

IN THE PROPHETS' FOOTSTEPS

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker
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One of the occupational hazards of ministry, and I suspect a lot of other professions, is the fact that people often want to talk “shop” at all manner of times. Random people, once they find out I’m a minister, will ask me to explain the nature of God; ask if there is a heaven and or a hell and who will get in; ask the meaning any number of Biblical texts, assuming I have memorized each and every one of them; or want me to defend religion, all of them throughout the history of humanity. Now I have to admit that sometimes, depending on the question and how high the questioner rates on the obnoxiousness scale, I give my learned opinion and present it as honest to God fact. It’s rather easy, just throw in a couple of theological terms like soteriology and hermeneutical and that’s usually enough to scare most people away or at least fail to understand the answer I’ve just given them.

But most of the time I am willing to engage in the discussion for at least a few moments. I find that most people are genuinely interested in questioning things and understand that what I say is really my learned opinion and not the honest to God fact. My doorman is one of those people. We often engage in theological conversations. He reads a lot and has a lot of questions. And he likes to talk a lot too. Unfortunately, he also works the 10pm to 6am shift so our conversations begin usually late at night. He finds it fascinating that there are several ministers of differing denominations in the building and I know that he asks us all the same questions just to see what our different traditions have to say about things.

When our conversations first began and he wanted me to explain Unitarian Universalism to him, he had a reaction that was not uncommon...he thought being a Unitarian Universalist must be easy. No catechisms to remember, no 613 rules to follow, no requirements to pray x number of times in a day or fast for y number of days. Just holidays galore! I have spent a fair amount of time disabusing him of that notion. It is difficult to be a Unitarian Universalist, since there is so much more pressure put upon the individual to develop and live a theology. The other question he had was about our history, with a subtext of “is this some kind of cult sprung up in the spiritual not religious age of new age religion?” I disabuse him of that notion as well.

But the second question about our history makes me rethink my answer to the first question about it being easy to be a Unitarian Universalist. On one hand it isn’t easy but on the other hand, today, it is very easy. This has not always been the case and I wonder if we take for granted the sacrifices the prophets of this great faith made in order for it to be easy us to be Unitarian Universalists. Yet if it weren’t for the Francis Davids, the Faustus Socinus’, the John Biddles, the Joseph Priestleys, the Olympia Browns and the Jeffery Campbells of our history most of us would not be sitting here today. I know I wouldn’t be standing at this pulpit if it weren’t for them. Yet, I bet if I asked most people here who these people were most of us wouldn’t know them. But we need to know who these brave men and women were and we need to know the sacrifices they made, because to not know our history is to not imagine our future. We need to know that our sitting here this morning was not by accident and was not with out

costs. Sometimes a great cost. So this morning I would like to take some time to tell you their stories.

We begin in, of all places, Transylvania. Yes, the same Transylvania where Count Dracula supposedly lived. In 1510 Ferenc David was born in the town of Kolozsvár and eventually attended university in Germany during the beginnings of Protestant Reformation. He returned to Transylvania in 1551 where he became a teacher and a minister. In those days most ministers were also the town's teachers as well. While teaching he kept a keen eye on the developments of the Reformation and became the chief theologian of the Transylvanian Reformation and eventually he became Bishop of the Transylvanian Swiss Reform Church. In 1564, he was hired as the court preacher to King John Sigismund of Transylvania. During the next few years he began to develop his Unitarian ideas influenced in part by Michael Servetus and Giorgio Blandrata. On January 20th of 1566 he preached his first Unitarian sermon. His influence was so great, that King Sigismund converted to Unitarianism and in 1568 Sigismund issued the first statement of religion tolerance which read:

“Preaches shall be allowed to preach the Gospel everywhere, each according to his understanding of it. If the community wishes to accept such preaching, well and good; if not, they shall not be compelled but shall be allowed to keep the preachers they prefer. No one shall be made to suffer on account of religion, since faith is the gift of God.”

