

Embracing our Future/Pledge Drive Remarks  
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April 7, 2019  
UCV

Some people work as carpenters and build things.

Some people are teachers and teach kids and adults

I'm a minister—and part of my job is to give sermons on Sunday mornings. Sermons are talks I share with people about religion, our congregation and about things going on in the world.

Now try to imagine this: there are about 1500 UU congregations around the world. A lot of them have ministers, ministers who also give sermons on Sunday mornings, and they do that week after week through most of the year. That's a lot of sermons! And Unitarians have been around for almost 500 years! So, I can't even count how many Unitarian sermons have been given—100,000s? a million or more?

I'm going to talk for a few minutes about what's probably the most important sermon ever given anywhere by a Unitarian minister, his name was William Ellery Channing, his birthday happens to be today, and this sermon was given 200 years ago. You can see a picture of him in today's order of service.

Back in 1819, there was a big conflict of words going on in the USA and Canada, and it had to do with churches, religion, the Bible and belief. For more than ten years, ministers and a lot of other people in Christian churches were saying ours wasn't a good religion, that our beliefs were wrong, and they said "Unitarian" as an insult, a way to "dis" us, summing up all the bad things they thought about us.

Well, Channing got tired of what people were saying. And so, on May 5, 1819, he preached a sermon in Baltimore, Maryland, during a meeting where a congregation, kind of like ours, was ordaining their new minister.

In this sermon, he called out what people were saying about us and said, basically: “you know what, you’re half-right, I’m proud of being a Unitarian—it’s no insult to me, and I’m going to tell you clearly what we Unitarians believe whether you like it or not.”

And for the next hour and half, in clear, beautiful prose, Channing took on two tasks to set the record straight:

First, he said that we need *reason*—we’ve got to use our heads—to understand and appreciate the meaning of the Bible, or any book of scripture. It’s a book written by and for people, said Channing, and its meaning “is to be sought in the same manner as that of any other book....With these views of the Bible, we feel it our bound duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually; to compare, infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit and times in which it was written.” Now, them’s was fighting words in a time when most thought that the Bible was the literally true, directly revealed word of God, and that we were supposed to believe everything in it. But Channing was saying, what do you bring to the Bible? *Reason*, backed up by learning and seasoned with respect.

The second task in Channing’s sermon was to spell out five stand-out things that Unitarians believed, though they were significantly different from the majority, orthodox Protestant Christian culture and churches of that time. First, was the unity of god, as opposed to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—the mystery of three gods in one person. If we’re going to talk about god, we’re talking about one thing, not three-in-one; the doctrine of the Trinity, Channing said, was not backed by scripture and it defied reason. Second, he asserted that the

person Jesus was fully human, and not a divine being. Third, the principal attribute of a God worth worshipping was moral goodness, not stern judgment. Therefore, the doctrine of Original Sin and the belief that God would elect a handful of people to salvation and condemn the rest of humanity to eternal suffering were abominable; they were affronts to divine goodness and to human striving for an ethical, just life. His fourth point was about the purpose of the life of Jesus. Channing rejected the doctrine that the death of Jesus somehow atoned for human sin. Rather, the main purpose of his life was to provide a moral example that would bring people to a life of compassion and justice. Finally, Channing affirmed that virtue has its foundation in human nature and conscience and that it is expressed by love of divine things and a moral life.

A lot had happened in the 200 years since Channing delivered this sermon. Today, and to us, it may sound like old hat or even beside the point. But in *1819?! This was a highly controversial and daring sermon that brought Unitarianism out of the closet on both sides of the Atlantic and into the light of day. To be sure, Channing got tons of hate mail and was denounced in countless orthodox pulpits for this sermon. But fortunately, he had the full support of his home congregation, his liberal Unitarian colleagues and their congregations. And within five years, our denomination was created as an independent religious body, and Channing, in effect, became its first leader.*

What I want us to remember, is not only this sermon (and I encourage you to read it someday (<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002089549704;view=1up;seq=11>), but more...and this: Channing didn't know what was going to happen after that day in May 1819, but he dared to embrace the future, his future and the future of those people who would be called Unitarians. And 160 some odd years later, that is about thirty-five years ago, in a graduate studies seminar in US religious history, I read this sermon for the first time. Back then, I belonged to another religion, but as I

read Channing's words line-by-line with mounting nervousness and excitement, I resonated to his logic and the spirit of his vision. That day, I began my first steps toward this faith and the fateful, fruitful decision to become a Unitarian and to take up ministry in this religion.

I don't know my future. I don't know the future of this congregation, though I have my thoughts and dreams. If we'll embrace its future, I see a congregation that will continue to abide here and endure; it will be a beacon of progressive, transformational religious, ethical and community life; it will flourish due to excellent programs, staff, and fabulous, generous members and friends of all ages gathered here in affirmation of the values and comradery we hold dear. This congregation will be here long after I'm gone. It will be here for generations to come and for reasons good and true, if we do our part today and in the days and years to come.

And so, in closing, may we all embrace our future here; we can do it today and the weeks ahead by pledging generously to this year's annual canvass. May we give early and often so that, come June and the congregational meeting when we review our budget, and future for next year, we'll have good, high cause to celebrate a pledge drive well and truly achieved.

And may it be so.