

KING'S CHAPEL TO FIRST PARISH

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As part of our "10 Steps to Growth Self-analysis as a church, the history of First Parish Unitarian-Universalist church of Billerica was supposed to be part of the history sermon series. To present such a sermon does require some basic information - such information as the first gathering of the church as the First Parish in 1658, 3 years after the village was settled; such information as the split in the congregation in 1835 separating those whose loyalties to a new idea, Unitarianism, caused them to vote the church to a Unitarian theological emphasis, while those parishioners whose loyalties remained trinitarian left the First Parish Fold to found the "other church" across the way; such information as the uncommon notion which occurred about the same time that the church building was facing the wrong direction physically as well as theologically, and so it was jacked up onto a cannon ball and turned to face its present direction. These facts are available.

But much other information is not easily gotten together. It is spread all over Billerica in various sanctuaries of safe-keeping. Therefore, our history commission is finding it very difficult the job of assembling all the materials, documents, artifacts, pictures, old sermons, membership lists and all the other items that separately are interesting tidbits of information but which, assembled, constitute a chronological, ideological history. Thus, the only good possible source for me to use in producing a historical sermon about First Parish is not yet in existence.

In addition, the fact that I have been your minister for a relatively short time and that this time has had to be shared with other responsibilities, thus limiting my ability to help gather the necessary material, also has risen as a stumbling block to a full sermon devoted to First Parish History.

Consequently, we must content ourselves with this: We do exist; we evolved from a beginning in 1658; we can in the future alleviate the situations currently preventing us from learning about our own past; and despite the lack of a coherent history, we do have a bright and cheerful future.

There is one more thing we have: we have the emotional or intuitional knowledge that our personal history as a church is very much bound up with the history of Unitarian Universalism in New England. We do have gathered between the covers of many books source material for a sermon about that topic. With your indulgence, that is what I shall confine myself to this morning - a trip through Liberal Religious History from King's Chapel to First Parish 1963.

That trip through history can be divided into three major stops:

1. The development and organization of Unitarianism in New England,
2. The Free Religious Thinking movement as it exploded in the West with fallout raining down on New England,
3. The Humanist-Theist controversy of our own era just now coming to a close, involving all of continental Unitarian-Universalism.

There are several deeply-rooted principles of Liberal Religion which we have discussed in the past. Many of these principles were highlighted in what we might call the Liberal Religious "Boston Tea Party" of King's Chapel. A number of royal religious "tea chests" were dumped overboard when King's Chapel became Unitarian.

What was there in history that makes King's Chapel outstanding as an individual institution? Especially are we interested in this when those of us who have visited #4 on the Boston Freedom Trail remember what the service was like with its full use of candles, mitre box, prayer stools, risings up and down, pulpit on high in one corner, altar center stage and all the rest of a highly liturgical Episcopal service.

Let us go back to 1784:

First we must become deeply impressed with the awesome fact that this church was the King's chapel: the king, who ruled by divine right, who was the titular head of all true believers, who appointed bishops or ordered their heads removed from their shoulders. This church - this chapel - was the King's persona property as much as was the castle on the Thames from which he issued his imperious orders,

Secondly, we must be impressed by the fact that the religion preached in this royal place was high Anglican Episcopal belief - and by high I do not mean that there was merely more formal worship service of candles and prayers and chants than in a low service,

No - by high service I mean a service that recognized no other worship of God than its own as legitimate or true; I mean a group of Christians who were dedicated not only to their personal worship but also to the persecution of any who worshiped otherwise. This King's Chapel in reality was a New World outpost of the very much entrenched English clergy who had crowded the Brownists, Puritans and Unitarians out of England years before!

Are we sufficiently impressed by these two facts that the church in Boston King's Chapel, was the royal personal possession of the King of England and that the faith followed in that church was High Anglican Episcopal, separated from Roman Catholicism only by virtue of the non-recognition of the Pope as spiritual leader?

If so, we may proceed.

Being in effect the King's private "prayer rug" in the New World, the rectors and priests of King's Chapel were personal appointees of his majesty.

