

William Ellery Channing, Father

A sermon for the All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

Delivered on June 18, 2017

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Today is Father's Day so let me tell you a bit about my father. My childhood kitchen table was routinely graced by people with disabilities, in emotional distress, hungry, homeless, struggling with addiction, or gay and lesbian folk all challenged by an inhospitable world. I watched my father welcome everyone to the table and as folks sat a while they were treated with dignity, were offered support, fellowship. I witnessed compassion for others, generosity, understanding, acceptance of differences, and giving voice to the "underdog" through the actions of my father. I easily learned to adopt these behaviors which have become expressions of my faith today. One act of kindness that occurred when I was nearly eight years old is stamped on my memory. My father returned from work one afternoon during the Thanksgiving season carrying a turkey that he received from his employer, as all employees at his place of work did each Thanksgiving. I remember my parents talking about how grateful they were because money was tight. This particular bird was not destined for our table. I remember watching my father carry and offer the turkey to a neighboring family. We could have really used the turkey but the generosity of my parents was greater than their fear of scarcity. It made sense to my parents to share the wealth and deliver the turkey to a family that might not have as much as we would have—as little as it may be.

My father helped me develop a deep and genuine concern for the needs of others—spiritual and otherwise. It is no surprise to me that the last thirty years of my life have been in service to others. It is also no surprise that my voluntary associations have been with grassroots organizations reaching out to support others. My spirit and my ministry have been deeply touched by witnessing the generosity and service to others by my father. I want to tell you about another father that inspires me and my ministry. He is called the father of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing. We have forgotten the father of our faith. Over time many Unitarians outgrew the beliefs of Channing. In the 19th century, Channing emphasized the ethical teachings of the New Testament. Today's Unitarians are interested in a comparative study of all the worlds' religions. Channing emphasized the priority of reason. Today's Unitarians are trying to learn how better to integrate reason with emotions. Channing emphasized the rigorous puritanism of serious thought and study. Channing opposed American Calvinist orthodoxy preferring a gentle loving God. He became the spokesperson for American Unitarianism.

If you happen to be in Baltimore, stop by the Historic Unitarian church. If you go inside, you can still see the pulpit where Channing preached his most famous sermon. If you happen to be in Boston, walk by Arlington Street church and look at the statue of William Ellery Channing on the edge of the Boston Public Garden. His eyes are level with the pulpit in the church across the street. If the church doors of Arlington Street Church are open on Sunday morning the minister can look out and see Channing staring back. And if you happen to visit one of our many Unitarian Universalist churches that bear the name All Souls, remember as you enter the church

the words of the father of American Unitarianism. “I am a living member of the great family of all souls; and I cannot improve or suffer myself, without diffusing good or evil around me through an ever-enlarging sphere. I belong to this family. I am bound to it by vital bonds.”

William Ellery Channing (April 7, 1780 – October 2, 1842) was the foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the early nineteenth century and one of Unitarianism's leading theologians. He was known for his articulate and impassioned sermons and public speeches, and as a prominent thinker in the liberal theology of the day. Caught between the opposing factions of Calvinism—conservative Protestantism—and the new more liberal thinking of the Transcendentalists, he was forced to take a stand in defense of the new direction that Christianity was taking in New England. His outspoken advocacy for humanity's more intimate relationship to Jesus Christ and God was soon heralded as the new denomination of Unitarianism. His writings on slavery, war, labor problems, and education were extremely progressive and influenced many American authors, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and other proponents of Transcendentalism, like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. and William Cullen Bryant.

Channing's most famous words were delivered at the ordination of Jared Sparks in Providence, Rhode Island in 1819. The text Channing preached from was Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter five, verse twenty-one. “Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.” And he did. The Trinity, which had no clear and unambiguous support in Scripture, was tossed. There is an important phrase that you may have heard that is most closely associated with William Ellery Channing. And that is “salvation by character.” Now, while what precisely the term means has changed a bit over the years, for us, I think we can hear that our salvation, salve, that is our healing from the hurts and bruises of life, the woundedness we experience, our shortcomings we're so painfully aware of, our failing our ideals so often, and all the harm that follows these failures of our deepest aspirations, for ourselves and the world, is resolved in how we choose to live, in who we become through what we do. That is salvation by character. Healing, the great healing is in our hands. Channing preached this good news from the rooftops. Who we are counts. What we do counts. Just like my father and the father of American Unitarianism taught.

