, a pretty good argument for tolerance as a value. But it's not the only way to get there. The Universalists got there by a much sunnier path, seeing their tolerance for doctrinal diversity as a reflection of their belief in God's unconditional love. But, then, the early Universalist societies in America were planted afresh by charismatic ministers. They were not born of a schism that split existing churches into two factions, forcing each church to choose whether to align themselves with the liberal or the orthodox camp. And never mind what this choice did to the churches themselves, for many churches held members whose sympathies were at odds. They tended to split apart, with a larger faction retaining the church building and all its property, and a smaller faction left out in the cold: angry, resentful, and mourning the loss of communion silver that had been shared peacefully for generations.

For his part, Channing didn't mince words about how it felt to be treated this way. "It is truly astonishing," he wrote, "that Christians are not more impressed with the unbecoming spirit, the arrogant style, of those who deny the Christian character to professed and exemplary followers of Jesus Christ, because they differ in opinion on some of the most subtle [sic] and difficult subjects of theology. A stranger, at hearing the language of these denouncers, would conclude, without a doubt, that they were clothed with infallibility, and were appointed to sit in judgment on their brethren. But for myself, I know not a shadow of a pretense for the language

of superiority assumed by our adversaries. Are they exempted from the common frailty of our nature? Has God given them superior intelligence? Were they educated under circumstances more favorable to improvement, than those whom they condemn? Have they brought to the Scriptures more serious, anxious, and unwearied attention? Or do their lives express a deeper reverence for God and for his Son? No. They are fallible, imperfect men, possessing no higher means, and no stronger motives for studying the word of God, than their Unitarian brethren. And yet their language to them is virtually this;—‘We pronounce you to be in error, and in most dangerous error. We know that we are right, and that you are wrong, in regard to the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel. You are unworthy of the Christian name, and unfit to sit with us at the table of Christ. We offer you the truth, and you reject it at the peril of your souls.’ Such is the language of humble Christians to men who, in capacity and apparent piety, are not inferior to themselves.” End quote.

There’s a lot to notice in this passage. First of all, Channing had a famously irenic temper, so it’s rare to hear him sound so exasperated. Second, he uses the terms “liberal Christian” and “Unitarian” interchangeably, so you can see that the liberals were well on their way to embracing the name. Third, we might note that the core of his message here is a classically Christian attitude that is easily forgotten by Christians and non-Christians alike: “judge not, that ye be not judged.” All of that is clear enough. But, if you read a little more closely, you can also hear, in Channing’s reference to “conditions favorable to improvement,” and his defense of the liberal wing’s “capacity and apparent piety,” echoes of his generation’s moralizing approach. The early Unitarian view of the religious life has been characterized, somewhat satirically, as “salvation by character.” That’s what lies behind the old joke: that the difference

between the Universalists and the Unitarians is that the Universalists thought that God was too good to damn them, and the Unitarians thought they were too good to be damned.

Historians usually describe this attitude, “too good to be damned,” as “genteel,” which is a word that makes modern people gag a bit. Contemporary Unitarian Universalists don’t generally walk around bragging about leading exemplary lives—I certainly don’t claim to have led one—so that aspect of Channing’s defense, that the liberals were just as proper and upstanding as their critics, might strike you as less than persuasive. A more modern way of expressing the sentiment would be to say, “look, we’re all fallible but we’re all committed to showing up here, week after week, and making this whole church thing happen. We’re all doing our best to bear witness to what we think is right, and we should cut each other some slack.” Channing certainly wouldn’t have put it that way, but I don’t think he would object.

At the same time—and maybe you’ll take this as evidence that I’m a bit of an old-fashioned Unitarian moralist myself at times—I don’t think salvation by character is necessarily all *that* terrible a way to approach the religious life. I mean, you could do worse. And really, that’s the tension that I’m trying to highlight in this sermon. Being right is not the same thing as being good. The Unitarians weren’t Unitarians because they wanted to get the doctrine right. They were Unitarians because they didn’t want doctrinal differences to distract them from being good.

None of this is meant as an argument that we shouldn’t care about ideas. We’re a gentle, angry people, as the hymn goes, but we’re also a bookish, thinky people. We value our ideas, and we like talking about them with other people who we think might take an interest. It’s natural to try to get the ideas right, but we must guard against the way this impulse tempts

us into righteousness. When we feel the spirit of exclusion and denunciation rise within us, when we feel tempted to judge, or condemn, or lash out, we have to ask ourselves: what does it do to our character when we behave this way? Is this who we want to be?

I said above that there are many paths to a tolerant attitude. You can find your way there because it's simply a reasonable attitude to adopt, given human diversity, or because you're optimistic about people's abilities to work through their differences. But you can also follow Channing's path, and find your way to tolerance because you see what intolerance does to people. We sometimes see tolerance as kind of a milquetoast value: you hold your nose and bite your tongue. But I think that's a mistake. Tolerance is not the enemy of candor, and a tolerant community is not a weak one. It is tolerant the way that steel is tolerant: it is able to withstand the stress of honest disagreement. It is intolerance that weakens us, and this is just as true of our nation as a whole as it is in the little chosen communities where we spend most of our lives.

I'll give Channing the last word. "The controversy in which we are engaged," he wrote, "is indeed painful; but it was not chosen, but forced upon us, and we ought to regard it as a part of the discipline to which a wise Providence has seen fit to subject us. Like all other trials, it is designed to promote our moral perfection... Already we have the comfort of seeing many disposed to inquire, and to inquire without that terror which has bound as with a spell so many minds... Of this, at least, we are sure, that inquiry, by discovering to men the difficulties and obscurities which attend the present topics of controversy, will terminate in what is infinitely more desirable than doctrinal concord, in the diffusion of a mild, candid, and charitable temper. I pray God, that this most happy consummation may be in no degree obstructed by any

unchristian feelings, which, notwithstanding my sincere efforts, have escaped me in the present controversy.” End quote.

This is my prayer as well. May it be so.

Benediction

In our call to worship, Channing spoke of intellectual freedom. But that is not the only freedom he had in mind. He continues:

“I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which is not imprisoned in itself or in a sect, which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of his children, which delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering wherever they’re seen, which conquers pride, anger, and sloth, and offers itself up a willing victim to the cause of mankind.” End quote.

May we ever strive to balance the demands of our intellect with the demands of love.

Go in peace.