

“Roots: The Beginnings of Unitarianism”

First in a three-part sermon series on Unitarian Universalism

September 22, 2019

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The First Parish in Lincoln

Some of you know that I have travelled to Scotland

These past three summers

Drawn there as if by some invisible thread.

Yes, part of it was to visit a sacred island called Iona

Located off the western coast.

Recommended to me many years ago by a dear friend--

A minister and a mentor, she has since died

And perhaps it was her death that prompted me to make the pilgrimage at last

As well as a difficult chapter in my own life.

But the strong pull I feel towards this part of the world

I think it goes deeper than that—

Think it's got something to do with digging into my own roots

Trying to discovery something about

My grandmother, who I never knew, who was born in Scotland

And through her, my birth mother—her daughter—who I also never knew

I don't quite know why NOW is the time in my life I feel drawn to make this quest

All I know it gives me energy and draws me on.

There is something life-giving about it for me.

There may come a time in our lives
When we feel drawn to seek out our roots
I think that can be true for communities such as this one
As well as for individuals.

Perhaps this is such a time here
As you pause in between settled ministers
To consider who you are
And where you might want to go.

What core values bring you together?
what is it you trying to do here?
this pretty little church set amongst the green fields
at the crossroads in Lincoln

Digging into your roots--
I hope we're going to have some fun with that this fall
Although the earliest beginnings of this place go back to 1747
(and even before)
The present incarnation of this church
Was formed in 1942
With the coming together of the Unitarian church in town
(This was their building)
And the Congregational church (they worshipped up the hill).
Today I'm speaking on Unitarian Universalism and next week
Wendy Vanderhart will explore the Congregational tradition.

Unitarian Universalism is a big subject—I'm not going to cram it all in today

(Don't know if you'll be relieved or displeased to know today is first of three part sermon series!)

Today, I'm going to try to do two things:

First, talk about the beginning of Unitarianism, first in the 300 years after Jesus died, and then in Europe from 1500s on

And second, tell you a bit of my own spiritual autobiography as a Unitarian Universalist.

In October, I'll preach on the beginning of Unitarianism in America and then how Transcendentalism arose a bit latter as a kind of challenge.

And finally, in November, a third sermon on Universalism.

(After all, Unitarianism and Universalism were two completely distinct denominations until 1961 when they merged and became one. They have different histories, theologies, and leaders. Different roots).

In our liberal tradition, we often say we grow out of heresy--

“Heresy” in Greek means choice--

“Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics,” writes the Rev. Mark Harris, long-time minister in Watertown and speaker here last spring.

“They are heretics because they want to choose their faith not because they desire to be rebellious.”¹

During the first 300 years after Jesus, there were a variety of beliefs about Jesus. Some believed Jesus was less than God but sent by God on a divine mission. These people who denied the divinity of Jesus later became Unitarian which literally means

¹ Mark W. Harris, *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), p. xix.

the unity or oneness of God rather than belief in the Trinity, God manifested in three persons.²

So our roots are very old and we grow out of heresy, choice.

Unitarian Universalism is very much a tradition that encourages individuals to search for religious truth in their own way

And to make their own choices

It emphasizes freedom rather than doctrine

And covenant (our agreement with one another about how we are going to walk together, how we are going to behave with one another)

Rather than creed.

We may wish that tracing origins of Unitarianism was like following a straight line but of course it's more complicated. Unitarian thought popped up in different forms in different geographic places at different points in time.

Although as I've said there were those in the first 300 years after Jesus' death with a Unitarian point of view, we can look for our spiritual ancestors first in the 1500s.

We grow out of the Protestant Reformation, of course, you remember Martin Luther pinning his theses on the door in 1517, right?

But Luther and Calvin, although they rejected the Catholic church in some things, held on to the Trinity and the idea of uniform Christian doctrine. Our spiritual ancestors, however, took a different view. So we look back to people like:

1. Michael Servetus

- Born in Spain, the son of nobility
- When he studied the bible, he saw no evidence for the Trinity (Just as Erasmus in the Renaissance had said).
- Servetus published his book, *The Errors of the Trinity* in 1531 when he was just 20 years old
- His book was a best seller but reaction against it was immediate and severe. Leaders of the protestant reformation like John Calvin feared his radical views would hurt the young Protestant movement.

² Mark W. Harris, *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), p. xix.