When a new priest arrived in Boston, he proceeded to the sanctuary of the church. There he was solemnly received by the lay leader of the church and his long-faced vestrymen. The congregation milled about in confusion. After proper introduction and identification, the Lay leader presented the new priest with the keys to the church. Thereupon, the priest dismissed all who were present, As the

last parishioner filed out of the door, the priest shut it firmly, and locked it. He then retired to his desk and began to catch up on his correspondence, his lunch, or to plan what change he would cause to be made in the church architecture, decorations, or service.

Meanwhile, the locked-out parishioners knocked discreetly at the door and requested admission. No answer. The knocking continued: the pleading for readmission to the church increased. This lasted for ten minutes to two hours depending on how long the new priest considered it would take to impress these New World people with the fact that this was the King's Chapel, the King's religion, and that they would be allowed to worship God by the King's permission alone, when the King's duly ordained priest felt the people were sufficiently humbled to worship under his leadership.

Then, and then only, did the new priest unlock the door and allow the people appointed King. to come once again into the presence of the spirit of God and his divinely anointed King.

In 1776 this procedure was rudely interrupted. When the British troops evacuated Boston, Dr. Henry Caner, the rector, went with them to Halifax, taking with him the church plate and other expensive equipment. The people, however, determined to maintain their worship, and they obtained the services of Mr. James Freeman as Pastor. He held the then underground heretical beliefs in Unity of God and the humanity of Jesus. Still the people desired to conform to their faith and they attempted to have Mr. Freeman ordained. No results were forthcoming from England. Not even the courtesy of a nasty answer to their request was received

And so the people held council. Over the next year or so they revised their prayer book, taking out all reference to the King and Empire, all reference to the Trinity, all mention of the Athanasian Creed, the Niceine Creed, and the Apostles Creed. They voted themselves Unitarian, the first grass-roots church in New England to openly avow the liberal theology, and to openly disavow the trinity.

Then, to light the way to true religious freedom in churches down the flame-lit corridors of the future, this little chapel in Boston gathered in congregational power and ordained Mr. James Freeman. For the first time in the world's religious history, the people took over and operated a sacrament always heretofore reserved for Kings and Popes. And so it is today: we the people hold that privilege high above all else to call and to ordain the clergyman of our choice. No other religious groups follow this practice of freedom.

Thus Boston's King's Chapel, the first Episcopal Church in the New World became the first fully Unitarian Church in the newly freed colonies. With their own revolution a success, the parishioners of King's Chapel bequeathed the New World's faithful a theology of the Unity of God, the humanity of Jesus. the right and responsibility of the congregation to design their worship of God, and to select, call and ordain their own clergymen. Liberal Religion became visible, The shape of American Liberal Religion became visible.

The way was now open for inspired devotees of freedom in religion to speak their minds and deepest thoughts. Ideas, ideals, the effort to bring religion to strike its most courageous blows in matters of

human concern - all these struck deeply into the congregations of orthodox Calvinists, and attracted many who thought it high time that man should begin to think for himself in religion as well as in politics and economics.

Men and ideas struck religious headlines for the next 50 years. William Ellery Channing lit a fire in American religion that has never gone out: he said, "Without inward spiritual freedom, outward liberty is of little worth. The human soul is greater, more sacred than the state and must not be sacrificed to it".

And then in 1819 he preached the famous Baltimore sermon at the ordination of Jared Sparks. In it he spoke of the Unity of God, the inferiority of Jesus to God, the prophetic message of Jesus to all humanity, and the moral requirements of religious man.

Many religious thinkers in Massachusetts took this sermon to heart. In 1819 the Dedham Church became embroiled in a controversy over which kind of minister to call - a Calvinist or a Liberal. The Liberal was called. The majority of the adult citizens in the town withdrew from the church. The minority of the church members remained. The case came to the supreme court as to who owned the property. The court decided in favor of the liberals who remained as members, against those who withdrew. This Dedham Decision opened the way for over 200 churches in Massachusetts to declare themselves Unitarian without loss of property.