In the words of Francis David “we need not think alike to love alike.” Sadly, the religious freedom given to the people of Transylvania was short lived. After Sigismund's death in 1571, the clocks were rolled back and religious freedom stifled. David came under intense scrutiny and his works were considered treasonous. In 1579 he was thrown into prison where he died of hunger and exposure. But he had begun something in Transylvania that still exists today, the Unitarian Church.

During the period of religion freedom, Transylvania became home to another, and perhaps more influential theologian, Faustus Socinus, whose birth name was Fausto Paolo Sozzini. Born in 1539 in Siena, he was educated in Siena as a lawyer and in 1563 was employed in the service of Isabella de Medici, for the next twelve years. He considered these years to be wasted for he held little interest in the law. What did interest him was poetry and religion. In 1575 he went to Basel, Switzerland where he began to translate the Psalms into Italian verse. In 1578 he published *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, which openly questioned the doctrine of atonement. He argued that Jesus' life not his death were what saved humanity. Eventually, finding Basel too confining and dangerous he moved to Krakow, Poland where there was more religious freedom for a time. There he wrote the *Racovian Catechism*. For those of you who do not know what a catechism is, it is a set of questions with answers, used as a method of teaching religion. In the *Rachovian Catechism* Socinus asks the question:

Q: What are the things that concern [Jesus'] Essence or Person?

A: Only that he is a true man by nature, as the holy Scriptures frequently testify concerning that matter...

Q: You said a little before that the Lord Jesus is man by nature, hath he not also a divine Nature?

A: At no hand; for that is repugnant not only to sound Reason, but also to the holy Scriptures.

This book became one of the most influential books in the Unitarian movement. As was the case in Transylvania, the religious freedom Socinus enjoyed ended under persecution by the Jesuits. Socinus was physically attacked in the streets of Krakow and forced to leave his beloved adopted city to die broken in 1604.

But his work survived and with it Unitarianism spread throughout Europe and eventually came to England, where we meet John Biddle, born in 1615. John Biddle was one mean scholar. By the age of 26 he was headmaster of the Crypt Grammar School and by 30 he knew the entirety of the New Testament in English and in Greek by heart. Now that's a man whom you could ask a question about the Bible. But reading the Bible and eventually the works of the Socinians he came to reject the doctrine of the Trinity.

In 1644, he found himself in trouble for sharing his new faith. He was charged with heresy for his Unitarian views but escaped imprisonment by writing a confession of faith that kept him out of jail. He then wrote another one to a friend that exposed his true beliefs and in 1646 he was once again accused of heresy. He spent the next five years in jail while his case was being decided. While in prison he continued to write and even published the article that got him arrested. He got out of jail in 1652 due to Cromwell's *Act of Oblivion* which gave the English a measure of religious freedom.

Free for a time in 1654 he published his own Catechism called the *Twofold Catechism* in which he argues the Unitarian case. Of course this gets him arrested yet again under the *Ordinances Against Heresies Act* of 1648. He could have been sentenced to death but instead he is exiled to St. Mary's Castle in the Scilly Isles until 1658. He returned to London where he continued to preach the Unitarian gospel until he was imprisoned yet one more time in 1662. This time for the last time, for he fell ill with "prison fever" and died at the age of forty seven. Yet Biddle became one of the most influential of early English Unitarians.

One of the people his works eventually influenced was Joseph Priestley. If you took science in high school you may remember his name as the discoverer of oxygen. In addition to being a scientist, Priestley was also a teacher and a minister. Even back then, religion and science were not necessarily at odds with one another, though the truth be told, Priestly appears to have been a better scientist than minister. Yet ministry was what he loved and he spent his life in England alternating between teaching and preaching. In 1767, he took a position at a small church in Leeds where he discovered the Unitarian writings of the Socinians and John Biddle. He continued his scientific pursuits while at Leeds and there he discovered carbon dioxide which he found would add bubbles to liquids. So one could say it was Priestly who gave us soft drinks. In 1772, he discovered oxygen. Had he remained a scientist he might have stayed out of trouble. But, as I said, his love was ministry and his Unitarian teachings were getting him in trouble.