- Hunted both by the Catholic Inquisition and by John Calvin
- Went underground for years
- Calvin's men finally got him
- He was Captured, arrested, imprisoned
- Finally, burned at the stake in Geneva (Calvin's city) on October 26, 1553.

We remember:

2. Frances David
 - Founder of Unitarian movement in tiny country of Transylvania
 - Court preacher for King John Sigismund, a man deeply interested in religion and in people's freedom to believe as they wanted
 - In 1568 Frances David made an historic plea for religious toleration and the king issued the Edict of Torda, the 1st ever proclamation for religious freedom
 - Preachers would be allowed to preach the gospel as they personally understood it, free from religious persecution

And finally, growing out of Italy in the 1500s, we remember:

3. Faustus Socinus
 - Born in 1539, an Italian
 - He asserted that Jesus was more man than God
 - and that Jesus saved men not by dying for them but by setting an example for them to follow
 - He said people should be free to interpret Bible for themselves, they didn't need a priest, and that reason was always the most important thing in any kind of biblical examination
 - One scholar has called him "the architect of modern Unitarianism"

Socinian views spread to England through his published books and by way of British travelers who conversed with Polish Socinians and Antitrinitarian Transylvanians in Holland.

We look to England in the 1600s for more of our Unitarian roots.

In 1648, the English Parliament in 1648 voted the death penalty for those who denied the Trinity and yet, we remember people like:

1. John Biddle (1615-1662)
 - a young schoolteacher
 - 1644 letter to a friend, he argued that the Holy Spirit was not God but only a manifestation of God

- Biddle spent most of his life in prison
- Died in 1662 the undisputed father of English Unitarianism

2. John Locke

- Although he never actually left the Church of England, his views on religious toleration were so outspoken they helped to produce a deep and lasting change in English attitudes towards church and state
- He thought all the different people arguing that their religion was better was just men striving “for power and empire over one another”³
- In 1689, he wrote “A Letter Concerning Toleration.” “I esteem that toleration be the chief characteristical mark of the true Church.”⁴

In the 1700s, anti-Trinitarianism continued to flourish in England:

3. Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808)

- organized the first Unitarian church in England
- When he conducted his first service in an auction room on Essex Street in London on April 17, 1774⁵
- It was attended by a large congregation including Ben Franklin and Joseph Priestley

4. Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)⁶

- Second pioneer of English Unitarianism
- a scientist, discovered oxygen in 1774, author, clergyman
- like Servetus he found no evidence in the Bible either of the Trinity or atonement (Jesus died for our sins)

³ John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” printed in *The Epic of Unitarianism*, David Parke, ed. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957), p. 33.

⁴ John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” printed in *The Epic of Unitarianism*, David Parke, ed. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957), p. 33. Some people boast about the antiquity of places and names, some boast of the pomp of their worship, others of the reformation of their discipline, others boast of the orthodoxy of their faith but all these things, Locke said, are more the marks of “men striving for power and empire over one another, than of the Church of Christ.”⁴

You can have any of these things and more but if you are lacking “charity, meekness and good-will in general towards all mankind, even to those who are not Christian” then you fall short of being a true Christian, Locke said.⁴

⁵ Parke, p. 46.

⁶ Scholar Earl Morse Wilbur calls Priestley “‘beyond doubt the most influential figure in the earlier history of the Unitarian movement in England.’”⁶

- His most influential book was called “History of the Corruptions of Christianity” where he argued that true Christianity, embodied in the beliefs and practices of the earliest church (Jesus’ followers in the early years following his death) was essentially Unitarian and that all subsequent departures from that early faith were corruptions.
- After his home, laboratory and library were attacked and burned by a mob in 1791, Priestley fled to America in 1794 to begin a new life
- Established a Unitarian church in Pennsylvania

But it wasn’t Priestley who brought Unitarianism to America; he only helped to accelerate something which had been cooking here for 150 years among the earliest colonists themselves.

And if you want to hear the story of how Unitarianism began in America (and how this sanctuary was built in 1842 when the Unitarians split off from the Congregationalists in town), come on October 20th!

Now, the second part of this sermon, a bit about my own spiritual autobiography.

I was born and raised in the Unitarian Universalist tradition

But I grew up at King’s Chapel which is kind of an outlier in the UU world

It’s an old stone church on School Street in the heart of Boston

Founded in 1686 as the king’s church—it was Tory

It’s kind of a strange animal--

Unitarian in theology, Anglican in liturgy, Congregational in governance!

