

First Unitarian Universalist Church

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Where Do We Place Our Trust?

September 20, 2009



READINGS from "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" by Theodore Parker, delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Charles C. Shackford in the Hawes Place Church, Boston, May 19, 1841 from *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*

Looking at the Word of Jesus, at real Christianity, the pure religion he taught, nothing appears more fixed and certain. Its influence widens as light extends; it deepens as the nations grow more wise. But, looking at the history of what [people] call Christianity, nothing seems more uncertain and perishable. While true religion is always the same thing, in each century and every land, in each [person] that feels it, the Christianity of the Pulpit, which is the religion taught; the Christianity of the People, which is the religion that is accepted and lived out; has never been the same thing in any two centuries or lands, except only in name.

...

Any one, who traces the history of what is called Christianity, will see that nothing changes more from age to age than the doctrines taught as Christian, and insisted on as essential to Christianity and personal salvation. What is falsehood in one province passes for truth in another. The heresy of one age is the orthodox belief and "only infallible rule" of the next.

...

Like the clouds of the sky, [the doctrines] are here to-day; to-morrow, all swept off and vanished; while Christianity itself, like the heaven above, with its sun, and moon, and uncounted stars, is always over our head, though the cloud sometimes debars us of the needed light. It must of necessity be the case that our reasonings, and therefore our theological doctrines, are imperfect, and so perishing. It is only gradually that we approach to the true system of Nature by observation and reasoning, and work out our philosophy and theology by the toil of the brain. But meantime, if we are faithful, the great truths of morality and religion, the deep sentiment of love to [humanity] and love to God, are perceived intuitively, and by instinct, as it were, though our theology be imperfect and miserable. ... Since [our theological notions] are so fleeting, why need we accept [human] commandments, as the doctrine of God?

...

Almost every sect, that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, and not the immutable truth of the doctrines themselves, or the authority of God.... Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason, why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on

[whoever] makes them known first or most clearly. It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.

...

Such, then, is the Transient, and such the Permanent in Christianity. What is of absolute value never changes; we may cling round it and grow to it forever. No one can say his notions shall stand. But we may all say, the Truth, as it is in Jesus, shall never pass away. Yet there are always some even religious [people], who do not see the permanent element, so they rely on the fleeting; and, what is also an evil, condemn others for not doing the same. They mistake a defense of the Truth for an attack upon the Holy of Holies; the removal of a theological error for the destruction of all religion. Already [people] of the same sect eye one another with suspicion, and lowering brows that indicate a storm, and, like children who have fallen out in their play, call hard names. Now, as always, there is a collision between these two elements. The question puts itself to each [person], "Will you cling to what is perishing, or embrace what is eternal? This question each must answer for himself [or herself].

SERMON

In 1841, Theodore Parker delivered a now-famous sermon, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" at the Ordination of Rev. Charles C. Shackford in Boston. This sermon has become required reading for anyone studying for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Our morning's readings are excerpts from it.

Theodore Parker was a fiery 31-year old preacher when he delivered it. He tended to push the envelope. Just the same, he had no idea about the firestorm he was creating. He didn't know he would be ostracized by ministerial colleagues. Nor did he know this sermon, along with other writings, would give him a prominent place in history.

It's hard to imagine how talking about what's permanent and what's transient could lead to what one historian referred to as the closest thing Unitarians ever came to a heresy trial. But it did. It may strike many of us as odd. We're likely to nod our heads in agreement with what Parker was saying. The reality is that in his own day, Parker's theology was a radical departure even from that of most of his Unitarian colleagues. Even the Unitarian tradition was still supernatural and conservative by our standards today. It was the work of people like Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson that would be the catalyst for change within our own movement.

Parker and other 19th century Unitarians considered themselves enlightened Christians. As part of their Unitarian view, Jesus was less than God, but still the chosen prophet of God. Miracles and supernatural events characterizing Jesus' life were still largely accepted by Unitarian clergy and their congregations.

And along came Parker asserting that Christianity was not permanent. He said Christianity could change. He said it was the teachings of Jesus, not Jesus himself, upon which authority rests. He argued that Christian practices and beliefs were impermanent. For Parker, true religion transcended these forms. It transcended creeds. In fact, he said, true religion transcended churches and ministers. It transcended Jesus.

Parker took what Ralph Waldo Emerson was preaching to a whole new level. Both of them were seeking a religion that was more immediate, more personal and more experiential. They wanted a religion that didn't depend on the accuracy of the historical record. Instead, they wanted it to grow out

of a deep, internal sense of the sacred and holy dimension of existence. (Unitarian Universalism, David Bumbaugh).

It isn't hard to see how from there Christianity would come to be seen as only one expression of universal truth. What both Parker and Emerson did was call into question the very meaning of the word "Christian" and its foundational doctrines. Parker defined real Christianity simply as "Being Good and Doing Good" – regardless of creeds, doctrines, rituals, churches, or ministers.

Parker's colleagues believed what he was saying was heresy. It's a bit strange to have a heretical faith like ours treating someone within its ranks as a heretic. But that's what happened. They shunned Parker and refused him ministerial fellowship. Some wouldn't talk to him at all. Some simply refused to exchange pulpits with him so their congregations wouldn't be exposed to his ideas.

Some felt he had gone so far as to no longer be able to be considered a Christian. Parker was even asked to resign from the American Unitarian Association but he refused. He said they would need to expel him. They backed down. And at that point, as one historian has said, "The first Unitarian heresy trial was over." (The Making of American Liberal Theology, Gary Dorrien)

Parker's own congregation supported him, and this helped make him famous, even notorious. He would preach to huge congregations of several thousand supporters. Ironically, by being shunned, he became a symbol of the free pulpit and the free faith that has come to be such a hallmark of Unitarianism and also Universalism.

