

It Could Never Happen Here

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

November 15, 2009

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Theodore Parker was mad. This was not an unusual state of mind for him. In many ways Parker was a maverick in every possible way. He was a Unitarian minister; the grandson of the leader of American troops at the battle of Lexington—the start of the America Revolution. He liked to display his grandfather’s musket that he used that day on Lexington Common. Parker actually kept a pistol in his desk at church. He was that sure that someone might break in and he would have to defend his own life. Being a revolutionary was in his DNA.

This applied to his chosen profession and his chosen faith. Parker was a Transcendentalist, meaning he believed that the Holy was in every person first and foremost, and the stories in the Bible were at best secondary to the religious life. While this idea might not appear too radical to modern Unitarian Universalists, indeed it sounds rather quaint to our ears, in his day this assertion was considered the height of radicalism. He preached this doctrine in a sermon entitled “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” in which the ethical teachings

of Jesus were the only things permanent, and pretty much everything else fell into the transient category as far as he was concerned. The audience that heard this sermon was there to ordain a minister, and some non-Unitarian clergy were shocked. Most Transcendentalists, if they started off as Unitarian ministers, usually left the profession and sometime our religion altogether. This was the case with Emerson. But Parker stayed. Having been among the graduating class that heard Emerson's Divinity School Address, Parker was determined to take Transcendentalist theology and move it into the church rather than a hut at the edge of Walden Pond. This so angered his fellow clergy that they refused to exchange pulpits with him; effectively a snub. His name became so hated that in the Midwest whenever a young preacher would talk about Transcendentalist ideas he was accused of "Parkerism." The term was not intended as a compliment.

But what really got Theodore Parker going, if you really wanted to set him off, it was the issue of slavery. Parker was a rabid abolitionist; he firmly believed that slavery was a moral and social sin that should be rolled back immediately. In his day, particularly in the Northern cities such as Boston where he lived, the Fugitive Slave Law was the most hated doctrine of the Abolitionists. The Fugitive Slave Act was passed by congress as part of the Compromise of 1850. It basically said that any slave that escaped to the North would be returned to their masters in the South. Thus the humanity of the African American person was

denied, and instead he or she was to be seen from a legal point of view as a piece of property to be returned to the owner. Daniel Webster was one of the architects and eloquent defenders of the legislation that put this into law. Webster was the senator from Massachusetts.

When Webster died many people eulogized him and remembered him for his service to the country and his state. There was actually much to praise. But Parker could not bring himself to join that chorus. To him Webster died when he passed the Fugitive Slave Law. He could not be silent on that point out of respect for the dead or because it was politically correct in the moment not to argue with a dead man. The issue was just too raw and too important.

There was good reason for this. Theodore Parkers many radical stances all hung together. They made sense actually even if it was hard for his contemporaries to see it. His Transcendentalist theology meant that he believed that each person had the spirit of God or the Over Soul within them. This included African American people who were people, not animals. Thus for Theodore Parker, his Unitarian beliefs translated directly into prophetic social action. It gave him the courage to stand as a voice for the good in a society that tried to see moral shades of grey in all the wrong places.

In many ways this is fundamental to our Unitarian Universalist faith and tradition. Ours has always been a religion that has demanded

that no belief be accepted until we can see its pragmatic effect. This is a very scientific approach in a lot of ways. What good will be the result of our religious beliefs? What action or difference in society will it yield? In Theodore Parker we see that social action is the direct result of the Unitarian faith. It is not action taken by a few, a couple of marginal people who seem to be a bit obsessed with one issue or another. No. For Unitarian Universalists, social action is the fruit of our individual beliefs.

This has certainly been the case here at First Unitarian Church. At the annual Fall Festival last year, I bought three sermons that someone had donated to the bookstore. These sermons were from my predecessor Charles Philips. Philips served as minister here only briefly in between John McKinnon and Bob Doss. He wrote a sermon with an intriguing title “A Philosophy of Social Action”. According to our church history Philips served very briefly because his sermons were so intellectual that no one could really follow them. I believe this because it took me about three or four readings of this sermon before I even figured out what he was trying to say. And then I realized I didn’t agree with him!

Fortunately our church since then has had better success with social action. One of the first stories people told me about First Unitarian Church was about the time back in the sixties when a cross was burned on the lawn. When people tell this story it is to convey both a little fear and a lot of the pride they feel about the church’s community

activities in those days. Of course my esteemed predecessor Rev. Doss marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma when he asked white clergy to join him. For many years the social action committee here was known as the anti-racism committee. That is how strong the church's focus was on anti-racism.

And it is not just in the past. I know that a number of members of our church are very active in YWCA and the Urban League. These are organizations that do tremendous work in healing our community from the stain of racism. In groups apart from our church, many of our people are doing the necessary work to move our community forward. Parker's example of a Unitarian who lives out their beliefs in the real world has borne fruit in our past history as a church, and in the current lives of individuals who attend here. Of course there is no racism here. We say that every Sunday when we welcome people. Some have even asked, "Why do you keep saying that?" It could never happen here.

That is the story of First Unitarian Church that I always knew. So imagine my shock and horror when I learned last month that racism is alive and well in our congregation. I rolled into the office on what appeared to be a typical fall morning around here. Terry, our Building Supervisor, left me a note that said we needed to talk. He and I walked up to room 29 which is upstairs in the RE wing. He showed me what had happened. The class in room 29 was studying world religions and diversity. They are doing a project that involves hanging a long piece of

paper on the wall so that students could write questions, draw symbols, or otherwise engage the material they were learning. This project would be ongoing throughout the year. At the top of this piece of paper someone had clearly written a racist term.