Having moved on from Leeds he established himself in Birmingham, and on July 14th of 1791, Bastille Day, an angry mob attacked his home, his laboratory, his library and his Unitarian Chapel burning them to the ground. He made a hasty escape to London and eventually found himself on a boat bound for America, where religious freedom was said to exist. Once here, in 1796, he established the very first truly Unitarian Church in Philadelphia. There were other churches with Unitarian ministers but they had not been established as Unitarian Churches, most of them were Congregational. The church he established still exists today as the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. Perhaps it should be renamed the First Unitarian Church of America. Long before William Ellery Channing's *Baltimore Sermon* there was a Unitarian Church in America, in the cradle of freedom, Philadelphia.

Yet the establishment of a Unitarian Church in America did not mean that the work of Liberal Religion was done. For the Universalists were making their mark on religious front as well. In some ways the Universalists were well ahead of the Unitarians in establishing the religion we now call our own. It was the Universalists who in 1863 became the first recognized denomination to ordain and give full ministerial standing to women. That first woman was Olympia Brown. The path she forged was not an easy one. While serving as a minister, in 1874, at the Universalist Church in Bridgeport Connecticut she wrote during her maternity leave that

“although (or because) my parish gave me a vote of endorsement, passed by a large majority, these enemies continued...calling ministers from neighboring churches...promulgating the doctrine that ‘what you need here is a good man.’”

Those who made her ministry so difficult because she was a minister forced her to leave by the end of the same year. But she persisted in ministry and eventually moved to Racine Wisconsin, to take over a small run down church. She wrote of her ministry “All I could do was take some place that had been abandoned by others and make something of it, and this I was only too glad to do.” And make something of it she did, but the price it took was a heavy one and at the age of 53 she left full time ministry for good to devote her life to the work of Woman's Suffrage and Equal Rights. At the age of eighty-five she saw her work fulfilled with the passage of the 19th amendment.

While she was able to fulfill the promise of her dream of ministry, the same cannot be said of the first African American to graduate, in 1935, from the St. Lawrence Divinity School, the first Universalist Seminary in the United States. While he was not the first African American to be ordained by the Universalists, that honor goes to Joseph Jordan who was ordained in Philadelphia in 1889, he was the first to graduate from a Universalist Divinity School. He was a fully credentialed and ordained minister and yet he was unable to find a pulpit in this country. He eventually moved to England and taught philosophy in Wales and was a tutor at Oxford. Only later in life did he return to America where he found a part time ministry in Amherst, MA.

He wrote of his experience

“I think I can honestly say that at no time...was I blinded to the difficulties at hand. Invariably at church conventions, the fathers of the faith would peer sadly at me over their spectacles, murmuring sometimes openly, always inwardly, “My

dear young man, how you will be hurt! What are you doing in this ministry? You are brave but unwise.” And always I would smile very gently because it seemed to me, with a clarity for which I cannot bring myself to apologize, that they were failing to grasp the genius of their own faith.”

These are some of the prophetic words and deeds of the women and men who make it easy for us to be Unitarian Universalists today. There are many more stories of many other brave men and women. They should be a source of inspiration and gratitude for each of us, for without their vision, their fortitude and their sacrifices we could not enjoy the freedom to worship together as a people of faith. We walk in the footsteps of these great prophets. We honor them by remembering their names and their stories and sharing them with others. We honor them by knowing our history that we may envision our future, free from persecution and the shackles of prejudice that keep us from knowing the genius of our faith. We honor them most when we live to the ideals they sought to teach us -- to stand up for freedom and justice, no matter what the cost.

Amen and blessed be.

Recommended Reading List

David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*

Ernest Cassara, *Universalism In America - A Documentary History*

Charles A. Howe, *For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe*

Cynthia Grant Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*