Parker's sermon raises an important and essential question. And I believe one that is challenging to us in any age. What is permanent and what is transient? What shall we keep? What is lasting in our values, our beliefs, our politics, our relationships, and our everyday activities? What lasts and what doesn't?

Parker's question – what is permanent and what is transient? – may hit us powerfully and uncomfortably. Many of us spend much of our lives focusing on the transient. We cling to what can't and won't last. When we cling to what is fickle and fleeting, it's not too long before we discover a level of dissatisfaction.

We may amass so much stuff and call it a life. I'm not saying we don't need some of it, or even that we shouldn't enjoy it, but that it will ultimately vanish.

We may spend our energy on things that won't last, such as worrying about what other people think or doing work just to get ahead. Our addictions to money, alcohol, drugs, and possessions are also examples of our focus on what's transient.

We may do this because we are confused about what is permanent and what is temporary. We may have our doubts about whether there is anything at all that is permanent. Is there anything we can truly rely on or trust in that will not perish? Or have we lost faith in the universe and in others because we have placed our confidence in things that will surely vanish? Are we spending ourselves on the fleeting and momentary?

It's understandable that we get confused. Experience tells us that everything is always changing and that things are always in flux. So much comes and goes. Just when things get to the way we wanted them, there they go again, changing. We lose a friend to death. A family member moves across the country. We lose a job or start a new one. We grow older.

All of this can be really disconcerting. It can lead us to see everything as temporary. This can be especially the case during those times in our lives when things are changing too rapidly and in painful ways. Everything may come to seem temporary.

When we are struggling to find our grounding and want to know there is, after all, something we can depend on, it may at first seem the floor has fallen out from under us. We may feel we are falling and there is no one or nothing there to catch us. We may resist making important changes in our lives because we have come to rely on the temporary.

Some of you have heard me say before that when I first felt the call to ministry, I was surprised, even reluctant. I had been searching for a new direction, but this one seemed to ask too much. I had no idea how I would afford it or where I would end up geographically. Yet I knew that I was being called to ministry. I knew that I needed to allow myself to pursue that path. To do so meant giving up a sense of security, a career that was advancing, a geographical location I enjoyed, and the wide circle of friends and acquaintances I had developed there.

It meant I had to be willing to trust that calling. I had to trust the voice of the holy speaking through my life, in me and around me. I had to trust that it would all work out.

Here I am today, still astonished. And finding that I continue to be called in all sorts of ways – to stretch myself beyond what I think I am capable of.

Without trust that there is something permanent to which we owe our allegiance, it is hard to take such risks.

There is a basic fragility to all things. Being vulnerable is part of the human condition. This is part of the philosophy of impermanence that is fundamental to Buddhism and Hinduism. And in our tradition, where we strive for an honest, true, and even practical religion, we too are aware that existence is ever-changing. That means we are always standing at a crossroads.

We stand perpetually at the crossroads. This very changing nature of existence, which sometimes makes us feel so vulnerable, also means that "everything is workable." ("The Path is the Goal," When Things Fall Apart, Pema Chodron). Because of the changing nature of reality, the courageous heart knows all things are possible.

Earlier I told you that Parker is remembered for the sermon on permanence and transience. He is also remembered for some other famous words. Some of those other words are most often misattributed to others – to Martin Luther King, Jr. and to President Barack Obama.

In an 1851 sermon, Parker wrote:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I can I am sure it bends towards justice ("Justice and the Conscience").

It was Parker who first said the long arc of the universe bends toward justice, toward love. So when you hear people attribute this quote incorrectly let them know. Tell them it was Theodore Parker. Be an evangelist. Tell them it was one of us.

This idea, this value, is embedded in our history and our faith tradition. If we didn't believe that the universe leaned toward justice, we might not be so inclined to be justice-seeking people. It encourages us to extend ourselves to others. It inspires us to play a part in healing the world. Parker lived this in many ways, including being part of the Underground Railroad. He was an abolitionist, working to hide and free slaves.

In Unitarian Universalism, we affirm the inherent goodness in life and in each other, even as we have to acknowledge the reality of pain and suffering. We do not perfectly express that goodness or always respect it in

each other. But our recognition that the universe bends toward justice acknowledges our own goodness and the goodness in others. It is a value we aspire to live.

For Parker, the permanent was revealed in our love toward others, just as it was revealed in an intuitive perception of the holy and in our ethical behavior. These values can be found in the teachings of Jesus. It is evident in the commands: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

For some of us, this is what we mean when we say that "God is Love," as is written on the pulpit of this historically Universalist congregation. For others of us, those values may be found in nature, in Eastern philosophy, in Jewish teachings or elsewhere. These universal truths are not limited to one age or one place or one religion.

In our chalice words this morning we heard that, "Only a few things wear the mark of the eternal." (Sidney Freeman) Only a few things! What retains its value is love. What lasts is an intuitive sense of the divine that can't be captured in any doctrine or creed. It is our kindness toward all life. What remains is being good and doing good. What endures is your hand resting in mine and mine in yours. The rest is transient and dispensable. Only the holy abides.

The question, says Parker, puts itself to each of us, "Will you cling to what is perishing, or embrace what is eternal? This question each [of us] must answer for [ourselves]."

Blessed be. Amen.

Sources:

Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History, David Bumbaugh

Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism, Conrad Wright, ed.

The making of American liberal theology: imagining progressive religion,

Gary Dorrien