But be that as it may, I was born and brought up in a Unitarian church

And it was a community that was enormously important to my family, especially in times of trouble and loss

And a church that was important to me when I returned as a young adult, during a confused and difficult chapter of my own life.

My grandfather was a Unitarian minister, as was my uncle, his brother, their father

So there is a familial component to all of this

And yet truth be told I have wrestled
 Often mightily with this tradition in which I was born and raised
 And sometimes, I still do.

I guess it is not that dissimilar to a family.
 You can love your family—I love my family—but you can also wrestle with them
 There can be painful aspects to being in a family, there can be struggles.

So I've wrestled with this tradition
 There are parts I don't always agree with or like, parts that don't seem to feed me
 spiritually
 We are such a diverse group theologically—although as you've seen our roots are
 Christian but we run the gamut, Christian, Buddhist, Jew, atheist, agnostic, humanist
 We brag about our diversity but sometimes, it seems as if we have such different
 spiritual vocabularies, that we go to our own separate corners and shy away from
 talking about theology or things of the spirit

Perhaps out of fear of hurting each other or anxiety over potential conflict.

In the absence of a theology we share, we turn to social justice as what we hold in
 common—and that's a good thing—it's a core part of who we are—faith as action in
 the world, not divorced from it, I'm proud of that, but sometimes, it seems to me,

Sometimes, that the spiritual deepening side gets short shrift.

I don't always feel supported in my quest for spiritual practices and so I turn to other
 religious traditions for schooling in things like a prayer practice that can sustain me

So there are things I struggle with and yet this is still my tradition, my family if you
 will. And over time, these roots become more important to me, not less.

I was raised as a UU but I think I took it for granted in many ways

It wasn't till near the middle of my life

When I moved to Concord in 1997

That I started to connect with my spiritual ancestors in a deep and powerful way.

I moved there because I'd been called to be one of the ministers at the church there--

Concord, if you don't know, is kind of like the Vatican for Unitarian Universalists

That is, Concord has a special place in UU hearts because it's the place where Emerson and Thoreau lived; Margaret Fuller visited many times, Bronson Alcott and Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Sophia Peabody.

It was kind of an epicenter for Transcendentalism and that's an important part of our Unitarian Universalist tradition

So perhaps it was inevitable, living in that town, walking its fields and rowing on its rivers

Perhaps it was inevitable that I found myself digging into these roots

I dived into the ocean of Transcendentalism

(Will tell you more in a later sermon this fall)

These women and men whose spiritual and intellectual energy was lighting up the New England sky like fireworks

They hungered for a religious intensity not found in their experiences of a cold, formal Unitarianism

I spent time with them, read their letters to each other, walked in places where they had walked

It's like they became real people to me

Margaret Fuller struggling with intense headaches and bouts of depression and yet blazing a new trail for herself and all women who followed after her; Thoreau walking for hours to fight off his own form of melancholia and yet a man in love with nature who wrote words of such beauty about the natural world that we read them still; Emerson as a broken-hearted young man trying to come to terms with the loss of his profession and the death of his wife Ellen who went on to teach us so much about how we can each have our own direct, personal religious experience and the "infinite" of the human spirit.

It wasn't till I got to know the humanity of these people grew to admire them for their creativity and their courage, grew to understand the challenges they faced—

It wasn't till I really got to know them as people that the UU tradition kind of started to get inside my skin in a new way

I felt like I was getting to know my ancestors

My spiritual ancestors

I understood in a new way that they were a part of me and I was a part of them

I felt a bone-deep connection with women and men who had come before me, not in a blood line, but a spiritual life line

This was life-giving for me; it seemed to inject a new kind of spiritual fervor into me for my own tradition.

It's a very personal thing in a way just like my digging for my roots in Scotland is a personal thing

I don't know where my quest for my family roots will lead me.

I don't know where our common quest this fall for the roots of this community will lead us.

I think each one of us has to make our faith our own

And perhaps this community needs to wrestle to the ground what its relationship is with these liberal religious traditions.

I don't know where these quests will lead, but I do know we are inheritors of something handed down to us.

We stand on the shoulders of women and men we will never see or know who went before us here.

Now, we take it and shape it and somehow make it our own.

We are inheritors of a tradition that urges us to:

Seek

Question

Doubt

Struggle

Learn

Grow

Despite all the wrestling I may do,

At the end of the day,

It's a tradition for which I'm profoundly grateful.

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