Channing has been called the “reluctant radical.” In 1825 when the American Unitarian Association was formed he was reluctant about becoming its front man and eventually declined and he was slow to speak out about some issues. Let us think about the nature of that reluctance. There is a place for some hesitation, a time to stop, to listen, to reflect. Which, of course, is itself, a difficulty, as sometimes you must step out and take that stand even without the time to reflect. It isn't easy. Channing, I feel, shows the difficulty we encounter as the rubber hits the road, as we apply our liberal religious principles where they must be applied, in this lived life. Channing's reluctance, his hesitation, to step out unless he was absolutely compelled to do so marked his entire life. There is no doubt he got out in front of a lot of issues. The litany of his stances for the good is long. He also got a lot wrong, at least by my lights, and while not so long, it is also a list. But it was his engagement with slavery that demands our attention here. It reveals, I think, most of the complexities in applying our principles, and also when and how. Channing came slowly to the public debate. He was torn between his instincts that everything about the institution was evil, strengthened by memories of the horrors he witnessed in Richmond, VA where he was a teacher in those first years after college, and his desire it be ended slowly with the least disruption to society at large as possible. What is generally agreed is

that his initial assault on slavery when it came in a small book, was, while important, and it was important, still, it was also far from his best work.

Jack Mendelsohn writes about Channing that he “was not, and could not be a social reformer in the ordinary sense. He breathed religion as he breathed air, in and out, in an unconscious, indispensable rhythm. He measured everything by spiritual ideals. He looked out at the world with God-intoxicated eyes.” In a letter to Lydia Maria Child Channing confessed, “My mind seeks the good, the perfect, the beautiful. It is a degree of torture to bring vividly to my apprehension what man is suffering from his own crimes and from the wrongs and cruelty of his brother.” What is significant is that while he hated witnessing the ills we perpetrate upon one another, nonetheless he didn’t turn away. Even though he was a contemplative by nature, that very openness of heart, which was his spiritual discipline, is exactly what brought him in the end to some very radical places. In his reluctance, within that hesitation, he grew. He continued to watch his heart and what was actually going on.

Nearly his last words, a testament to us were how, “There are certain truths which I can no more doubt than my own existence. That God is just and good, and that justice and goodness are his laws, and are at once the safety and glory of his creatures... When I am told that society can only subsist by robbing men of their dearest rights, my reason is as much insulted as if I were gravely taught that effects require no cause... The doctrine that violence, oppression, inhumanity, is an essential element of society, is so revolting, that, did I believe it, I would say, let society perish, let man and his works be swept away... No! It is safe to be just, to respect men’s rights, to treat our neighbors as ourselves.” Two months later Channing died, the war that would end slavery still twenty years away. Those who would insist the evil so great that it had to be ended at any cost would be informed, in large part, by the measured reflections of William Ellery Channing.

So, what is our take away? What lessons might we want written on our hearts? Remember you’re not always going to be right. We don’t know what our prejudices, our blind spots, our misunderstandings are. So, a little hesitation can be a good thing. But don’t rest there. Listen widely. Learn. And throw your heart and your mind wide open. Test everything by this measure, if we’re all connected, deeply, truly, members of the same family, what then? And with that, act. Do something. Channing, my father, your father, the men in your life who have acted as fathers, expectant fathers, father’s who have lost their children, all fathers are part of the big family that Channing referred to as humanity. Let us honor, remember, praise and glean some lesson from the teachings of our fathers that will allow us to live our Unitarian faith with a bit of hesitation at first, but eventually opening our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to living it fully to bring wholeness to our world.

May it be so.