And so in 1820 Liberal ministers organized into the Berry Street Conference to discuss vital issues of the mushrooming religion. It still persists. In 1821 the "Christian Register" was founded to spread Unitarian views in print. We read it today as the "Register-Leader". In 1825 the Berry Street Conference organized the American Unitarian Association. The final split between Congregationalism and Unitarianism in America thus occurred. Two separate bodies now existed.

More and more the literate and vocal in religion commanded the reading and listening public.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in 1838 an essayist and preacher of renown, preached the sermon for the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School.

He pronounced the dictum that truth was not silenced when the Bible was completed: God still speaks. He disposed of the angry man with a long beard and vengeful personality residing on a cloud in heaven and gave the world his transcendental God - a God above and beyond all human bickering about definition, yet a God who was any man's that would seek him out. He was a naturalist in religion, a mystic, a man who combined what he found to be the best in both East & West into an inspiring and loving faith.

It is well for us to know of Emerson and his views for it was from this very pulpit that he preached many sermons and drew many pictures of his loving, merciful, forgiving, strengthening God.

It was also from this very pulpit when it stood in a Boston church, that Ralph Waldo Emerson stepped down from his preaching ministry refusing to serve a communion in which he did not believe - a

communion centered around the mythical story of a God-man, or man become God, which Emerson could not accept as religious beyond paganism.

But he inspired many. He was a mentor of Theodore Parker. Parker stood before the religious world and claimed that religion is the natural flowering of man's personality. Religion is independent of all supernatural revelations in creed, in Bible, or in Savior.

Parker's sermon, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" is yet inspiring reading for everyone. He inspired many, and indeed became the forerunner of the Free Thinkers in religion.

Parker demanded of his people:

Freedom - it demands freedom for itself, usefulness in its institutions, truth in its teachings, beauty in its deeds,

Reason - try things by reason and conscience and using the present age, lead public opinion and not follow it.

Tolerance - it does not demand all men to think alike, but to get as near as possible to a life perfectly divine.

Action - not of faith only, but of works, a just church, by its faith bringing works into life.

Much action and new faith grew from inspired groups under such leadership. But it was the Midwest that wrote the next mighty chapter of Liberal thought. Liberalism literally moved West and a Western Conference was formed in 1852.

The Free Thinkers brought about the first great liberal schism. They claimed openly that:

Religion is the effort of man to perfect himself.

The root of religion is universal human nature.

Historical religions are all one.

Christianity is limited by the Christian Confession.

The Fellowship of Free Religion is free; it proclaims the great brotherhood of man without limit or bound.

Eastern Unitarians at first rejected this, then changed their corporate mind and reunited all Liberals across the expanding nation. But New England was affected. The Christian center of Liberal New England was dissolved in favor of all mankind.

More was coming. The Bible gave way to all the scriptures of the world.. The works of contemporary sociologists, psychologists and human scientists invaded the libraries of pulpit and pew alike. The Social Engineer who wanted to design the perfect human world opened vistas of unimagined glory to a religion all of a sudden become man-centered. The word "humanist" took on new color. Once it meant someone who believed in a God that the state did not accept. Now it came to mean that person who felt that man could not only get himself into trouble, but get himself out of it as well.

The Humanist also included those openly disavowing God.

The Humanist-Theist controversy flamed up in Liberal Religion.

The Theist the believer in God, cried out that the Humanist had no right to be in church,

The Humanist answered-look at history, God never has done anything for man's benefit. Man must do it for himself. and religion is man's effort to perfect himself.

The fires of that controversy still flicker fitfully here and there - even in First Parish of 1963. But only fitfully - for each side of the discussion now realizes that the other has rights and privileges. Each side of this Humanist- Theist debate now recognizes a deeper urge than the mere statement about belief in deity.

All liberals now openly assert that religion is the struggle for the best that is in man to emerge and become dominant in human affairs. Whether this be the activity of God or the works of evolution is a matter of semantics and personal decision.

But the freedom to choose is basic. The Freedom to work together and bring even more truth to light is challenge and purpose.

The desire and commitment to join in a fellowship of worship of the highest ideal, dedicated to working for a more beautiful, more abundant, more peaceful world for us and for all mankind, is First Parish of 1963.