Now I refuse to soil this pulpit or this sanctuary by repeating that word here. But I am sure you can guess what it was and which letter of the alphabet it started with. The Night Custodian Charles had been the first to see it when he was cleaning the room the night before. The writing had made reference to fishnets; implements that were commonly used to capture escaping slaves. Terry told me that when he saw that word written in our church, it was as if someone had kicked him in the chest. I was offended of course. The entire staff was. But for these two African American men, that word carries with it a profound emotional resonance that can be as powerful as a physical blow. To have that experience where you work, especially when that workplace is a church that proclaims itself to be a beacon of liberal religion to the world, it becomes almost too much to bear.

Of course immediate action was taken. The paper was immediately taken down. Catherine, our Director of Religious Exploration, spoke with the class and talked to them about what happened. We turned it into the proverbial teaching moment without Barack Obama or serving anyone any beer! It is important to note that we do not know who did this, and we certainly have no evidence that it

was a student in the class that meets in that room. It could have been a renter. It could have been a random person walking the hallways who got some perverse pleasure by writing the forbidden N word on the wall. We don't know who did it, but we know who they did it to. All of us.

I personally apologized to both Terry and Charles on behalf of First Unitarian Church for this incident. I reiterated to them that that was not who we are or what we are about as a congregation. They both accepted the apology. But later Terry and I talked about what happened and what needed to be done. He agreed with the decisions we were making, but he said something else. We have to do more. Taking the paper down and talking to the class was the right thing to do, but we have to do more. I think he is absolutely right. We have done tremendous work in the area of anti-racism in the past, but what are we doing now? We do a lot of laudable anti-racism right now as separate individuals, but this didn't happen to us individually; it happened to us as a church community. I think that it was a brave and heroic thing for Bob to have marched in Selma. But that act does not give us a lifetime pass as a congregation to never have to think or talk about race again. What truly matters is how we are going to move forward into the future together as a church. How will we respond?

In today's modern reading, Thich Nhat Hanh talks about how injustice and suffering are a part of our very being. Normally we think that they are something we do or an action we take. That is only part of

it. To truly see the world as it is, we need to recognize our innate connections to each other. The interdependent web of all existence means that when someone else is happy, then I am happy. When someone else is in pain, then I am in pain. This is fundamental to our Unitarian Universalist worldview. It is the cornerstone in many ways, to any modern Unitarian Universalist theology or spiritual practice. We all affect each other, even indirectly. When something like this happens to two of our own, Terry and Charles, then it happens to all of us too. We cannot deny that it happened, we cannot look to someone to blame or scapegoat so that I am innocent by comparison.

On the other hand, we should also resist the all-too-common temptation among liberals to feel guilty about this event, the things Thich Nhat Hanh mentioned in our reading earlier, or other social evils. Yes they are a part of our being; I stick to that belief. But the response we give should not come out of guilt. Guilt you see is a pretty useless emotion. It is a veiled form of egotism—“Oh if only I would have done something differently then this would not have happened.” Guess what: you or I are not that powerful. Guilt is the first cousin to *hubris*, the pride of thinking ourselves all-powerful. The famous religion writer Karen Armstrong often talks about her very strict training as a nun prior to the reforms of Vatican Two. She used to do things like self-flagellation and kiss the floor if she entered a room late. She says that in that hardcore environment, guilt was seen as self-indulgent nonsense. It

was the ego resisting the universe. If even pre-Vatican Two nuns think guilt is useless, so too should we Unitarian Universalists.

But just before you breathe a sigh of relief thinking Rev. Josh has let us off the hook, not so fast. We need a different response to our understanding that racism, injustice and suffering are a part of who we are. Rather than respond with guilt, which only wastes time and energy by focusing on us and our ego, we should instead respond in a self-less way. I would call this something like “compassionate anger.” When we learn about something like a racial word being written in our church, it is very natural to become angry. We are not racist, yet an incident of racism has occurred. Of course we will be angry in such a situation. But if we stay with anger, many negative things can result. We could look to blame someone without evidence. This again is a form of denial; denial so that we can separate ourselves from such an ugly thing. However if we truly live as interconnected beings we know this is not possible. The racist and the victim of racism are both a part of us, Thich Nhat Hanh would say. And so we must transform our anger at injustice into compassionate action for everyone. Healing is only possible if we consider everyone’s healing; not just a few we deem morally worthy. This response of compassionate anger is the most congruent with our Unitarian Universalist tradition.

Over a century ago, our spiritual ancestor Theodore Parker responded with compassionate anger to slavery and narrow-mindedness.

He understood the basic humanity of both black and white men and women because of his Unitarian beliefs. These beliefs propelled him to act and to speak out courageously. They have done so in the past here at First Unitarian Church, and I believe they do so again this morning. It happened here. The question is, how will we respond? What does compassionate anger look like today?

It is now your turn and my turn to answer those questions. Today immediately following our worship service, I have reserved room 29. In the very room where this horrendous event took place, Rev. Barbara and me will be co-facilitating a conversation on how our church can begin to restart our anti-racism work. We will craft our healing message of compassionate anger in the very place where this injustice occurred. Each and every one of you here are invited to attend that conversation instead of coffee hour. We will be looking at what we can do today and moving forward. If you have some compassionate anger around this issue, I urge you to join us. It isn't going to be about blame or guilt. It is going to be about doing important work. Our UU faith, the knowledge of our interbeing with others, compels us to act.

May we always cultivate the awareness of our interconnections with others. May we, like Theodore Parker, not shy away when it is our turn for some courage. And let us become the religious community we profess to be. Amen Blessed Be.